

Ads lure teenagers into vice

OPERATORS of vice dens are busily recruiting young girls in thinly veiled job advertisements placed in a number of local Chinese newspapers.

The advertisements are all designed to exploit the naive and sometimes gullible school leaver or someone desperately trying to get work during the long summer vacation months.

Most all the jobs are for "ushers", public relations officers and "social escorts" to work in dubious nightclubs, popularly known as "fish ball dens".

To lure a prospective employee into their clutches, the operators offer jobs which pay exceptionally well.

An "usher" can earn up to \$50 or \$60 an hour, a "public relations officer" up to \$100 an hour and a "social escort" can pick up nearly \$10,000 a month.

There is also the attraction of being paid on a daily basis.

If that is insufficient to attract a prospective job seeker, the operators of these "nightclubs" also offer "advances", ranging from several hundreds to thousands of dollars to those desperately in need of money. This is usually in the form of a loan, with an exorbitant daily rate of interest, that is repayable daily.

Social workers describe the summer vacation months as "the open season" with operators preying on the young.

Students and school leavers looking for

jobs are naturally the prime target groups," one social worker said.

"Apart from the chance to earn so much money, few really believe that once they are caught up in the clutches of the operators, their only means of escape is with the help of the authorities.

"Threats of bodily harm are a normal practice when the victims tell the operator that they want to leave. Then there are the loan sharks who batten on those who have taken advances," said the social worker.

Few of the victims dare to report to the police because of the stigma attached to working in such places, said a social worker from Mongkok.

She had personally seen school-girls "graduating" from "an usher" into prostitution within days.

"It is a sad story. Even with police raids on the vice dens, the penalties are insufficient to deter an operator from re-opening his business within a matter of hours on the same premises."

Pointing to the "job advertisements" she suggested that the authorities can do little because of the legal implications.

"It may be that the only answer is newspaper proprietors to screen these advertisements before accepting them. It is little common sense to be able to differentiate between a genuine advertisement and those put out by operators to prey on the young girls.

She criticised the authorities for not introducing tough anti-vice laws and penalties for those convicted of procuring under-aged girls.

"Vice will always flourish in an open society like Hongkong. It is unavoidable. But steps should be taken to protect the young," she said.