

# 70 Years After V-J Day, Still No Honor for Japanese Empire's 'Comfort Women'

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By **Janice G Raymond**



*Remedios Tecson, 85, a Filipino "comfort woman" during World War II, displays a placard as she joins a rally outside the Japanese Embassy in Manila on Aug 14. (Bullit Marquez / AP)*

The history of the so-called comfort women constitutes one of the most egregious war crimes of the 20th century, but it has never been officially recognized as such. On Victory Over Japan (V-J) Day, Sept. 2, marking the 70th anniversary of Japan's formal surrender in World War II, countries are planning events to honor the service and sacrifice of those who fought. No plans are underway, however, to commemorate the hundreds of thousands of women conscripted into military sexual slavery who were also sacrificed in this war.

In this "comfort system" of state-sponsored prostitution, Japan subjugated between 100,000 and 200,000 women, most of whom are

now deceased. The methods of procuring women ranged from abduction to deception and spanned Japan's wartime empire in the Asia-Pacific. Japanese historian Yuki Tanaka calls this crime "the largest and most elaborate system of trafficking in women in the history of mankind, and one of the most brutal."<sup>1</sup> [See footnotes at the end of the article.]

Most women procured for military sexual slavery came from the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Korea and China. In the Philippines, Japanese soldiers pressed an estimated 1,000 women into sexual servitude during the war, seizing women and girls from homes and streets and then raping and confining them.

In other countries, the Japanese military used recruiters to stock the "comfort stations." Many women were deceived about the real nature of their position, being told they owed debts for payments to parents or relatives. On a normal day, women serviced 10 men, but the number would increase to 30 or 40 a day before and after battles.

In Indonesia, 20,000 Indonesian women and a small number of Dutch women were victims of sexual servitude. Numerous brothels were built to accommodate the 220,000 Japanese military personnel stationed there. After the war, Dutch authorities organized a war crimes tribunal but prosecuted only those Japanese officers responsible for violating white Dutch women.

More than 100,000 of the women taken into sexual servitude were Korean. After 50 years of anonymity, privation and an experience that produced shame and fear of revelation, the survivors told their stories. Yi Yongny? was one of them. "The Japanese occupied our country and abused us. ... But now they are making feeble excuses about the recruitment of the comfort women, and they say that we volunteered."<sup>2</sup>

When the war ended, most of the comfort women were abandoned. Many stationed close to the battlefields died as a result of warfare. Those who survived lived with lifelong illnesses and injuries. The Allied forces rescued some, but others were drafted again into sexual slavery when the system was replicated by the U.S. military, which occupied Japan after the war.

Decades after World War II, researchers found documents buried in the national archives of Japan, the U.S. and Australia. These records

proved that Japanese authorities institutionalized the comfort system during and after the war.

It took an Asian feminist movement, inspired by the brave public testimonies of survivors, to make the victims' plight visible to the world. Matsui Yayori, a Japanese journalist at the time, wrote the first article about the comfort women in the newspaper Asahi Shimbun, marking the first time any major newspaper had addressed the issue.

The Korean women's movement has led international efforts to pressure Japan into accepting legal responsibility for their war crimes against women and for paying compensation to the survivors.

The terms "comfort women" and "comfort stations" are euphemisms used by the military authorities to mask Japan's brutal system of prostitution and make it sound like the women were performing a voluntary service. In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced there was no evidence the Imperial Japanese Army had forced Asian women into military brothels during World War II. A paid Washington Post advertisement that followed claimed the women were "embedded with the Japanese army ... working under a system of licensed prostitution that was commonplace around the world at the time."

In April 2015, Abe visited Washington and addressed the U.S. Congress. Asked about making an official apology for Japan's system of sexual slavery during the war, he evaded a direct admission of guilt. "I am deeply pained to think about the comfort women who experienced immeasurable pain and suffering due to human trafficking," Abe said. He made no reference to Japan's responsibility for this pain and suffering.

Then in August of this year, Abe offered only an indirect statement avoiding official culpability for these crimes against women. He added, "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."

The evidence for World War II military sexual slavery points not to Japan alone. U.S. re-enactment of the comfort system in postwar Japan is less well known but not less abusive. When Japan surrendered in 1945, the Japanese government, fearful that "sex-starved" U.S. occupation troops would behave as Japanese forces did abroad, recruited thousands into officially organized brothels.

Both the Japanese and American occupation authorities treated prostitution as a necessary amenity for the "recreation of the warriors." From the beginning, U.S. authorities not only tolerated military prostitution but also systematized it. They colluded with Japanese officials to inspect women for venereal disease, monitor the red-light districts and brothels and set up prophylactic stations. U.S. military police were commanded to keep order among the lines of soldiers waiting their turn to enter the brothels and initially could hardly contain the mobs of men who lined up to be sexually gratified. Each woman had to service from 15 to 60 buyers a day.

It has been estimated that at the peak of the legal postwar system, 70,000 women were used by 350,000 occupation troops, most of whom were from the U.S. but also included 40,000 from Britain and Australia.

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, held to prosecute Japanese war crimes, took place from 1946 to 1949. U.S. authorities who held key positions at the tribunal were well aware of Japan's crimes against the comfort women but chose not to prosecute. It is likely that U.S. officials did not want their own "comfort women" system exposed. That it was mostly Asian women who were violated by both the Japanese and the Americans added to the U.S.'s lack of accountability.

The history of the comfort women system is timely because it reverberates with lessons about state-sponsored prostitution today. In a non-military context, governments are as persuasive in promoting prostitution as in a military context. Countries that have legalized or decriminalized systems of prostitution become prostitution nations in which women are encouraged to prostitute *because* it is legal. More men are given legal permission to buy women *because* prostitution is rebranded as a "sexual service" and pimps are transformed into legitimate business agents. State-sponsored prostitution regimes weave the sturdy fabric of sexual exploitation in peace as well as in war.

In 1952, historian Yanaihara Tadao stated that the consequences of America's postwar sexual exploitation of women corrupted Japanese society both morally and economically, not only when the brothels were set up for the Allied occupation troops but also when Japan became the rest and relaxation center for U.S. and Australian forces during the Korean War. High taxes levied on the Japanese sex industry played a key role in raising public money for the rebuilding of Japan and constructing the economic infrastructure of Japanese capitalism

after the war—the same 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.

The Japanese government whitewashed its conscription of women into military prostitution by alleging that they were “embedded” within a system of voluntary legal prostitution, which masked the exploitation and violence. The Netherlands, Germany, Australia and New Zealand use the same rationale and ignore the harmful consequences of their legal regimes of prostitution.

We honor the comfort women by opposing the comfort systems of today.

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Footnotes:

1. Yuki Tanaka, “Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation” (London: Routledge, 2002), 167. I am indebted to Tanaka’s meticulous and groundbreaking work.
2. Keith Howard, ed., “True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women” (London: Cassell, 1995), 62.