



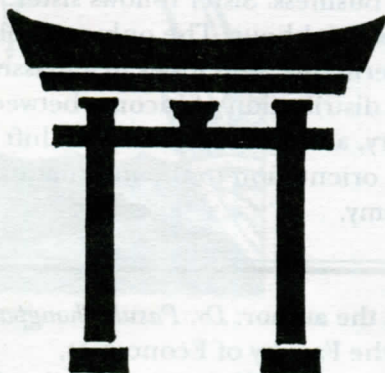
The Plight of Women Entertainers in Japan

by Carmelita G. Nuqui

Of the Asian entertainment workers in Japan, women from Southeast Asia, particularly Filipinas and Thais, constitute the biggest number. Women from Taiwan, Korea and China come next and those from South Asia foremost of which are Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans. The prominence of these countries, as top senders of entertainers, both documented and undocumented, dates back to the halcyon days of sex tours around Asia in the 1970s and early 1980s, where their governments played willing hosts to organized tourism. It was then subsequently banned as a result of massive protests, both in the home front and in Japan.

Statistics indicate that from the period 1981 to 1991 Asian women workers who entered Japan to work as entertainers number at about 64,078 or 66% of the total 89,572 foreign entertainment workers in Japan during that period. Top sending countries included the Philippines (56,851); Korea (2,735); Taiwan

(2,021); China (1,145) and Thailand (410). On the other hand, an equally high incidence of undocumented entertainment workers was estimated by the Japanese Ministry of Justice in November 1991, topping the list were 3,575 (94%) Filipinas out of the total 3,806 deported women who were on tourist visa or on short stay. (See table on page 49).



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Table 1. Undocumented Entertainers and Short Stay Workers by Sex
(Japanese Ministry of Justice: 1991)

Nationality	Undocumented Entertainment Workers		Short Stay	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Filipino	3,575	697	10,594	12,269
Malaysian	5	0	6,850	18,326
Thai	2	3	18,794	13,383
Burmese	0	0	2,412	0
Korean	9	5	8,756	19,097
Taiwanese	9	3	2,895	2,597
Chinese	46	2	1,012	1,713
Pakistani	0	0	125	7,573
Bangladeshi	0	0	75	7,084
Sri Lankan	0	0	198	2,489
Iranian	0	0	592	21,067
Others	147	175	6,385	14,042

The vast number of these women suffer from various cases of maltreatment and exploitation experienced in their places of work and in their relationships with Japanese men.

Service Labor Environment in Japan

Labor shortage in Japan continues as a result of the increasing volumes of business and industrial activities. This has also caused competition among industrial firms, thus various measures have been made to attract potential workers such as higher wages, more paid holidays and fewer working hours ("Japanese labor shortage," *Monterey Review* Vol. 13, no. 1 Fall 1992, p. 38). The situation obviously contributes to the attractiveness of those entertainment joints to service the rest and recreation needs of these workers. Even if

Push and Pull Factors

Women usually flock to Japan for want of high paying jobs that may not be readily available at home. Or if there are jobs at all, the pay is extremely low. The situation is complemented by the vast employment opportunities in various industries in Japan.



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Organized Recruitment

Recruitment for Japan from Asian countries is commonly being facilitated by syndicates and/or unscrupulous individuals. Those vulnerable to these recruiters are mostly poor young women and are low educated. In Thailand most women are procured from rural villages who are quick to respond to the grandiose promise of getting a good job and better pay in Japan. They are selected and traded for about ¥1,500,000 and forced to work as prostitutes under virtual control. (*Newsletter* no. 6 June 1993 p. 6).

Saalaa, a Thai women's shelter documented that these women even before working are told that they owe about ¥4,000,000 as *shakkin* (debt) to the owner of the snack bar in which they will start working as prostitutes and they have to clear the debt before they could leave the bar. Of course, they do not know why, for

working hours have been increased, the chances are that workers still feel the necessity of having to release work tensions and look for ways and means to entertain themselves in the company of co-workers and friends. Japan's economic development and stability go hand-in-hand with the lucrative performance of the entertainment industry. The entertainment industry in this regard, is a necessary accessory of the Japanese workforce.

they have not borrowed any money from the bar owner at all. Some of them may be released after paying off their debts but most of them are told they have another debt which they do not really owe at all. Refusing to follow the system would mean threat or physical harm to them and/or their respective families.

Women recruits in the Philippines, on the other hand, are from the provinces or cities. Some of these women enter Japan for a short stay but end up working outside their visa's limits. In general, organized recruitment is being facilitated in a systematic way.

Problems Encountered in Work and Relationships

Women who come to Japan also have their sad tales to tell, starting from their work application in the homefront, during the course of their work and on their return home. Cases of illegal recruitment, fees and contract substitution are the most common cases of exploitation experienced by these women, in addition to anxieties that go in finding sources to finance one's application for overseas job. It has always been the need to support their families that motivate these women to seek jobs in Japan.

While on the job, the women especially those undocu-



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mented ones, are twice as vulnerable. These undocumented workers are those who have overstayed, specifically those who entered as tourists and on occasions operate under fake passports or visa. Under these circumstances and in view of the strict immigration law of Japan, they take the high risk of being at the mercy of their employers or recruiters. The setback therefore comes in cases of serious problems and they do not have resources to come out in the open, like reporting to the police or seeking help from proper authorities. Exploitation in terms of low wages, poor working conditions and inadequate accommodations are some of the problems that go with their work. Moreover the practice of withholding their passports presents another serious concern. Usually their employers do this as a leverage and as a means of control. The women then who are not knowledgeable about Japanese labor laws and how to reach out to halfway houses, or to government welfare centers are unduly disadvantaged and marginalized.

Newspaper reports about prostitution busts are a common occurrence in Japan — and most of these relate to Asian women. *The Mainichi Daily News* reported that during one of the busting operations in Yamamota, Nara Prefecture in October 1989 around 150 Asian women mostly Filipinas and Taiwanese were rounded up, detained and later deported. These women revealed that brokers were believed to be trafficking syndicates — the latter promised them jobs as waitresses, singers and dancers with ¥150,000 as monthly pay and a condominium accommodation. But as soon as they arrived in Japan, they were forced to work as prostitutes under strict control. These women also reported that these brokers took a big percentage of the tips from their customers. In all operations, the women reported that the inns where they work, pay the brokers ¥800,000 to ¥1.5 million for each woman. During their stay with the employers, they were not allowed to go out even on free days, but could only shop for a few hours on

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Saturdays and/or Sundays. These women who could not stand the harsh restrictions and severe restraints chose the bolder way to get out of the miserable condition, defying risks even if it means taking their own or other person's life, as a way to escape.

Discrimination in Society

Apart from the work-related anxieties that the women develop, there is also their experience of discrimination in Japanese society. Aside from the men's sexist orientation, there are conservative Japanese women who regard these foreign entertainers with contempt and racial prejudice. Specifically, Japanese wives accuse them of unduly engaging their husbands into sexual activity. On occasions, Japanese women were also the sources of reports on the whereabouts and activities of some women, consequently leading to their arrest.

Citing a case compiled by Siriporn Skrobaneck, co-founder of the Women's Information Center in Bangkok, Thailand, it is said that racial prejudice led to the death of two Filipinas trapped in a fire that burned down a cabaret club in Okinawa in 1983. It was alleged that firemen, realizing that the place was the residence of foreign prostitutes, took their time in breaking the window bars.

Another case of discrimination concerns the unabated growth on the number of Thai women affected with AIDS which has caused some conservative Japanese women to ostracize Thai women.



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