

“Or We Will Have to Break the Law”: Sex Workers’ Bodies, Gender and Sexual Experiences in Japan’s “Self-Orientalist” Anti-Prostitution Law (1945–1967)

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Abstract At the end of the Second World War, Japan enacted the Anti-Prostitution Law (*Baishun Bōshi Hō* 売春防止法), declaring the complete abolition of the “public prostitution system” in 1956 as part of a broader national project to modernize the state, protect sex workers’ rights, and reshape sexual morality. Yet the rhetoric of liberation, civilization and rehabilitation concealed a deeper reconfiguration of risk: sexual labor that had once been licensed and taxed became criminalized, pushing sex work underground and transforming women’s embodied experiences from social and geopolitical tensions into moral failures. Existing scholarship has underscored the role of the U.S. occupation in shaping the law and highlighted the tension between its proclaimed objective of protecting sex workers and the new forms of marginalization it produced. Building on but moving beyond existing scholarship, this research revisits the sex workers’ experiences from the overlooked lens of Japanese self-orientalism, which underpinned a linear narrative of civilizing and modernizing the nation through the anti-prostitution discourse. This study reconstructs a layered picture of how law, transnational power, and ideology intersected with women’s lived realities in postwar Japan, thus moving beyond the nation-state paradigm and the hegemonic Western-centric interpretations of Japan’s postwar gender governance.

Keywords Anti-Prostitution Law; self-orientalism; public prostitution; U.S. occupation; postwar Japan.

1. Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, Japan enacted the Anti-Prostitution Law (*Baishun Bōshi Hō* 売春防止法), declaring the complete abolition of the “public prostitution system” in 1956. This measure was framed as part of a broader national project to modernize the state, protect sex workers’ rights, and reshape sexual morality. Existing scholarship on the law has primarily revolved around two analytical frameworks: women’s rights activism and state regulation of sexuality. Feminist scholars highlight the role of women’s organizations in

advocating the abolition of the public prostitution system and often treat Western, especially American, gender norms as a positive democratizing force (Onozawa 1999; Hirai 2014), while legal studies focus on institutional debates and the practical failures of regulation (Akagawa 1995; Honda 2015; Kawashima 2018). These studies have illuminated the impact of the U.S. occupation on Japan and offered crucial insights into the paradox of the law that ostensibly liberated sex workers' experiences. However, existing scholarship reproduces a potential linear narrative of civilizing and modernizing the Japanese nation-state through analyses of anti-prostitution discourse, leaving unaddressed the contradictions and historical experiences embedded in sex workers' lived realities.

Focusing on the process of formulating and enacting the Anti-Prostitution Law (1945–1967), this paper applies transnational and gendered perspectives to examine how bilateral Japan–U.S. relations and broader Cold War–era legal reforms interacted with Japanese legislators and authorities, and how sex workers responded to these transnational dynamics, the resulting legal regime, and the changes these processes brought to their everyday lives. This paper argues that sex workers actively negotiated and resisted the Anti-Prostitution Law, which, although framed as a step toward “modern civilization,” in fact produced a self-orientalist form of modernization that deepened the exploitation of women within the sexual industry. This analysis traces three phases of the law: the pre-legislative years (1945–1956), the legislative debates (1948–1956), and the outcomes of implementation (1957–1967). Across these phases, sex workers' organized resistance, though articulate and politically engaged, was ultimately subsumed within the state's “modernization” project. American “neo-regulationism” and Japan's embrace of Western moral discourse redefined sexuality in ways that served geopolitical rather than humanitarian ends. This study reconstructs a layered picture of how law, transnational power, and ideology intersected with women's lived realities in postwar Japan, thus moving beyond the nation-state paradigm and the hegemonic Euro-centric narratives.

2. Literature Review

Previous scholarship on the Anti-Prostitution Law has primarily revolved around two analytical frameworks: women's rights activism and state regulation of sexuality. Feminist scholars highlight the role of women's organizations in advocating for the abolition of the public prostitution system and often regard

Western, especially American, gender norms as a democratizing force (Hirai 2014; Lu 2016). Onozawa (1999)'s comprehensive studies of the JCWTU (Japan Christian Women's Temperance Union, *Kyōfūkai* 教婦会) demonstrate how these organizations drew on American models to reform sexual morality, particularly through the influence of leaders such as Kubushiro Ochimi, who studied at American social hygiene institutions. However, these feminist scholars have not critically examined the power asymmetries and cultural imperialism embedded within these reform movements. The tendency to view Western feminist models as inherently progressive risks obscuring the ways in which the abolition of the public prostitution system was inappropriate for Japanese social conditions and may have adverse consequences for women it purported to protect.

More recent scholarship has further revised such Western feminist models. Honda (2015)'s analysis of modern Japan's anti-prostitution discourse emphasizes the tension between the "prostitution preservation theory" and the "prostitution abolition theory," noting how legal recognition through the public prostitution system provided certain protections that were later eliminated. Kawashima (2018) argues that while the Anti-Prostitution Law seemingly presented itself as a women's liberation movement, it reflected male-centric perspectives on female sexuality and failed to consider women's economic agency and survival strategies. Yō (2018)'s work goes even further, demonstrating how the implementation of the law deteriorated conditions for sex workers by pushing them into unregulated markets where they faced increased violence and exploitation. These studies provide crucial insights into the practical failures of the law but do not fully theorize the transnational mechanisms that led to these outcomes or connect them to broader patterns of legal imperialism in Cold War East Asia.

Legal studies from a comparative and global perspective have clarified Japan's approach to abolishing the public prostitution system. Fujime (1997) situates Japan within a global landscape of prostitution regulation and shows that its turn to criminalization was an exception rather than an embodiment of international best practices. In the postwar period, most countries prioritized preventing exploitation over criminalizing prostitution itself, making Japan's adoption of American-style "neo-regulationism" particularly problematic. This comparative perspective reveals that Japanese policymakers' understanding of "international standards" was filtered largely through American military viewpoints rather than a genuine global consensus. The law has also been analyzed as a site of cultural negotiation and power struggle. Pratt (2007)

introduces the concept of “contact zones,” a useful framework for understanding how legal reform emerged from unequal interactions between American and Japanese institutions. From this perspective, the Anti-Prostitution Law can be seen as the product of such contact zones, in which American military authorities, Japanese officials, women's organizations, and sex workers negotiated competing visions of social order.

However, existing Japanese and English scholarship has largely relied on top-down official sources, producing a linear narrative of civilizing reform that obscures sex workers' lived experiences and everyday negotiations with state power. This paper therefore adopts a gendered and transnational perspective in examining Japan's Anti-Prostitution Law. It foregrounds sex workers' agency through the use of sources related to sex workers' own experiences, including oral testimonies and written records. It further situates sex workers' experiences within transnational forces in order to move beyond the nation-state paradigm and Euro-centric assumptions.

3. Pre-Legislative Years (1945–1956): Competing Interpretations of “Civilizing” Selling Sex

Before examining the law itself, this section analyzes the contested terrain in which Japanese authorities, U.S. occupation forces, and women engaged in sex work negotiated the meaning of regulation of selling sex in postwar Japan. From 1945 to 1956, economic desperation and state policy intersected with U.S. military presence to produce not a unified regulatory logic, but a field of competing interpretations: Japanese policymakers framed prostitution as a civilizational problem, U.S. authorities projected selective moral standards as universal norms, while women responded pragmatically to shifting legal and economic constraints. As analyzed below, these interactions reveal that the governance of prostitution emerged through conflict and negotiation rather than linear policy-making.

Exacerbated by war and occupation, selling sex became both a means of resisting long-term poverty and a survival strategy for many women. Pre-war rural poverty, especially in regions such as Tōhoku, combined with the collapse of the agricultural economy in the 1930s normalized the sale of daughters, transforming women into exchangeable household assets under conditions of indebtedness rather than individual choice (Dower 1999; Harada & Annaka 2015). The women's livelihoods were later devastated by Japan's defeat in 1945, as the demobilization of soldiers, the repatriation of millions from former

colonies, urban destruction, and rampant inflation left many women with few employment pathways for survival (Masuda 2023). In this context, sex for survival rapidly became an unavoidable reality for war widows, single mothers, and displaced migrants (Shiga-Fujime & Findlay-Kaneko 1993). For many of these women, prostitution was not an act of moral decline, but a pragmatic calculus of survival in the aftermath of the war. As recorded in *Women's New Wind* (*Fujin Shinpō* 婦人新報), an account during the immediate postwar period presents a woman who had “never imagined” she would be forced into prostitution until she owed 1,000 yen (Takenaka & Sumiya 1949: 155). This account reveals that women were compelled to sell sex as a result of accumulated debt. Another account presents a mother who turned to street prostitution amid economic hardship as both the de facto head of household and sole provider caused by the uncertain survival of her husband as a soldier in the war (Kawanishi 2014: 40). These accounts suggest that, amid economic collapse, sex work was often experienced by women as a coerced means of survival rather than a matter of autonomous individual choice. The commodification of women's bodies, gender, and sexuality thus operated within broader structures of poverty and social dislocation that rendered conventional forms of economic activity impossible for many households.

However, the Japanese government sought to frame sexual labor as a form of sacrifice for the nation rather than a disgrace. In the immediate aftermath of surrender, the Japanese state sought to manage the presence of U.S. occupation forces by instrumentalizing women's bodies through the Recreation and Amusement Association (RAA) system. The establishment of the RAA represented a deliberate government strategy to “sacrifice” certain women to protect others from sexual violence by occupying forces. This policy was explicitly framed in terms of national sacrifice, with government officials arguing that the RAA system would serve as a “breakwater” to protect “respectable” Japanese women from American soldiers (Dower 1999; Hirai 2014). Evidently, this was not a humanitarian intervention but a calculated strategy to sacrifice a subset of women in order to preserve social order and national dignity. In this manner, government propaganda portrayed sex workers not as victims of economic circumstance but as patriotic contributors to national recovery. For example, Police Chief Yamamoto Kunishi described sex workers as “national agents” serving their country (Hirai 2014). Echoing this framing, one sex worker in Aomori Prefecture even regarded herself as a member of “special attack troops” in the occupied era (Awaya 1980:325). It presents how state propaganda temporarily reconfigured social outcasts into

national heroes, elevating sex workers' status as they can serve broader political objectives.

Nevertheless, official discursive shift did not empower women within the sexual industry. Instead, it illustrated the instrumental redeployment of women's bodies to stabilize Japan's international standing under the U.S. occupation, as this elevation was both conditional and temporary. When the RAA system was closed due to American pressure based on ethical and health issues, the same government that had praised sex workers as national heroes quickly abandoned them. Many RAA workers found themselves without employment or support and were forced to continue sex work in unregulated markets where they faced greater risks of violence and exploitation. A letter from a sex worker to missionary U.G. Murphy highlights that even severe illness did not allow sex workers to exit exploitative arrangements, underscoring the gap between official claims of protection and the reality of state abandonment (Hayashi 2020: 129). The woman's insistence that she "cannot leave" her post despite suffering from syphilis points to the material pressure that rendered departure impossible. With no mention of legal protection, medical care, or state assistance, and only an appeal to divine help, the letter exposes how postwar sexual governance offered neither protection nor liberation but instead normalized bodily sacrifice among marginalized women.

American occupation power further normalized sexual violence through racializing sexual discourse and enforcing the silence of sex workers. American military personnel viewed Japanese sex workers through orientalist lenses that combined racial othering with sexual objectification. U.S. soldiers frequently referred to Japanese women employing the dehumanizing term "yellow toilet," reflecting a racialized construction of sexual availability that reduced Japanese women to objects for American consumption (*Shinsō* 1954: 34). This language was not merely an expression of individual prejudice but revealed broader patterns of racialized sexuality that characterized American military occupation across multiple Asian contexts. Furthermore, the testimony from a Japanese woman who was sexually assaulted by American soldiers exposes that the occupying power operated not only through physical violence but also through enforced silence (Mizuno 1953: 223). Mizuno's claim that she was "not even allowed to speak" of the wounds inflicted by the "apostles of freedom" lays bare the contradiction between the democratic rhetoric promoted by occupation forces and the lived reality of sexual violence. This silence was politically imposed, which transformed bodily harm into an unspeakable

private trauma rather than a public injustice. This testimony further highlights the enduring nature of personal suffering: the wounds persist long after the formal end of the war, becoming internalized and carried for life. This account thus demonstrates how sexual governance under occupation functioned by erasing women's voices, and preserving the moral authority of the occupying power at the expense of local women's recognition and justice.

These dynamics shaped a regulatory environment in which women's bodies were already treated as instruments of politics rather than as subjects to be protected. Public health policy, particularly the management of venereal disease in postwar Japan, provided the mechanism through which these informal logics were translated into routine regulation. By 1946, infection rates of sexually transmitted diseases among U.S. troops had reached nearly twenty-five percent, causing American pressure, which prompted the Japanese government to impose strict regulations on sex workers, including compulsory treatment and even imprisonment (Tanaka 2002). Responding to this issue, the Japanese government anticipated Western approval by presenting sexual regulation as proof of "civilized" governance (Fujime 2006). Not only were American soldiers exempted from such penalties (Tanaka 2002; Hirai 2014), but also by 1952, Japanese police had catalogued 29,476 sex workers serving American military personnel, subjecting them to mandatory STD testing while still exempting their American clients from similar scrutiny (Kovner 2009). Japan's response regulations therefore revealed how transnational power asymmetries shaped domestic approaches to regulating sexuality, with Japanese women bearing disproportionate responsibility for managing the health and moral concerns of the occupying force.

This unequal enforcement established a precedent that was institutionalized a decade later in the Anti-Prostitution Law's principle of "single punishment," which criminalized sex workers while exempting their clients. The pattern demonstrated how Japanese sovereignty was subordinated to American military priorities and how women's bodies became sites for managing the contradictions of democratic occupation, public order, and geopolitical necessity. Therefore, postwar venereal disease governance functioned as a self-orientalist rehearsal of future legal reform, by displacing regulatory responsibility onto Japanese women while exempting American servicemen in the name of civilized governance.

4. The Legislative Debates (1948–1956): Gendered Regulation and Sex Workers' Failed Resistance

Following competing interpretations of selling sex, competing demands emerged among American occupation authorities, Japanese ministries, women's organizations, and sex worker associations during the drafting of the Anti-Prostitution Law between 1948 and 1956. Rather than constituting an internally coherent legal reform, the process unfolded through resistance and negotiation among these parties. As analyzed below, sex workers did influence the drafting of the law, while geopolitical tensions ultimately shaped its content.

American influence, especially the projection of selective moral standards as universal norms, set the ideological boundaries of the debate. The initial impetus originated with General Headquarters (GHQ), which ordered the abolition of licensed prostitution in 1946 amid U.S. media criticism and public pressure (Hirai 2014). Beyond such directives, American social-purity discourse shaped the ideological framework within which Japanese women's groups operated. Organizations such as the JCWTU, whose roots lay in Protestant missionary networks, appropriated American models of social hygiene and abolitionist morality (Onozawa 1999; Lu 2016). This was a process of ideological translation in which U.S. understandings of "purity," "rehabilitation," and "modern womanhood" were reframed as universal. This ideological configuration differed sharply from international mainstream debates on prostitution. Whereas the International Abolition of Slavery Alliance emphasized the protection of workers from exploitation and focused on forced prostitution and trafficking, American reformers advanced what contemporaries described as "neo-regulationism", a prohibitionist program advocating the criminalization of both the sale and purchase of sex (Kovner 2009). Japanese reformers, lacking direct access to European debates and relying heavily on American interlocutors, mistakenly interpreted U.S. policies as the global standard (Kataigi 1996). As a result, American policy was naturalized as the normative horizon of "modern" governance of gender and sexuality.

Japanese political actors framed prostitution as a civilizational problem; however, they were not unified in their responses to these frameworks. The JCWTU, and several female Diet members framed prostitution as an inherently immoral practice requiring the criminalization of both sex workers and clients regardless of economic circumstances or social context (Fujime 1997). Their claims rested on a moral rehabilitation logic that privileged social purification

over labor rights. Other bureaucratic actors, particularly within the welfare ministries, advocated prevention-focused regulation that targeted solicitation and brothel operators while offering correctional and vocational programs to women. The eventual compromise around *kōsei* (rehabilitation) tethered the law to a welfare-cum-correctional model that treated sex workers not as workers or citizens but as deviants requiring re-education (Kataigi 1996; Kawanishi 2014).

The incorporation of these discourses into law further reflected a process of self-orientalism, in which Japanese elites cast licensed prostitution as a barbaric remnant incompatible with modern civilization. This framing was codified in Article 1 of the Anti-Prostitution Law, which declared that prostitution violated human dignity, offended sexual morality, and disrupted social customs (Anti-Prostitution Law 1956). These normative claims, in turn, provided the legal justification for pushing those who promoted prostitution while subjecting sex workers themselves to corrective and protective measures. In the context of Cold War competition and U.S.–Japan asymmetry, adopting American social models became synonymous with demonstrating national modernity and international respectability. This symbolic performance of gendered modernization reconfigured the stakes of reform since the law came to signify Japan's reintegration into a U.S.-centered liberal order more than it addressed the material conditions of sex work.

However, sex workers themselves resisted these framings, demonstrating forms of agency and political awareness that contradicted stereotypes of passive victimhood. The National Service Employees Union, representing licensed-district workers, submitted petitions, testified in Diet hearings, and organized demonstrations, successfully lobbying to transform the law from a punitive “prohibition” measure to a supposedly protective “prevention” statute (Shiga-Fujime & Findlay-Kaneko 1993). Their claims rested on economic and political arguments: since the state had licensed and taxed prostitution for decades, it bore responsibility for compensating workers upon abolition. They demanded financial restitution, reduced medical fees, retraining programs, and protection from displacement into unregulated sectors (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955a, 1955b). Workers further warned that criminalization would push women into more precarious “blue-light” and “white-light” districts, worsening rather than ameliorating exploitation (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955c, 1955d). Their arguments thus invoked a citizenship-based logic in which sex workers sought recognition as legal subjects and workers, a logic ultimately incompatible with the moral-hygienic framework embraced by reformers.

Despite substantial mobilization, geopolitical imperatives ultimately prevailed. While sex worker advocacy managed to mitigate some of the punitive elements of the law, American military interests guaranteed that American clients would not be prosecuted. Even after the 1953 revision of the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty granted Japan partial jurisdiction over American personnel, the Justice Ministry reached a secret agreement excluding prostitution from prosecution. As a result, American servicemen continued to access Japanese sex markets without legal consequences (Dower 1999; Kawanishi 2014). The exclusion of American soldiers from legal liability was not merely a technical diplomatic arrangement but reflected deeper assumptions about racial hierarchy and national responsibility. American negotiators insisted that Japanese women bore primary responsibility for sexual transactions, while American soldiers were framed as responding to temptation rather than actively participating in exploitation (Hirai 2014). This arrangement also reflected the paradox of the reform: the Anti-Prostitution Law functioned less as a domestic social policy than as a diplomatic performance of moral modernization. Even as Japan regained formal independence in 1952, American military interests continued to shape domestic legislation in ways that prioritized American concerns over Japanese social welfare. The secret nature of these agreements also demonstrates how transnational power relations operated through informal channels that were shielded from public scrutiny and democratic accountability. While signaling Japan's conformity to U.S. normative expectations, the law left intact the hierarchies and inequalities produced by the occupation system.

5. Post-implementation Outcomes (1957–1967): Uneven Modernization and Renewed Marginalization

The implementation of the Anti-Prostitution Law in April 1957, followed by the enforcement of its penal provisions in April 1958, provides a crucial test of whether transnationally inspired legal reform achieved its stated objectives of protecting sex workers and modernizing Japanese society. On both counts, the evidence suggests that the law failed while simultaneously advancing the geopolitical interests that motivated its creation. A key assumption guiding the law's implementation in 1957 was that it would displace rather than eradicate prostitution. Japanese government surveys conducted in advance forecast its limited efficacy. Of the approximately 180,000 women directly affected, only about a quarter were expected to transition into regular employment or return

to families under the “correction” programs overseen by women’s organizations, while a mere 15 percent might enter related entertainment work such as geisha houses or bars; the majority, between half and seventy percent, were predicted to continue in underground prostitution (Shiga-Fujime & Findlay-Kaneko 1993). These forecasts were not pessimistic outliers; rather, they were compiled by the very state agencies promoting the law. The fact that official data anticipated such widespread evasion of the law demonstrates that officials acknowledged that very few would receive welfare assistance. From the outset, therefore, policymakers anticipated displacement rather than eradication of prostitution.

As a consequence, the Anti-Prostitution Law transformed sex workers from state-licensed laborers into criminalized subjects, resulting in worsening their social and economic vulnerability and shifting risk of selling sex onto them. Women’s testimonies confirmed these outcomes. Testimonies collected in *Women’s New Wind* and other contemporary publications reveal the everyday hardships produced by this legislative approach. For many, sex work remained the last viable survival strategy in a society where wages were inadequate, welfare provision meager, and gendered labor opportunities limited (Kobayashi 2022). One woman, widowed and left without stable housing or employment, explained:

“Now, the last desperate attempt I made to survive is about to be taken away... No matter how desperate a person is, deep down, she still longs for a normal life. From April 1 onwards, we will be cast into the turbulent sea of society, with no guarantee of a stable life. This is no different from death itself. Or we will have to break the law and turn to the blue light and white light districts so we can continue to live.” (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955a: 32)

Such statements underscore that the law did not provide viable alternatives for displaced sex workers. Instead, it criminalized their primary means of subsistence, transforming legally recognized workers into offenders overnight. The conceptual underpinnings of this transformation are visible in the law’s emphasis on *kōsei* (“rehabilitation”), a term typically reserved for individuals convicted of serious crimes. When applied to women whose “offense” was selling sexual services under economic duress, the discourse of *kōsei* recast these women as criminalized subjects in need of correction, compounding stigma and vulnerability. What had previously been state-licensed and taxed labor now became an illicit activity, exposing women to harassment, arrest, and contempt (Yokoyama 1993; Kawashima 2018). With licensed districts shuttered, sex work migrated underground into venues increasingly controlled

by organized crime. Women faced heightened exposure to violence, coercive debt arrangements, and limited access to legal recourse. Rather than ending the sex trade, the law redistributed risk downward—away from the respectable public and onto already-precarious women.

Unequal jurisdiction under the post-occupation security regime continued to shape the regulatory environment. Crimes committed by American servicemen disproportionately affected sex workers, yet courts frequently reframed assaults as contractual disputes over prostitution rather than violations of bodily autonomy, thereby undermining women's legal standing as victims (Hirai 2014). The law's "single punishment" system further entrenched this asymmetry: sellers bore criminal liability, while buyers, including foreign servicemen, remained exempt. Under the U.S.–Japan security apparatus, the Anti-Prostitution Law thus functioned less as an instrument of women's protection than as a form of regulatory imperialism that shielded foreign military interests at the expense of local women. Far from securing emancipation, the new legal order reinforced existing hierarchies of race, gender, and sovereignty.

In this way, the Anti-Prostitution Law drove the trade underground and intensified the structural precarity that sustained it. Women expelled from the licensed system faced ostracism in their home communities, difficulty securing formal employment, and the constant threat of criminal prosecution. Many, unable to overcome these barriers, returned to sex work under more precarious and dangerous conditions. As former red-light districts lost their legal status, the trade was absorbed into underground markets increasingly controlled by organized crime syndicates, where gang-affiliated pimps replaced licensed brothel operators and violence intensified (Kawanishi 2014). Without even the minimal labor protections afforded under the pre-1957 system, sex workers lost legal recourse against abusive clients or employers, and physical assaults often went unreported due to fear of arrest. Between 1957 and the early 1970s, more than 120,000 women were arrested under Article 5, which criminalized the public solicitation, tailing, or advertising for the purpose of prostitution alone (Tanaka 2002). Official surveys acknowledged the overwhelmingly economic motivations behind these arrests: in 1957, the National Service Employees' Union reported that eighty-six percent of women entered prostitution for financial reasons and seventy-seven percent were fully aware of the illegality of their work but had no viable alternatives (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955b). The structural conditions that drove women into prostitution in the 1950s, low wages, gendered labor segmentation, and inadequate welfare provision, persisted well

into the late twentieth century, undermining any claim that the law represented a step toward social modernization. In this sense, the Anti-Prostitution Law not only failed to dismantle the economic drivers of sex work but actively reinforced cycles of marginalization. The moral rhetoric of “civilization” and “protection” thus masked a reality in which legal reform deepened the vulnerabilities it claimed to address.

6. Discussion and Conclusion: Self-Orientalism and the Limits of Transnational Legal Reform

As a result, the failure of the Anti-Prostitution Law to realize its stated humanitarian objectives should be understood within the broader logic of self-orientalist reform. In their eagerness to demonstrate “modernity” to international observers, Japanese policymakers adopted regulatory frameworks that were ill-suited to local labor markets and fundamentally misaligned with sex workers’ material needs. This self-orientalist orientation manifested itself in three interrelated tendencies. First, Japanese reform advocates routinely characterized indigenous public prostitution as “backward” or “uncivilized” while treating Western alternatives as inherently progressive, regardless of their actual consequences (Kataigi 1996; Tanaka 2002). Second, policy debates privileged Western, especially American moral principles over the pragmatic concerns of sex workers, subordinating welfare to symbolism (Yokoyama 1993; Kawanishi 2014). Third, the reform process marginalized those most directly affected while elevating the perspectives of elite women who had achieved social mobility through the adoption of Western cultural models (Kataigi 1996; Kovner 2013). These three points further reveal the disconnect between symbolic performance and substantive outcomes. By internalizing Western critiques of indigenous practices, Japanese reformers became committed to legal transformation irrespective of its practical consequences. The Anti-Prostitution Law thus succeeded in signaling Japan’s alignment with American moral standards but failed to improve conditions for the women it claimed to protect, highlighting the tension between its proclaimed objective of protecting sex workers and the new forms of marginalization it produced. Modernization was thus performed rather than achieved.

In conclusion, Japan’s Anti-Prostitution Law of 1956 was more than a failed attempt at moral reform. It exemplifies how transnational power relations in a postcolonial setting shaped domestic law in ways that privileged geopolitical interests over humanitarian concerns. American occupation

created the pressures and conditions for abolition, while Japanese elites' self-orientalist embrace of Western models foreclosed critical evaluation of the law's consequences. Tracing the law's development across three phases, from the commodification of women's bodies in the immediate postwar years, through debates dominated by transnational influence, to post-implementation re-marginalization, reveals how projects of legal modernization can entrench inequality when symbolic alignment with international norms takes precedence over substantive improvement in social conditions.

This case resonates with broader Cold War patterns of legal reform across East Asia, where Western models were privileged, affected populations excluded, and moral discourse substituted for structural analysis. For contemporary scholarship, the lesson is clear: analyzing the content of reform is insufficient without also interrogating the power relations that shape its making and implementation. Ultimately, the Anti-Prostitution Law illustrates the limits of externally driven modernization. Legal transplantation, even when cloaked in humanitarian ideals, risks reinforcing hierarchies if it excludes the voices of those most directly affected. Japan's experience thus stands as a cautionary tale: beneath the performance of civilization, self-orientalist impulses persisted, and the lived realities of women in the sex industry were rendered invisible in service of geopolitical and ideological ends.

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