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## **Women's Work and Japan's Hostess Culture**

*By The Editors*

A recent New York Times article described the Japanese profession of hostessing, which involves entertaining men at establishments where customers pay a lot to flirt and drink with young women (services that do not, as a rule, involve prostitution). The jobs, the article said, are increasingly regarded as glamorous and coveted, because the dismal Japanese economy offers few opportunities for young women, let alone at the relatively high pay that hostesses can earn.

But could the popularity of the jobs reflect something more basic about the role and expectations of women in Japanese society? While hostessing is still not accepted as respectable by middle- or upper-class families, what besides the economy is fueling its popularity?

- Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow, women's studies professor
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### **Shows That Demean Women**



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"Kyabakura," where thousands of Japanese women work as hostesses across the country, are establishments that fall somewhere between a cabaret and a club. They sprang up in the mid-1980s and represent just one of several types of establishments, including "soap lands," pubs, snack bars and "pink salons" that offer various types of services for men.

As a rule, kyabakura hostesses do not engage in sex with their customers, and men are forbidden from touching the women's breasts and other body parts, but recently more establishments seem to allow this.

While many of these women look upon hostessing as a career that pays more than a lot of other jobs available to those with not much education or specialized skills, there are college students who work part time in kyabakura to earn spending money or help pay for tuition. The attitude among such students seems to be that as long as the men aren't going to touch their bodies, nothing is wrong in getting paid — and paid much more than working part time at a restaurant or convenience store — if men want to pay money to have a drink or meal with them.

In my view, variety programs on television that feature high-earning hostesses who invest considerable money and time in drawing and keeping steady customers are responsible in large part for creating the illusion among even young girls that this is some kind of a glamorous profession.

Growing consumerism and the desire to acquire brand items — clothes, bags, accessories — and the attitude that it's O.K. to do whatever it takes to get money, also fuel its attraction to young girls. I would hasten to add, though, that hostessing is by no means looked upon favorably by most people, nor as a desirable or rewarding career by middle to upper-middle income families.

Popular mass media in Japan depict women in explicitly sexist and demeaning ways that serve to perpetuate stereotypes of females as dependent on men and lacking the ability and will to make their own way in life. The mass media have become self-regulatory when it comes to the use of language in reporting on disabled people or those belonging to minority groups. But similar attention has not been given concerning women, sexual minorities or foreigners.

Women's groups have continued to raise objections, but at the heart of the problem is that the general public continues to tolerate variety shows in which men comment on the size of a woman's breast, for example, or quiz programs where a woman removes a piece of clothing every time she gives a wrong answer, not recognizing that such behavior violates women's dignity.

The Japanese government, in theory at least, has endorsed the goal of creating a gender-equal society based on respect for the human rights of women and men. Little has been done, though, to educate people so that they acquire awareness of, and sensitivity toward, issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace, domestic violence or sexist depictions of women in the mass media. A prime example of this is that the country's political leaders continue to make derogatory comments about women (referring to them as "baby-producing machines," or to those beyond child-bearing age as "useless") with apparent impunity.

At the same time, schools have not done enough to equip young girls with the knowledge, skills, self-confidence and pride to combat and overcome the negative stereotypes and to strive for independence and self-realization through acquiring careers that do not simply exploit their sexuality.

### **Many Cinderellas, Few Princes**



*Nobue Suzuki is a professor of anthropology at the Faculty of Letters, Chiba University, Japan.* Hostessing in Japan's night entertainment industry has provided many women and some men, Japanese and non-Japanese, an opportunity that most other jobs would not have given them: financial ascendancy, and skills and knowledge in dealing with customers to eventually run their own businesses. But does hostessing bring women a rosy life and socioeconomic mobility? The answer is yes for only the fortunate few.

It's worthwhile to remember that Japan has been recently criticized (again!) by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women for failing to alleviate gender inequality.

Japanese women's gender empowerment index in 2008 was ranked 58th out of 108 countries, down from 42nd in 2006.

Young women today fancy the celebrity lifestyle in hostessing characterized by tiaras, gowns, perfumes and fun. Like Cinderella, however, most of them can experience a taste of the "good life" within a limited time. After their youthful attractiveness wears off, what awaits them is a barely survivable level of livelihood, unless they meet a reliable "prince." Under the recurring recessions that began in the 1990s, expecting a prince has become even more unrealistic than ever before, as numerous male workers have been stripped of secure employment and decent pay. Despite and perhaps because of that, some of these young women realize that they are just out to enjoy a momentary glow.

Structurally, hostesses are still confined within a niche of providing emotional labor, where they cheer men with their feminine demeanor and services. Learning individual names, affiliations, titles and personal attributes while drinking and paying attention to each customer's needs, demands physical exertion and mental gymnastics. But career development in this field is nearly impossible.

Prior to the current boom of hostessing, for the past 30 years or so numerous immigrant women and men from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the former Soviet bloc have also taken up this job. In the case of Filipino hostesses, many of them came to Japan with entertainer visas. Their lives were confined within the night hours and the premises of the clubs. Developing any meaningful social ties with the host country was almost nonexistent.

Today, Filipino hostesses are no longer allowed to enter Japan on that visa for the suspicion that they engage in prostitution. Those who had stayed in Japan by marrying Japanese men are now middle-aged and taking up menial jobs with little hope for upward mobility or getting out of a "second citizen" status. While pampering men at nightclubs during the 1990s and 2000s, many of them completely missed the chance to acquire skills such as using computers and the Internet as a way to land an office job.

For the Japanese women as well as the immigrant women, their "choice" in hostessing reflects unkind social conditions and dysfunctions which, as in many other countries, limit their ability to pursue better futures.

### **High Pay but High Costs**



*Aya Ezawa is a sociologist in the Japanese studies program at Leiden University in the Netherlands.* Who are the women who work as hostesses? There are no specific statistics, but it is likely to attract those without a college education and with limited work opportunities. Many hostess clubs try to lure single mothers by offering a comparatively high hourly wage, housing and day care. Essentially, they're targeting women in dire straits. It is also a common occupation among undocumented immigrant women.

The current recession seems to have broadened and diversified the pool of hostesses, and the influx of women from higher social strata may have heightened the status of hostessing. But rather than reflecting changing attitudes, women are drawn to it for the same reason as before: the promise of a higher income.

While some hostess stars enjoy fame and high salaries, for the vast majority, particularly those working in non-elite establishments, the realities are far from glamorous. Although the job can pay relatively well, it comes with a range of costs, from a stylish wardrobe and frequent hairdresser appointments to cellphone calls and Valentine's Day gifts for clients.

Moreover, hostessing is not just about flirting and partying with clients. Particularly in the cheaper establishments, a certain amount of groping and pinching may be involved. Hostesses hoping to become No. 1 are likely to offer top clients special perks. Even though hostessing does not officially involve sexual intercourse, it is a job that comes with working conditions which in other cases would be considered sexual harassment.

At a time of economic downturn, it is worrisome that the media in Japan and abroad portray hostessing as a glamorous job and a woman's road to success. Instead of focusing on the hostesses, it would make more sense to examine the attitudes of the men who are willing to pay a high price for being entertained, served, and pleased by women with short skirts and heavy makeup.

### **The Reach of the 'Water Trade'**



*Vera Mackie, a research professor in history at the University of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia, is the author of ["Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality."](#)*

The Tokyo hostess clubs are the tip of a huge iceberg of businesses which depend on the selling of sexuality. These businesses are known collectively in Japan as the "water trade," reflecting the casual and transient nature of the work carried out in the sector.

At one extreme, the sector includes the plush clubs of the Ginza district; at the other extreme are immigrant sex workers in conditions of unfree labor. In between are various classes of cabarets, snack bars and karaoke clubs, with infinite variations catering to diverse tastes, including cross-dressed hosts and hostesses.

It is difficult to draw a clear line between prostitution and other forms of entertainment, for all of these places share a common feature. Clients are paying for spending time with attractive attendants, whose sexuality has been turned into a commodity.

Hostessing is one of those non-regular occupations where workers do not receive the kind of welfare, insurance and allowances enjoyed by full-time regular employees of large corporations. Only a small number of hostesses in the most expensive bars would receive high salaries.

Any figures on salaries also need to take into account the working hours, the lack of benefits, and the limited working life of any occupation based on youth and beauty. If we assume that hostesses

receive between ¥2,000 (US \$20.50) and ¥3,000 (US \$31) an hour, then for a 35-hour work week in 48 weeks, it would amount to ¥420,000 (US \$4,335) a month at most, or ¥5,040,000 (US \$52,080) a year.

As for the clients, how are they able to afford such entertainment in a recession; are their companies paying for this entertainment? And how much profit do the proprietors of the clubs extract from the emotional and aesthetic labor of their workers?

### **Ego Boosting, With a Dark Side**



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Hostessing isn't restricted to women; men do it as well. Japan is also full of “host clubs” — where women go to be flirted up and treated as royalty by handsome men. There are many establishments in Japan that openly offer sexual services for money; what is really being sold at the host(ess) clubs is not sex — it's *gijirenai* (virtual love) and sometimes friendship.

In the clubs, customers are made to feel welcome, attractive and interesting. They are assured that someone will listen intently to their problems. In many ways, hosts and hostesses in Japan serve the functions therapists do in our society: they are paid friends, of a sort.

In 1999, while covering the red-light district as a reporter, I spent an evening working at AI, the oldest host club in Tokyo. What surprised me the most was just how much it was like a hostess club — except now I was “the hostess.” I lit the cigarettes for the women, poured their drinks, laughed at their jokes, listened to their problems, complimented their looks — doing it all quite badly but enough to get a tip. Surprisingly, many of the women paying for the fake affection of the well-tanned and immaculately manicured hosts were hostesses themselves. They knew it was all an illusion but didn't care.

However, not all customers understand that it's just a game.

This is why the job can be very dangerous for the women, Japanese or foreign. There are numerous cases of hostesses being stalked, assaulted, and sometimes even killed, by disgruntled customers who wanted more than the fantasy. The *dohan* (outside date) which is part of the job, is particularly risky. The most famous case is that of Lucie Blackman, a young English woman. She vanished on a *dohan* in July of 2000 and was found dismembered in a cave in February of 2001. That's the extremely dark side of “the glamorous business.” The salaries are high but so are the potential costs.