

Students by day, sex workers by night

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CEBU CITY—Twenty-year-old Sophia looks like a typical colegiala who has a dream of becoming a respected lawyer someday.

Barely 5-foot tall, she keeps a low profile at the Catholic-run school in Cebu City, where she is a freshman student, as she doesn't want to call anybody's attention to herself.

It is because she keeps a secret from her classmates: She sells her flesh to pay her school bills.

Sofia works as a GRO (guest relations officer) in an elite night club and offers sexual services to men, mostly foreigners.

"I don't care if I'm a prostitute. I will finish my studies no matter what," she said.

Sofia's case is not isolated. According to Julius Bungcaras, head of the International Justice Mission (IJM) Cebu's Community Mobilization for Churches and Students, 10-15 percent of every 1,000 students (10 out of 100) resort to prostitution.

The IJM is a human rights organization that rescues victims of slavery, sexual exploitation and other forms of violent oppression.

Bungcaras said that based on the cases he had handled, students were prostituted not only because they needed to pay the tuition. Other reasons include financial independence, materialism and peer pressure where students feel the need to have what their friends have, he said.

Sofia's story

Sofia, who hails from Negros Oriental, was left to the care of her aunt when she was 12 years old after her father died and her mother abandoned her.

After graduating from high school, the 16-year-old lass moved from Negros Oriental to Cebu to pursue a college degree. Little did she know that school fees in Cebu were expensive.

For three years, she did odd jobs—from housemaid to salesgirl—so she could save enough money for her tuition. But the pay was not enough to even cover her basic needs.

She quit being a salesgirl and had been unemployed for a while. In April last year, a friend, who worked as a GRO, told her that their night club was looking for another GRO. Since work was hard to come by for a high school graduate, she took it.

"I didn't like it but I had no choice," Sofia cried.

The pay was good though, and that made her decide to stay in the business. Since then, she had been to nine different clubs, where the tips ranged from P1,000 to P8,000 from her permanent “guests.”

‘Private’ services

“We call our clients guests. A gathering of GROs is called a show-up. I am one of those. Then the guests would choose who among the GROs they like,” she said in Cebuano.

Aside from tips, she receives a fixed pay of P120 per hour from the club and gets not less than P1,000 per customer for “private” services.

Sofia goes to school in the morning because her work starts from

7 p.m. and ends at 4 a.m.

Her income allows her to buy food, as well as pay for her board and lodging, and other school fees. She has extra money to send to her aunt in Negros Oriental, who doesn’t have a clue on how she earns a living.

Sofia said she also spent on a new cellular phone, clothes and even shabu (methamphetamine hydrochloride) to keep her up all night.

Aside from other clients, Sofia is being maintained by her “boyfriend”—a 61-year-old Norwegian who paid her tuition this year.

Sexually transmitted diseases, including the incurable Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), don’t scare her. She is more afraid of getting killed by her customers without any witnesses inside the hotel than dying of AIDS.

What matters to her is to finish her studies so she could become a top lawyer and command the respect she has always wanted.

The lure of fast bucks is one of the factors some student-sex workers quit school and make prostitution a career path.

Miles’ story

One of them is 20-year-old Miles, who decided to drop out because she believes that prostitution is the easiest way to help her mother and three siblings, as well as provide her wants and needs.

“I can give my mother more money if I continue working as a a sex worker. It’s fast and more practical than going to school,” Miles said in Cebuano.

She gets at least P1,000 per hour from her customers, who are mostly foreigners.

Unlike Sofia, Miles does not work in a club but stays home and waits for a text message from customers on where and what time they will meet.

She uses her earnings to buy new cellular phones, trendy clothes, food and makeup. “Sometimes, I can buy all I want, but I never took drugs,” she said.

Asked if she was scared of catching the virus that causes AIDS, Miles said she was confident that she was healthy since she uses condoms for every sexual contact and has a regular checkup every three months.

Although she had no plans of going back to school, Miles acknowledged that her chosen career would not last forever. Eventually, she would have to get a degree so she can get a decent job.

Toni’s story

A gay escort named Toni, a fine arts student, confirmed that many students are sex workers. “I don’t think the government can do anything because it’s not just me who’s into it. There are a lot of us,” he said.

Toni, 22, offers sexual service to homosexual foreigners and gets P1,500 to P 2,500 per client. “It was easy money,” he said. He usually has two clients per night.

Toni said that because of his income, he was able to provide for his family and pay his tuition.

“We join dating sites where most of the foreigners (mostly old Caucasian and Americans) come to visit and meet us for sex,” he said.

He uses condoms, he said, because he is scared of getting AIDS. “We’ve been tested (with AIDS) last April and we’re thankful we’re negative,” he said.

Toni had stopped going to school since he broke up with his boyfriend, a foreigner who paid for his tuition. Now that he has saved some money, he plans to go back to school and get a degree.

“If I couldn’t finish college and get a good job, maybe I’ll end up being an escort forever,” Toni said.

Annabelle Maglasang, guidance counselor of the University of the Philippines High School, said the escalating tuition has forced students to sell their bodies. “The end does not justify the means. But, I can’t blame them (student prostitutes),” she said.

No information

The government has been working to prevent sexual exploitation of students through various agencies, but these do not have information on the number of prostituted students. The Department of Social Welfare and Development and the police intervene only when there are complaints or suspicion of trafficking.

The City Health Office, on the other hand, doesn’t give special attention to student-prostitutes. It merely conducts surveillance operations and holds periodic medical checkup on sex workers.

For Sofia, Toni and Miles, the only way to stop the flesh trade, especially among students, is to make education affordable. Unless they are able to get a degree and find decent jobs, they know they will have to stay in the game to survive.

Charisse Gay Ursal is a third year mass communications student of the University of the Philippines Visayas-Cebu College. She is one of the 16 students who participated in the 1st Inquirer Write-Along for Campus Journalists held in Cebu in September. This article is her workshop output.

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