

Young Japanese Women Vie for a Once-Scorned Job, By HIROKO TABUCHI

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Eri Momoka is a single mother who turned her hostess career into a lucrative fashion business, where she designs and sells hostess clothing and often appears on television.

TOKYO — The women who pour drinks in Japan’s sleek gentlemen’s clubs were once shunned because their duties were considered immodest: lavishing adoring (albeit nonsexual) attention on men for a hefty fee.

But with that line of work, called hostessing, among the most lucrative jobs available to women and with the country neck-deep in a recession, hostess positions are increasingly coveted, and hostesses themselves are gaining respectability and even acclaim. Japan’s worst recession since World War II is changing mores.

“More women from a diversity of backgrounds are looking for hostess work,” said Kentaro Miura, who helps manage seven clubs in Kabuki-cho, Tokyo’s glittering red-light district. “There is less resistance to becoming a hostess. In fact, it’s seen as a glamorous job.”

But behind this trend is a less-than-glamorous reality. Employment opportunities for young women, especially those with no college education, are often limited to low-paying, dead-end jobs or temp positions.

Even before the economic downturn, almost 70 percent of women ages 20 to 24 worked jobs with few benefits and little job security, according to a government labor survey. The situation has worsened in the recession.

For that reason, a growing number of Japanese women seem to believe that work as a hostess, which can easily pay \$100,000 a year, and as much as \$300,000 for the biggest stars, makes economic sense.

Even part-time hostesses and those at the low end of the pay scale earn at least \$20 an hour, almost twice the rate of most temp positions.

In a 2009 survey of 1,154 high school girls, by the Culture Studies Institute in Tokyo, hostessing ranked No. 12 out of the 40 most popular professions, ahead of public servant (18) and nurse (22).

“It’s only when you’re young that you can earn money just by drinking with men,” said Mari Hamada, 17.

Many of the cabaret clubs, or *kyabakura*, are swank establishments of dark wood and plush cushions, where waiters in bow ties and hostesses in evening gowns flit about guests sipping fantastically expensive wine.

Some hostesses work to pay their way through college or toward a vocational degree, or to save up to start their own businesses.

Hostessing does not involve prostitution, though religious and women’s groups point out that hostesses can be pressured into having sex with clients, and that hostessing can be an entry point into Japan’s sprawling underground sex industry.

Hostesses say that those are rare occurrences, and that exhaustion from a life of partying is a more common hazard in their profession.

Young women are drawn nonetheless to Cinderella stories like that of Eri Momoka, a single mother who became a hostess and worked her way out of penury to start a TV career and her own line of clothing and accessories.

“I often get fan mail from young girls in elementary school who say they want to be like me,” said Ms. Momoka, 27, interviewed in her trademark seven-inch heels. “To a little girl, a hostess is like a modern-day princess.”

Even one member of the Japanese Parliament, Kazumi Ota, was a hostess. That revelation once would have ignited a huge scandal, but it has not. She will run for re-election on the leading opposition party ticket, the Democratic Party of Japan, in the national election next month, and the ticket is expected to unseat the ruling party.

It is unclear how many hostesses work in Japan. In Tokyo alone, about 13,000 establishments offer late-night entertainment by hostesses (and some male hosts), including members-only clubs frequented by politicians and company executives, as well as cheaper cabaret clubs.

Hostesses tend to drinks, offer attentive conversation and accompany men on dates off premises, but do not generally have sex for money. (Men who seek that can go to prostitutes, though prostitution is illegal.)

Hostesses are often ranked according to popularity among clients, with the No. 1 of each club assuming the status of a star.

Mineri Hayashi has made it to the top of her club, Celux, six years after coming to Tokyo from northern Japan. One recent evening, she readied herself for an elaborate birthday event her club was throwing in her honor.

Outside the club, bigger-than-life posters of Ms. Hayashi adorned the street. At the club, a dozen men put up balloons and lined up Champagne bottles.



The club's clientele is diverse, including workaday salarymen, business owners and other men unwinding after work.

Celux hopes to make more than \$60,000 on Ms. Hayashi's birthday party, which will be attended by scores of regulars.



Mineri Hayashi calls a client to see if he's coming to her birthday celebration at Club Celux.

“Life has been fun, and I want to keep on having fun,” Ms. Hayashi said, placing a tiara in her hair. She talks of plans to retire next year and travel abroad.

Her 17-year-old sister, who also wants to be a hostess, may succeed her. Ms. Hayashi is supportive. “I just want her to be happy,” she said.

Popular culture is also fueling hostessing’s popularity. TV sitcoms are starting to depict cabaret hostesses as women building successful careers. Hostesses are also writing best-selling books, be they on money management or the art of conversation.

A magazine that features hostess fashion has become wildly popular with women outside the trade, who mimic the heavily made-up eyes and big, coiffed hair.

But Serina Hoshino, 24, another Tokyo hostess, is exhausted from the late nights and heavy drinking.

Slumped in her chair at the M.A.C. hair salon, she talked about endless after-hours dates with clients. Stumbling back home at dawn, she sleeps the rest of the day. On her days off, she hardly leaves her apartment.

Her reward is about \$16,000 a month, almost 10 times the salary of most women her age.

“It’s nice to be independent, but it’s very stressful,” Ms. Hoshino said, speaking through a cloud of hair spray and cigarette smoke.

In recent months, clubs have also started to feel the squeeze of the bad economy. Hostess wages are starting to fall to as little as \$16 an hour. Still, that rate remains above many daytime jobs here.

So, the young women keep coming. The Kabuki-cho district is lined with dark-suited scouts recruiting women. One club recruiter said some women turn up to interviews with their mothers in tow, which never would have happened when the job was less respectable.

“Women are being laid off from daytime jobs and so look for work with us,” said Hana Nakagawa, who runs a placement agency for higher-end clubs in Tokyo.

She gets about 40 inquiries a week from women looking for hostess jobs, twice as many as before the downturn.

Atsushi Miura, an expert on the issue, says hostessing will be popular among Japanese women as long as other well-paying jobs are scarce.

“Some people still say hostesses are wasting their life away,” he said. “But rather than criticizing them, Japan should create more jobs for young women.”



Mineri Hayashi, 28, is the No. 1 hostess at Club Celux in Kabuki-cho, Tokyo's main red light district. M.A.C. Hair is a hair salon in Tokyo's main red light district. According to the salon's manager, Miyuki Gunji, 90 percent of their clientele are hostesses.