

Requests for legal advice from women who suffered sexual abuse in childhood have been on the increase since a 2014 court ruling that granted a woman's request for compensation.

With the aid of lawyers, the woman is campaigning for a suspension of the statute of limitations, which often prevents victims from filing lawsuits or criminal complaints.

Since the Sapporo High Court ruling in September 2014, lawyer Toko Teramachi, who worked for the plaintiff, has received about 20 inquiries from women in their 30s and 40s who claim to have experienced similar sexual abuse.

"I was surprised to learn there were so many victims," Teramachi said.

The high court ruling, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in July this year, ordered an uncle of the plaintiff, in her 40s, to pay her about ¥30 million (\$246,000), including ¥20 million in damages and ¥9 million to cover medical costs for treating depression attributed to the abuse.

"Sexual abuse of children is committed mostly by relatives or other acquaintances, so the cases tend to be kept quiet," said Toshiko Kamo, chief of the Institute of Women's Health at Tokyo Women's Medical University, who provides psychological treatment for plaintiffs involved in such lawsuits.

"The woman's courageous act should be the start of a new movement and an attitude of never forgiving sexual abuse should be shared widely in society," Kamo said.

Time limitations on such suits remain a major stumbling block to efforts to make perpetrators accountable.

The right to seek compensation in civil litigation expires 20 years after the illegal act has taken place, while there is a seven-year statute of limitations for the filing of criminal complaints.

"I sometimes have to tell a woman seeking advice that she is no longer eligible to

file a damages suit as the 20-year limit has passed,” Teramachi said.

According to the high court ruling, the plaintiff, from Kushiro in Hokkaido, was sexually abused by the uncle between the ages of 3 and 8. She began to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder around 1983 and depression around 2006.

A district court ruling rejected the woman’s petition on the grounds that when she filed the suit in 2011, 20 years had already passed since the abuse ended in 1983.

But the high court made a different judgment on the starting point of the statute of limitations, ruling that the reckoning should have started when she developed her illnesses. The time limit for seeking compensation, therefore, had expired for PTSD but not for depression, it concluded.

The woman and Teramachi have met lawmakers to lobby for amendments to the laws so that the statute of limitations under the Civil Code and Penal Code is suspended until sexual abuse victims turn 20 years of age. They also requested better assistance from medical specialists.

According to lawyers for the woman and the Justice Ministry, such suspensions have been adopted in some U.S. states, Germany, France and South Korea.

The woman and her supporters plan to submit the same requests to the government, along with the signatures of people supporting their call for a suspension of the statute of limitations.

“I hope children who are living in despair will not come up against the same wall in 10 or 20 years as the one I faced,” the woman said in a message posted on the Internet by Teramachi after the Supreme Court ruling. “All we can do is to make efforts step by step.”