

# Fighting Human Trafficking: Human Rights Education for Children and Youth

Aiki Matsukura

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**M**Y NAME IS AIKI MATSUKURA. I am proud to be a human rights educator because I get to support people and help them realize their strength and potential.

The main reason I became a human rights educator is that I strongly wish to create a society where there are no victims and no one lives in fear of experiencing any kind of violence. I believe that human rights education helps individuals realize their own worth and know that every human being without exception should be treated with respect. That is why I work to strengthen and promote human rights education.

## Initial Involvement

I joined Free the Children Japan when I was in high school. Free the Children Japan is a non-governmental organization (NGO) with a mission to free children from poverty and discrimination and to free children from the notion that they are powerless to create positive change in the world. At sixteen years old, I became involved in its activities and raised funds for two years to build a library for children in Mongolia. Through these activities, I came to understand the serious issue of child labor around the world. I was particularly angered by the issue of sexual exploitation of children and wanted more than anything to see it eradicated. The passion I felt then is still at my core.

## Trafficking in Japan

Human trafficking in Japan is not a widely recognized issue. However, Japan is known to be a major destination, source, and transit country for men and women subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. There have been many cases of non-Japanese women, many from Asian countries, who have been

deceived, brought to Japan and forced to work in the sex industry. However, in recent years, we are seeing increasing cases of Japanese women and children being exploited in this industry.

While it is often believed that women who work in the sex industry chose to work there, there are many cases in which women were deceived, threatened, mind-controlled and forced to work in the sex industry. In recent years, many Japanese men, women, boys, and girls are reported to being coerced to sign vague contracts and forced to participate in making pornographic films as well.

It is especially disturbing fact that many children and young people are targeted as victims of sex trafficking in Japan. Loopholes in the legal system allow various forms of business that facilitate sexual exploitation of teenage girls to operate in Japan. *Sextortion* is a worrying and increasing trend, in which children who meet people online via app are tricked into sharing their sexually explicit pictures or videos, and then blackmailed into sending more materials under the threat of releasing them to the public. Child pornography is also a big issue in Japan where child abuse materials called *child erotica*, pictures and videos depicting children under eighteen wearing bikinis in sexually provocative poses, are available for sale.

The issue of sex trafficking is attributed to the country's large sex industry, along with socio-cultural factors such as the lack of sex education, commodification of children's sex, and legal loopholes.

Victim blaming which is deeply rooted in the society is also one of the biggest challenges in solving the issue.

Bystander's comments such as "Girls should cherish their body" intended towards victims of sexual exploitation do not give thought to what the high school girls could be going through. What are the underlying reasons for these girls to have ended up in such situation? Family discord, financial issues, being abused at home are some of the many possible problems experienced by the high school girls that these comments disregard. We must take a bold stance that in any situation, the perpetrators who commodify children's sex are to be blamed for their actions and not the children.

### Human Rights Education

"Human rights education" can sound very formal. When you say "education," it gives an impression of teaching someone from a superior position. I think that this is a widely held idea in Japanese society.

However, human rights education in my mind is accepting the persons right in front of you as they are, reaching out to them and getting involved in their situation so they could realize or get back the potential they have or originally had - the power to live, strength to believe in themselves, or the strength and mindset to care for their own selves.

I believe that human rights education is beyond passing down knowledge of what human rights are. Instead, it is important to show what it means to respect each individual's human rights through words and actions. I am convinced that it is only through learning the importance of and having the experience of being respected that one can respect others' rights.

When delivering human rights education to children and youth, I think that the elements of self-worth and body autonomy should be at the core. It is also very important to deliver human rights education by using media which children and young people feel familiar with and to use language that is easy for children to understand.



Actively engaging with and listening to young people's voices in Kabukicho, Shinjuku in Tokyo.

A human trafficking survivor expressed her sentiment after getting words of encouragement:

What I can still remember clearly today among her words is that: “No one has the right to take away my happiness.” She gave me these powerful words. Until then, I was being reclusive, only wanting to disconnect from people, but, little by little, I started to be able to meet close friends and through the connection to the society, I started to be able to find myself.”

This is an example of the impact of human rights education that emphasizes self-worth and body autonomy to young people who suffered from trafficking.

## Activities

I joined a non-profit organization called Lighthouse: Center for Human Trafficking Victims in 2014. Lighthouse is committed to fighting for a society without human trafficking and works to support victims of human trafficking, especially sex trafficking, in Japan. Like a lighthouse that guides people who are lost in the dark to safe harbors, Lighthouse was founded to be the beacon of hope for survivors of human trafficking and to be their voice. Lighthouse closed and concluded its activities in 2022.

As Public Relations Manager of Lighthouse, I was in charge of awareness-raising campaigns. I gave talks at schools and companies, and in the media to raise awareness on the issue of trafficking. I was also involved in creating tools such as *manga*, videos, pamphlets which are relatable and easy to understand for children. I also responded to calls and e-mails on the hotline from different parts of Japan (though Lighthouse was based in Tokyo), and provided direct support to the survivors of sexual exploitation.

In 2015, Lighthouse published a *manga* entitled *Blue Heart*, based on the experiences of survivors of sexual exploitation. Many parents, teachers, social workers, doctors, and government officials have been using the *manga* as a tool to protect children from sexual exploitation. Children and young people who read the *manga* has also reached out to Lighthouse’s hotline for support. This *manga* has been a very effective tool and was translated into Chinese and English as well.



*Blue Heart* published by Lighthouse

Lighthouse also produced several videos that challenge bias towards the issue of sexual exploitation. To show that anyone could become a victim, a video shares a story about a so-called ordinary high school girl falling victim to sex trafficking. One of the videos is titled “Close to You” and contains a message that a problem like this is happening right next door, very close to us, and that children suffering from such victimization actually exist close to you.

It also contains another message to the children who are suffering right now: “We are on your side. There are adults who will support you.”

My work at Lighthouse also involved educating and training law enforcement and government officials to respond to sexual violence cases appropriately as well as conveying the need and the importance of legal and systematic change. My role was to talk to professionals who were in the position of supporting the victims and help them deepen their understanding of the issue and prevent second rape (insensitive and traumatic actuations often blaming the victims). Lighthouse was also asked to give feedback on awareness-raising campaigns planned by the government.

Meanwhile, Lighthouse proactively took action to individually meet government officials, Diet (Parliament) members, and local assembly members to lobby for change. My role was to deliver the voice of the survivors to

policy makers, have their voices heard, and to work with the policy/decision makers to create a society without human trafficking.

The lobbying activities of Lighthouse resulted in making the Japanese government take specific actions against sexual exploitation of children and youth. For example, as an outcome of lobbying politicians and government officials, the government declared in 2017 the month of April as month for raising awareness on the issue of sexual violence against young people. With discussion of sex being taboo in Japan and little attention being paid by the government to the issue of sexual exploitation, I believe this has been a great breakthrough.

### **Sexuality Education as Human Rights Education**

I personally think that sexuality education is human rights education, because cherishing our own and others' human rights starts from knowing how important our own body, especially our private zone, is. By providing sexuality education, which supports each child's sense of self-worth, children may have less chance of becoming a victim of sexual exploitation or abuse, because they know that it is their right to say NO or to seek help.

With increasing number of sextortion cases being reported by children to the Lighthouse hotline, I strived not to "educate" these children by warning them or telling them what they should do. Instead, I try to ease their fear and anxiety as well as repeatedly conveying to them the message that no one has the right to invade their own body and that they have the right to say NO. I witnessed many cases in which the children who were blackmailed and were completely mind-controlled by the perpetrators came to realize that they did not have to follow what the perpetrators instruct and instead chose to take action to protect their own rights. Although this process takes time and requires patience, I believe this act of consistently telling children their important worth and their right to protect their body has a great impact not only to the individual but to the society at large.

When people know their own rights and are able to care for themselves, I believe there is a greater chance for people to be able to also respect other people's rights.

## **Final Thoughts**

Throughout my work as a human rights educator, I met many children and young people who struggle to feel self-worth and are overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. It saddens me that many children and youth, the treasures of our society, who are full of so many possibilities feel hopeless to live. I believe that the presence of even a single adult who will listen to and believe in a child is very important. Thus, I wish to be that single adult for as many children as possible and help them realize their own strength and potential.