

Tokyo exhibition focuses on plight of sexually exploited girls

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In Japan, teenage girls who turn to prostitution do so because they want to make easy money or fulfill their own pleasures.

Or not really.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, “few girls I’ve seen began prostituting themselves light-heartedly or to earn easy money,” said Yumeno Nito, a 26-year-old activist who heads Colabo, a Tokyo-based organization supporting marginalized teenage girls.

“In many cases, they are in poverty, abused at home or bullied in school. . . . Feeling lonely, they wander the streets or explore the internet before being approached by adults who trick them into prostitution,” she said.

An exhibition titled “Watashi-tachi wa Kawareta” (“We Were Bought”) kicked off in Tokyo’s Kagurazaka Session House on Aug. 11 in an effort to dispel misguided assumptions. The event, co-organized by Colabo and Tsubomi, a self-help group of young girls victimized by sexual abuse and exploitation, runs through Sunday.

“It’s not like we got involved in prostitution because we wanted to. We had to. Some of us felt so isolated at home we had nowhere else to go,” a 16-year-old girl who went by the pseudonym Nao told a news conference at the Kagurazaka gallery prior to the opening of the exhibition.

“At first I thought what happened was my fault because I was too cowardly to say no. . . . Looking back, I do think I shared some blame, but eventually, I’ve realized I wasn’t entirely at fault,” she said, without elaborating on her past.

Sex trafficking and child prostitution remain long-standing problems in Japan.

In the 2016 Trafficking in Persons Report, the U.S. Department of State slammed the entrenched practice of *enjo kosai*, or “compensated dating,” where older men pay young women for sexual favors via gifts. It also pointed out that variants of the notorious “JK” business, which sexually exploits *joshi kosei* (high school girls), “continue to facilitate the sex trafficking of Japanese children.”

“Sophisticated and organized prostitution networks target vulnerable Japanese women and girls — often in poverty or with mental disabilities — in public areas such as subways, popular youth hangouts, schools, and online; some of these women and girls become trafficking victims,” the report said.

Instead, she said, they approach isolated teens on the street with an avuncular air and offer them what they need — a quick meal, a place to stay and most importantly, a gesture of affection the girls are sorely denied at home and at school. By taking advantage of their loneliness, those adults slyly put the girls under their psychological control, wearing down their resistance, she said.

The exhibition showcases an array of photos, drawings, letters and diaries revisiting the trauma of the girls. A total of 24 girls, aged 14 to 26, were involved in organizing the event, Nito said.

About 10 of them allowed themselves to be photographed, albeit incognito, posing in various settings to re-enact particularly traumatizing scenes or situations that remain etched in their memory.

In these pictures, some are seen wandering downtown streets, while others writhe in shame on a bed. One striking photo, meanwhile, shows a kimono-clad girl posing during her actual coming-of-age ceremony, with her wrist marked by numerous traces of cuts and cigarette burns.

In another highlight, participating girls violently scribbled down on a massive piece of paper examples of verbal abuse adults heaped on them that particularly tore them apart. Phrases such as “you shouldn’t have been born,” “drop dead” and “we won’t bother to have a funeral for you even if you die” are among them.

Meanwhile, on one tell-all letter that was hung on the wall, an 18-year-old girl recalled an experience that she said had destroyed her life.

“I can trust nobody,” she wrote. The girl, whose mother was rarely at home due to work, said she had barely hit puberty when she got involved with a man who falsely charged her over a porn website she had browsed and roped her into sex under the pretext of helping her to pay the bill.

“I wanted people to know the poverty situation of girls like me and the fact that I’ve lost my dream, friends and family because of that one guy,” the letter read.

Despite the gut-wrenching nature of the displays, Nito expressed hope that visitors to the exhibition won’t focus too much on their past.

“Instead of just feeling sorry for what the girls went through, I hope visitors will realize they have stood up against their own challenges and are now moving forward, alive.”

For more information on the “Watashi-tachi wa Kawareta” (“We Were Bought”) exhibition, see jtim.es/3DUC303gW6k (<http://jtim.es/3DUC303gW6k>).

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