JAPAN, THE MECCA FOR TRAFFICKING IN COLOMBIAN WOMEN

By Fanny Polanía Molina

"A dangerous network of trafficking in women is captured. A dangerous network dedicated to trafficking in women, at the service of the Japanese Mafia, was disarticulated this weekend by units belonging to the DAS – the Administrative Security Department. The DAS had known of the existence of the actions by the Japanese Mafia for two years now, which, through Colombian contacts, sought beautiful young women to engage them in prostitution."

Trafficking in Colombian women to the Asian continent has become “a true threat for thousands of Colombian women who end up as slaves in Japan and other countries.”

Trafficking in Colombian women to Japan began in the 80s, when the Japanese Mafia began to make incursions in Colombian territory and decided to set up their center of operations in certain regions of the country.

1. Recruiting:

Colombian women are recruited to travel to Japan using the following methods:

a. Advertisements in newspapers, with both national and regional coverage, usually in the classified ads section.
   - "Difficult times? Take advantage of this opportunity! Solvent, determined, faithful foreigners wish to marry Colombian women..." El PAIS, April 8, 2000.
   - " Young models are sought, who wish to be successful abroad. Call us..." La Tarde- El Eje, June 25, 2000.
   - "Want to work abroad? Inquire..." La Tarde, December 5, 2000.

a. Scholarships: By means of catalogs that offer women the opportunity to study in United States, going through Japan. Their studies are facilitated by means of payment of installments with student bonuses. Applicants must

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2 SEMANA Weekly Magazine, Legal, Sex and Nightmare Report, pages 66 through 68, September 18, 2000
3 Daily newspaper with national coverage
4 Newspaper with regional coverage in Armenia, Pereira and Manizales
5 Idem
first be selected by drawing lots. "My parents have no idea that I am in Japan. They think that I am studying with the 'scholarship' in United States".

b. Contracts with companies: They are offered to be representatives for Colombian companies at international trade fairs in Japan. This contract is accompanied with an invitation signed by Japanese citizens, business cards, a specified time period between 15 and 30 days and lucrative pay.

c. Marriage by catalog: The women send in their photographs which are included in catalogs for Japanese men who seek Colombian "wives." Then they travel to Colombia where, in some cases, they get married in Bogotá. In other cases, the women are led to believe the promise that they will be married as soon as they arrive in Japan. "The boyfriend invites his female friends to be bridesmaids at the wedding, with all expenses paid. There are cases where the women take all of the preparations for the wedding, including the wedding gown. We know that it is a front to traffic in women, the problem is finding evidence and getting the victims to report it. With the Japanese, we deport them. That is all we can do," an immigration official stated.

d. Women who recruit: These are women who, in most cases, were trafficked and engaged in prostitution in Japan and who are entrusted with dragging in other young women, offering them work in providing services such as being a waitress, nursemaids, domestic servants. In other cases they are offered work in activities related with prostitution or directly engaging in it.

There have been some cases in which the recruiters are members of the family, such as aunts and cousins who devote themselves to traffic with their own family, particularly nieces and sisters. Later the trafficked women are sold to a "manilla" in Japan.

e. Music or dance groups: The recruiters seek women who wish to be dancers or singers. They show them a set-up of a video that shows a Japanese newscast that seeks Latin American talent. Then the traffickers film the applicants and choose them, telling them they have been admitted to the "tropical" group that will tour Japan and make presentations.

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6 Segment of an interview with a 20 year old girl from Pereira who was detained by immigration at Juyo on account of illegal stay.
7 Diario del Huila, Trafficking in women network is disarticulated in Neiva, page 8, November 5, 1999.
8 Bogotá is the capital city of Colombia
9 Manilla: term that is used to refer to the person who is in charge of commercializing the women who are trafficked in Japan.
1. Trafficked women

According to the various sources that were consulted, including the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Relations, the Administrative Security Department (DAS), INTERPOL, the Colombian embassy in Tokyo and the Fundación ESPERANZA, the women that are trafficked in Japan show the following profile:

- The average age of the women is between 15 and 30 years of age.
- Schooling: low and medium
- Average number of children: 2
- Marital status: mostly unwed mothers or separated women
- Economic standard of living: low and medium.

A report published by the I. O. M.\textsuperscript{10} states that:

- Of the 54 women interviewed, 33 were of Colombian origin
- The average age was 23 years
- 17\% of them had a high level of schooling
- 38\% of them had a partner
- 32\% of them had undergone AIDS testing in Japan.

There are no reliable statistics to date to allow us to accurately gauge the dimension of trafficking in Colombian women to Japan, since this phenomenon exists mostly in criminal circles that are difficult to detect and because very few studies have been carried out regarding this issue, either by governments, migration authorities and organizations that provide direct assistance to trafficked women.

However, there are some data that allow us to have a general idea of the problem:

- According to the Colombian embassy in Tokyo, between 1980 and 1985, the number of Colombian women that that entered Japan per year did not surpass 150. It is estimated that between 1995 and 1990, there was an average of 300 Colombian women in Japan per year. Between 1990 and 1995, this figure doubled to 600. It is estimated that between 1995 and 2000, there are approximately 1,100 women. The number of Colombians that are registered in Japan is 2,350.

- According to the Ministry of Justice, as of December 31, 1999 there were 2,071 Colombians in Japan. This does not include Colombians who entered with forged passports.

- Most of the Colombian population is concentrated in Tokyo, Nagoya and Yokohama, although there are some in other cities and rural areas.

• According to the DAS Immigration Authorities, 106 Colombian women were deported from Japan in 1998, 116 women in 1999, and 85 women in the first half of 2000.

• As the destination country for trafficked women who are a part of the Fundación ESPERANZA’s reception program, in 1999, Japan represented 12.50% of the cases. Of the 97 Colombian women contacted by the Fundación ESPERANZA at the El Dorado International Airport in Colombia during 1999, Japan represented 3.03% of the cases.

• Information provided by a Colombian recruiter who was engaged in trafficking in Colombian women to Japan during an eight-year period, shows us the inconsistencies that exist in the statistics, when stating that “Just in Tokyo there are around 30 red-light districts. In a single business there are around 35 Colombian girls… That works out, with two shifts, to around 60 to 70 girls.”

1. Place of origin

Most of the women trafficked to Japan come from the departments of Valle del Cauca, Antioquia, Bogotá, Caldas, Risaralda. According to a survey undertaken by the Fundación ESPERANZA in 1999 with 97 women that were victims of trafficking, these areas were also identified as high-risk areas:

![PLACE OF ORIGIN](image)

The networks of traffickers that operate in Colombia, engaged in recruiting women to cover the international trafficking demand in persons for Europe and Asia have broadened their tentacles to almost all of the Colombian territory, as we can see in the following map:

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11 SEMANA Magazine, Sex and Nightmare, pages 66 through 68, September 18, 2000
COLOMBIA:

Most vulnerable region for international trafficking of women

Area with highest incidence
- Valle del Cauca
- Antioquia
- Coffee-growing region
  - Caldas
  - Risaralda
  - Quindío

Area with medium incidence
- Bolívar
- Atlántico
- Magdalena
- Cundinamarca
- Norte de Santander

Area with lower incidence
- Tolima
- Huila
- Santander
4. The YAKUZA in Colombia

YAKUZA is a Japanese word taken from the Oicho- Kuba game, which is a type of oriental Black Jack, formed by the combination of the numbers 8 ya, 9 ku and 3 za which, when added together yields 20, the meaning of which is “those who have no value for society.” The Yakuza bases its Mafia-type relationships on the familiar term oyabun-kobun, where oyabun is the father that protects and the kobun is the son who swears obedience, service and loyalty without reproach.

According to reports issued on trafficking in women to Japan, it is stated that the Yakuza is seriously involved with various strata in Japanese society, such as the economic and political sectors, as well as the authorities. They engage in trafficking in arms, narcotics, smuggling and trafficking in women who come from Thailand, China, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, The Philippines, Russia, Colombia and Mexico.

According to Colombian authorities, the YAKUZA established themselves in Colombia in the mid-80s and took on their centers of operation in the country’s central and southwestern region, including the departments of Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda and Valle del Cauca.

At the onset, members of the Yakuza arrived in Colombia as businessmen who were interesting in “hiring” Colombian women for various jobs in Japan. Others were interested in finding “wives” by catalog. In this way they recruited most of the Colombian women who were later forced to engage in prostitution against their will. By then, the Japanese themselves took over the whole process that trafficking in women implies, from recruitment through exploitation of the women.

Subsequently, the Yakuza enters into business with Colombian organizations that take over recruiting the women and handling reprisals against those who escape, as well as their families, thus maintaining full control over the victims. The presence of Colombians in Japan has allowed them to provide a constant flow of Colombian women to the Yakuza, without the latter organization having to travel to Colombia.

According to certain reports issued by Colombian authorities, it is known that some women have engaged in prostitution and that, in certain cases, after having been trafficked, have struck up a commercial and/or sentimental relationship with members of the Yakuza, becoming recruiters or administrators of the businesses devoted to prostitution.

5. Yakuza links and liaisons

According to the testimony and reports from several of the trafficked women, one can observe certain links and liaisons that are part of the traffickers’ organization in the chain to traffic Colombian women to Japan.

**COLOMBIA**

Talent  \(\leftrightarrow\) Contact  \(\rightarrow\) Recruiters

Intermediaries  \(\rightarrow\) Companions  \(\rightarrow\) JAPAN

Fetcher  \(\rightarrow\) Manilla

Collectors  \(\leftrightarrow\) Guards

Chimpiras

Yakuza

Talent:
This is a term that the networks of traffickers use to refer to the trafficked women. In some cases, the women travel in small groups. In other cases, they believe that they are traveling alone, but during the voyage realize that there are other women who are traveling to the same destination. In other cases, when the trafficked women arrive in Japan, they recognize each other, since they have been traveling together, without knowing that they are bound for the same destination.

Contact:
As its name indicates, these are the persons in charge of contacting women who are to be trafficked to Japan. In most cases, they are neighbors or acquaintances and, in turn, can be relatives of the recruiters, or intermediaries or manillas. A contact can earn between 200 and 500 dollars for each woman that is sent.

In certain cases it is the trafficked women themselves who seek out the contacts and offer themselves to travel, given that the stories that are spread regarding migration of Colombian women are many. “Since I started school, I heard of girls who would go to work in Japan and returned in five or six years, loaded with money to live well; they would buy two and even three apartments,
a car, and the rest of the money they would stash away in the bank to live peacefully for the rest of their lives. Some said they took care of elderly people or children, or that they cooked in family homes... and others spoke of modeling contracts to work for magazines or in movies.”

Recruiters:
These are persons who are entrusted with interviewing the women, extending the job offer, verifying that the woman satisfies the physical requirements that are called for, and begin the procedures for the trip. In most cases, the women enter into a debt with the recruiters, which ranges between 10,000 and 50,000 dollars for expenses, such as airline tickets, travel money, travel documents and passport, among others.

This person has access to all of the information about the trafficked woman and is familiar with her family environment. In the event that the woman were to resist the traffickers, or in case that she were to decide to escape, her relatives are the first to be threatened and intimidated to ensure that the woman does not report, returns to the network, or pays off the debt.

In some cases, the women that have been trafficked strike up a relationship with the traffickers and become recruiters for other women. There are documented cases of Colombian women who travel to Mexico to recruit Mexican women that are then taken to New York and subsequently to Japan.

In other cases, the trafficked women are forced to recruit other young women in order to reduce the amount of the debt entered into with the network and thus, pay it up “quicker.” Recruiters, in some cases, perform the role of an intermediary.

Intermediaries
These are the ones who have direct contact with the Manilla. They design the travel route, the mechanisms to evade migration controls, and are entrusted with periodically providing their contacts in Japan with women.

Companions
These are the persons entrusted with making sure that the women arrive at their destination, from their native rural areas, smaller towns and intermediate-sized cities, to the capital city of their department. From there, to where they can board an international flight, whether it be to a Latin American country, to Europe or the United States, in order to continue their connection to an Asian country or directly to Japan.

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16 Travel money: money that serves the purpose of justifying entering as tourists in the destination countries and which is taken away from the woman once she has crossed the border. Often times, the passport and return airline ticket are also snatched away from the victims as well, to prevent them from escaping and in this way increasing their dependence on the traffickers.
There can be several companions in this process. In some cases, the women are aware of their presence, whilst in others, they do not.

Forgers:
These persons are dedicated to altering documentation or forging travel documents, stamps, visas, among others. This takes place in a transit country that is used for a short period of time, where the trafficked woman is instructed about her new identity. The most frequently used passports are those from Spain, Peru, Brazil and France. The Colombian Foreign Affairs Ministry corroborates this information in a report that states: “It has been detected that many of the women who have been contacted are minors; they leave the country and enter Japan with false documents. In this way, they are able to evade problems with the authorities. Similarly, many of them are provided with false passports and national identity cards. On the other hand, some of the passports of the recently arrived women are used for other Colombian women, entrusted with making contacts in Colombia, to return, thus forming a total chaos of false identities. Lately, in accordance with information provided by the victims, the forged passports are made in Hong Kong for a price of 2,000 dollars”\(^\text{17}\).

Fetchers:
These are the persons entrusted with receiving the trafficked women when they arrive in Japan. The women are recognized by the Fetchers by means of photographs or by signals or marks that have been agreed to previously with the contact in Colombia. Their task is to transfer the woman from the airport to the place that the Manilla has decided. In some cases, they are the persons entrusted with requiring and retaining the return ticket and other travel documents.

Manilla:
This term, taken from the English *Manager*, refers to the person who is also known as the "promoter," who is the person who takes care of buying and selling women. According to information provided by the authorities, Colombian women are sold to the manillas at a price of 2 million to 4 million yens. Testimonies rendered by some of the trafficked women, they were sold to the manillas for the amount of the outstanding debt they had entered into. “I was sold to a Japanese manilla for the balance of the debt that I still had not paid. From what I was told, I was still owing one million yens and I was sold this way several times over. When I was no longer good for anything, they turned me over to the immigration police and they deported me”\(^\text{18}\).

Collectors:
Like the name indicates, these are the persons in charge of collecting the amount of money established by the manilla from the women. If the woman is


\(^{18}\) Interview with a Colombian woman trafficked to Japan, who returned to Colombia after having engaged in prostitution for five years. Bogotá, June, 2000
unable to make a payment, she is beaten. The collectors are Japanese, Iranian and Colombian.

Guards:
Are the persons entrusted with constantly guarding the trafficked women. "We were allowed to leave, but we were always accompanied by those men who never stopped watching us. It was so horrible, we could feel their breath down our backs... we would walk around the streets of Tokyo until it was again time for our shift at the theater." 19.

“Chimpiras”:
These are Japanese persons who work as informers and messengers for the Japanese Mafia.

Yakuza:
This is the term by which the Japanese Mafia is known. According to Japanese authorities, there is a different Yakuza in every province, the strongest being the one in Osaka, with 18,700 members. Colombian authorities consider that 40% of the Colombian women that are sold for prostitution are taken to Japan. Japan has become the Mecca for trafficking in Colombian women.

A recruiter who worked for eight years trafficking in Colombian women states that “they are the real owners of the business. If a woman is sold to that Mafia, she is put to work without pay, they don’t feed her, they tie her up so that she does not escape, and it can take years to pay up the debt “ 20.

6. The Routes:
Traffickers of Colombian women use different routes to get the women to Japan. Some of these are the following:

- In Latin America:
  ⇒ Colombia, Peru, Thailand, Japan
  ⇒ Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, United States, Japan
  ⇒ Colombia, Costa Rica, Japan
  ⇒ Colombia, Brazil/ Chile/ Argentina, Japan
  ⇒ Colombia, Mexico, United States, Japan

- In Europe:
  ⇒ Colombia, Madrid, Japan
  ⇒ Colombia, Frankfort, Japan
  ⇒ Colombia, Amsterdam, Japan
  ⇒ Colombia, France, Japan

- In Asia
  ⇒ Colombia, Korea, Japan

19 Interview with a Colombian woman trafficked to Japan. This young lady was recruited by a relative and sold to a Japanese manilla for two million yens. Bogotá, October, 1998.
20 SEMANA Magazine, Sex and Nightmare, pages 66 through 68, September 18, 2000
7. Upon arrival:

Information gathered to date has shown us that most of the Colombian women who are trafficked to Japan are destined for the sex industry. In the case of women who are forced to engage in prostitution in Japan, they are placed at:

- **Massage parlors**: At these establishments, clients pay an average of 15,000 yen for oral sex. The woman can be with the client between 30 and 40 minutes. They take care of an average of 10 clients per day.

- **The theater**: Women start their work at 9:00 am and end at midnight. The woman goes up on a stage and does strip tease or act out a scene. In some cases, women perform sex in public with the client. In other cases, men line up in their changing room. The client pays between 3,000 and 5,000 yen. The average number of clients per shift is 10 to 19 men.

- **The streets**: Women must solicit clients in the bars and discos; others stand on the sidewalks. A woman told us that "The work is harder there. In this area there are many discotheques... it is supposedly in downtown Tokyo and is known as Sinji. There are all kinds of men and the police patrol the streets in search of foreigners.”

- **Offices**: These provide escort services, where the client chooses the woman by catalog through a telephone contact. With respect to this, one of the women told us "We called them interview places. They are places where our pictures are all there... there are women from everywhere, of all sizes and ages, with our respective numbers so that they can identify us.”

8. Reports:

The pressure that is exerted by the traffickers’ organization on the women, to the extent of submission, intimidation and fear of reprisal against their relatives in Colombia, are the may deterrents that influence the women against reporting the crime of trafficking in persons.

On the other hand, the fact that they are in a different country, Japan, in this case, where the migration authorities give more consideration to the fact that the woman is an illegal immigrant than to her condition as the victim of a crime, which Trafficking in Persons is, has resulted in that, in most cases, they be deported to their country of origin.

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21 Interview with a Colombian woman trafficked to Japan, who returns to Colombia after engaging in prostitution for five years. Bogotá, June, 2000.
22 Idem
23 Trafficking in Persons: a term adopted by the United Nations in the Convention against Organized Transnational Crime, which refers to trafficking in persons, regardless of their sex or age, for purposes of exploitation.
The fact that they do not speak the language and cannot communicate with the authorities or with other organizations and entities that could provide help in these cases, is another of the reasons why a trafficked woman does not report.

According to the Colombian embassy, “during the last two years we have received 20 statements at the Consulate, signed by victims of trafficking in women. However, there are a large number of verbal reports from young girls that have been forced to engage in prostitution.”

Colombian authorities have undertaken several operations between 1997 and 1999, which allowed for the release of 32 women and the arrest of 40 persons who were related with trafficking in Colombian women to Japan.

In 1999, the cases that were prosecuted for trafficking in women in Colombia were 102; however, there is no information as to how many of these are related directly with Japan. On the other hand, during the year 2000, the Fundación ESPERANZA received 6 cases of Colombian women who had been trafficked to Japan, of which two have reported.

9. A violation of Human Rights:

Trafficking in women is a violation of Human Rights, since it attacks the integrity of persons. Trafficked women are subjected to physical and psychological violence, intimidation, blackmail, kidnapping, lack of communication, privation of their liberty and of being able to decide what to do with their lives and their bodies, when bought and sold by the networks of traffickers.

In most receiving or destination countries, the women do not have equal conditions to access justice, since there are no laws that penalize this crime within the internal order of these countries. Thus, the fact that they are foreign migrants predominates over their condition as victims of trafficking in persons, and in other cases, the fact that the victim engages in prostitution aggravates this in the proceedings, since it taints her version as the facts, which is perceived as “doubtful.”

Trafficking in persons is considered to be the third most serious crime in the world, after trafficking in drugs and arms. In December, 2000, the Protocol for the prevention, repression and penalization of trafficking in persons, particularly women and children was approved, at the United Nations Convention against Organized Transnational Crime.

26 A minor is understood to be a person of either sex who is less than 18 years of age.
On the other hand, certain NGOs that defend Human Rights have prepared and published Minimum Standards for the Protection of Trafficked Persons, the objective of which is to ensure that the Human Rights of the victims of this crime be respected and protected by the States and the authorities. Also, with the purpose that the NGOs that provide assistance to trafficked persons know of the existence of international instruments that protect Human Rights, and for society in general to recognize and report the abuses committed against the victims of trafficking in women.

10. Recommendations

Trafficking in Colombian women to Japan is a phenomenon that is on the rise and there is insufficient information to allow dimensioning the magnitude of it. Therefore, it is necessary for research to be carried out, both in Colombia and Japan, to allow for a diagnosis of the situation.

To perform prevention activities in the high risk population groups in Colombia, aimed at alerting the population of the existence of this phenomenon and of the situation that is lived by Colombian women abroad. This prevention should also be carried out in Japan, given that society needs to be informed of the existence of trafficking in women in their country and of the Human Rights violations that are committed against the persons who are trafficked in that country.

By informing the population, one can raise awareness in the community, facilitating that they report, cooperate with the authorities and protect the women who have been trafficked.

The States should recognize the existence of trafficking in women in their territories and adopt legal measures that penalize this crime and, at the same time, protect the Human Rights of the trafficked persons, bearing in mind the legislation and international instruments that exist. It is necessary for Colombia and Japan to sign bilateral agreements for legal cooperation, the protection of witnesses and the repatriation of the trafficked persons under decent and honorable conditions.

To create mechanisms for assistance, both in the country of destination and of origin, that allow providing for follow up of the trafficked women, facilitating their safe and assisted return to their communities and families, thus attaining that they be reincorporated into society.

To provide training for public officials, police and migration authorities so that they can be informed, trained and specialized in trafficking in persons, thus achieving that a professional and adequate treatment be afforded them, given the dimensions of the problem.

27 Document prepared by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, GAATW, the International Human Rights Law Group and the Foundation Against Trafficking in Women. This document is available in several languages and was published in 1999.