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Exercising Autonomy, Demanding Atonement: Sex Workers' Resistance to Japan's Prostitution Prevention Act

State-sanctioned sexual exploitation of the female body was a defining feature of the Japanese state for centuries. However, following the notorious climax of legalized prostitution — the institutionalized abuse of “comfort women” through military brothels during the 1930s and 1940s — Japan reversed its stance on sex work. The 1956 Prostitution Prevention Act was presented by abolitionists as a safeguard for women’s rights and necessary moral atonement for years of sanctioned impropriety. But beneath this rhetoric, the Act functioned as a calculated political gesture meant to signal a commitment to democratic values and respectability to Japan’s new Western allies. Though many abolitionists may have acted with good intentions, the legislation lacked concrete rehabilitative measures or meaningful protections for the women who would inevitably continue to face exploitation. Instead, criminalization pushed the sex industry underground and made prostitution even more dangerous and stigmatized. Yet despite enduring a long history of exploitation in the service of patriarchal nationalism, sex workers in Japan demonstrated agency through activism and advocacy that challenged the criminalization of their labor. Though their efforts at reversing the legislation were ultimately unsuccessful, their resistance complicates the narrative of passive victimhood and illuminates how sex workers actively challenged the systems that sought to narrowly define them and erase their autonomy.

Legalized prostitution in Japan began in the 16th century. Until the 1930s, the practice was systematized through the establishment of licensed pleasure quarters, where women were

often sold into contracts and subject to state regulation.¹ Sex workers suffered limited autonomy, and the practice was considered necessary for maintaining public order and morality — a symptom of the deeply patriarchal origins of the modern Japanese state. In the 1930s, this structure escalated into overtly exploitative military brothels known as “comfort stations.” They were first implemented in Manchuria to discourage Japanese soldiers from raping local Chinese women, and later aimed to prevent rape of “pure” Japanese women on the mainland by soldiers and control the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the military.² Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian women were coerced or forcibly recruited through physical violence and rape to serve as “comfort women” through this system of institutionalized sexual violence. Comfort stations continued during the American occupation under the Recreation and Amusement Association.³ I invoke comfort women here to mark what I view as the peak of state-orchestrated sexual exploitation — not because these women were central actors in the resistance to the 1956 Prostitution Prevention Act. As most comfort women were violently coerced and forcibly conscripted for military sexual service, they were not the same women who later organized in opposition to prohibition. Still, their history is essential in tracing the deep-seated patterns of state complicity in the sexual exploitation of women, particularly those deemed unworthy of shielding under the guise of national interest or public health.

During the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) occupation of mainland Japan from 1945 to 1952, several proposals for anti-prostitution legislation emerged, most notably the 1947 bill. However, these efforts failed to pass due to a combination of domestic

¹ John Lie, “The State as Pimp: Prostitution and the Patriarchal State in Japan in the 1940s,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1997): 252.

² Yoshiaki Yoshimi, “The Course and Conditions of the Establishment of the Military Comfort Station System,” in *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 45.

³ “Allied Translator and Interpreter Section, no. 120, *Amenities in the Japanese Forces* (1945),” http://archive.history.go.kr/image/viewer.do?catalogId=AUS043_57_00C0411.

political resistance and monetary dependency on the sex industry.⁴ Following the formal end of the occupation in 1952, the sex industry only expanded because of economic instability and ever-present demand from Japanese men.⁵ But in 1956 — the same year Japan was admitted to the United Nations — the National Diet passed the Prostitution Prevention Act, ending state-regulated prostitution in favor of outright prohibition. This was no coincidence: abolitionists framed the law as proof that Japan had shed a feudal and undemocratic past, thus aligning the country with the modern liberal values expected of UN member states.⁶ The Japanese government modeled the 1956 Act, in part, after European and American abolitionist efforts, especially those embedded in the 1949 United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. While Japan had not initially joined the Convention, the framing of its own legislation as human rights-driven was a deliberate attempt to mirror these international standards. The government was intent on passing the law in 1956 to posit a symbolic and strategic statement of modernity, civility, and alignment with the international community at a crucial moment of reentry into global politics.

The act, which the state began enforcing in 1958, allowed Japan to accede to the UN's 1949 Convention, signaling its commitment to global norms of public-facing morality. Yet while it criminalized the sale of sex and imposed penalties on sex workers, the legislation and subsequent enforcement provided no meaningful support or rehabilitation for the 180,000 women affected.⁷ Concern centered around image rather than genuine structural reform. As Tokyo prepared to host the 1964 Olympics, for example, the Citizens' Council on Measures

⁴ Yuki Shiga-Fujime, "Japanese Feminism and Commercialized Sex: The Union of Militarism and Prohibitionism," *Social Science Japan Journal* 9, no. 1 (2006): 43.

⁵ Lie, "The State as Pimp," 259.

⁶ G. G. Rowley, "Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act of 1956," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal: English Supplement*, no. 23 (2002): 47.

⁷ Yuki Shiga-Fujime and Beverly L. Findlay-Kaneko, "The Prostitutes' Union and the Impact of the 1956 Anti-Prostitution Law in Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal: English Supplement*, no. 5 (1993), 23.

Against Prostitution facilitated a “clean sweep” of visible sex work to present a sanitized image of the nation to visitors.⁸ The law introduced a dangerous dichotomy: women recognized as victims — underage girls, trafficked women, and others deemed “rehabilitatable” — could receive limited state “care,” while the majority, deemed complicit in their exploitation, were criminalized and silenced.⁹ By conflating visibility with immorality and prioritizing national image over women’s safety and well-being, the state once again revealed its primary concern: not to protect women, but to maintain patriarchal control under the guise of modernization.

The prevailing historical narrative surrounding prostitution in Japan following the Meiji period emphasizes prohibition as a triumph for human rights and the liberation of Japanese women. Abolitionist perspectives have long dominated historical analysis. G.G. Rowley of the University of Wales, Cardiff, notes in her article in the *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* that abolitionists viewed prostitution as a violation of women's fundamental rights, and therefore saw ending legalized prostitution and criminalizing the sex industry as a step toward liberation and social advancement.¹⁰ Central to this narrative is the work of Japanese feminist and politician Ichikawa Fusae, whose extensive document collection has served as a foundational source in nearly all historical accounts of modern Japanese prostitution despite its omission of any testimony from sex workers themselves.¹¹ Scholars Yuki Shiga-Fujime and Beverly L. Findlay-Kaneko also note that for decades, the 1956 Prostitution Prevention Act was portrayed through a narrow lens in women’s history as an unequivocal feminist victory. In such accounts, prostitutes are portrayed as passive bodies — “pawns, blindly manipulated by their bosses” — while women’s groups are celebrated for their role in securing prohibition.¹² According to

⁸ Rowley, “Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act,” 48.

⁹ Shiga-Fujime, “Japanese Feminism,” 47.

¹⁰ Rowley, “Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act,” 39.

¹¹ Rowley, “Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act,” 39.

¹² Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko, “The Prostitutes’ Union,” 3.

Shiga-Fujime, both mainstream Japanese discourse and scholarly treatments have equated abolition with feminism until recently.¹³

Recent scholarship has begun to challenge and complicate this view. An emerging body of work reframes prostitution not only as a site of oppression, but also as one of negotiation and survival. Rowley, for one, attempts to tell the prostitutes' side of the story in her work with oral histories, the prostitutes' union newspaper and memoirs from figures such as geisha Masuda Sayo.¹⁴ Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko assert that prostitutes' resistance to the Prevention Act should be viewed as a uniquely radical movement as these women challenged the state for making them, its most deeply harmed victims, bear the burden of its policies.¹⁵ This shift recognizes their activism as not merely a response to marginalization or abuse, but as a form of political engagement that challenges dominant narratives about morality and victimhood.

Other scholars have further expanded the conversation by situating the prostitution debate within broader social, political and ideological contexts. Cultural historian Robert Kramm highlights the importance of understanding prostitution in relation to the male nationalistic desire to redefine Japanese sexual identity during the nation's transformation from an imperial to a modern "Western" state.¹⁶ The post-surrender occupation necessitated the establishment of a "female floodwall" (*onna no bōhatei*) to protect the "national body" of Japan, i.e. the female population, from sexual advancement by American troops.¹⁷ Kramm argues that the outlawing of the sex trade occurred because Japan sought to remake itself as a respectable Western-style democracy. Sociologist John Lie insists that women should not be viewed as a collective but rather understood in relation to the influences of class, ethnicity and global political and

¹³ Shiga-Fujime, "Japanese Feminism," 33.

¹⁴ Rowley, "Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act," 39.

¹⁵ Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko, "The Prostitutes' Union," 24.

¹⁶ Robert Kramm, "Haunted by Defeat: Imperial Sexualities, Prostitution, and the Emergence of Postwar Japan," *Journal of World History* 28, no. 3/4 (2017): 589.

¹⁷ Kramm, "Haunted by Defeat," 587.

economic dynamics.¹⁸ For Lie, prostitution must be analyzed within the context of both political and sexual economies, where state power, national identity and gender relations are inextricable.

These scholars emphasize the need to complicate the dominant abolitionist rhetoric by foregrounding sex workers' voices and acknowledging the patriarchal and socio-political forces that shaped the abolitionist movement. Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko further assert that, in addition to a nuanced reevaluation of the causes and significance of the Prostitution Prevention Act with attention to sex workers' perspectives, we must consider how the law continues to shape societal views and the treatment of prostitutes in Japan today.¹⁹ The shift in scholarship to acknowledging sex workers' resistance and self-advocacy, as well as the historically-shaped experience of prostitutes in Japan today, is recent but palpable. I aim to contribute to this evolving narrative by demonstrating that sex workers, far from being merely subjects of state manipulation, actively challenged the Japanese state and the anti-prostitution legislation that sought to invalidate and suppress them. They were not passive in the face of the shifting geopolitical and ideological influences that motivated the government to disregard female autonomy — as the voices, publications and legacies of sex workers themselves demonstrate. I argue that through their resistance to the Prostitution Prevention Act, sex workers carved space for complex, self-realized existence in a society that sought to define them narrowly as victims, villains, or cautionary tales.

A clear manifestation of sex workers' resistance came in the early 1950s, as conversations around criminalizing prostitution intensified. Sex workers organized a red light district union and launched a newspaper titled *Fujin Shinpū* (Women's New Wind), which featured stories, satirical verses and poems written by sex workers themselves. A 1954 edition

¹⁸ Lie, "The State as Pimp," 252.

¹⁹ Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko, "The Prostitutes' Union," 4.

includes a poem by a former prostitute under the pseudonym Kyōmachi Michiko. Questioning what it means to be “soiled,” she critiques “lady bigwigs wearing chrysanthemum badges” — likely elite reformers or legislators — and the entitlement of being able to apply politics and morality to prostitution.²⁰ Kyōmachi writes:

One of the ladies says,
“I, too, have a daughter the same age as you;
Just thinking about it is enough to break my heart.”

In these lines, Kyōmachi pushes back on the condescension she’s experienced and insists on her right to be seen not as a victim or object of pity, but as a woman with agency and self-awareness. Rather than internalizing dominant narratives of shame and deviance, she asserts a palpable counter-narrative against what she perceives as a moralizing elite. A few lines later, she is biting and ironic:

The something Law, the something Law, and the something Law
If we do this, we’ll all be saved
And society will get better, they say.
What on earth is “politics?”²¹

Kyōmachi’s repetition of “the something Law” highlights the dissonance between abstract legal ideals and the lived realities of sex workers. She concludes the poem by wondering when she will be called back to the brothel — “it was already after four o’clock / wondering if someone from the brothel hadn’t come to fetch me / I felt chilled and ill at ease”²² — acknowledging the inescapability of sex work because of the limited options available to her. In her analysis, G. G. Rowley posits that the concerns of sex workers under prohibition transcend the simplistic moral framework imposed by the state, writing that “they [sex workers] did not want to be locked up in

²⁰ Kyōmachi Michiko (pseud.), “Erai hito” (The Bigwigs), *Fujin shinpū*, 1954, in “Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act of 1956,” by G. G. Rowley, *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal: English Supplement*, no. 23 (2002): 49.

²¹ Michiko (pseud.), “Erai hito,” 49.

²² Michiko (pseud.), “Erai hito,” 49.

the ‘rehabilitation dormitories’ the moral crusaders had in mind for them. They couldn't afford it. What would happen to their families while they were being ‘rehabilitated’?”²³ This concern reflects economic reality: a 1957 survey found that nearly 80 percent of prostitutes reported entering the trade due to family poverty or to aid relatives. In areas like Tokyo’s Yoshiwara district, some women earned as much as 30,000 yen per month, over three times the monthly wages of typists or factory workers, to support their families.²⁴ In this light, Kyōmachi’s poem not only gives voice to her trauma but also encapsulates the contradiction at the heart of the Prostitution Prevention Act: a law that claimed to “rehabilitate” women instead erased their agency and jeopardized their own and their families’ livelihoods. Her poem becomes a political statement in its own right — one that asserts that resistance can take the form of visibility, irony, and the refusal to be silenced.

Other voices in *Fujin shinpū* were more urgently direct. For example, a letter by an anonymous sex worker printed in 1955 to lobby against the Prostitution Prevention Act reads:

In today's world, is there a class that is as miserable as ours? Actually, we are rabble that the word "class" is probably too good for ... we are human beings, feed us! Even though we are in dire straits, our voices go unheard. We are about to be made enemies of the law and of the police for the simple reason that we are living our lives here in this way.²⁵

Rather than remaining passive recipients of top-down morality, this writer frames herself and her peers as politically disenfranchised laborers whose criminalization is not incidental but intentionally constructed by the state. Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko provide context for the author’s assertion that sex workers’ “voices go unheard” — according to the historians:

No matter how earnestly the women tried to explain why it was so difficult to leave prostitution, politicians simply would not listen. Instead the prostitutes were told that they

²³ Rowley, “Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act,” 49.

²⁴ Rowley, “Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act,” 43.

²⁵ *Fujin Shinpū: Women's New Wind*, July 15, 1955, in Yuki Shiga-Fujime and Beverly L. Findlay-Kaneko, “The Prostitutes’ Union and the Impact of the 1956 Anti-Prostitution Law in Japan,” *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal: English Supplement*, no. 5 (1993): 18.

were hedonistic remnants of the feudal era who had little hope of understanding human rights and who could be helped only by punishment that would bring about a sense of repentance.²⁶

Rather than alleviating marginalization, anti-prostitution legislation cemented it and compounded the danger and precarity of work for which demand never ceased. The author pleads — “we are human beings, feed us!”— both a cry for progress and a demand for recognition, reframing sex work not as deviance but as a livelihood specifically and intentionally excluded from Japan’s postwar democratic promises.

Fujin shinpū was part of a broader movement in which sex workers collectively organized to resist marginalization through advocacy networks. A myriad of prostitutes’ unions were active in the 1950s, including the Yoshiwara Women’s Health Preservation Union, which preceded the Tokyo Women Employees Alliance and Red Light District Labor Union.²⁷ According to historian Sally A. Hastings, the unions’ logic was that ““it has become a world where one must resort to prostitution in order to survive.”” Members argued that sex workers were not a threat to public health, but rather law-abiding, tax-paying citizens who had the right to earn a living and support their families through a profession that the Japanese state had historically condoned. Hastings posits that “members emphasized the greater importance of the right to live.”²⁸ They considered unemployment, poverty and prostitution inextricably intertwined issues and emphasized that if the government was to criminalize sex work, they needed to enact tangible policies to protect women from the need to prostitute themselves and from exploitation that would not end just because it was outlawed.

²⁶ Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko, “The Prostitutes’ Union,” 18.

²⁷ Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko, “The Prostitutes’ Union,” 21.

²⁸ Sally A. Hastings, “Disputing Rights: The Debate over Anti-Prostitution Legislation in 1950s Japan,” in *Gender and Law in the Japanese Imperium*, ed. Susan L. Burns and Barbara J. Brooks (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014), 53.

Women held meaningful leadership positions in unions and actively shaped their demands and representations. For example, in her keynote speech at the organizational meeting of the Tokyo Women Employees Alliance, governing board representative Ishii Risa says:

We have been subjected to questioning by investigators and observation groups, being asked such things as, “Do you think what you are doing is right?” “Have you no shame?” “Do you have plans to pursue a proper job?” “Are you planning to continue this for long?” It may just be my warped point of view, but I feel that these questions imply that we know no shame, that we are lazy and stupid. It also seems as if the investigators feel that fools like us can be dealt with only through punishment, not assistance. We want our voices heard without prejudice.²⁹

Rather than accepting narratives of victimhood imposed by middle and upper-class abolitionists or the state, activists like Ishii demanded that sex workers be seen as active agents capable of labor organization and political engagement. By speaking publicly and critically of how prostitutes were interrogated and dismissed, she directly challenged the moralizing tone of abolitionists and exposed the classed assumptions that underpinned even well-meaning abolitionist politics.

The influential Red Light District Labor Union amplified the voices and experiences of women who lacked the means to write or publish on their own through a union newspaper, political organizing and grassroots mobilization. It should be noted, however, that the union was formed and headed by two men — Iwauchi Zensaku and Takahara Asaichi. In his speech at their first meeting, Takahara says: “women ... must sell their own bodies: indeed, they have laid down their bodies before society ... Why don't people get the help they need? Whose responsibility is it? It goes without saying that this is a lack in our political system.”³⁰ Iwauchi and Takahara imagined a union fundamentally different from earlier Women’s Health Unions: one that would

²⁹ Risa Ishii, *Keynote Speech*, Tokyo Women’s Employee Alliance, Tokyo, Japan, January 12, 1955, quoted in Yuki Shiga-Fujime and Beverly L. Findlay-Kaneko, “The Prostitutes’ Union and the Impact of the 1956 Anti-Prostitution Law in Japan,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal: English Supplement*, no. 5 (1993): 19.

³⁰ *Fujin Shinpū: Women’s New Wind*, no. 38, quoted in Yuki Shiga-Fujime and Beverly L. Findlay-Kaneko, “The Prostitutes’ Union and the Impact of the 1956 Anti-Prostitution Law in Japan,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal: English Supplement*, no. 5 (1993): 13.

ultimately become unnecessary by empowering its members to confront and overcome the exploitation and economic hardships tied to the sex trade.³¹ Although the union aimed to advocate for and protect women — particularly those impacted by anti-prostitution legislation — it remains important to critically examine the implications of male leadership in a movement ostensibly centered on women's voices.

This dynamic reflects broader patriarchal structures at play in postwar Japan. Yet, the political landscape was far from monolithic; a significant number of female legislators in the Diet, along with numerous women's groups, actively supported the Prostitution Prevention Law.³² As historian Sarah Kovner notes, these abolitionists framed prostitution as inherently coercive and incompatible with Japan's democratic future and advocated for its elimination in the name of progress and human dignity.³³ But this abolitionist framework often marginalized the voices of sex workers themselves. Shiga-Fujime notes, for example, that many women's groups viewed sex workers as “women with a shameful occupation,” who “besmirched the honor of the Japanese empire and the Imperial military.”³⁴ As prominent Kamichika Ichiko infamously quipped: “We have no choice but to punish the 500,000 some prostitutes in order to protect the way of life of 40 million respectable married women.”³⁵ But while their efforts often silenced the perspectives of sex workers, it is necessary to recognize that many were sincere reformers, motivated by a genuine desire to protect women from exploitation. The politics of sex work in 1950s Japan thus defy simplistic binaries and demand a nuanced understanding of women's

³¹ Shiga-Fujime and Findlay-Kaneko, “The Prostitutes' Union,” 11.

³² Hastings, “Disputing Rights,” 55.

³³ Sarah Kovner, *Occupying Power: Sex Workers and Servicemen in Postwar Japan* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 99.

³⁴ Shiga-Fujime, “Japanese Feminism,” 41.

³⁵ Kamichika Ichiko, *Sayonara ningen baibai* (Tokyo: Gendaisha, 1956), quoted in G. G. Rowley, “Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act of 1956,” *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal: English Supplement*, no. 23 (2002): 47.

motivations on both sides of the prostitution debate. Women from all backgrounds spoke out — as organizers, laborers and lawmakers — and complicated any singular narrative of either resistance or reform.

Just as it is necessary to recognize how sex workers from or colonized by Japan were active agents in seeking reclamation, it is also pertinent to acknowledge the courage of former comfort women in sharing their stories. Shiota Suzuko, a pseudonym for a Japanese survivor who wrote an autobiography entitled *Mary's Hymn*, describes her experience of being raped and forced into employment at the overcrowded Tokiwa-rō brothel. Shiota condemns the lack of public discourse surrounding comfort women in postwar Japan and posits that the public does not want to acknowledge the pain or responsibility the Japanese state has to the victims of the brothel system.³⁶ Even after the war ended, she was compelled to continue selling her body, eventually falling into drug addiction and attempting suicide. Zhang Gaixiang, a Chinese survivor whose testimony is also recorded in the University of California at Los Angeles' Comfort Women Resource Center, says: "My heart is filled with indignation when I think of what the Japanese devils did to me ... they did so many evil things but don't seek ways to rectify them — can this be called human behavior? ... We must record the facts of our sufferings clearly and let them know that they are responsible for the damages."³⁷ Although not directly involved in resisting Japan's prohibition of prostitution, the victims of the comfort system used personal testimony to reject the silence imposed on them and courageously challenge the societal and state constraints they faced.

³⁶ Shiota Suzuko (pseud.), "Summary of Her Autobiography *Mary's Hymn*," trans. Keigo Nishio, *Comfort Women Resource Center*, UCLA Center for Korean Studies, https://www.international.ucla.edu/cks/care/comfortwomen_speakup/267638.

³⁷ Zhang Gaixiang, "Zhang Gaixiang, Chinese survivor (1925-2014)," interview by Zhang Shuangbing, *Comfort Women Resource Center*, UCLA Center for Korean Studies, https://www.international.ucla.edu/cks/care/comfortwomen_speakup/267638.

Sayo Masuda was one of the most articulate and prominent former sex workers to share her story and resist prohibition. Masuda's memoir, *Autobiography of a Geisha*, delineates her experiences and commentary on the geisha and sex work industries. Written between 1956 and 1957, Masuda submitted the original transcript to a "True Stories by Women" competition, where it won second place. It was first published by *Housewife's Companion* and later translated by G. G. Rowley under its current title. Masuda's memoir balances personal narrative with political critique — discussing the reality of the Prostitution Prevention Act, she questions: "If a geisha or a maid sleeps with a customer and gets paid, isn't that prostitution? But if they're accused, they'll just say they're in love with each other. There's no way you can pass a law against being in love!" Masuda goes on to assert that "nobody becomes a prostitute because she enjoys it. It's human instinct, is it not, to fill your belly when you're hungry, even if you have to steal to do it? Just passing laws banning prostitution isn't going to accomplish anything."³⁸ Masuda highlights the material conditions and survival strategies that shaped sex work and exemplifies the political consciousness of sex workers themselves. She refuses to be reduced to a moral scapegoat and instead asserts her agency through sharp critique. In doing so, she challenges the dominant abolitionist rhetoric that framed criminalization of sex work through moral and emotional appeals, and instead grounds her resistance in lived reality, economic necessity and reason.³⁹

At the same time, Masuda openly recounts the tragic beginnings of her life as a geisha. She uses her story to educate readers and evoke empathy, further highlighting the memoir's role as a form of radical self-definition and activism. Masuda's mother, who had abandoned her as a child to be raised by her uncle, returned when Masuda was twelve only to sell her to a geisha

³⁸ Masuda Sayo, *Autobiography of a Geisha*, trans. G. G. Rowley (Columbia University Press, 2003), 159.

³⁹ Hastings, "Disputing Rights," 55.

house in order to pay for her new husband's medical treatment. Although geishas were traditionally trained performers rather than sex workers, the line between art and exploitation was often blurred, especially for impoverished girls like Masuda who lacked autonomy. Masuda writes that she was "unable to go to school, unable to read ... I had grown up as an abandoned dog does; and then ... I was sold."⁴⁰ Yet Masuda does not exploit her pain for pity — she writes: "even now it fills me with anger: I want to rage against the miserable lives we lead, those of us who are born into this world as blots of sin because of a parent's irresponsibility; I want to cry out that a life like mine must never be repeated. No matter how deep in disgrace, a human being is human."⁴¹ Masuda's searing honesty and call to action illustrate her intention of garnering awareness for the humanity and complicated circumstances of geishas and sex workers. For example, Rowley explains in her translator's introduction to the memoir that after Masuda's teenage years trapped in the geisha world, she was forced to turn to prostitution in 1952 when her brother contracted tuberculosis.⁴² Further, Masuda decided to write her autobiography in part because she needed money but primarily to raise awareness for sex workers with complicated backstories — "women supporting parents whom the war had left incapable of earning a living, women from districts where the local coal mine or factory had closed down, women trying to escape the chronically low wages of female occupations such as those in the textile industry,"⁴³ among others. Masuda didn't go to school as a girl and only learned to read and write as an adult. Yet she found her voice and produced a memoir richly representative of not only her own life but of so many women on the margins of Japanese society, resisting patriarchal abandonment and social erasure that defined criminalization efforts.

⁴⁰ Masuda, *Autobiography of a Geisha*, 19.

⁴¹ Masuda, *Autobiography of a Geisha*, 18.

⁴² G. G. Rowley, "Translator's Introduction" in *Autobiography of a Geisha*, by Sayo Masuda, trans. G. G. Rowley (Columbia University Press, 2003), 3.

⁴³ Rowley, "Translator's Introduction," 5.

Importantly, Masuda explicitly and articulately denounces the Prostitution Prevention Act. She writes:

Prostitution isn't something that will simply disappear just because you've passed a law against it. Probably this stems from a well-meaning attempt to rescue these women from exploitation and profiteering at the hands of rapacious entrepreneurs; but among those making the laws, were there any women like us, who couldn't have survived if they hadn't prostitute themselves? I went to see a newsreel. Those women legislators, all done up in their finery, mincing so proudly on their tour of the red-light district — they were just having fun, I was forced to conclude. If they thought that goggle-eyed gawking was going to help them understand what goes on in the whorehouses, they were very badly mistaken.⁴⁴

Masuda expresses frustration at what she sees as a lack of understanding among women who advocated for the criminalization of sex work, but she also demonstrates a nuanced understanding of how their place of privilege informs their lack of knowledge of sex workers' situations. Rowley expands on this point in her 2002 article, arguing that "prostitutes understandably resented attempts by better-off women to relegate their problems to the realm of morality and to dismiss the painful 'choice' they felt they had been forced to make as mere evidence of lack of moral fiber."⁴⁵ An absence of alternatives — as well as the well-documented state-sanctioned coercion of comfort women — ensnared and held women in sex work.⁴⁶ Though Masuda recognized that women's groups made up of female abolitionists were well-intentioned, she critiqued their savior complex, moral judgment, and lack of awareness of the greater structural conditions that led women to resort to the dangerous, undesirable field. Lie explores this dynamic by showing how the patriarchal Japanese state's paternalistic desire to "protect" women necessitated exploitation of colonized, ethnically marginalized, or poor women as prostitutes to satisfy a socially accepted and rarely questioned male need for sexual release.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Masuda, *Autobiography of a Geisha*, 158.

⁴⁵ Rowley, "Prostitutes against the Prostitution Prevention Act," 44.

⁴⁶ Kramm, "Haunted by Defeat," 610.

⁴⁷ Lie, "The State as Pimp," 252.

Rowley also writes that the 1950s prostitution debate created a “deep fissure” among women — sex workers who feared even more dangerous conditions in a criminalized environment and women’s groups who worried about Japan’s national image and the safety or moral sanctity of prostitutes. Masuda and other sex workers’ attempts to tell their stories through publishing and activism were both a powerful resistance to their status on the margins of society and an attempt to bridge the divide by seeking understanding, empathy, and visibility.

The Prostitution Prevention Act did not eliminate the sale of sex, nor did it curb demand. Instead, it drove it underground and provided reason to surveil, arrest, and coerce prostitutes. In its aftermath, many sex workers experienced greater precarity, facing heightened police harassment, illegal medical examinations, loss of legal protections, and increased dependence on exploitative intermediaries.⁴⁸ As Shiga-Fujime argues, “had Japanese society been a society that valued women's human rights, it probably would not have established ... prostitution prevention laws.”⁴⁹ Despite Japan’s economic success and its efforts to project itself as a “modern” society, the persistence of sex work — particularly the trend of foreign women migrating to Japan for employment in the adult entertainment industry — exposes the contradictions inherent in the Prostitution Prevention Act. Sex workers’ freedoms became even more restricted and they lost the ability to organize against exploitation through grassroots organizing, unions, or publishing their experiences. Yet while they may not have succeeded in overturning the legislation, their resistance challenges dominant portrayals of sex workers as passive victims and urges a broader, more complicated understanding of agency and dissent in postwar Japan. Contemporary scholars, activists and policymakers in Japan and globally must critically reexamine whose voices are prioritized in narratives of liberation and how state power continues to regulate the

⁴⁸ Shiga-Fujime, “Japanese Feminism,” 39.

⁴⁹ Shiga-Fujime, “Japanese Feminism,” 46.

terms of women's labor and survival. Honoring their legacy means preserving their stories, valuing their labor as part of Japan's social and economic fabric and using their struggles as a lens to critique ongoing systems of gendered control and oppression. By centering the voices of these sex workers — who organized, wrote and spoke out in refusal of their erasure — we can move towards a more complete understanding of the history of gender and sex in Japan and a more just future.

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