

Colabo's Fights against Sexual Exploitation and Misogyny in Japan Today

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Eight years ago, Ayumi called Colabo out of desperation. She had received abuse from her parents, been kicked out, and gone to her grandmother's house, where her uncle raped her. She got pregnant and underwent abortion. She told staff at the children's welfare center what her uncle was doing to her. In response, the staff arranged for her to go back to her parents' place. The center believed her parents, who said Ayumi was a pathological liar. Because she did not want to go home, she roamed around the city with no money. This made her an easy target of sexual exploitation. She could make money only in Tokyo's night industries. In exhaustion, she emotionally relied on friends who were in similar circumstances, but one of them tricked her into prostituting in an orgy for schoolteachers. "When I first called Yumeno san, I was so tired that I wept loudly." She was only fifteen years old. [1]

Ayumi is one of many girls who have lived in a deep abyss of poverty, sexual exploitation, homelessness, and the dearth of reliable human relationships. The clothes girls wear and communication devices they carry have changed over the decades, but exploitative sex industries that absorb girls and women in distress remain robust—rather, its recruitment methods have become more sophisticated and the services on offer more diverse. Sexual exploitation spreads not only by the industry owners and consumers. Japanese society as a whole has been giving them voluminous space and freedom. It has hyper-commercialized sexual services, reduced girls' value to that of sex devices, and along the way harming their physical health and damaging their basic sense of self-dignity. This is exactly the society that cannot squarely face the history of "Comfort Women." Sexual violence is not being seen as violence.

Colabo became Ayumi's safe space. Established in 2011, Colabo has been a "peer organization" for girls and young women who found themselves in precarity and sexual exploitation and violence. When I was approached by the editor of KYEOL in February 2023, I asked if I might write an essay about Colabo. The harassments and obstructions against it were escalating day by day. The attacks against Colabo and its founder Nitō Yumeno chillingly reminded me of the backlash against the feminist movements for the Comfort Women in recent years. I am a mere distant and small supporter of Colabo and a reader of Nitō's publications, but also a historian. I have lost sleep in resentment at the déjà vu of the enormous force of social misogyny, which can be seen in the forms of ugly denialism and distortions employed against Colabo.

Colabo's mission [2] is clear and simple: "We are working to create a society in which all girls have clothing, food, shelter, and people they can rely on. A society in which girls in trouble do not find themselves being exploited or exposed to violence." Nitō and Colabo staff, including some who got their life courses restored with Colabo's help, listen to the girls' situations, provide food and shelter, often hold deeply personal conversations with them, get legal help from lawyers, accompany them to OBGYNs, and negotiate with city officials and school administrators on their behalf. Its care work

has no clear end point, nor does it rely on measurable outcomes to gauge its success, unlike most of public projects. It does not follow strict protocols which public shelters or municipal offices usually adhere to. Many girls come by word of mouth and get astounded at its swift response. Colabo provides a community of diverse personalities, a “family-like space” or “a team for survival” in the girls’ words, and aims to foster a sisterhood that is both unconditional and unbinding.

The founder of Colabo, Nitō Yumeno, is a big sister figure for these girls and a pioneer activist. When she was in high school, Nitō herself was stepping into the spiral of abuse by parents, disconnection from school, sexual exploitation, and suicidal thoughts. A number of encounters changed Nitō’s life, including an encounter with a farming teacher and activist for refugees, who helped her see girls’ predicaments as a wider social issue. As another catalyst, Nitō often mentions her trip to the Philippines, where she witnessed Japanese men touring for teenage prostitutes who were given fake Japanese names. She started working with teenagers in Tokyo, as well as Miyagi after the 2011 earthquake, which led to the current form of Colabo. [3]

Nitō explains the grim state of girls recruited into sex industries in her public talks and publications. [4] It is important, she argues, to learn the techniques of skilled recruiters. Girls’ testimonies describe their choices to trust these men: “The manager was very kind and listened to me,” “The recruiter said I could rest in the group waiting room between calls [that order a dispatch of a girl for sexual services]). Colabo engages in active outreach, talking to girls on the street just as recruiters would do. The girls’ ideas crystalized in a nighttime bus café, which provides a temporary haven with food, clothes, goods, and no predatory men, where girls can hang out or talk with Colabo staff. Nitō pays close attention to detail to establish the “peer” association. Colabo staff dress and speak like the girls they try to connect to, and girls consider the staff “very different from officials in children’s welfare center” at their first consultations, which usually take place casually over a meal. Nitō’s Youtube videos and tweets make abundant use of slangs such as kimoi (gross) and uzai (annoying), respecting the girls’ instincts and expressions. Colabo staff know how to react to and advice on their problems, unlike clueless schoolteachers. Colabo celebrates the girls’ birthdays—for many of them, this is their first time being celebrated for just having been born. Nitō writes, “It is not easy to explain Colabo’s activities are not ‘support’ (shien), but to ‘be together with the girls.’ It is frustrating that even that is considered a method of ‘support.’” [5]

To these girls, stories of the Comfort Women are not something of the distant past. They deeply relate to the testimonies of these elders. In 2016, inspired by a photo exhibition of Comfort Women exploited by the Japanese army, the girls organized their own exhibition, We Were Bought. These girls suffer from widespread images that stigmatize them as if they had wanted brand bags and they took advantage of middle-aged men. Through the exhibition, girls told their stories of homelessness, abuse, bullies, sexual violence, abandonment by the police, teachers, and children’s welfare center, and wrist cuts. [6] In publications, girls often testify that “I had to pretend I enjoyed it in order to survive,” and “I even aimed to become a queen of SM sex play” by internalizing the social discourse. The courage shown by former Comfort Women and Colabo’s sisterhood allowed them to get out of that entrapment and view their experiences through the broader historical lens of abuse and sexual exploitation.

Representing these girls’ voices, Nitō Yumeno is vocal on Twitter. Especially because Nitō tells these girls not to expose themselves on social media to avoid stalkers, pimps, and parents, but also is determined to voice up on their behalf, she constantly takes the brunt of online misogyny. One issue she drew attention to was a marketing campaign [7] of hot spring resort towns using low-teen anime characters that were overtly sexualized and were uttering such phrases as “I am waiting for a surprise visit in my bed.” Nitō’s powerful critiques on the day-in day-out sexualization of girls has unfortunately enraged those who view it as harmless fantasies and their free artistic expressions. The convoluted sense of “being attacked by radical feminists” had led some of these men to harass,

stalk online or off-line, and threaten Nitō and Colabo over years.

In the summer of 2022, cyber harassment of an unprecedented scale began. One leading Twitter account, Himasora Akane [8], kept posting grave distortions of photographs and data shown on Colabo's official Facebook account and website. For example, Colabo posted a photo in which girls were calculating monthly budgets required to live independently and concluded that they needed 141,000 to 163,000 yen. Himasora gave the impression that they had been receiving those amounts as social welfare, and also as if they illegally obtained the imagined welfare checks. He also compared Colabo's overall annual report and its reports of the projects commissioned by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, pointing to a gap in numbers—which obviously exist as they are different types of reports—as evidence of an abuse of public funding. There is no logic at work in these examples when given even at a cursory look, but the sheer number of his attacks created a movement. Colabo's legal team [9] counted that the Himasora Akane account had disseminated 900 tweets (at least 170,000 retweets), 27 entries on a web portal called *note*, and 30 Youtube videos (1,198,181 views) to attack Colabo during the few months between July 12 and November 28, 2022. Through these outlets, he incessantly fabricated a conspiracy theory that Colabo confiscated girls' social welfare checks, enslaved the girls in bad living conditions, used them as free labor, and stole taxpayers' money. In November 2022, he filed an audit request on Colabo's projects to the Tokyo government, which led to a third-party audit report. It has shown that Colabo, far from embezzling public funding, even used its own funding to complete the commissioned projects. The audits further requested additional information that was not filed in the required system, but it proved that none of Himasora's accusations had any basis.

What this harasser did to Colabo and Nitō can be considered defamation, and the legal team has filed a lawsuit against him. It has imposed a great amount of stress and additional work on Colabo. But by far the scariest was that it triggered a gush out of misogyny on Twitter and Youtube. Even though Himasora Akane's words are easy to refute, tens of thousands of people eagerly disseminated them, "liked" them, and thanked and encouraged him. As lawyer Ōta Keiko argued [10], "The more distortions it presents, the more attention and "likes" it gets and it is disseminated more. It keeps escalating... In short, there is a social atmosphere in which misogyny can get you numbers." The Himasora Akane account itself has mentioned that "I would stop if you [Nitō] stopped burning *moe-e* (the kind of anime drawings that tend to sexualize young girls)," implying this was his revenge against Nitō's attack on the hot spring campaign characters. The scale of this movement expanded quickly and embodied a backlash against what they saw as "feminists." This grew regardless of the stupidity of the accusations or what Colabo has done or has not done.

The consequences have been grave. In early 2023, other harassers [11], including elected officials, started showing up at the bus café, filming themselves shouting slurs around it. To protect the girls, Colabo obtained a restraining order against them. Despite such measures, in March 2023, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government pressed a halt on the bus café operations even on the exact spot that had been awarded legal protection, supposedly for "safety" reasons. Tokyo soon notified that it would not renew the projects previously contracted to Colabo.

These adversities are heartbreaking. Time and again, we have seen the pattern of distortions, misogyny, and gaslighting of victims of sexual violence and their advocates as corrupt and greedy money grabbers. We allowed it to happen again, right in front of our eyes. But Colabo will not end here. Women volunteers assembled to become a wall [12] to protect the bus café from harassers. Women gathered to protest against the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's decision. Nitō Yumeno is certainly not done yet. In April, she has resumed the bus café in a different location. She commented [13], "During the month that we could not operate, I got a number of messages from girls who got pregnant. This one month must have been very long and full of trouble for many girls."

Colabo now relies completely on donations for their operations. For information on donations, visit its website [14]

publications by Nitō Yumeno's:

Nitō Yumeno, *Nanmin kōkōsei: Zetsubō shakai o ikinuku 'watashitachi' no riaru* [Refugee high schoolers: 'Our' reality of surviving the society of desperation] (Tokyo: Eiji shuppan, 2013).

Nitō Yumeno, *Joshi kōsei no urashakai: "Kankeisei no hinkon" ni ikiru shōjotachi* [The underworld of high school girls: Girls living in poverty of human relationships] (Tokyo: Kōbunsha shinsho, 2014).

Nitō Yumeno ed., *Atarimae no nichijō o teniireru tameni: seisakushu shakai o ikiru watashitachi no tatakai* [To obtain normal everyday: Our struggle of living in a sexually exploitative society], (Tokyo: Kage shobō, 2023).

Nitō's social network accounts:

<https://www.facebook.com/yumenyan>

https://twitter.com/colabo_yumeno

Colabo:

<https://colabo-official.net/>

<https://www.facebook.com/colabo.official>

Sayaka Chatani

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P.S.

KYEOL Webzine

<https://kyeol.kr/en/node/541>

Footnotes

[1] Nitō Yumeno ed., *Atarimae no nichijō o teniireru tameni: seisakushu shakai o ikiru watashitachi no tatakai* [To obtain normal everyday life: Our struggle in living a sexually exploitative society], (Tokyo: Kage shobō, 2023, Tokyo), 29-30.

[2] <https://colabo-official.net/projects-english/>

[3] Nitō Yumeno, *Nanmin kōkōsei: Zetsubō shakai o ikinuku 'watashitachi' no riaru* [Refugee high schoolers: 'Our' reality of surviving the society of destitute] (Tokyo: Eiji shuppan, 2013).

[4] The large and complex sex industries provide a wide range of jobs to underage girls. Some of them ostensibly use and promote the sexualized connotation of *joshi kōsei* (high school girls)—they call it JK business—and thus often ask these girls to wear school uniforms and be escorts for “tourists.” Colabo estimates about 5,000 teenagers work in such “JK businesses.” Without any onsite supervision, often in isolated rooms like karaoke box rooms, customers can

ask them to provide sex-related services as “options.” From there, it is only a small step for these girls to get into more clearly sex-based jobs. Many of these girls, and those who already came of age, do not know how to get out of it. Nitō Yumeno, *Joshi kōsei no urashakai: “Kankeisei no hinkon” ni ikiru shōjotachi* [The underworld of high school girls: girls living in a poverty of human relationships] (Tokyo: Kōbunsha shinsho, 2014).

[5] Nitō ed., Atarimae, 6.

[6] Nitō ed., Atarimae, 80-89.

[7] https://twitter.com/colabo_yumeno/status/1460060377379602434?s=20

[8] <https://twitter.com/himasoraakane>

[9] <https://colabo-official.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/221129.pdf>

[10] <https://colabo-official.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/cee5ab6bd71bcd6ccd475b2973624268.pdf>

[11] <https://www.facebook.com/yumenyan/posts/pfbid029WTQHe2gJmHfcxDNVF5aJe6X5omapu8fz6a2dGyib6vJjThhrmOoP4ZwsQPbKf8Kl>

[12] <https://www.kanaloco.jp/news/social/article-966619.html>

[13] https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik23/2023-04-21/2023042113_01_0.html#top

[14] <https://colabo-official.net/support/>