

The NPO provides psychological care, language lessons and work training as part of their rehabilitation program



Toward a World Where Children Cannot Be Sold

Photo by Natsuki Yasuda

TAMAKI KAWASAKI

The NPO Kamonohashi Project, founded in Japan in 2002, is determined to prevent children in Asia from becoming victims of sex trafficking. Working with local governments and legal authorities, Kamonohashi has been tackling the issue in Cambodia and India.

DURING her college years, Sayaka Murata, joint director of the Kamonohashi Project, had the opportunity to meet children rescued from Cambodian brothels at a shelter for victims of child prostitution. She had a visceral reaction to the sight of several pre-pubescent girls among the victims, thinking to herself that “this sort of inhumanity shouldn’t be allowed.” Born into rural families in acute poverty, the children were sold to pay off their parents’ debts and taken to brothels. At the time the situation in Cambodia was horrific, and the sale of underage and even pre-pubescent girls for sexual purposes was widespread.

Together with two other cofounders, Murata set up her organization in 2002 with the aim to solve the problem in Cambodia. As a measure to stop the girls from being sold, they provided support for rural women to maintain independent livelihoods.

By employing sisters and mothers from the poorest families in a rural area with a high risk of child trafficking at a general goods factory, they gave their siblings or children the chance to get an education. As part of Kamonohashi’s action to stop buyers, they supported training for local police to raise their awareness and technical capabilities related to child trafficking, building on the efforts of other international agencies and NGOs. The activities were then handed over to the local government.

As the various efforts of international institutions, NGOs and the Cambodian government to tackle human trafficking coalesced, arrests of sex offenders have increased ninefold in the nine years up to 2010. As a result of Cambodia’s economic growth and development, along with stronger deterrence methods, the proportion of minors working in brothels has fallen drastically, from around thirty percent in 2000 to 2.2 percent in 2015 (and just 0.1



Sayaka Murata, joint director of the Kamonohashi Project



Photo by Natsuki Yasuda

Boosting coordination is an essential part of tackling issues across state boundaries in India



Young women working at the factory in Cambodia



Learning new skills gives the women Kamonohashi Project helps a new lease on life

percent for children under fifteen).

“It was good to finally see that. We realized that we could solve major social issues by combining the efforts of a large variety of people,” Murata recounts. The *Financial Times* covered her activism in 2006, and in 2007 the Junior Chamber International recognized her as an Outstanding Young Person of the World.

Having spun off their Cambodian operation into an independent organization, the Kamonohashi Project is focusing on their Indian operation. There are numerous cases in India of children from states in poorer regions being tricked by traffickers and then sold in the country’s large, developing cities. Cooperation between Indian states is weak, because each has different laws, local governing bodies, languages, cultures and religions.

Zeroing in on this, Kamonohashi has worked to boost coordination among administrative, law

enforcement and nongovernmental organizations across state boundaries by supporting local NGOs tackling the issue. In 2017, they helped 359 victims of trafficking by providing psychological care and support for social rehabilitation.

Since the problem of child sex trafficking –the “most evil form child labor takes”–is something that as a society we are often reluctant to cast light on, there are times when Murata’s team encounters resistance to their efforts to solve the problem. But the project’s team members remain steadfast in their stance that their NPO is one of “imagination without borders, and with the mobility to tackle human rights problems head-on,” Murata states.

Kamonohashi, which started from a determination to eliminate the evil of child trafficking, is tackling these complex social issues head-on and hoping for nothing more than a world where their activism will become unnecessary. **7**