

Rape for the “*comfort*” of soldiers

Still waiting after 60 years: Justice for survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery system,
report by Amnesty International, December 2005, London.

Reviewed by Lara Fergus

We just had to get on with our lives as if nothing had happened, that was really hard because for us the war never ended because the shame continued, we were always afraid someone might find out, we carried this horrific shame. I really couldn't do anything about it, you carry all the shame, you feel dirty, you feel sorry, you feel different, you feel unworthy, they took away my youth, my possessions, my dignity. It is so amazing that after the war, men came back with all these medals on their chest and all women came back with were these scars. (Jan Ruff O'Hearne, who was repeatedly raped over a period of three months in an Indonesian “comfort station” during World War Two, in an interview with Amnesty International Australia, June 2005)

late last year Amnesty International released the report, *Still waiting after 60 years: Justice for survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery system*, on the systematic sexual violence suffered by the euphemistically-termed “comfort women”. As noted in the report, “comfort women” is a translation from the Japanese “jugun ianfu”, and, though widely used, is objectionable in its minimisation of the extreme human rights violations committed. The women and girls were abducted, forced, coerced or deceived into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army from around 1932 to the end of World War II. They were transported, often internationally, into “comfort stations” where they were raped, and often beaten, by up to 50 soldiers a day over several years. Amnesty estimates that up to 200,000 women and girls were enslaved in this way, though the exact number will never be known – women from Korea, Timor Leste, Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Burma and many of the Pacific Islands.

Though examples of systemised sexual violence against women by soldiers are many, Amnesty highlights the institutionalised sexual slavery used by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War Two in this report as one of the most compelling examples. It constituted the “legalised military rape of subject women on a scale – and over a period of time – previously unknown in history” (Hicks, 1995 p.xv). The report begins with information from a variety of sources about the history, extent and nature of this “widespread and systematic” practice. It also includes many testimonies from survivors, which, though harrowing, are necessary reading for those who believe women’s experiences must inform our theory and practice around sexual violence. Finally, a large part of the report is devoted to a thorough legal analysis of the responsibility, under international and national law, of the Japanese Government to provide reparation, with Amnesty clearly targeting the current government to implement specific changes. While this latter analysis is too detailed to be adequately reviewed here, below is an overview of the parts of the report dealing with the history and nature of the “comfort women” system, drawing parallels with contemporary manifestations of sexual slavery and military sexual assault.

According to the Amnesty report, the first military “comfort station” was probably that established in Shanghai in 1932 (Yoshimi, 2000), and “full-scale institutionalisation of such facilities for sexual slavery appears to have begun after 1937” (Amnesty International, 2005 p.6). This institutionalisation developed alongside Japanese colonisation and military expansion across the region. Attempted justifications for the system included: “to reduce the number of rapes in areas where the army was based; prevent sexually transmitted diseases; counter the threat of espionage and [...] improve soldiers’ morale and relieve them of ‘combat stress’ ” (Amnesty International, 2005 p.7, citing Boling, 1994-5; and Hicks, 1995). Reports and regulations – on such elements as inspections of the facilities, venereal examinations and schedules for the use of the “comfort stations” by officers or lower ranking soldiers – testify to the official sanctioning of the system.

Through “recruitment” techniques almost indistinguishable from those used by traffickers today, the Japanese military “preyed on [the] women and girls who because of age, poverty, class, family status, education, nationality or ethnicity were most susceptible to being deceived and trapped into the sexual slavery system” (Amnesty International, 2005 p.8). For example, particularly in Korea, “poor young girls were led to believe they would be earning good wages in factory work or similar employment [and] most were motivated by the need to support their families” (Amnesty International, 2005 p.9). The vast majority of women enslaved were young, aged between 12 and 20, and most came from poor rural backgrounds. Where the above “recruitment measures” of coercion and deception were inadequate, the Japanese military did not hesitate to use extreme violence and outright abduction, either of individual girls or women, or in large-scale “slave raids”.

Though some women and girls “were forced into sexual servitude near their homes, many were transported long distances to wherever Japanese soldiers were based” (Amnesty International, 2005 p.9). Sim Dal-yun, from Korea, testifies in the report:

I was taken by ship, I think to Taiwan. There were many girls on the ship. [...] I was battered and hit so harshly that sometimes I fainted, once a soldier cut my thigh with a knife. My mental state was so unstable, I was like a dead body, I just lay there; soldiers would still come in and rape me. I was so young, I was in complete shock (quoted in Amnesty International, 2005 p.9).

Upon arrival at a “comfort station”, the women and girls were kept detained, with their movements closely monitored and restricted. Most women were not allowed to leave the military camps in which the “comfort stations” were situated, which were surrounded by barbed wire making escape impossible. Even if they were allowed to leave the camp, they found themselves in the middle of a war zone – and often in a foreign country with no money or ability to speak the local language – meaning they had nowhere to go. Those who managed to escape were highly vulnerable to being caught, and severely punished with physical and sexual violence when they were.

While in the “comfort stations”, the women and girls had to endure repeated rape and beatings. Some were forced to labour during the day and then raped at night. The report details the level of abuse they suffered:



Lee Ok-sun, at the House of Sharing, South Korea.
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Some [were] forced to “serve” 50 soldiers a day. Women have testified that their genitals were swollen and they experienced constant bleeding. They could not sit, sleep or urinate without pain. Soldiers would wait in line and rape the women one after the other, some were gang raped. Others were kept as the personal sex slaves of individual officers (Amnesty International, 2005, p.11).

As a result of the almost universally harsh conditions and extreme violence, the health of the women and girls deteriorated, and many died as a result of disease, malnutrition, exhaustion and ill-treatment. The Japanese military feared the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, which was one stated reason for the enslavement of such young, sexually-inexperienced girls. While forced health checks were carried out by army doctors, these were limited to preventing the spread of such diseases. The women and girls were denied medical attention for their other injuries, such as “cigarette burns, bayonet stabs and other forms of torture and ill-treatment inflicted on them” (Amnesty International, 2005, p.12). Many were killed or committed suicide during their enslavement.

The report notes that survivors faced additional trauma at the end of the war, when:

Some were summarily killed, some died in combat at the frontlines, while others were simply left stranded. Survivors faced severe hardship whilst attempting to make their way home, some died in transit. There are accounts of women who assimilated into the countries they were taken to. Some survivors returned to their home countries but rarely to their home towns. On return, the women kept silent about what happened to them. [...] The location of shame upon the violated woman is a thread that links the experiences of “comfort women” to other victims of sexual abuse in war, peace, at home and elsewhere across the world (Amnesty International, 2005, p.13).

The survivors are now in their seventies and eighties. Many have died without hearing an apology on behalf of the Japanese government or seeing justice served on the perpetrators. The impact and trauma of the abuse has continued throughout their lives. Hardly any of the survivors interviewed for the Amnesty report had been able to have children, as a result of their internal injuries or sexually transmitted disease. The emotional torment and psychological damage is evidenced in the testimonies of many of the survivors, who describe lives of isolation and solitude, of feeling “different from other women”, of “hiding”, of being scared. One survivor, Kang Soon-ae, who was abducted when she was 13 years-old, spoke of the long-term emotional effects of the abuse:

I thought about killing myself often ... I feel tired, really tired; nobody knows my pain. I can smell the men, I hate men. The Japanese government should see me, realise what they did. They have to admit what they create (quoted in Amnesty International, 2005 p.14).

In addition to this, the survivors of the sexual slavery system, like survivors of trafficking and other forms of sexual abuse, spoke of being afraid to disclose or report what had happened to them because of consequences ranging from disbelief, rejection and alienation, to being declared unfit for marriage and suffering the resulting economic and social repercussions. In 1991, a Korean survivor, Kim Hak-soon, became the first to speak publicly about her experience. The Amnesty report notes that:

Aged 74, her decision was based on having no living relatives to be ashamed of her past. She in turn inspired many other women, including Lola Rosa Hensen who spoke on television and radio in the Philippines in 1992 urging survivors not to feel ashamed but come forward and demand justice. These remarkable women gave strength and courage to many others, becoming champions of justice for all victims of Japanese military sexual slavery (Amnesty International, 2005, p.17).

Many of the survivors now organise demonstrations and conferences, and have addressed United Nations (UN) bodies and pursued litigation in Japan and the United States. In the face of ongoing impunity for perpetrators of the abuse, and lack of redress to the survivors, women’s rights activists came together in 2000 for the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery. Though a non-judicial tribunal, it gave the opportunity for survivors to testify in a formal environment and made recommendations based on legal findings.

The recommendations issuing from the tribunal, and the analysis in the Amnesty report of Japan's obligations under national and international law, are too detailed to be reproduced here. In summary, however, Amnesty has reflected the demands of survivors in calling on the Japanese government to:

- *Accept full responsibility for the "comfort women system" wherever it occurred;*
- *Issue an apology that is acceptable to the majority of "comfort women" and their immediate relatives;*
- *Offer adequate and effective compensation;*
- *Guarantee non-repetition by ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; and,*
- *Provide an accurate account of the sex slavery system in Japanese text books on World War II.*

(Amnesty International Australia, 2006, p.4)

The Amnesty report also draws links with wider military sexual violence, noting that rape, mutilation and murder of women and girls are common tactics in war. Many theorists have examined the particular history of militarisation with regard to sexual violence and prostitution. Sheila Jeffreys, for instance, situates the massive growth in the prostitution industries of Saigon, Thailand and the Philippines as a direct result of large United States (US) military presences (Jeffreys, 1997, citing Enloe, 1983; Sturdevant & Stoltzfus, 1992). Robert Jensen goes further to draw links between prostitution/pornography and war, saying they "both depend for their success on the process of rendering human beings less-than-fully-human so they can be hurt" (Jensen, 2005, p.31). He quotes one investigative journalist reporting during the 1991 Gulf War that US pilots watched pornographic movies before flying missions, apparently to get them "pumped up" to drop bombs (Kurtz, 1991, quoted in Jensen 2005).

A recent report by Human Rights Watch notes that during the 1992-5 conflict in the former Yugoslavia, thousands of women were raped by Bosnian, Serb and Yugoslav armed forces (Human Rights Watch, 2002). Such sexual violence was not only opportunistic but systematic, taking place in rape camps and detention centres scattered throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. The report goes on to point out that:

With the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, violence against women and girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not cease. The grim sexual slavery of the war years has been followed by the trafficking of women and girls for forced prostitution (Human Rights Watch, 2002, p.4).

The latest report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, draws specific links between military deployment and sexual exploitation. Respondents to her questionnaire confirmed that the influx of military personnel, peacekeepers and even employees of international organisations or international aid workers, into "a situation of armed conflict or political instability, often brings about a demand for services deriving from sexual exploitation [which] can lead to an increase of trafficking. Human rights advocates also provided information on the role of United Nations peacekeeping troops in creating a demand for prostitution and trafficking in post-conflict situations" (Huda, 2006, p.18).

Some countries and organisations have taken action to reduce such exploitation, with the UN, the US and Norway banning their military personnel from using prostituted persons. In addition, "forty-six nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have agreed to prohibit their military personnel from



Demonstration with Malaya Lolos (Freedom Grandmothers), Filipina survivors of Japan's WWII military sexual slavery system, in front of the Japanese embassy in Manila.
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engaging in the use of prostituted women who are known to be controlled by traffickers, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has adopted a code of conduct for all mission members in Bosnia and Herzegovina that prohibits mission members from promoting or facilitating prostitution and trafficking in persons" (Huda, 2006, p.18).

Despite this increased awareness of the abuses women suffer in wartime – and other developments such as the recognition of rape as a war crime and crime against humanity under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – there remains widespread impunity for such crimes, with states failing to investigate, perpetrators left unpunished, and victims denied reparation. Many of the survivors of the "comfort women" system are also involved in campaigning to end wider violence against women across the world. Survivor Lola Julia Porras is quoted in the report as saying:

Women are being raped now; they are being killed. [...] I spoke in the former Yugoslavia to women who themselves had been raped in the conflict, after I spoke they came up to me, they were crying, they said they themselves were not ready to speak about what happened to them but that I had given them courage and hope (quoted in Amnesty International, 2005, p.18).

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On 9 August 2006, Amnesty International will be holding an international day of action, calling for justice for the survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery system. The report, *Still waiting after 60 years*, is available on the Amnesty International website at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA220122005>

The *What's New* page of the ACSSA website also contains regular updates and links to this and other recently-released reports relevant to sexual assault: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/whatsnew.html>
Reports are later archived in our *Research Collection*: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/research/docsmenu.html>