

A History of Sex Work in Japan: From Base Culture to Idol Culture

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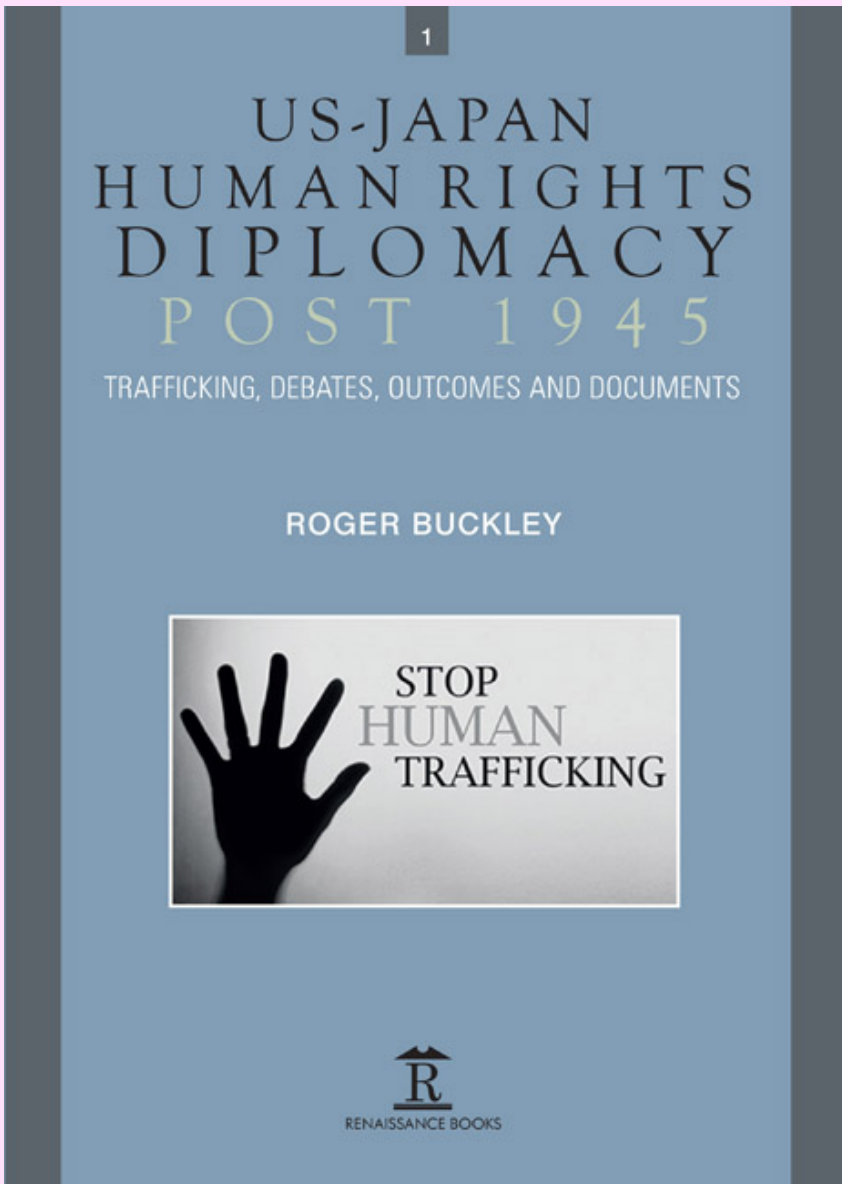
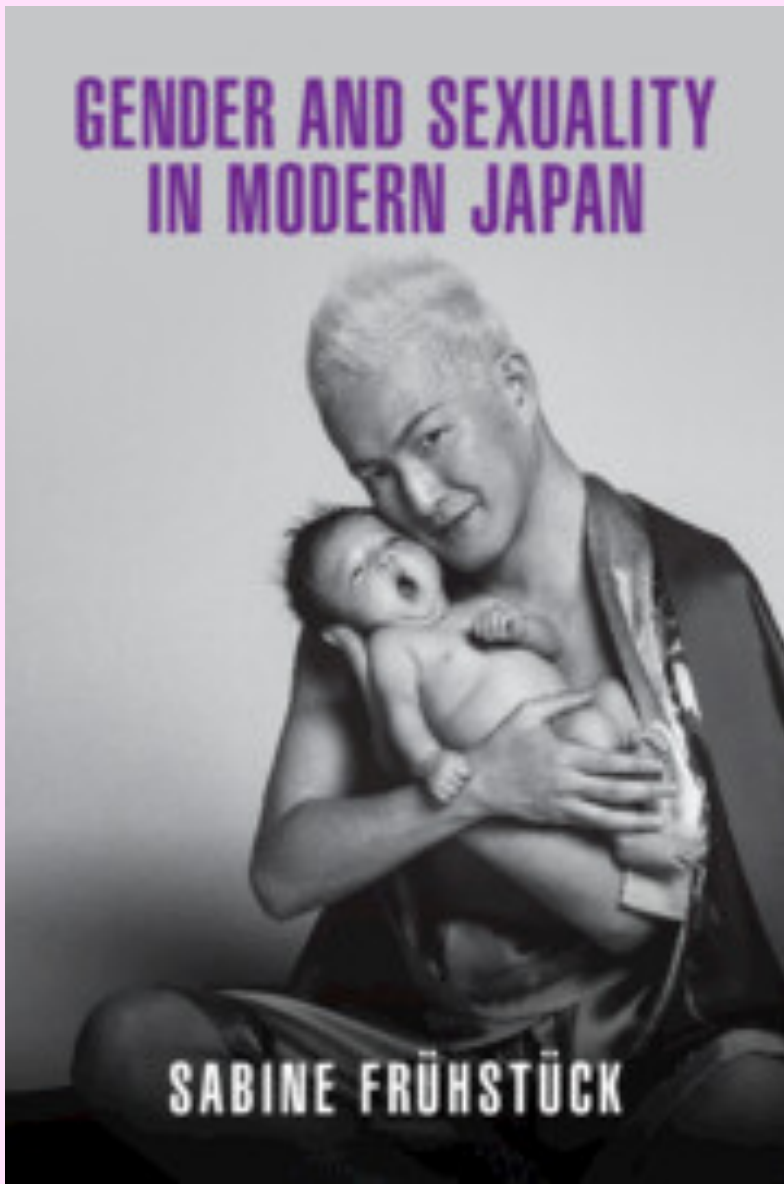
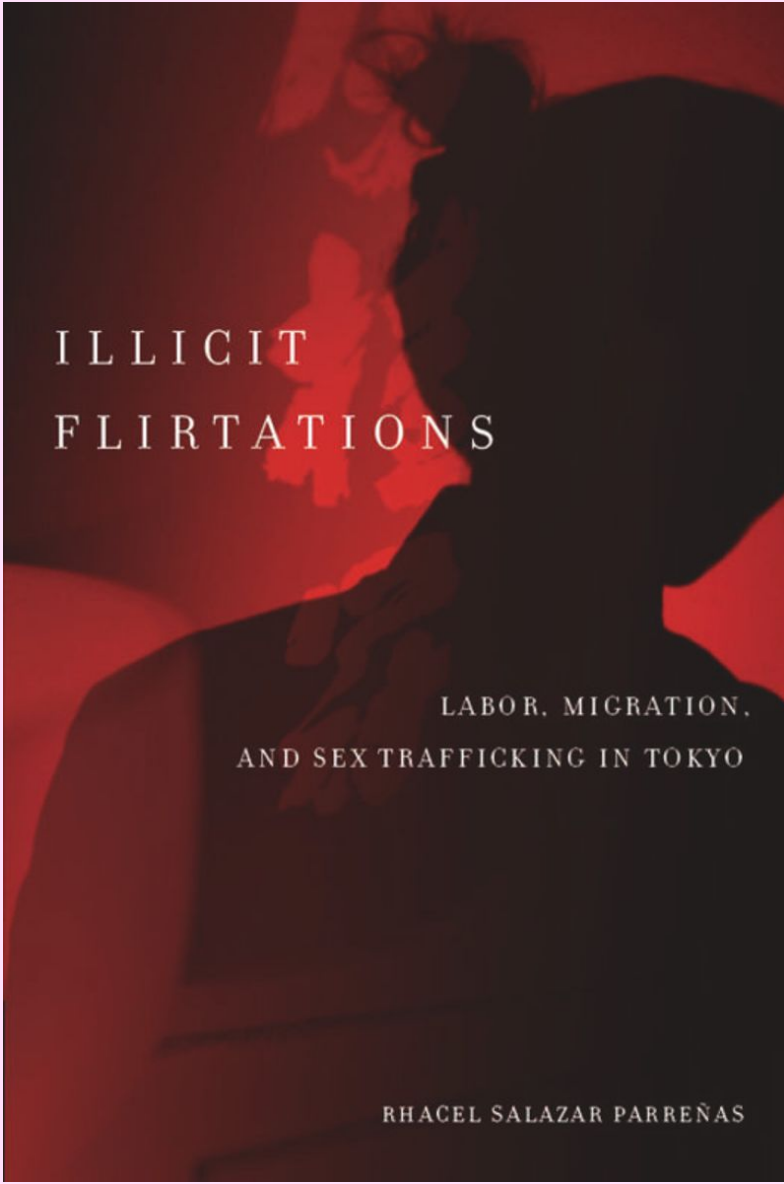
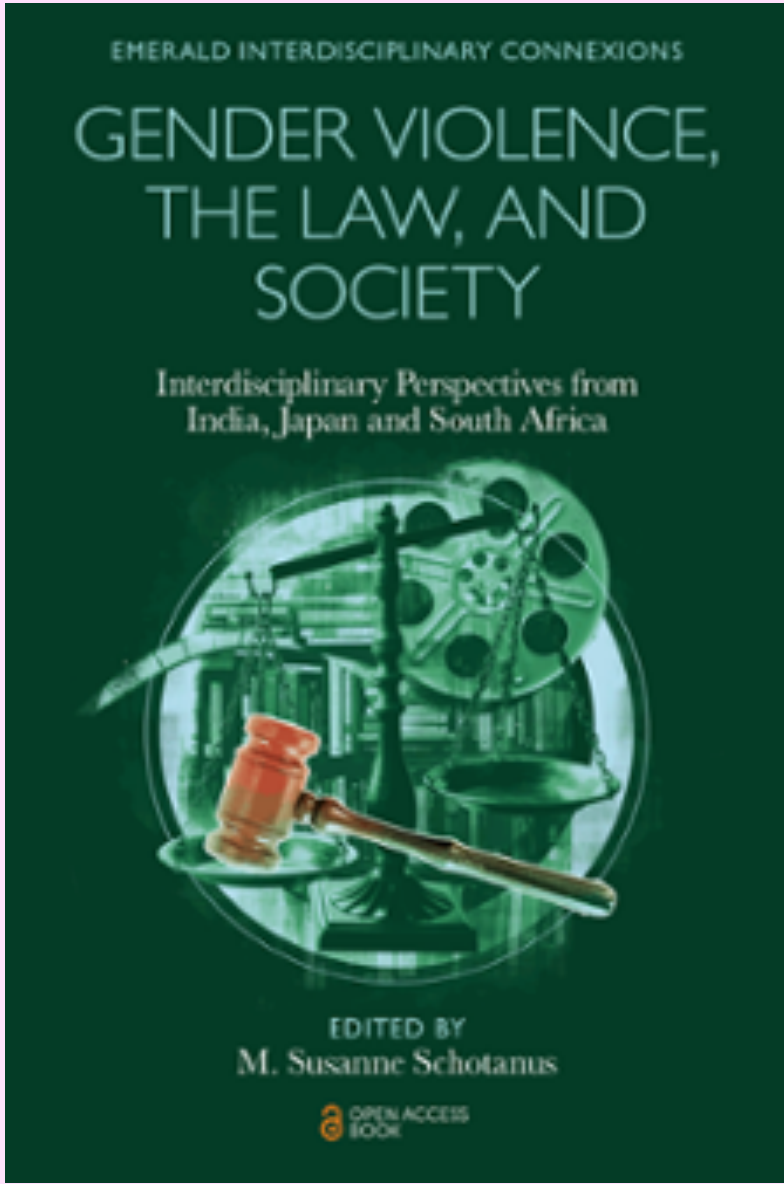
Introduction

The Japanese sex work industry created by World War 2 shaped the future of sex work in the country and contributed to public and governmental perception of both the sex work industry and sex workers themselves. Base culture and Pan Pan girls, while not technically government sanctioned, functioned with the social permission, albeit moral reprehension, of the Japanese people at large and economically supported the cities and towns in which they functioned. In current day Japan, hostess clubs and Idol culture similarly offer economic support and a large money-making industry, allowing them to function without high levels of government or social criticism. In fact, government sanctioned immigration fuels the current sex work industries as a vast number of sex workers in Japan are now foreign workers, primarily from the Philippines. The focus of this research was to determine how the laws and social structures regarding sex work have developed post World War 2, how they have have impacted the current iterations of sex work in Japan, and whether or not there is a direct line to be drawn from Pan Pan girls and base culture to the sex work currently happening in Japan.



American GI and Pan Pan Girl in Yokohama, 1955.

Tucker, Anne Wilkes, et. al. *The History of Japanese Photography*. New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2003.



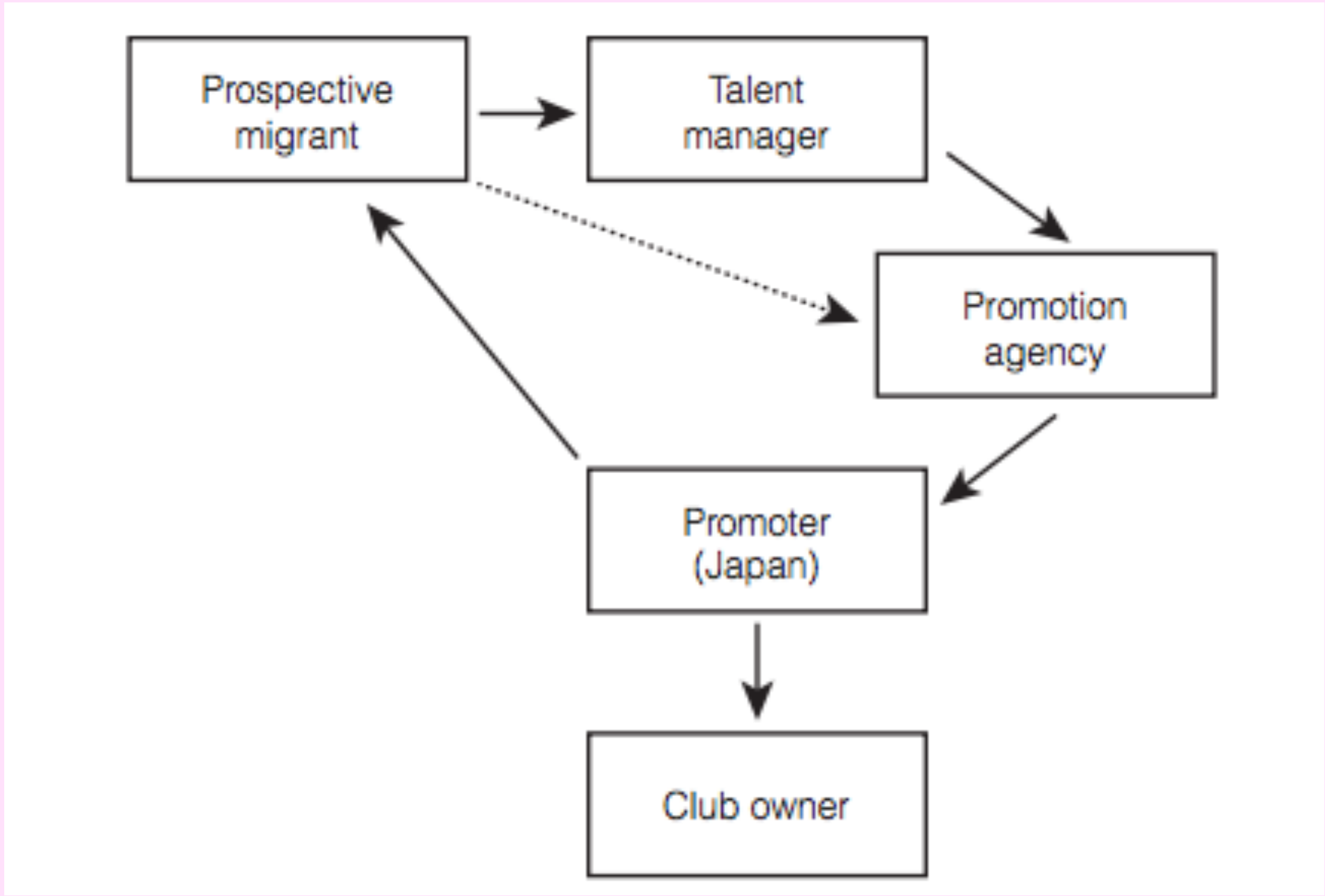
Various Book Covers (From Top Left Clockwise): Gender Violence, The Law and Society, Illicit Flirtations, US – Japan Human Rights Diplomacy Post 1945, and Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan

Methods

The taking off point for the research of this project was the article *The Commodification of Sex in Modern Japan: Outdated Attitudes and Overdue Reforms* by Gavan Patrick Gray. This article provides an insight into current and historical governmental neglect of the sex work industry, and the negative effects this consistent overlooking has had on the people engaged in the industry and the general public. Using the argument outlined in this article, that “it has been accepted for decades, both socially and legally, as a ‘necessary evil’.” the research for this project sought to find articles and chapters that highlighted how this understanding of sex work has developed in Japan over time. Another main source for this project comes from the main text for this class *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan* by Sabine Frühstück, particularly the chapter titled *The Politics of Sexual Labor*. The main takeaway that informed the development of research from this chapter was regarding the enactment of the Prostitution Prevention Law in 1956 and how its narrow definition of prostitution continues to be the standard for legal intervention in sex work in Japan today. From there the research expanded into scholarship about sex trafficking, the migrant worker influx in modern Japanese sex work, and the sexual exploitation of young women.

Discussion

This research made clear that the connections between sex work in post World War 2 Japan and sex work in modern Japan are related to issues that go back in time even further. The main connection found through this research was that throughout Japanese history, the government has tried to simultaneously shame and reproduce sex work for their own benefit. As discussed in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan*, state sanctioned prostitution was prevalent in Japan for nearly three and a half centuries before the creation of the Prostitution Prevention Law. This overlooking of sex work or adjacent industries has contributed to the overall culture towards sex in current day Japan. The governments desire to be seen as a country free of sex trafficking by the countries like the USA as discussed in the article *US-Japan Human Rights Diplomacy Post 1945* only pushed sex work into hiding, potentially making it even more dangerous for the people who perform it. This governmental control also means that sex work adjacent industries, or industries that use sex as a selling point even when that is not the primary product, have continued to grow. The Idol industry, as seen in the film *Tokyo Idols* directed by Kyoko Miyake, uses this idea of sex and companionship to market young women to older men. As well hostess clubs staffed primarily by foreign workers are accepted by government standards yet often capitalize off of the women they employ and contribute to high rates of loneliness and over work in migrant workers.



A chart from *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* by Rhacel Parreñas showing the migration process for foreign workers engaging in Hostess club work in Japan.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Illicit Flirtations : Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* / Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. Stanford University Press, 2011, doi:10.1515/9780804778169.

Conclusion

While this research illuminated in part the very complex cycle of connection between government, law, migration, war, and sex work there are still many unanswered questions. An expansion of this project would include looking more deeply into government documents and original laws to understand the specific perspective of the government at different times throughout history. As this project was conducted in English there were limitations to the sources available. Gaining insight from the actual people engaged in sex work in Japan was always through a second-hand translation of an interview, and therefore limited to the questions most pertinent to that researcher which did not always completely align with the research. Despite this limitation, all of the research gathered lays bare just how complicated sex workers relationship with both the public and the government is in Japan. The governments hesitance to enforce strict laws regarding child pornography, child employment, sex in marketing and other media, and sex work adjacent fields needs to be overcome in order to properly protect all those that engage in sex work in Japan. If governmental regulation is left in this loose and loophole full state than the historical mistreatment of sex workers will continue.

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