

When Mi-yong recounted her story in the office of the Kanagawa City Union in March 1993, her initial complaint was that of unpaid wages from the club she worked in. It became clear as the Kanagawa City Union, and three other groups—the Kanagawa Women's Space Mizura, Yokohama Diocese Solidarity with Foreigners and House for Women Salaa—pursued the case, however, that Mi-yong was a victim of far worse than unpaid work: She was being forced by her employer, a certain Ri-Miran, to have sex with a regular customer of the pub and repeatedly subjected to sexual assault.

Mi-yong's only goal when she came to Japan in 1992 was to learn the management side of running a restaurant. Back in Seoul, she was introduced to Ri-Miran by her brother-in-law, and shortly after, she signed a contract for employment in Japan as a kitchen worker in Ri-Miran's pub. Under the contract, she was to receive ¥15,000 (US\$150) in wages daily.

Mi-yong entered Japan on a 15-day tourist visa. Her first job was as a waitress in the Korean night club Sezon. She was eventually approached by Ri-Miran with a proposal that she become a hostess. "We need a hand," her employer said. Mi-yong thought to herself, "I will quit as soon as I receive my pay." Mi-yong had no idea that from that point on, however, Ri-Miran would withhold her salary for several months.

One of the regular customers at Sezon was a certain Kami, who worked as director of Kouei Corporation. After Mi-yong was cornered into becoming a hostess, Kami began to visit the club more often. Ri-Miran instructed Mi-yong to sit next to Kami and be the one to entertain him each

time. Mi-yong dreaded the assignment. She could never get used to such a job as hostess—she did not even speak Japanese. She considered going back to Korea and demanded her salary several times.

One time, Ri-Miran ordered Mi-yong to go shopping with Kami and before Mi-yong knew it, she was being pushed into Kami's car. She was taken to a hotel room where she was overpowered, then later raped.

Mi-yong demanded her salary from Ri-Miran repeatedly, which led to constant arguments between the two. The only reason that she could not quit was because she still had to collect her unpaid salary. In the meantime, Ri-Miran continuously insulted her for not providing good 'service' to Kami who violated her repeatedly.

On November 11, Ri-Miran told Mi-yong to resign. Her brother-in-law came all the way from Korea to help her out negotiate for her salary. Finally, Mi-yong was paid ¥620,000 out of a total ¥1.45 million due her.

The non-payment of salaries is a common problem that Asian migrant

women working in Japan's night clubs bring to the attention of NGOs.

In Mi-yong's club, for instance, the salaries of four other hostesses were also held, and the women were forced to survive on money they received through the 'Dohan'—a system where a hostess receives pocket money from a customer, whether directly or through the employer, for going out on with him on a date. (Dating customers is a regular task of hostesses.) One variation is the Dohan Shukkin where a hostess has to set a date with a customer, outside the club, beforehand and comes to the club with him.

The club manager usually sets the Dohan or commission that hostesses receive, and some pubs even regulate the minimum number of Dohan commissions (customers) a hostess should maintain per week. In any case, a hostess' regular salary is different from the commission or pocket money received from Dohan customers. In the case of Mi-yong, however, her employer apparently made no distinction between the workers' Dohan payments and their

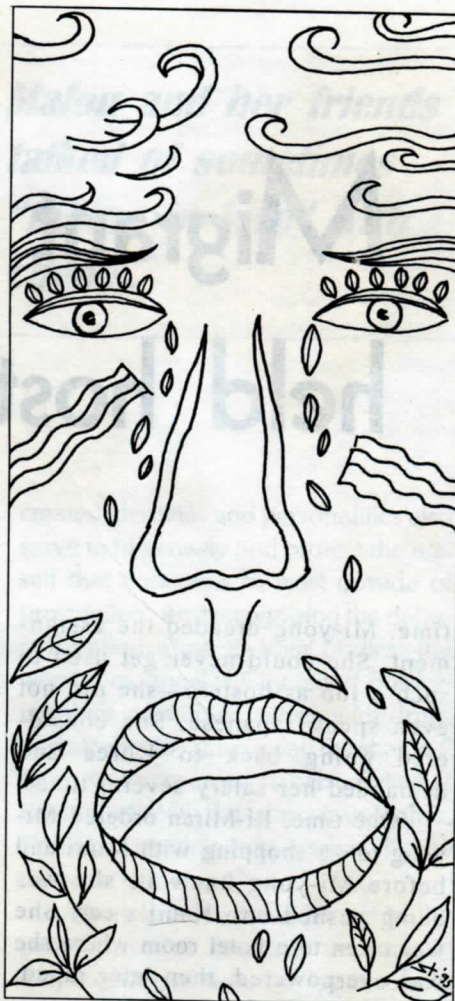
Migrant worker held hostage

Violence Against Women

regular salary. Ri-Miran believed that because she arranges her workers' profitable relationship with their customers, the Dohan commissions they receive are already part of the salary due them.

The Dohan system does not always involve sexual relations; in fact, some restrict hostesses from engaging in sexual relations with customers as a policy, arguing that such prostitution would ruin the club's reputation and discourage customers. In Mi-yong's case, Ri-Miran forced her into prostitution by withholding her pay. Ri-Miran also held Mi-yong hostage with her "overstaying" visa—another common strategy of employers to maintain their workers—and constantly threatened her with arrest or deportation. According to Mi-yong, most of her colleagues were contented with the pocket money received from the Dohan system and even berated her for demanding a 'separate' salary. "Why don't you just tolerate it like everybody else?" they asked her.

In the beginning, Mi-yong's case was pursued as one of unpaid wages by the direct employer. The NGOs sought to enter into collective bargaining with Ri-Miran on behalf on Sezon. In the course of the investigation, however, Ri-Miran closed Sezon as well as another Korean night club, the Busankou, abandoned the apartment she lived in, then vanished. The groups learned that Ri-Miran offered the sale of the Busankou to Kami. In November 1992, Matsumoto Company, a subsidiary of Kouei Corporation where Kami works, loaned money to Kami for him to take over Busankou. Between October and November 1993, the Kanagawa City Union appealed for collective bargaining with Kouei Corporation, negotiated twice for compensation for Mi-yong's unpaid salary and lodged



a complaint of sexual violence.

As president of Kouei Corporation, Kami, along with a certain Mr. Matsumoto, president of Matsumoto Company, denied any responsibility for unpaid wages to Mi-yong. Both insisted they had no direct employment relationship with her. The Kanagawa City Union pointed out that in view of both Ri-Miran's disappearance and the Matsumoto Company's purchase of the Busankou club, the two parties are now accountable for the original employer's unpaid wages.

As for the charge of sexual violence filed against Kami, he admitted to having had a sexual relationship with Mi-yong but insisted that with Mi-yong's consent. Moreover, Kami said, he paid her each time, making the case one of prostitution, not sexual violence.

Mi-yong's case turned out to be a learning lesson to the Kanagawa City Union itself. As the organization pursued her case, it became clear that some Korean members of the union itself have neglected and even 'mishandled' women's issues. They made light of Mi-yong's struggle, adding to the victim's anguish and resentment and making empowerment all the more difficult for her. But the union is learning from its mistakes.

The four organizations involved, the union, as well as Mizura, Salaa and Solidarity with Foreigners, have agreed on three tactical points to redirect their joint struggle: first, to respect Mi-yong's brave appeal as means to improve the conditions of overstaying women migrant workers who are deprived of their rights as provided for in Article 13 of the Japanese Constitution and Labor Standard Law; second, to pursue Matsumoto Company and Kouei Corporation's accountability; and third, to incorporate the women's movement in the campaign to make the employment policies and working conditions that women face equal to those applied to men. The groups now realize that special attention should be given to women migrant workers, whose choices are restricted by the limitations in the types of work available to them.

source: Solidarity with Foreign Workers, 1098 Kashimada Saiwa-Ku, Kanagawa, Japan; phone: 81-44-511-94-95