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An Eighteen-Year-Old Works to Abolish Child Labor

by Amano Kazuya

[It has been estimated that throughout the world 250 million minors under eighteen, "Child Laborers", are engaged in dangerous and cruel professions. This is the story of a Japanese high school student and her activities with an NGO devoted to ending this situation. It is widely believed that the problem of child labor is primarily one located in the poor nations of the periphery. In March 2003, however, the Committee of Experts of the UN's International Labor Organization cited the United States for violation of Convention 182 directed to ending the worst abuses of child labor. US legislation of 2002 has weakened protection of children against work in numerous hazardous occupations, notably in agriculture. As this story of the activities of Kuriyama Moe shows, the issues, whether involving the sex industry or the transport of illegal migrants, repeatedly cross national boundaries. This article appeared in the August 29, 2003 issue of Shukan Kinyobi.]

One side of the street is lined with a rather dubious-looking row of stalls selling fake brand-name merchandise; on the other side "go-go bars" feature nude dancing and the like. This is Bangkok's Patpong Road, famous even in Japan. Eighteen-year-old Tokyo high school student Kuriyama Moe visited this area last year as part of a study tour sponsored by Free The Children (FTC), an NGO dedicated to the abolition of child labor. There are things she saw that she will not soon forget.

Night on Patpong is packed with throngs of both domestic and foreign tourists. But if you look closely, standing in front of these clubs in their garish clothing and heavy makeup are young girls no more than ten years old. The large electric billboards blare Anzen da yo! (No problems, we're safe!) in Japanese, with the touts exhorting in staccato Japanese to the potential male customers: "Mr. Satô, Mr. Tanaka, right this way!".

"I could do with a teen-ager, myself." This phrase that caught the ears of Ms. Kuriyama was not of the touts but carried native inflection. A group of five or so young men in their early-twenties were perusing a club "album" held open by one of the touts. In it were filed according to age the photos of women. As if in appraisal of merchandise, the five men were exclaiming loudly, "This one looks good…no, wait, this one over here." For Ms. Kuriyama, to see these men shopping for women as if deciding on an order in a fast-food chain, brought on feelings of anger and embarrassment as a fellow Japanese, as a human being, and as a woman.

According to Thailand's "Center for the Protection of Children's Rights", there are about 800,000 underaged girls working in what is considered to be the "worst" form of child labor exploitation the sex industry. Almost all have been leased into indentured servitude by their parents. FTC of which Ms. Kuriyama is an active member was born out of a desire held by its youthful members for the children themselves to have a hand in the changing of their circumstances. The NGO now has chapters in 35 countries with 100,000 members, almost all of whom are under eighteen.

The Catalyst: The death of a twelve-year-old

FTC's founder is Toronto native Craig Kielburger, now aged 20. In 1995 at the age of twelve he founded the group as a means of "liberating the world's children from the tragedy of poverty and abuse" by having other children become active in education, fund-raising, and volunteer work. His inspiration came from an AP newspaper article carrying the headline: "Boy, 12, murdered for speaking out against child labor: Pakistani Iqbal Masih was four-years-old when sold for sixteen dollars to a carpet factory where he worked long hours every day tying small knots. Since his release at age 12 he was devoted to broadcasting the evils of child labor, even traveling outside his own country. He was murdered, apparently by people lying in wait for him, 35 miles east of Lahore."

Such was the shock of reading of the death of a youth his own age that Mr. Kielburger and his friends began their investigations of the child labor problem. Upon the founding of FTC Mr. Kielburger with the support of PTA and church groups began to speak around Canada about child labor based on his research. Then, they began signature campaigns. After receiving media coverage for his actions, he spoke in Toronto in front of the Ontario Labor Federation enabling him to raise $150,000 in private and group donations.

As Mr. Kielburger believes in the importance of on-site visitation, with the cooperation of international groups such as UNICEF and the South Asian Anti-Child Labor Federation, FTC members have visited over 30 countries. He visited many workplace sites, met with Mother Theresa, and talked to street children and the handicapped at welfare facilities. With the money collected from donations and proceeds from the publications of the journal of his travels (Save the Children [In Japanese: Boku-tachi wa Jiyu da!] he contributed to the establishment of welfare centers for sexually abused minors. In addition, he volunteered for school construction projects in rural areas, beginning in rural India, and then in other areas in Asia, Africa, and Central America.

FTC Japan opened as the twenty-fifth international branch in 1998 and Mr. Kielburger's visit to Japan the following year marked the beginning of Ms. Kuriyama's involvement with the group. It came to her as a surprise to know the specific reason for the original founding of the group, for she too had read the article about Iqbal Masih and it remained in her mind.

I want to change the world!
When Ms. Kuriyama was in her fourth year of primary school she enrolled in a social studies course with the title "Let's Investigate the World", and it was then that she read the article about Iqbal. Shocked at a world with child labor extant and with children stolen of the opportunity to go to school, she wanted somehow to "change it"; however, with the passage of time and the business of her daily life she eventually came to forget the story she had read. What revived this memory was her meeting with Craig Kielburger, and she berated herself for wasting five years in inaction. His response to this exclamation was that this was in fact time that was not wasted, but spent in preparation for the future. Since then, to fulfill her desire to enact "change", she has become fully involved in FTC activities.

From participating in organizing meetings and collecting donations, she spent last year with Mr. Kielburger and FTC members volunteering in India in a school construction project. This year she also participated in a joint FTC-Japan Teacher's Federation (Nikkyoso) campaign called "For the Education of the World's Children" (Sekai no Kodomo ni Kyoiku wo). Aside from donation collection and symposium organizing, the campaign organized a special event to set a new Guinness world record with the world's largest classroom. This was done to demonstrate the goals set by the 2000 UN Millennium Summit: Educational parity for all girls and boys by 2005, and every child in school by 2015.

The event was held simultaneously in 100 countries gathering 1,300,000 participants. The content of the class included lectures explaining how lack of educational opportunities encourages child labor and questions to the audience in the form of quizzes. Two of the questions were

#1 How many people in the world cannot read and write and have no access to education?

#2 What percentage of these are women?

Answers: #1: 862 Million, and of this number 150 Million are children unable to attend primary school; #2 Two-thirds

From the participants came comments concerning the importance of literacy in daily life, such as without reading skills you cannot read a contract nor the cautions on prescription medicine.

Ms. Kuriyama sat as a panelist on one symposium and discussed what she witnessed in the prostitution areas in Thailand. There was also one more happening that she has since been unable to forget.

"Who needs a dream?"
Kuriyama attended a leadership training session in Thailand to learn organizing and presentation skills. She spent her free time volunteering at a group home for abused and abandoned children. Speaking and playing games with the residents of this home, there was one small boy who refused to respond to her and with a blank expression fled as she called to him. Seeing her perplexed, a young seven-year-old girl named Jenny explained to Kuriyama, "He's a good boy". So encouraged, Kuriyama continued to call to the boy, asking his name and inviting him to play.

On the third day she was able to catch him in an embrace; his led to his first expression of laughter, exclaiming "It tickles!". It turns out he was six years of age with no knowledge of his name, calling himself in turn "Kids" or "Captain" or "Kai" (the last word meaning "bird" in Thai). From then on they were able to establish a good relationship talking about birds and the way children play in Japan. Then, at one point Kuriyama asked Kai about his dream, a subject in which he appeared to have no interest whatsoever.

Noticing this, Kuriyama attempted again and again the same question, until Kai with an expression of resignation finally answered: "A dream? Since it doesn't come true anyway, who needs it?" It made her speechless to hear this, and forced her to think. "It is my work to make a society where every child can have a dream. This kind of world where a six-year-old thinks like this, this is something that I must change."

Her two-week stay soon came to an end. The day before her departure, Kai who normally would be rolling around in play in her arms shouted to her "Go away!" and flew to another room to hide. While the other members were preparing to leave, Kuriyama searched everywhere for him, and finally found him crying by himself. It seems that all foreigners eventually have to leave after staying only several days, and all of them promise to visit again although not one has. This brought deep doubts to Kuriyama's own ability to act. The only thing she could find she could say was to promise again and again that she would come and see him.

Upon her return she thought of Kai continually all the while becoming increasingly impatient with her position, one that bespoke "hypocrite" borne out of "self-satisfaction". Her participation in anti-war rallies protesting the US invasion of Iraq also, in the end, did not seem to make a bit of difference. This feeling of helplessness was compounded by the pessimism expressed by classmates that "nothing changes", and the criticism of her instructors that she was "giving her life away" to other people.

At last, stretched to a breaking point, she decided to withdraw from school and is now completing her high school degree via correspondence course. She now throws her energies entirely into the activities of the FTC, and also attempts to fulfill her desire to meet Kai yet again. This past May she was actually able to make her way to Thailand again but sadly could not fulfill her dream of seeing him. This was because the neighborhood surrounding the shelter had become increasingly impoverished and it was deemed too dangerous for foreigners to enter. For Kuriyama the disappointment was palpable: "I was just one neighborhood away and was so, so close. I will try again next year. 'To give every child the chance to dream', is not simply an ideal but a personal goal for me to make true."

What is "Child Labor"?
Hazardous or extremely involving labor involving children from age 5 to 17.
The following are considered the "worst" types of child exploitation:
1. Indentured slavery (children working as a means of loan repayment)
2. Forced child soldiers
3. The sex industry and pornography
4. Children forced into the manufacture and sale of narcotics

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