

Japan's sex industry in the year of Corona, 2020

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The sex industry featured prominently in Japan's year of the Corona pandemic. From its earliest stages, the virus was linked to the industry, which was seen as both a vector of infection as well as destination for pandemic-impooverished women. Overall, Japan's sex industry was damaged by the pandemic, not just through reduced revenues but also through some galvanising of public opinion against prostitution being viewed as a welfare safety net for immiserated women.

The earliest report of a sex industry-related business being linked to the pandemic came from the yachting town of Kamagouri in early March 2020. A man recently diagnosed with COVID-19 was caught on CCTV visiting a 'Philippine pub' for the purpose of infecting its staff. Staff received a phone tip-off of his intentions while he was drinking and singing karaoke with hostesses in the venue. He shortly after died of a pre-existing condition in hospital, but not before police laid charges over to his actions, which caused the infection of a staff member.¹

Most of the sex industry and its spin-off businesses (including 'Philippine pubs') were forced to shut down over the summer months of 2020, and, during this time, Japanese media ran stories about the industry's decline.² These included a two-part series on 'sugar-daddy' online businesses that featured testimony from a sex buyer that he had likely infected two women with the virus.³ He nonetheless commented to the reporter that, 'Right now, there are a lot of girls flowing into the sugar market, but because the supply is increasing and demand is decreasing, it's getting much cheaper. That is: the number of women... who have lost work and so have started sugaring is increasing, and the number of "generous" men... is decreasing, causing the price to fall'. According to the testimony of one sex industry broker, one third of women in the industry dropped out and went into daytime jobs during the pandemic.⁴

The prospect that the pandemic would force newly impoverished young women into the sex industry, on the other hand, was joked about in April by one of Japan's most famous comedians who has his own program on the public channel NHK. Okamura Takashi said on radio that the pandemic would mean 'pretty girls will become sex workers for a short time', because

if they don't earn money in a short time frame they'll be hard-pressed. So in a three-month span, you'll see pretty girls suddenly start working hard then suddenly quit... So, be patient. Be patient, save up your money to go to sex clubs, economise if you're not working, and set your sites on those three months.⁵

In response to these comments, members of the Alliance of Feminist Representatives launched monthly protests in Shibuya's main square against sex-buying, and in support of greater public debate about Japan's prostitution-tolerant culture.⁶ These protests, followed by study-seminars held at a nearby community centre, were staged throughout 2020,⁷ and contributed to the building of the abolitionist movement in Japan. This movement was already underway before the pandemic. It comprised groups like the Anti-Pornography and Prostitution Research Group, People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence, Colabo, Lighthouse, and

¹ <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN6H564FN68OIPE00V.html>

² <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/byline/yonahasatoko/20200806-00192027/>

³ <https://bunshun.jp/articles/-/38040>

⁴ <https://www.nishinippon.co.jp/item/n/637700/?page=2>

⁵ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3082278/coronavirus-good-forcing-pretty-girls-sex-workers-japan-comedian>

⁶ <http://senokiyo.main.jp/s11/?p=3076>

⁷ Morita Seiya and Caroline Norma from the Anti-Pornography and Prostitution Research Group gave presentations at these study sessions, on the topics of 'sex work' theory and prostitution legalisation respectively. See <https://ameblo.jp/chocora2535/entry-12627954541.html>

Human Rights Now. Their work came to be newly supported in the pandemic by Fujita Takanori, the director of an NGO called Hot Plus that assists residents in poverty. Thanks to his NGO work, this director had a media profile in Japan as a public commentator on issues of poverty, and a regular newspaper columnist.⁸ Soon after Okamura's comments, he began using this platform to call for the abolition of Japan's sex industry, and wrote a number of articles describing alternative policy approaches like the Nordic Model.⁹ His efforts, in combination with those of abolitionist groups, caused the Japan Communist Party in late 2020 to publish a booklet in which the Nordic Model was discussed favourably, and its newspaper *Akahata* to carry two articles in favour of the Model.¹⁰

Schools throughout Japan were ordered shut from the beginning of March 2020, and statistics emerged shortly after showing the pandemic disproportionately hurting female employment, and especially that of women in precarious jobs.¹¹ Schools did not hold online classes during the three-month shut down (because of adequate internet and computing infrastructure), and even child care centres operated at greatly reduced capacity. So, mothers came to be burdened with childcare and household responsibilities to an extent they were forced to quit work.¹² This shock to women's material circumstances compounded their already strained situation before the pandemic in which the majority were in precarious employment and supported by very weak social infrastructure. At the bottom of this pile are the single mothers and homeless young women in Japan's sex industry, or at risk of entry. A survey of this vulnerable group during the pandemic found that, 'of the about 90% of respondents reporting physical or mental effects [of the pandemic], nearly 70% had said they had thought about wanting to disappear or killing themselves'.¹³ While the effect of the pandemic on this marginalised group was severe, even in the wider Japanese female population by August 2020, '[f]orty women under the age of 20 [had] committed suicide...up from 11 reported the previous August. The number of suicides among women in their 20s jumped to 79 from 56 in the same month last year while that for women in their 30s rose from 44 to 74'.¹⁴ Elevated rates of domestic and sexual violence encouraged by government stay-home policies also saw '[v]ictims of sexual violence...contact...support centers for help on more than 23,000 occasions between April and September, up 15.5 percent from a year earlier'.¹⁵ These outcomes were aggravated by public policies in the pandemic that were insensitive to women's circumstances and guided by the extreme economic austerity that underpinned Japan's administration of the prior two decades.

The Japanese government initially excluded women in the sex industry from a subsidy scheme for workers in the pandemic,¹⁶ but efforts by abolitionist feminists, such a letter to the minister signed by academics Onozawa Akane, Kim Puja, and Nakasatomi Hiroshi, saw this decision overturned. This revised decision was different, however, from the government's continuing exclusion of sex businesses from an industry-support financial subsidy scheme.¹⁷ This decision was justified on the grounds that the sex industry was an 'enterprise of harm', even if partly legalised Japan. In response, an escort agency owner, supported by one of Japan's sex industry associations, launched a civil suit against the government, which is still in the

⁸ Fujita was called 'evil' by 'sex worker rights' group (SWASH) representative Kaname Yukiko in a subsequent self-published piece. See <https://note.com/kanameyukiko/n/n6deb27eae9ea>. Kaname then published a number of pro-prostitution articles in liberal and feminist online media outlets.

⁹ <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/profile/author/fujitakanori/comments/posts/16040473321336.eba8.18302/>

¹⁰ https://www.jcp-tokyo.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/gender_p.pdf

¹¹ <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/articles/7f96b9a2b4f2ba1e05287cc0ef45d1bd797137f6>

¹² <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20201027/k00/00m/040/001000c>

¹³ <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201008/p2a/00m/0na/016000c>

¹⁴ <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13796119>

¹⁵ <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201107/p2g/00m/0na/018000c>

¹⁶

https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/11909000/000609600.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3EVqknvTtJHsazFvFeMmNU2Zb kfP9AK1orKvBJ_PhMNM6LOW59UEd9XbQ

¹⁷ <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/byline/fujitakanori/20200915-00198327/>

country's courts.¹⁸ As in the photo below, the industry is represented by left-leaning lawyers, including a female lawyer with a progressive media profile.¹⁹ The case is being brought on the rhetorical grounds of 'assistance for sex work' (as in the banner behind the lawyers). In other words, sex industry entrepreneurs used the language of the pro-prostitution 'sex worker rights' movement in the pandemic to lobby for government subsidies. In turn, Japan's main sex work group supported them. Lawyers representing the sex industry staged a press conference in September 2020 to announce their suit against the government that was uncritically reported on by Japan's public broadcaster NHK.



A press conference held in September 2020 by lawyers representing the sex industry against the Japanese government. The banner behind the panel features the pro-prostitution catchphrase 'sex work is work'.²⁰

A 'study' webinar jointly held in September 2020 by a sex industry group, lawyers, and Japan's main 'sex work' group SWASH.

Japan's 'second wave' of the pandemic came in July 2020 when infection clusters were discovered in host clubs in Shinjuku in Tokyo.²¹ These clubs ostensibly offer male 'hosts' for company and flirtatious conversation with female customers who visit the venues to drink. In reality, though, the clubs are operated by brothel owners in order to manufacture debt against young women who are then funnelled into sex industry venues to undertake repayment.²² In spite of the direct and prominent link between host venues and the new cluster infections that arose in mid-2020 (and which ballooned into Japan's second-wave),²³ little discussion arose about the need to suppress the sex industry as a public health hazard. Rather, Japan's public broadcaster, which is relentlessly supportive of the sex industry, publicised efforts by prostitution businessmen to encourage social distancing measures.²⁴ In this second-wave, there were reports of sex industry scouts in Japan's cities trafficking women into regional areas where infection rates were lower,²⁵

¹⁸ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/10/04/national/sex-industry-coronavirus-aid/>

¹⁹ <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3102743/sex-business-operator-sues-japan-over-exclusion-coronavirus>

²⁰ <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20200923/k10012630931000.html>

²¹ <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/20201029-OYT1T50173/>

²² Among many news reports of this function of host clubs, see <https://news.livedoor.com/article/detail/15938455/>

²³ https://www.kahoku.co.jp/tohokunews/202010/20201014_13019.html

²⁴ <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20200721/k10012525301000.html>

²⁵ <https://www.dailyshincho.jp/article/2020/07211102/?all=1&page=4>

but public attention did not turn to the role of ‘scouts’ and ‘hosts’ in Japan’s sex industry who were responsible for both community virus transmission as well as the exploitation of women immiserated in the pandemic.

The abolitionist direct-service organisation Colabo, which undertakes outreach to teenage girls in inner-city Tokyo who are involved in, or at risk of involvement in, the sex industry,²⁶ between March and October 2020 reported more than 700 referrals from girls in distress, compared to a total of 590 referrals for the whole of 2019.²⁷ The NGO Futerasu, which is not abolitionist but which does outreach to women in Japan’s sex industry, reported it had three times the number of women approach it in circumstances of destitution in March 2020 compared to March the year before.²⁸ Futerasu had seen 163 women throughout 2019, but this number rose to 244 by 8 April 2020. A representative of the organisation said that women were supplementing lost income through advertising on web-based platforms. The abolitionist People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence group, which assists women exploited in the sex industry and especially its pornography businesses, reported 137 face-to-face referrals between April and September 2020, which compared to 182 referrals for the whole of 2019. However, in this same period, the organisation was flooded with more than 1000 phone enquiries, and had to employ three more staff members in October 2020 to cope with women seeking advice for issues relating to the sex industry in the pandemic. The extra staff will allow the organisation to meet with, and take on as social work cases, some of the women who phoned them during the pandemic.²⁹

Among newly recorded victims of the sex industry emerging in the pandemic were young Vietnamese women stuck in Japan unable to return home after beforehand entering the country via the ‘work-study’ scheme, which facilitates the temporary employment of young Southeast Asians in farming work and other manual labour jobs.³⁰ The young women were rendered jobless in the pandemic, and then recruited by sex industry businesses where they were found by authorities. Their joblessness had particularly serious consequences because the families of young participants in Japan’s work-study scheme usually take on debt to furnish costs relating to participation in the scheme, and so remittances are required to meet repayment. These circumstances are likely to have rendered the young Vietnamese women highly vulnerable to the predations of sex industry entrepreneurs who routinely offer credit and housing to prospective recruits.

Overall, Japan in the year of Corona brought to the society’s surface the sex industry’s largescale activities in a country where women’s status is low, and their share of national income small. While there are overseas trafficking victims in Japan’s sex industry, the industry mostly trades young local women, both in systems of prostitution and pornography. The nature of the pandemic, which damaged hospitality and tourism industries disproportionately employing high numbers of young women, meant that a larger population of Japanese women became newly vulnerable to entry into the sex industry. Concurrent downturn in brothel and similar businesses of the sex industry, due to customer fear of infection and social constraints on after-work entertaining, is likely to have increased competition for revenue. This might mean women in the industry are having to acquiesce to unreasonable and violent demands from pimps and customers in exchange for small payment. Parts of Japan’s sex industry even before the pandemic were trading women at very low rates, and the pandemic is likely to have pushed the poverty and exploitation of these victims further. Japan’s social welfare safety net is very weak, and, as the following graph indicates, welfare recipients declined over the months of the pandemic while jobless and suicides rose. This overall trend impacted upon the young, female, impoverished population of Japan’s sex industry, and limited their options for survival in the pandemic.

²⁶ <https://colabo-official.net/>

²⁷

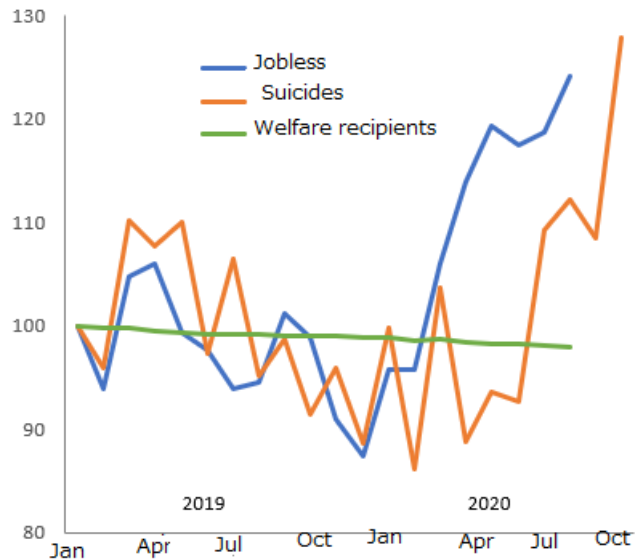
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TifHp1bntoY&fbclid=IwAR0fCy9tJd7WA02szbKyg254361ZIICpQrUqj5aVHD64-euvoloCgf6B68s>

²⁸ <https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/national/list/202004/CK2020041302000050.html>

²⁹ Personal communication with PAPS members, and also see <https://www.paps.jp/post/papsmag-99>.

³⁰ <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASNCB3R7RNC8UTIL22P.html>

Change in jobless, suicide and welfare recipient numbers over the months of Japan's pandemic



This escalating heinousness of Japan's sex industry does, however, offer the country's abolitionists an opportunity to rebut the claims of the domestic 'sex work' movement that prostitution is job for women like any other. Public incredulity at such claims is likely to strengthen in an environment in which (unfortunately) large swathes of the Japanese population—both men and women—are widely understood to have fallen into poverty because of failed government policymaking during the pandemic. While the sex discrimination and inequality of prostitution is not likely to negatively influence public attitudes towards the sex industry (because of the weakness of the women's movement in Japan), the sight of immiserated young women from regional areas flooding into the sex districts of Shinjuku and Shibuya will likely resonate with national memories of Japan's pre-war era in which girls were trafficked en masse in a similar way.

Japan's 1958 *Prostitution Prevention Law* is currently under review by a committee that will make recommendations to government for its revision. This review commenced before the pandemic, but its deliberations are hopefully influenced by stories of horror emerging from Japan's sex industry during the pandemic, which attracted more attention than usual over the year 2020. The strengthening of this law in a direction towards the Nordic Model has the potential to wind back some of the gains that the sex industry made in the decade following the Great East Japan Earthquake when many young women in Japan's northeast prefectures fell into poverty as a result of the tsunami and nuclear disaster. While the sex industry is large and powerful in Japan, the pandemic saw some strengthening in local movement for abolition. More than anything, the industry's future—or lack thereof—hinges on the ability of this movement to consolidate its strengths and capitalise on the opportunity the pandemic presents to persuade people that prostitution is a public health threat as well as a parasite on the poverty that was forced upon young women through no fault of their own in Japan's year of Corona.