

The State of Prostitution in Japan

by Kikue Takahashi

The Prostitution Prevention Law

After working long and hard for the establishment of the Prostitution Prevention Law, it was finally enacted in 1956 and promulgated on April 1, 1958. This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the law. The law prohibits public prostitution operations and seeks to protect and rehabilitate women. The law was intended to prohibit public prostitution by the State.

When the law was promulgated the red-light districts in Japan seemed to disappear. However, different enterprises began to prosper like the public baths with private rooms, called "soapland." The "soapland" establishments or private bath businesses can operate within limited areas as they have been recognized under the public bath laws and popular culture operation laws.

We have protested against the operation of "soapland" establishments as they defy the Prostitution Prevention Law. These public baths with private rooms are located in the former redlight districts of Tokyo. Some prefectures have recently assigned the businesses to new locations in entertainment districts.

Another aspect of the law seeks to protect women through the establishment of counselling and rehabilitation centers. Public funds have been made available to women counsellors who have contributed greatly to the rehabilitation of women in the red-light districts. There are a total of 47 counselling centers for women located in each of the prefectures. They are supported by national and district government funds. To date there are 60 protection centers and 516 women counsellors.

Although the law has been in existence for thirty years, the fact remains that the system and its operation has been affected by the bureaucracy of its primary funding agencies. One of the reasons for this problem is that 77% of the protection center's operations have been managed by public funds, which is higher than any other social welfare program.

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Salvation Army, being involved in the establishment of the Prostitution Prevention Law, have been struggling for the protection and rehabilitation of women today.

Unfortunately the use of these centers has decreased and therefore some of the district governments are cutting down on the operation of center activities. To oppose the government move, 16 women's groups have established the Association for Anti-Prostitution Actions; these groups were originally involved in establishing

the Anti-Prostitution Prevention Law. The WCTU has responsibility for maintaining this office.

On the island of Okinawa, which was occupied by US military forces after World War II, the Prostitution Prevention Law was enacted 15 years after the mainland's enactment of the same law. Because of the US bases in Okinawa, prostitution became a major problem.

Women in Okinawa suffered from three forms of sexual oppression: husband at home, military bases, and occupation policies.

Presently, the area which the law designates for private bath operations is three times larger than in mainland prefectures which have the same land area and population. In Okinawa there is still prostitution on the military bases. The women who are working in the said areas are Filipinas. The newspapers reported the tragedy of three Filipina "entertainers" who perished in a fire when they could not escape the burning building because they had been locked in a room with iron barred windows.

Child Prostitution

The Prostitution Prevention Law is discriminatory, punishing the women but not the men. Even in the private bath operation ¹ [^] the women become the object of punishment.

It is commonly understood that incest is the primary reason motivating women to become prostitutes. Japanese law states that the sentence for rape is over two years, while robbery is over five years. But there is no sentence for the crime of incest under Japanese law. It is treated as rape. Usually it is difficult to apply the rape law when the mother gives priority to the man over and against the daughter.

There are many victims of incest in mother-child families and orphanages. Girls aged 12 and under are protected under the law but for those aged over 12 there is no law to protect them against sexual crimes.

Human rights laws are very poor, particularly those relating to the protection of girls and boys aged 18 and under against sexual crimes. These laws have not been successful in protecting the weak of our society for it is too easy for young girls to become victims within the present social structure.

We have been working on a revision of the Child Welfare Law in order to protect girls and boys aged 18 and under, and to ensure that those who violate the rights of minors are punished. It is our hope that punishment for prostitution related crimes will be broadened to include men, the sexual violence of incest, and acts which use sexual relations for corporate advancement. Lawmakers should also consider implementing changes regarding acts of rape.

The Japanese government has ratified laws prohibiting sexual discrimination against women. However there are no plans to change the laws regarding sexual crimes

against women. Intellectuals and liberal political parties have even opposed such changes in the laws, arguing that privacy would be violated and the police force would then be allowed to invade our bedrooms.

Present trends indicate that the average age of prostitutes is decreasing and more young women are selling sex without any ethical considerations.

Sex Tourism - Asian Women in Japan

In July, 1973 Korean Church Women United sent an appeal to Japanese women informing them of the problems of sex tourism in Korea. The appeal indicated that Japanese men treated women in Korea as slaves, reflecting the economic superiority of Japan.

We Japanese women were awakened and realized the necessity of responding to the appeal. We took various actions: the first attempt made by the WCTU was to produce the slide program "Shameful Japanese" in order to inform others of the facts. The program was used widely in Japan and a translated version sent to many other Asian countries. The Philippines provided an extensive audience and the program was shown at a meeting to oppose sex tourism held in Manila in January 1981, which coincided with the visit of Japan's Prime Minister. The slide program was also translated into English with the title, "You Know the Word Shame? — Prostitution Tourism." It was shown at the NGO Forum of the World Women's Congress at Copenhagen in 1980.

The Japanese government and the Japan Association for Travel Agencies (JATA) did not listen to our voices until the movement against sex tourism became stronger. The Tourism Section of the Transportation Ministry is the organization which supervises travel agencies. Appeals concerning the issue of sex tourism were to be made to this organization. In 1982 the law relating to travel agencies was revised and regulations were imposed on those agencies which promoted sex tours.

The statistics released by the Immigration Office of the Justice Ministry indicated a slight decrease in the number of males who visited other Asian countries. However, recent developments show the number of young women coming to Japan from other Asian countries is increasing.

The economic differences between Japan and other Asian countries entices women to Japan on a visitor's or entertainer's visa. However, they are usually forced into sexually exploitative jobs and the language barrier provides further complications. The Asian women's passports are taken away and they are usually watched 24 hours each day by their employers.

In commemoration of its 100th anniversary, the WCTU started the HELP Center in April, 1987. This is an emergency shelter for women and to date more Filipinas have used the center than any other nationality. A group of female lawyers has cooperated with HELP in order to assist those women who use the shelter. The lawyers negotiate with the employers to secure the back pay of the Filipinas. The

lawyers also assist in cases related to medical care, and problems which arise from illegal entry and subsequent treatment as criminals.

Japanese law states that in order for a non-Japanese to receive social welfare benefits they must possess an alien registration card. This is due to the fact that non-Japanese nationals are not guaranteed rights under various laws.

Protests have been made to national and district governments, and questionnaires were sent to the House of Representatives in an attempt to change laws which violate the rights of foreigners living in Japan.

The Women's Association is requesting that government organizations broaden the application of the Prostitution Prevention Law to include women in Japan who are not nationals. A shelter for women in each prefecture should be established so that the existing counselling centers and institutions may be used by other Asian women in Japan.

Recently the Public Welfare Ministry, which previously ignored our request, has changed its mind and allowed local offices to open counselling services to non-Japanese women.

Concluding Comments

The problem of prostitution is directly related to the existence of poverty. However, in this period of "economic prosperity," the problem of prostitution has yet to be solved. Rather, it still permeates the culture causing frustration and poverty of spirit.

Another problem lies in the public prostitution system of ages past. It has not been eliminated but still exists in the shadows of our present society; the system still remains, but under a different name. Sex is not understood as a right of choice but rather as the object of male curiosity. Such an understanding perpetuates the development of prostitution businesses and the social acceptance of prostitution.

Women's liberation movements must take up the issue of prostitution, for the dignity of human beings is at the heart of human liberation movements.

Kikue TAKAHASHI is a staff member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union which was the first women's group in Japan. She has organized various women's groups appealing for government compensation for the Korean women who were used as military prostitutes by Japan's imperial army.

Aus: In God's Image, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1991.