

# SEX FOR SALE: TEENAGE GIRLS RESPOND TO TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN JAPAN

*Brian Veazey*

*Writer's comment:* Young women in the developing world are often inadequately prepared for legitimate employment; consequently, many turn to prostitution for their very survival. Though unfortunate, teenage prostitution is a daily reality in the Third World. Needless to say, I was astonished to discover that teenage prostitution is also a problem in Japan - one of the most developed countries in the world. How ironic that young Japanese women with no immediate need would resort to prostitution by choice! Baffled by this Japanese version of an age-old phenomenon, I decided to make it the subject of my "explaining essay" for my Advanced Composition (English 101) course. Many thanks to Professor Squitieri for his encouragement - not only on this paper, but throughout the course - and to my workshop partners, Christan and Karla, for putting up with me for a quarter.

— *Brian Veazey*

*Instructor's comment:* Brian Veazey wrote this fine essay for my Advanced Composition (English 101) course last winter. This assignment required that students select a notable or bizarre social phenomenon and then make sense of it in a short analytical paper. I think most readers will agree that Brian admirably achieves that goal. Brian's essay bears eloquent witness to the efficacy of revision. In its earliest draft (as Brian himself intuitively sensed), "Sex for Sale" stood out as the weakest of his many worthy essays for my class. Prompted partly by my comments, even more by the thoughtful criticism of his class workshop partners Christan McClellan and Karla Rodriguez, but mostly by his own zeal to excel as a writer, Brian tirelessly refined his material and worked out the logic of his original idea. The result is an inspired example of sociological speculation.

— *Victor Squitieri, English Department*

**B**UUZZZZZZ. “Oh, a page,” says Michiko to her friend, “give me a minute to check it.” She pulls out her mobile phone and dials the number to check her messages. This message is from one of her regular customers, Mr. Tanaka. He would like to meet this afternoon at the little restaurant next to the same “love hotel” they used last week (a place that rents theme rooms by the hour). Michiko giggles to her friend, “Poor Tanaka-san, he is such a lonely guy, but he’s very generous.”

Michiko meets up with Tanaka-san, a businessman in his mid-forties, later that afternoon. They grab an early dinner, then head directly to the love hotel. After about an hour, their transaction is complete and Tanaka-san “offers” Michiko about ¥10,000. Suddenly, Michiko notices the time. It’s nearly eight, and she has about an hour commute, by train, to her house in the suburbs. “My parents will be angry that I’m so late again, especially since I have an important algebra exam in the morning!” Michiko quickly kisses Tanaka-san on the cheek and rushes around collecting her things. “Call me soon. Okay?” says the seventeen-year-old as she slips out the door.

Michiko and Tanaka-san are imaginary, yet they illustrate a very real phenomenon in Japanese society - teenage prostitution. Young girls selling themselves to older men is not a new phenomenon. Underage women around the globe resort to prostitution as a means of survival. There are few industries women can enter where capital costs are low, barriers to entry are few, and educational requirements are nil. Yet what is puzzling in the Japanese case is that most young women like Michiko do not depend on the money they receive from prostitution for survival - yet it does help to buy Burberry scarves, Chanel hand bags and other “must-haves” (Moffett 50).

While it is tempting to say that teenage prostitution is a means for young women to obtain the material items they feel they cannot live without, there is more to this phenomenon than meets the eye. If it were merely a matter of wanting extra money, young girls would most likely seek legitimate employment - translation, the increasing popularity of prostitution among teenage girls in Japan is a response to the strict gender stratification of Japanese society.

### **The Bifurcation of Japanese Society**

The fact is that Japanese society is bifurcated into two spheres: the productive sphere of the man and the reproductive sphere of the woman. There is little, if any, overlap between the two. Success in each gender sphere depends on one’s ability to live up to the societal expectations associated with his/her gender role. The principle role of the male is that of breadwinner. Success in the male sphere, therefore, greatly depends on a man’s ability to provide for his family. The principle role of the female is that of wife and mother. While her overall status in society is linked to her husband’s socioeconomic position, her success in the female sphere largely depends on her ability to be a good wife and mother.

From childhood, men are encouraged to participate in group sports, to study hard, and to get accepted into a good university. These activities are believed to build the strong character a man will need if he is to become a “salary man,” or one holding a position within a prestigious Japanese firm. A salary man, therefore, is the idealized version of a man who has fulfilled his role in relation to the societal expectations placed upon him. While every man may not achieve the salary man ideal, each man’s goal is the same, regardless of occupation: to financially support his family. Women, on the other hand, have an equally well-defined gender role in Japanese society as housewife and mother:

Though Japanese women are among the best educated women in the world, they are, by Western standards, second-class citizens in their own country. Traditional values discourage women from appearing outspoken or independent-minded and demoralize those who try to climb the political or business hierarchies. (Makihara 35)

It is quite uncommon for Japanese women to maintain careers after they are married and almost inconceivable that they would work during their child-rearing years. According to an article in *Time*, many companies uphold traditional expectations that women will resign once they are married. Toyota Motor Corp., for example, “gives women who do so a special ‘farewell money gift’ of up to three months’ salary” (Makihara 36). Although many women obtain a university education, few put it to much use. Marriage is the ideal, and women are expected to conform to it. If a woman has any professional aspirations, she will most likely “aspire” to be a professional housewife. Japanese women take marriage very seriously, and it is not uncommon for them to enroll in bridal training courses. Such programs stress traditional women’s roles with courses like flower arranging, wearing the kimono, traditional cooking, and the tea ceremony. Training oneself “to become the ideal *okusan*, literally ‘Mrs. Interior,’ can be and often is a full-time job” (Fallows 62).

Women who work at all work only long enough to find a suitable husband. Once married, a wife is expected to stay at home to raise the children, and her husband is expected to work diligently in his chosen career. Marriage represents a couple’s commitment to adulthood. For men, this means commitment to employment; for women, it signals the end of a career in the commercial sphere, but the beginning of a career in the domestic sphere (Hendry 149).

### **Professional Housewife vs. Career Woman**

Although most women are forced to function within their gender sphere, some ambitious Japanese women try to make careers for themselves within the male sphere. Such breaks with tradition are not easy. Sexual harassment and discrimination are pervasive in almost all Japanese firms, and society typically views women who “make the break” with a skeptical eye - women who “do try to join the professional ranks must not only match men hour for hour but also be prepared to do continuous battle with skeptical views of their aspirations to be more than lovely but low-level ‘office flowers’” (Makihara 35-6). In fact, it was not until 1986 that the Japanese Diet passed the Equal Employment Opportunities Bill obliging companies to give men and women equal consideration in all aspects of employment. Unfortunately, attitudes are not as easy to change as legislation. Japanese courts, for example, set a disappointing precedent in 1995 when a group of women at Sumitomo Metal Industries claimed they were systematically paid less than men. Although the courts ruled against Sumitomo, they only “advised” the company to comply with the 1986 law (McGregor 42).

Impediments on the home front can also stymie a Japanese woman’s efforts to become anything more than a professional housewife. A 1986 government survey among double-income couples discovered that while working women devote three and one-half hours per workday to household chores and child rearing, their husbands spend a total of eight minutes (Makihara 36). Although younger men tend to share more household responsibilities than do their fathers, they still expect their wives to manage household affairs. (There is little incentive to work an eight-hour shift at the office if one must then work an additional shift at home.)

### **A Lack of Role Models**

Young Japanese women today therefore receive a mixed message from society. On the one hand, they are encouraged to go to university and to participate in the workforce; on the other, they are expected to abandon any career aspirations when they marry. Despite their higher levels of education, success in the male sphere for today’s young women proves to be just as elusive as it was for their mothers. The message is clear: if young women want to succeed as wife and mother, they must sacrifice their careers; if they want to succeed as career women, they must sacrifice their marriages.

In Japan, there are few contemporary role models who successfully integrate both family and work.

Consequently, teenage women looking for role models are likely to encounter either of two types: traditional or ultra-modern. The role model for the traditional Japanese woman can be illustrated by the following passage:

Some Japanese women still help dress their husbands in the morning and routinely serve them the choicest morsels from the family rice pot. And once, I watched a harried woman in her 50s rush onto the train weighted down with suitcases, shopping bags, and various parcels. She scrambled to claim the last free seat. A moment later her husband strolled onto the train, cool and collected, and slipped into the seat his wife had saved for him. While he read the newspaper, she stood in the aisle, bags and purse still dangling, all the way to Kyoto, a two-and-a-half-hour trip (Fallows 58-60).

While this example may seem a bit far-fetched, its essence - that of the do-anything-for your-husband-wife - is more accurate than many Westerners would like to believe. The alternative to the traditional role model is the “‘bad girl’ like Ai Iijima, who quit school at 13, became a porn star, and is now, at 21, an author and television personality” (McGregor 42). While this type of role model is both economically and sexually liberated, her liberation comes at a steep price - sacrificing family and home. Traditional or ultra-modern, role models for Japanese women tend to reinforce traditional gender expectations: “woman as wife and mother” or “woman as sexual object.”

### **Why Prostitution?**

Now that we have examined traditional gender roles and how they limit women’s participation in the commercial sphere, we can better analyze the phenomenon of teenage prostitution in Japan. If we look at the available literature, we soon realize that some theorists believe teenage prostitution is simply another fad to sweep over trend-conscious Japan, while other theorists believe it is a way for girls to obtain the necessary capital to treat friends to hamburger parties or to buy those essential must-haves for trendy teenage girls. Whatever theory turns out to be right, one thing seems to be clear: teenage prostitution, at some level, has a lot to do with social control as known. In a society where most women have little influence over their station in life, it should therefore come as no surprise that many young women attempt to exercise control while they still have that luxury - in their teenage years. Not yet burdened with the responsibilities of wife, mother, and home, prostitution offers teenage women sexual and economic power. Unlike women who resort to prostitution because of necessity, these girls control access to their bodies; they sell themselves when, and if, it is convenient for them. Because they do not depend on the proceeds of their prostitution for survival, these young girls exercise control over their economic resources and spend their money as they please. Prostitution, therefore, allows young women to sample the power which will elude them in their adult lives. For these young women, prostitution serves as an immediate response to the inexorable gender roles in Japanese society.

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