



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

Traffic in Women to Japan

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(translation by Martha Ono)

As I wandered among the procurers who “import” women from all over Asia to work in the pleasure districts of Japan, I was buffeted by offhand remarks like, “I got this girl for a song and sold that one for a cool profit.”

Tens of thousands of Asian women have been lured to Japan under the sham of work contracts only to be subjected to the worst treatment that the sex slave trade offers. Some say that things are looking up because of the rapid decline in sex tours to Asian countries. But the underlying significance of this declaration is that the “North - South sex tour problem” has just assumed a new form, bringing the issue closer to home, where it is continuing to escalate to unknown heights.

The sudden rise in the number of women entering Japan corresponds to the liberalization of international travel by ASEAN countries, starting with Taiwan in 1979. Entering on tourist or business visas, they engage in unauthorized work such as bar hostessing or stripping. And very soon they find that they have overstayed their short-term visas.

It is difficult to estimate the real number of foreign women working illegally in Japan. There are said to be thousands of Korean women working as *kisaeng* (entertainers who sing and dance in nightclubs, but are also prostitutes) in “Korea Clubs” scattered

throughout Japan. Add to these figures women from Taiwan and Thailand and the number of Asian women now in Japan easily reaches tens of thousands.

How did these women get here? The route from Thailand used to take two basic forms: A Japanese scout would go and find recruits, or enterprising women aspiring to advance their financial conditions would come to Japan on their own. Recently, however, a new figure has appeared on the scene: the agent who procures and brings women into Japan.

Behind the scenes, however, the real masterminds of the Asian sex traffic are organized crime syndicates. According to officials of Narita International Airport, between January and October 1981, 535 people with gangster connections departed from Narita on smuggling operations to buy women and contraband. While the dealers are making huge profits, most of the women receive relatively little for their work.

Facts like these make it easy to see the “crime” in “organized crime” and who the



victims are. Would the same treatment be given to Japanese or Westerners? And yet tens of thousands of Asian women are being bought, imported and sold as cheap sex commodities. These women suffer the compounded curse of being Asian and being female, which justifies whatever treatment they get in the eyes of those involved in their exploitation.

International trade relations and sex trade

The homelands of these thousands of women are in many cases the very countries which are struggling with rapidly mounting foreign debts. These strained circumstances push more and more women out of their countries to work as prostitutes abroad.

The Korean *kisaeng* come to Japan with their government-issued "entertainment licences" in hand. After training them for two or three weeks in impromptu singing and dancing, the government administers a test and issues the licences.



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However, the monthly wages from the Korea Club, depending on the contract, are remitted directly in *won* to the women's parents or family in Korea. The only cash the woman herself sees is a meal allowance. But almost all the women are already in debt for advances made in preparation for the journey. Who can pay back a debt out of a meal allowance? About all that leaves is prostitution.

The Korean *kisaeng* scattered around Japan get about US\$ 800 - per month. Add to this prostitution earnings, and the total figure can have a substantial impact on the national debt hanging over South Korea.

The government recruits prostitutes and licences them. This can only be seen as government controlled prostitution for the purpose of foreign income.

Japanese economic aggression

The encouragement of international prostitution by Asian countries is in large part due to Japanese economic aggression. Considering the relationship between the Japanese national economy and the rest of Asia, Japan's profits from the one-sided robbery of Asia's wealth stand out in stark relief. This calculated exploitation includes taking advantage of the "nationalized prostitution" of despotic governments through the massive importation of Asian women as the cheapest sex objects on the market.

Sexual exploitation and economic exploitation are two sides of the same coin, the interplay of which is intensifying the sex traffic problem in Asia. These women streaming into a strange land follow in the footsteps of Japan's own unfortunate *karayuki-san*, women who set out for

lives of prostitution in Southeast Asia, Australia, India, and even Zanzibar around the turn of the century. Transcending time and national boundaries, the poverty of women continues to be exploited.

Source: *Trouble & Strife* 12, Winter 1987, pp. 11-13. Norwich, U.K.