

Book Review

Koch, Gabriele. *Healing Labor: Japanese Sex Work in the Gendered Economy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020, 230 pages.

Michaël Châteauneuf
University of Ottawa

Healing Labor explores how the sex industry in Tokyo directly impacts the women involved, offering a new perspective on its importance in the national economy. Gabriele Koch demonstrates the gendered distinction in Japanese workplaces by relating it to the sex industry, especially considering how hard it is for women to have a career in Japanese companies. For many, being an Office Lady is not attractive, because the work schedule is intense, the pay is low, and women face different obstacles if they want to have a “man” career (Eto 2020). Koch’s ethnography contains multiple stories of women who choose another path, a path that allows women to have a better grip on their own schedule, and a better income, as this rejects the normative model and accepts the risks that come with working in the sex industry. Koch reminds us about this gendered relation in all industries, and goes on to show how these relationships shape sex work. Using *iyashi* (healing), these women have a specific relationship with their clients: they are healers. For whom? Mostly men, as the sex industry is mostly cisheteronormative.

Men do not have time to invest in a relationship since work takes the better part of their schedule. The use of the word *iyashi* is interesting in this context because it stems from the women’s point of view. The idea of healing hardworking men (the salaryman) defines the role of women in society. As in every job, newcomers receive training, which the author was able to observe. She notes that this training does not take an institutional or centred form, although we must keep in mind—like the author does—that her findings are not generalizable to Tokyo’s sex industry as a whole. However, the presentation of the results took an interesting form: an older sex worker shared all her experience with eight participants, including the anthropologist, and this is

available on DVD (104–109). The instructor shared her experiences on how to produce *iyashi*. To do so, one must make the customer feel like a man, see the relationship as a maternal one (from the concept of *amae*), compliment the man on his efforts at work. Koch also develops on more technical information, where ultimately, the goal is to relieve pressure and stress. The seriousness and dedication, seen in both the instructor's training and the participant's attentiveness, are common in Japan, and should perhaps not come as a surprise. What Koch does well is presenting a more positive view of people who are generally marginalized by their profession.

Still, the Japanese government's approach to this industry is traditional. As sociologist Nagai Yoshikazu calls it, the policy is "enclosure" (28). Trading sexual favours is seen as entertainment, as long as there is no heterosexual intercourse. Often, when a client goes for such a service, they enjoy other types of business and participate in the local economy. The sex industry is not hidden as it is in some other countries, but is seen in public spaces (54). Even if this industry is massive in Japan, and its services are used by many, the women involved are not seen as workers but as victims. The illegality of the industry translates into no protection for workers, a situation that has worsened recently.

The relation between the economy and the sex industry is expressed in this book in a way that furthers our knowledge of the Japanese economy. The neoliberal consequences on this industry over the last few decades are clear: fewer physical places and more delivery (40), which is not unique to sex work. However, the impacts on sex workers are far greater, because women are unprotected if they need to move in their client's private space, far away from the safety of a brick-and-mortar business. This increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections in a context that is already difficult, especially when most of these women do not tell their family of their work, and therefore receive no support from them (74). Moreover, sex workers are not legally seen as "real" workers, and their job is associated with human trafficking. The industry is under assault due to changes in zoning regulations, making it harder to open a new business. Instead of eradicating the sex industry, these changes accelerate its decentralization. While the industry exists because it is part of the gendered economy, there is a demand and government policy does not address men.

This book contributes to work studies in Tokyo, and sheds light on an industry some do not want to discuss. The book is at the intersection of gender studies, an essential aspect for properly understanding contemporary Japan. Its reflections on the concept of labour require undoing stereotypes about sex

workers. The book will be of interest to students and scholars of the gendered economy. The book is a good example on how to present this subject and the fieldwork experiences in an ethical way. When working with marginalized people and writing about them, Koch shows the care and sensibility required of studies in this field.

Reference

Eto, Mikiko. 2020. *Women and Political Inequality in Japan: Gender-Imbalanced Democracy*. Routledge Contemporary Japan Series. London, New York: Routledge.