

SKorea's secret: Runaway teen prostitution

Parental pressure to achieve good grades has led to a soaring number of children on the streets who are selling sex.

Jennifer Chang Last Modified: 07 Nov 2012 08:44

Teenage runaways often sell sex then live with others in the cheap hotel room (Jennifer Chang/Al Jazeera)

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea is paying a high price for its rigorous education system - a major reason for its economic success - with teenagers increasingly turning to prostitution after fleeing home to escape academic pressure. An estimated 200,000 youths - at least 60 per cent female teenagers - roam the country's streets. About half have worked as underage prostitutes, according to the latest government figures.

Many say they initially ran away to be with friends instead of studying, and later ended up selling their bodies to earn money to survive.

"In high school, I would say that massive academic pressure is the main driver pushing kids onto the streets," says a professor at a prominent South Korean university, who requested anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity in the country.

This reporter spent several weeks talking to runaway girls. All were between age 12 and 18, and their names have been changed to protect their identities. Most lived in a "runaway family", the term they use to describe a group of teenagers who meet in Internet chat rooms and develop relationships based on selling sex. Such "families" often sleep together in hotel rooms where they've sold sex beforehand. Or they're made up of one or more underage prostitutes who seek shelter in rooms owned by individuals who, in return, expect them to do anything from chores to selling sex.

The prostitution problem in South Korea continues to stump authorities. An estimated 1.2 million women are believed involved in the business - or about 20 per cent of all South Korean women aged 15-29.

Yu-ja, 18, says she first ran away at age 12 from her parent's home so she wouldn't have to study, and could instead, "play, chat and smoke with her school friends all night at playgrounds". She left for a few days, sleeping on subway trains.

The professor says "intense pressure" on students begins as early as age 12. "High school students are being forced to study every day after school until late at night, often until 1am, by their parents so they can get into a good college, a requisite for obtaining high-paying jobs," he says. South Korean students have ranked in the top 10 among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries annually since 2000, he notes.

Yu-ja was 14 the second time she fled home, again to get away from schoolwork and "to have fun". This time she began selling sexual services for about \$275 through Buddy Buddy, a popular online chatting service among underage runaways that was later shut down after authorities caught on. A man in his early 20s picked her up at the Internet café where she had solicited him, and took her to his studio apartment in the capital Seoul, a city of more than 10 million people. The United Voice for Eradication of Prostitution is a non-governmental organization that counsels teenage prostitutes, educates them on the pitfalls of selling sex, and administers rehabilitation programs.

At least a dozen prostitution websites operate online, says counsellor Shim A-ra. "There has been an explosion of such sites in the last few years". The websites are also difficult to police. After authorities shut them down, many operators simply change names and reemerge. For all the emphasis South Korean schools put on good grades, they fail to warn youngsters about the dangers of running away from home.

"No one ever told me it was wrong to prostitute myself, including my schoolteachers. I wish someone had told me," Yu-ja says. "Girls should be taught that from an early age in class here in South Korea, but they aren't".

The money she earned from her first customer enabled Yu-ja to pay for three weeks of lodging at a jjimjilbang, or public bathhouse furnished with saunas, as well as food. She then, through online chatting, hooked up with a "family" of runaway teen prostitutes.

Former child prostitutes learn skills to keep them off the street [United Voice for Eradication of Prostitution]

For a year, she survived by sleeping in hotel rooms where they'd met and slept with clients, paying for her food with sex earnings.

Unloved at home

Moon Young-me, a programme officer for the United Voice for Eradication of Prostitution, says the demands made on Korean adolescents such as Yu-ja to study hard are not the only factor that causes teens to leave home. She also cited physical, verbal or sexual abuse by those they live with .

Yu-ja says the last time she ran away she was 17 and had been kidnapped by her father to his residence from her mother's home. There, he beat her regularly for refusing to take part in track and field activities in high school, so she could get into college despite poor grades.

Yu-ja now lives with Hyun-ju, a 12-year-old runaway prostitute who was sexually abused when she was in third grade by an uncle who lived at her home. Yu-ja came to the interview with Mi-kyung, a 15-year-old runaway from the southern port city of Busan whom she also resides with.

Mi-kyung says the reason she first fled home was that, like Yu-ja, she wanted to avoid schoolwork and be with friends. Showing up with hair and lips coloured bright red, Mi-kyung insisted she had never sold sex despite living on the streets for years. Her claim, says the centre's head counselor Cheon Bo-gyeong, may be false since underage runaways are extremely reluctant to talk about sex work.

Prostitution by underage girls on South Korea's streets is rising despite counseling services and centres trying to stem the practice. Almost all these facilities are run by state or local agencies.

Officials refused to answer questions, saying the country's reputation would be harmed in the eyes of the international community if the sensitive topic was broached.

The largest agency responsible for helping runaway teenagers is South Korea's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. A high-level official requesting anonymity says while the ministry "acknowledges the problem, government agencies ... conducting research to resolve the situation have not yet found a solution."

Cheon says runaway teens normally perform sexual services at a motel after using Internet chat rooms or smartphone applications to hook up with male customers. Sometimes they are raped if they refuse to indulge in unorthodox sexual practices, she says.

"One customer even slipped his wallet into a teenage prostitute's bag after having sex with her at a motel. He refused to pay her for her services after accusing her of stealing his wallet and beating her for the theft," Cheon recalls.

Shim says the most common way teenage girls become prostitutes is for boys or men in their 20s to trick them into selling themselves.

She cited the case of an 18-year-old runaway prostitute she had counselled. Three weeks after becoming romantically involved with a young man and moving in with him, he and seven friends gang-raped her .

"Their intention was to sell her to other men, but she contacted an older woman friend from an Internet café when she was with the eight rapists, who helped her escape to a shelter for underage runaway prostitutes," says Shim.

It is common for many teens to contract syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases. "The girls more frequently go without condoms, since most of their male customers refuse to wear them," Shim says.

Once young women get involved in the business, it's difficult for them to leave, Cheon says. "About half of the girls we counsel turn away from prostitution, but the other half go back to selling sex".

Even for those who manage to escape the sex trade, their past lives often come back to haunt. Former employers at entertainment venues often track down their former prostitutes and threaten to tell their families unless they pay a fee. Many subsequently are ostracized from their husbands and families after they discover the women are former prostitutes.

"In some cases, fortunately, NGO lawyers working on their behalf manage to save them from becoming blackmail victims of entertainment establishments by taking legal action," says Shim.

As the interview wraps up, Yu-ja confesses she is "now tired of being a prostitute". Since she is old enough to earn a legitimate living, she says she plans to support herself by "cleaning Internet cafés."