

## *Honoring the “Comfort Women” Drafted into Military Sexual Slavery*

Radical Feminist Conference, London, September 15, 2015

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During this year, many countries are celebrating the 70th anniversary of World War II (WWII) to honor the service and sacrifice of those who fought in the war. Thus far, no plans are underway to commemorate the hundreds of thousands of women conscripted into military sexual slavery and who were truly sacrificed in this war.

The history of these so-called comfort women constitutes one of the most egregious war crimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but has never been officially recognized as such. Most of these women are now deceased, but the remnant who have survived and their allies, are still pressuring Japan, to take responsibility for this crime, apologize and make reparations.

This talk is not only about Japan’s war crimes against women. It is also about the US military’s reenactment of the comfort women system during the post-war years when the United States occupied Japan. And the drafting of women into military sexual slavery certainly did not begin with Japan’s “comfort women” system. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British army subjected women in India to the cantonment system of military prostitution and provoked an outraged protest from Josephine Butler, the woman who founded the international abolitionist movement.

In this system of military prostitution, Japan subjugated 100,000-200,000 women, most who are now deceased. The methods of procuring women were highly organized and government-sponsored, ranging from abduction to deception, and spanning the breadth of Japan’s wartime empire in the Asia-Pacific region. Japanese historian Yuki Tanaka calls this crime, “the largest and most elaborate system of trafficking in women in history... and one of the most brutal.”<sup>i</sup>

The “comfort women” system provides the template for other war crimes against women committed during the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, including the tradition of military field brothels established by the French in Vietnam, supplied with girls and women imported from Algeria; the US system of military prostitution in the Philippines in which women were officially registered,

examined and certified as hospitality women, another euphemism like comfort women; the systematic rapes of Bengali women by West Pakistani soldiers during the Bangladesh war for independence; the rape camps in Bosnia; and the abduction and rape of hundreds of young girls and women who remain captive today in Nigeria, Syria and Iraq placed in sexual servitude to Islamic extremists.

### Who were the so-called comfort women?

Eighty percent of the women drafted into prostitution by Japan were Korean. Beginning with Japan's colonization of Korea, large numbers of Korean women were trafficked to Japan at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Japanese colonial government introduced a licensed prostitution industry in Korea, similar to one already existing in Japan, officially setting up and regulating "prostitute employment industries" run by both Japanese and Korean procurers.

In 1932, in its attempt to colonize parts of China, Japan established an overseas prostitution industry of military brothels for its troops in Shanghai. In addition to the Chinese women procured for Japanese military brothels, "recruiting agents" also brought many Korean women to China. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Japanese military authorities set up "comfort stations" wherever its troops moved in the Asia-Pacific war zone. My father was stationed on one of these islands during the war and said that he and other Marines noted the unusual presence of Asian women near the wartime campsites of the Japanese military.

Other women procured for military sexual slavery came from the Philippines, Taiwan, the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) and China. From testimonies of survivors, we learn that different methods of procurement were used. In Indonesia where the local population welcomed the Japanese military as "liberators" from Dutch colonialism, deceit was the preferred method. In China and the Philippines, it was kidnapping and abduction.

In the Philippines, it is estimated that Japanese soldiers pressed 1,000 women into sexual servitude during the war. In 1992, survivor Maria Rosa Henson courageously revealed what happened to many women like her. Encouraged by her testimony, 51 other women came forward to give detailed accounts of their sexual slavery. She related how Japanese troops in the Philippines seized women and girls from homes and streets, followed by rape and confinement. The average age of Filipinas procured was 17, although many were younger than 15.

Many of these girls also had to witness the murder of their parents and siblings at the point they were kidnapped.

The girls and women were kept under guard 24 hours of the day. They were also forced to cook and clean for the soldiers during the day. On average, they were forced to serve at least 10 Japanese soldiers per day. Many were tortured if they tried to resist.

In other countries, the Japanese military did not directly capture women but instead used recruiters to stock officially approved “comfort stations.” Deceived about the real nature of their position, many were told they owed debts for payments paid to parents or relatives.

This is the testimony of Korean survivor Ha Sunnyŏ who tried to escape: “...the proprietor knew. He came in and beat me all over, saying that he would teach me a lesson once and for all. When my wounds were almost healed, soldiers began to come looking to have sex with me. I resisted them, so then the proprietor hit me on the head with a club. I can remember blood gushing out from the wound...I blacked out...I was saved because a Western woman living in the neighborhood saw me ...and brought ointment to put on my wound.”<sup>ii</sup>

The military tightly controlled each “comfort station.” Ordinary soldiers were allowed to enter during daily hours, whereas the evening hours were reserved for officers. On a normal day, women serviced 10 men, but the number would increase to 30 or 40 per day before and after battles. Despite regulations that mandated condoms for any soldier who used the stations, many men refused, forcing the women to sexually serve them. Some women used drugs mixed with alcohol to blunt the abuse and dull the pain. Some committed suicide.

In Indonesia, 20,000 native Indonesian women, and a small number of Dutch women who lived there during the war, were victims of sexual servitude. Numerous brothels were built to service the 220,000 Japanese military personnel stationed in the country.

Prior to the war the Dutch colonizers had sexually exploited large numbers of Indonesian women. After the war, Dutch authorities conducted an investigation of Japanese war crimes resulting in a war crimes tribunal. However, only those Japanese officers who had conscripted *white Dutch women* into sexual servitude were prosecuted. Probably because their own soldiers had abused many

Indonesian women before the war, the Dutch military authorities viewed the sexual slavery of 20,000 Indonesian women through a racist lens as inferior

When the war ended, most of the “comfort women” were abandoned and left to fend for themselves. Many women in stations close to the battlefields died as a result of warfare. Those who survived lived with lifelong illnesses and injuries from the sexual violence. Some were rescued by Allied forces and sent home, and others were drafted into military sexual slavery when the “comfort women” system was replicated by the US military during the American occupation of Japan in the post-WWII years.

### After the War: a Hidden History

Decades after the war, several researchers began to excavate and examine documents that lay buried for many years in the national archives of Japan, the United States and Australia. In spite of Japan’s denial of government-sponsorship of military prostitution, many of these records proved that Japanese authorities officially institutionalized the comfort system during and after the war.

It took an Asian feminist movement, which was also joined by Japanese feminists, to make visible to the world the plight of the victims of military sexual slavery during WWII. This Asian feminist movement was inspired by brave survivors of the “comfort system” who gradually began to testify in public about their experiences.

In 1981, now-deceased Japanese feminist journalist Matsui Yayori was posted to Singapore where she met with women who had been forced to serve as “comfort women.” In 1984, she wrote the first article about the “subhuman” life of a “comfort woman” in Thailand. Matsui’s work marked the first time any major newspaper addressed the issue. She later resigned from the paper to work for women’s causes. In 1998, she founded the Violence Against Women in War Network and with the Asia-Japan Women’s Center, organized a mock tribunal in the year 2000 called the Women’s International War Crimes Trial that convicted leaders of the “comfort women system.” She was one of the founders of the Tokyo Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace in order to preserve the history and memory of the wartime violence committed by the Japanese military against women.

The Korean women's movement has led international efforts to pressure Japan into accepting legal responsibility for their crimes against the former "comfort women" and paying compensation to the survivors. In 1991, 3 Korean survivors filed a class-action suit on behalf of themselves and other Korean women. After 50 years of anonymity, privation and an experience that produced shame and fear of revelation, the survivors --now advanced in age -- told their stories. Yi Yongnyŏ was one of them.

"The Japanese occupied our country and abused us...I want them to compensate us for the sacrifices we were forced to make...They took us completely under their control, But now they are making feeble excuses about the recruitment of the comfort women, and they say that we volunteered. It was their politics that drove us to the place of our deaths. I want to tell the Japanese government that they must not evade the issue any longer."<sup>iii</sup>

A Korean NGO, The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, appealed to the-then UN Commission on Human Rights to investigate the comfort women's situation and Japan's official responsibility.

In 1995, Japan set up a fund to compensate the victims, an arrangement that was essentially an end run around any admission of official guilt and responsibility. The funds would be administered through an intermediary instrument, called the Asian Women's Fund (AWF), which would dispense payments to each individual survivor who registered in countries from which women were conscripted.

The Korean Council and its international allies were opposed to accepting AWF money because they viewed it as a governmental tactic to sidestep moral responsibility, official accountability and straightforward recompense to the victims. Survivors took varying positions because many were aging and dying, and needed the money. Maria Rosa Henson, the first Filipina to come forward, was among those who received the money, whereas Kim Hak-sun, the Korean woman whose testimony catalyzed the international movement refused to accept the money and died in 1997.

Four Filipinas who chose to accept payment from the AWF said although they took the payments, they wanted more than compensation. One stated: "They ruined our lives as women. My elder sister, she lost her mind because of the trauma. Philippines Survivor Lila Pilipina said she was still hopeful that justice

would be served. She said: “What I’m only afraid of is, we are running out of time...”<sup>iv</sup> By 2015, Korean survivors had dwindled to 50, with an average age of 89.<sup>v</sup> The surviving Korean women joined by Korean NGOs are still seeking admission of legal responsibility from Japan.

### The United States:

The evidence for WWII military sexual slavery points not to Japan alone. Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945 (Japan Time Zone). The Japanese government, - - fearful that “sex-starved” US occupation troops would behave as did Japanese forces abroad -- recruited thousands of women to serve these foreign soldiers in official brothels. The women who were pressed into service were told that their mission “was to be a sexual dike to protect the chastity of Japanese women” and prevent pollution of the race.<sup>vi</sup>

Official police accounts maintained the Japanese “comfort women” were all professional licensed prostitutes. Yet, the authorities could only fill the brothels by advertising for women who would “serve their country” in this way. A typical ad read: “We require the utmost co-operation of new Japanese women who participate in a great project to comfort the occupation forces...Accommodation, clothes and meals, all free.”

Many of the Japanese women who enlisted or were eventually drafted were war orphans and widows who were starving and homeless. Some of them were high-school students who had been put to work in the munitions factories, had lost their families and had nowhere else to go. Some were women raped by US soldiers at the end of the war. Still others were returning women who had earlier been conscripted into wartime “comfort stations” in various parts of the Asia-Pacific.

Japanese politicians had no compunction about segregating a group of disposable women from the general female population, allegedly to protect women who weren’t so expendable, and could be used to sexually serve “enemy” soldiers who would occupy post-war Japan.

The “comfort” facilities were made available only to the occupation forces that were mostly US, along with 40,000 troops from British Commonwealth countries. Japanese men were banned from the premises.

### Complicity of the US Occupation Government:

What was the specific role of the US military in Japan's post-war prostitution system? US occupation authorities from the beginning were prepared not only to tolerate organized prostitution but to regulate it in ways that would accommodate the troops. US army officers inspected the red-light districts and set up prophylactic stations. US military police were commanded to keep order among the lines of US soldiers waiting their turns to enter the brothels, and in the beginning could hardly contain the throngs of men who lined up to be sexually served.

Despite reports that women were being coerced into the occupation brothels, and with full knowledge of Japan's appalling conscription of women into military sexual slavery during the war, US soldiers found an officially sanctioned system of brothels in Japan waiting for them almost immediately after the country surrendered to the Allies. Each woman had to serve from 15-60 buyers a day.<sup>vii</sup> Both the Japanese and US authorities treated prostitution as a necessary amenity for the "recreation of the warriors."

At its peak 70,000 women ended up serving the 350,000 occupation troops in the post-war period. The number of unofficial private brothels servicing the US military was probably even higher.<sup>viii</sup> The US military's collusion with Japanese government inspections of women for venereal disease, the way in which Japanese women were induced and deceived into prostitution, the continued use of many "comfort women" who were prostituted during the war, and the supervision of brothels for U.S. military use during the occupation all testify to the US reproduction of the Japanese "comfort system."

In 1946 at the instigation of US military chaplains, Gen. MacArthur was pressured to end the military's use of "comfort stations" in Japan, put them off limits, and relocate women who had been passed down from the Japanese troops to the Americans. All violations of the new policy would be subject to disciplinary action.<sup>ix</sup> By that time this edict went into effect, many of the prostituted women had venereal disease and were destitute. More than a quarter of all US military servicemen in Japan also had a sexually transmitted disease.<sup>x</sup>

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, held to prosecute Japanese war crimes, took place from 1946-49. However, these crimes against the hundreds of thousands of "comfort women" were never prosecuted. US military authorities, who were well aware of these crimes against women, held key positions of power during the Tribunal. It appears that one reason the Tribunal did not prosecute the crimes

against the “comfort women” was that the US occupation authorities did not want their own “comfort women” system exposed. Furthermore the fact that it was mostly Asian women who were violated by both the Japanese and the Americans added to US lack of accountability.<sup>xi</sup>

### Contemporary Efforts:

Japan is still divided over the “comfort women” issue. The Japanese government has attempted to eliminate information from school textbooks sanitizing its brutal exploitation of hundreds of thousands of women subjected to military sexual slavery by the Japanese army during the war. Most recently, the Japanese government is targeting the work of historians not only within Japan but also abroad.<sup>xii</sup>

The language of “comfort women” or “comfort stations,” of course, are euphemisms used by the Japanese to mask the brutality of its prostitution system and make it sound like the women were performing a voluntary service. In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in a regressive public statement announced there was no evidence that the Imperial Japanese Army had conscripted hundreds of thousands of mostly Asian women into military brothels during World War II.

Abe’s statement was followed by a full-page ad in the *Washington Post* signed by a group of Japanese lawmakers who wanted to share “the truth with the American people.” The ad claimed that no historical document proves that these women were forced, but rather alleges they were “embedded with the Japanese army... working under a system of licensed prostitution that was commonplace around the world at the time.” Although the ad acknowledged there were some “breakdowns in discipline,” it asserted many of these women “made more money than field officers and even generals.”<sup>xiii</sup>

In April of 2015, Abe visited Washington, DC in his second term as Prime Minister in an attempt to solidify Japan’s military and economic relationship with the United States. Critics pressed him about the “comfort women” issue and asked whether he would make an official apology for Japan’s sexual slavery during WWII. Once more, he evaded a direct apology and stated: “I am deeply pained to think about the comfort women who experienced immeasurable pain and suffering due to human trafficking.”<sup>xiv</sup> No reference to the Japanese government and the Japanese military that engaged in the trafficking. No

reference to those who were responsible for the sexual slavery of hundreds of thousands of Asian women.

Then again in August of this year, commemorating the end of the war with Japan, Abe offered only an indirect statement avoiding an apology and assumption of official responsibility for the crimes committed against the “comfort women.” He said: “We must never forget that there were women behind the battlefields whose honor and dignity were severely injured.” He attributed no blame for past deeds and regressed further in stating, “We must not let our children, grandchildren and even further generations to come, who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologize.” Mr. Abe is a member of the conservative party in Japan who have long sought to revise the history of Japan’s role in WWII and especially to avoid what they call a “masochistic” approach to Japan’s history.

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) has worked recently with Korean organizations to urge Abe to make an official statement of apology specifying Japan’s role in drafting hundreds of thousands of women and girls into sexual slavery during WWII. In February 2015, CATW published a petition on Change.org calling on the Prime Minister to make an apology, accept Japan’s moral responsibility for this crime, and end attempts to revise the history of Japan’s systematic trafficking. To date, there are over 40,000 signatures. <https://www.change.org/p/urge-the-japan-government-to-take-responsibility-for-comfort-women>

### Conclusion:

The history of the “comfort women” system is timely because it reverberates with lessons about state-sponsored prostitution today. For some, it may be easier to comprehend that meaningful consent does not exist within a military context where women of another country are used in prostitution by the dominant power than in a modern democratic government, which legalizes or decriminalizes the sex industry. Because these countries draw a line in the sand between voluntary and forced prostitution, and base their systems of sexual exploitation on women’s right to choose, people are not so ready to understand the harm to women of modern state-sponsored prostitution regimes.

In a non-military context, governments can just as well be persuasive promoters of prostitution as in a military context. In countries that have legalized or decriminalized systems of prostitution, these countries become prostitution

nations in which women are encouraged to prostitute *because* it is legal; men are given legal permission to buy women *because* prostitution is re-branded as a “sexual service;” and pimps who prey upon the vulnerabilities of women and children are transformed into acceptable business agents. These countries justify not only the creators of the prostitution system and its crimes against women, but also the hundreds of thousands of ordinary men who use and abuse prostituted women.

The Japanese government whitewashed its conscription of women into military prostitution by alleging that women were “embedded” within a system of legal prostitution that made distinctions between women who are forced and women who make the alleged choice to be in prostitution. The Netherlands, Germany and Australia use the same reasoning to support their legalized regimes of prostitution.

In 1952, historian Yanaihara Tadao stated that the consequences of the US post-war sexual exploitation of women had affected Japanese society “no less than the destructive power of the A-bombs” dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>xv</sup> State-sponsored prostitution corrupted Japanese society both morally and economically, not only when the post-war brothels were set up for the US and other Allied occupation troops, but also when Japan became the center for US and Australian forces who took their R&R in Japan during the Korean War. The high taxes levied on the Japanese sex industry played a key role in raising public money for the re-building of Japan and in constructing the economic infrastructure of Japanese capitalism after the war – the same economic infrastructure that governments are replicating through legally sanctioned prostitution of women in state-sponsored regimes such as the Netherlands where prostitution accounts for 5 percent of the country’s GDP.

Militarism is a radical feminist issue. Militarism is just as horrific today as it was during World War II. The United States bears immense responsibility for this, especially in the Middle East, which is now riven by war and war crimes against women. Several years ago, I worked with a group of women who had organized a 4-year project in the Middle East to assist women in Iraq caught between the violence of an occupying country’s warmongering and the wholesale slaughter of women on the streets of Basra by woman-hating local extremists. Today, we are trying to organize a similar project to assist the Iraqi and Syrian women who are victims of the same violence.

Militarism is a radical feminist issue, not only because rape, sexual slavery and trafficking in women are fueled by war but for other reasons as well. Consider the following reasons spotlighted by Patricia Hynes in her article on why militarism is bad for women.

“Massive numbers of women civilians are killed and injured in modern warfare; women are injured and killed by landmines; widows of war are displaced, disinherited and impoverished; 80 percent of the world’s refugees and internally displaced persons are women fleeing war and conflict; women and girls are sexually exploited by UN peacekeepers and aid workers in post-conflict regions; women and girls are at higher risk of STDs from soldiers and peacekeepers; women and their children lose health, housing education and welfare services due to war-related pressure on these services and the priorities of the military budget; women suffer higher rates of battering from military husbands and partners; women are exposed to toxic chemical weapons and environmental contamination.”

It is mainly feminists who have historically insisted that violence against women is a human rights issue. Like those women drafted into military sexual slavery who continue to insist on justice and restitution, feminists once had to insist that rape, woman battering, prostitution and pornography are crimes against women. We are still insisting, particularly where pornography and prostitution are concerned, and we will continue to insist.

We honor the “comfort women” by opposing the contemporary “comfort systems” of today.

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<sup>i</sup> Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2002), 167.

<sup>ii</sup> Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 62.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>iv</sup> “Filipino ‘Comfort Women’ Demand Justice from Japan.” *Japan Times*, August 14, 2014. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/08/14/national/filipino-comfort-women-demand-justice-japan/#.VZwT-GBU3wy>

<sup>v</sup> “Dwindling Sex Slavery Victims Hope for Truth,” *The Korea Herald*, June 15, 2015. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150615001111>

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<sup>vi</sup> Michael Schaller, *Altered States: the United States and Japan Since the Occupation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997). See especially Chapter One.

<sup>vii</sup> Associated Press, “American Military Ignored Japan’s Sex Slave Abuses, New Records Show,” April 27, 2007. [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18355292/ns/world\\_news-asia\\_pacific/t/us-troops-used-japanese-brothels-after-wwii/#.T7FTI-1yFl](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18355292/ns/world_news-asia_pacific/t/us-troops-used-japanese-brothels-after-wwii/#.T7FTI-1yFl)

<sup>viii</sup> Associated Press, “American Military Ignored Japan’s Sex Slave Abuses.”

<sup>ix</sup> Hudson “Bill” Phillips, “The Flag of My Father,” *Panama News* 14, 3, February 13-16, 2008.

<sup>x</sup> Tanaka, 161.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>xii</sup> Letters to the Editor, “Standing with Historians of Japan,” *Perspectives on History*, March 2015, 33. <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2015/letter-to-the-editor-japan>

<sup>xiii</sup> “The Facts,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2007. <http://www.occidentalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/thefact.jpg> Accessed November 15, 2011

<sup>xiv</sup> “Japanese Leader Sidesteps Apology for WWII ‘comfort women,’” *Politico*, April 4, 2015. <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/04/shinzo-abe-wwii-comfort-women-117423.html>

<sup>xv</sup> Quoted in Tanaka, p. 165.

#### Biographical Note:

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