The military "comfort women" of the Japanese Imperial Army in World War II offer an extreme case of institutionalized sexual violence against women. Trafficking in women is a form of sexual slavery in which women are transported across national borders and marketed for prostitution. In this way, their bodies are displaced and commodified by other powers. This practice has been expanded in times of peace to "sex workers," either as entertainers or prostitutes. Japan is now the most notorious country in the world for recruiting such women. Sex tourism to other Asian countries by Japanese men is a contemporary version of comfort women. Unless sexual violence and the commodification of women's bodies are eliminated, there will always be comfort women. War justifies violence against women; to stop war, we have to recognize the fact of this violence and understand the casualties.

TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN'S BODIES, THEN AND NOW
The Issue of Military "Comfort Women"

by Kazuko Watanabe

Contemporary feminists have been demanding the autonomy of women's bodies as a human right. At the same time, they have been trying to conceptualize and historicize bodies from various perspectives and theories. However, in this article I confront real bodies and at the same time historical bodies that have been segregated, tortured, disentangled, and totally deprived of basic rights.

History has shown us how war has accelerated the violation of women's bodies. Trafficking in women's bodies near the battlefields and military bases in times of war is a prime example of this. Trafficking in women is an institution of sexual slavery in which women are transported across national borders and marketed for prostitution or similar practices. In this way, their bodies are totally displaced and commodified by other powers. In addition to prostitution around military bases, trafficking in women's bodies takes the form of sexual violence against women, sex tourism, false marriage, "catalog brides," forced domestic labor, and migrant sex
workers (called *Japayukisan* in Japanese). However, the military "comfort women" of the Japanese Imperial Army in World War II are an extreme case of this institutionalized violence against women. By viewing the issue of these comfort women in a historical, cultural, and political context, we can conceptualize the politics of war and bodies in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity.¹

In March 1994, "The Asian Tribunal on Trafficking in Women and War Crimes against Asian Women" was held in Tokyo by the Asian Women's Human Rights Council and the Women's Human Rights Committee of Japan. The meeting allowed survivors to articulate their experiences publicly in a way that preserved their dignity. This article is based on the findings in this hearing as well as on the World Human Rights Conference held in Vienna in 1993 and other national and international conventions that exposed the long-suppressed story of the comfort women of World War II.

In December 1991, Korean women identified themselves as military comfort women for the first time. They unveiled the sexual war crimes committed by members of the Japanese Imperial Army and filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government at the Tokyo District Court. They asked for an official apology to each individual victim, compensation, prosecution of perpetrators, proper education of the public on the nature of this war crime, the rewriting of the history of war crimes to include this one, and the building of memorial tablets for deceased victims. The voices of comfort women are only now being heard after 50 years of silence.

Kim Haku Soon, the only plaintiff who revealed her name in the 1991 court case, related her experiences. Her story included the following: "When I was 17 years old, the Japanese soldiers came along in a truck, beat us and then dragged us into the back. . . . I was told that if I were drafted, I could earn lots of money at the textile company. . . . The first day I was raped and the rapes never stopped."²

Each woman was made to service an average of 30 to 40 soldiers per day. The men would stand in line outside a small room, waiting for their turn. In her interview, Soon explained her feelings of anger and agony: "I was born as a woman but never lived as a woman. . . . I feel sick when I come close to a man. Not just
Japanese men but all men—even my own husband, who saved me from the brothel—made me feel this way. I shiver when I see the Japanese flag. . . . Why should I feel ashamed? I don’t have to feel ashamed.”

Since Soon gave her testimony, dozens of Korean women have followed her example including a Korean Japanese woman, Song Siin Do, who now lives in Japan. Most of these women have reached the age of 70. Their pains and scars must be overcome for them to “rebuild their ruined lives before it becomes too late.”

The term “military comfort women,” a literal translation of Jughun Ianfu, is a euphemism for forced military sexual slavery during World War II. It actually meant the collective and systematic rape of women and the regulation of rape by the Japanese Imperial Army. Clearly, the term “military comfort women” was coined by Japanese military officials as well as agents of the sex industry to disguise its dreadful reality. It was originally called Teishintai, which means “voluntary labor corps.” Even today, Korean women would rather use this latter term.

Thus were women brought from Japan’s Asian neighbors—Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines—to the battlefields where Japanese armies were stationed. Their total number is estimated to have been more than 200,000. Fewer than 30 percent survived the end of the war. I focus on the Korean comfort women of World War II because they were the most numerous, comprising 80 percent of the total, and because I have been more involved in their movement.

One of the witnesses, a Japanese military doctor during World War II, Tetsuo Aso, declared that these women were treated as “female ammunitions” and that their dehumanized bodies were used as “public toilets.” They were also important laborers who carried weapons even on the front lines. In addition, Kim Yonja testified that even her blood was taken for Japanese soldiers.

The Japanese Imperial Army divided comfort women into a hierarchical order according to class, race, and nationality—and according to the rank of the soldiers they were made to serve. Korean and most other Asian women were assigned to lower class soldiers. Japanese and European women went to high-ranking
officers. Most of the European women were Dutch who were imprisoned in a prisoner of war camp in the Netherlands East Indies. This latter group has also sued the Japanese government.

Until Yoshiaki Yoshimi, history professor at Chuo University, discovered the incriminating documents about military comfort women in the library of Japan’s Self-Defense Force in Tokyo on January 16, 1992, the government continually denied the conscription and recruiting of such women. Since that evidence has become available, witnesses have started to come forward to disclose how military sexual slavery was directly controlled and supervised by the army. Under pressure, the Japanese government issued an apology in August 1993 but offered no compensation. Instead, it has sought to collect donations from Japanese civilians, avoiding taking any legal or financial responsibility. This action has angered many Korean women, who do not want charity from Japan but rather want a real apology with full acknowledgment of official complicity and monetary compensation.

World War II was not the first use of comfort women by the Japanese army. Indeed, the practice had been institutionalized as early as the turn of the century. In the invasion of Siberia in 1918, the Imperial Army took along Japanese prostitutes. Most of these women, called Karayukisan (“foreign-bound prostitutes”), were daughters of poor farmers.9

Beginning with the Japanese invasion of China in 1932, the “recruiting” of women as prostitutes from Korea (which had been annexed by Japan in 1910) became systematized. The purpose was to arouse the soldiers’ fighting spirits by providing them with an outlet for the frustration fostered by hierarchical military life. The system was also designed to prevent Japanese soldiers from collectively raping Chinese women, especially after the highly publicized Nanking massacre in 1937. The use of comfort women was also begun to protect Japanese soldiers from venereal disease because the Korean recruits were young women who were not sexually experienced and were, therefore, free from such disease. Today, this practice is reminiscent of the trafficking in young girls as prostitutes as protection against AIDS.
The practice of military sexual abuse and trafficking in women did not end with the comfort women operation in World War II. The trafficking of women has been expanded on an unprecedented scale in times of “peace.”10 Associated with Karayukisan is Japayukisan, the term identifying Asian women bound for Japan, mostly to serve as “sex workers,” usually as either entertainers or prostitutes. It is also a contemporary form of trafficking in women.11 (The term Japayukisan is a racist and sexist expression because it has strongly been associated with prostitution and evil action. However, I use it deliberately to call attention to the plight of these women in Japan.) The total number of sex workers who arrive in Japan every year is estimated to be more than 100,000 women. Wealthy Japan is now the most notorious country in the world for recruiting and exploiting such women.

Today, these women usually go through three steps with recruiters called syndicates, brokers, agents, and pimps (called Yakuza in Japanese). At the first step, women are collected in one place in their country and receive a passport and some money for preparation; at the second step, they are placed near major airports in Japan; then, at the third step, they are sent to working sites. Each step gets them deeper in debt to their exploiters. They can end up owing up to $30,000 or $40,000, being forced to remain as prostitutes indefinitely.12 Materialism and the market economy have brought with them a consumerist ethic that legitimizes the commodification of women’s bodies, which can be bought, sold, and abused in response to male demand—just as the militaristic ethic did to the comfort women. Some women trapped in this present system have been shot up with drugs, some have contracted AIDS, and others have been killed by clients. In desperation, some women have killed themselves or their managers. Many have fled.

In 1991, more than 3,000 Thai women, who today account for the largest number of migrant sex workers in Japan, fled their pimps by escaping to the Thai Embassy. In 1992, 300 women sought refuge there every month. In 1993, dozens of murders involving sex workers were reported in Japan; in three cases, women murdered their bosses.13
In one case, in 1991, a Thai woman barkeeper was stabbed to death by three Thai women in Shimodate, a town outside Tokyo. The three were indicted on charges of burglary and murder. The personal history of one of those three women is typical. In Thailand, she had been approached by a broker and told that if she went to Japan, she would be employed as a factory worker, as a department store saleswoman, or as a model. She was sent over with a group of other women, all with forged passports. Reaching Narita Airport, she came to understand that she had been sold. She was told that she had a debt of 3 million yen and that the only way she could pay back such an amount was through prostitution, although she would not herself receive any compensation. After that, she was sold to other brokers many times and stayed in the country illegally without a visa. Women like her were constantly warned that if they did not work or tried to escape, their parents would be put in jeopardy. In this case, the three women killed the barkeeper, who also used to be a sex worker, in an attempt to free themselves from their horrifying predicament and to save their families in Thailand. Yet a Japanese court sentenced the three women to 10 years’ imprisonment.14

There is a clear parallel in a historical, political, economical, and cultural context between wartime comfort women and the Asian sex workers of today. Both groups of women have been tricked, imprisoned, raped, and then forced against their will to work as prostitutes. Comfort women and contemporary sex workers have been recruited often by similar deceits: if they followed the brokers, they could easily find well-paid, responsible jobs. Sex tourism to other Asian countries by Japanese men is a contemporary version of the Japanese Imperial Army’s sexual exploitation of Asian women.15 Symbolically, the difference lies only in the way the men dress: instead of military uniforms, they now wear business suits. Both cases show us men commodifying and dehumanizing women’s bodies.

Actually, men’s bodies and sexuality are also victims of militarist and consumerist capitalist societies. Men are, supposedly, unable to control their sexual impulses and are in need of prostitutes. Male soldiers were dehumanized to make them good fighters and then
stimulated by sexual desire that was fulfilled by comfort women. These soldiers acted just like Japanese businessmen called “economic animals” during the postcolonial era.

Both the soldiers who were forced to die for the emperor on the battlefields and today’s businessmen who die for their companies from karoshi (overwork) have often been rewarded with prostitutes. Thus gendered bodies were used to expand the state’s power during World War II, and this process continues today in the postwar economic expansion by Japanese corporations into other Asian countries. Also, so-called South (or Third World) countries cannot provide enough resources to their people and therefore encourage them to earn foreign currency by commodifying their bodies. Thus both North and South countries share responsibility for this practice.

Legally and psychologically, comfort women and Japayukisan who were trafficked have been left in uninformed isolation. They were brought into an environment where they lost their identities as well as their cultures and languages. Japayukisan are forced to use falsified passports and then the passports, their legal source of identification, are taken away as soon as they enter Japan. They are trapped and imprisoned in small apartments and bars. Similarly, most of the comfort women of World War II were called by Japanese names and forbidden to speak their own languages. As a result, such women were and are quite powerless and completely vulnerable.

Culturally, Confucian ideology, which promotes and characterizes the patriarchal system in Asian countries, has created a double standard. Its taboos have made people put a priority on women’s chastity, which has resulted in women separating themselves from their own bodies. It has also inhibited them from speaking about their own sexuality while trapping them as men’s property. It is one of the reasons why survivors of sexual military slavery have been silenced for half a century.

Because of this chastity myth, comfort women caught by Japanese militarism faced only two alternatives: either they submitted or they killed themselves to protect their chastity, which Confucianism taught them to consider more important than their lives. After the war, some survivors of sexual slavery committed suicide or
stayed away from their own families and led solitary lives because they were so ashamed of the loss of their virginity.

Even during the present era, Japayukisan have been stigmatized as prostitutes in their own societies. Even if they succeed in fleeing pimps and return to their homelands, many of them find themselves so traumatized that they return to Japan. To the extent that their bodies are denied in their society, women are dehumanized. Comfort women have especially suffered from victimization, totally deprived of not only their sexual desire but also the ability to procreate. Many of them have been sterilized and feel even more degraded because they were denied motherhood.

Even more pathetic and discouraging is that today many Japanese women regard trafficked Asian women as cultural and historical “others” and try not to see them and not to hear their cries. Research has shown that more than half of Japanese women try not to believe in comfort women although they have heard their stories. Japanese wives often help their husbands pack for sex tours in other Asian countries. They do not seem to mind as long as their husbands buy women of another ethnicity or nationality. Thus women are overly categorized as either prostitutes or bearers of children. The double standard exists not just in gender and sexuality but also in race and ethnicity. Thus was constructed the durable sexism and racism that has allowed wartime and present Japan to traffic in women’s bodies.

Historically, culturally, and politically, the institution of comfort women was reinforced by the public prostitution that was legal in Japan until 1957. The army used comfort women’s bodies to protect Japanese women’s chastity during the war. During the postwar era, prostitution serviced American soldiers in the occupation army. Patriarchal, colonial, and imperial systems have included legal prostitution throughout Japan’s history of modernization. Similarly, the successful postwar economic resurgence of Japan has widened the income gaps in Asia and allowed Japan to inveigle migrant sex workers. The roles of comfort women and migrant sex workers as an integral part of Japanese patriarchy, imperialism, and colonialism cut across the divisions of state, class, gender, race, and ethnicity.
To politicize these issues and solve the problems, organizations and self-help groups have been formed. Actually, it was the women’s movements in Korea and Japan that encouraged Korean women to detail their experiences and to disclose the sexual violence against them. Korean anger at the current sex tourism of Japanese men and the frustration at Tokyo’s attempt to ignore the issue of comfort women led to stormy national protests in Korea. Moreover, a landmark court case in Korea taught women how important it was to protest sexual abuses. In 1986, a Korean woman, Quon In-suku, spoke publicly for the first time about how she was raped and sexually tortured in prison by Korean policemen. Then she sued the Korean government.²⁰

Through such actions, women in Korea and Japan have begun their liberation from militarism and postcolonialism as well as patriarchy. They have raised consciousness to regain the autonomy of their own bodies. After half a century, their silence has finally been broken. Through speaking their stories, these women have been recovering their lost pasts and their sense of themselves as angry victims. It takes enormous courage to speak publicly about such experiences, but in this way these women have begun to write their lost pasts into history.

Today, in Japan, there are three different kinds of action groups fighting against sex tourism and trafficking in women. One group consists mostly of men and emphasizes racism, colonialism, and imperialism.²¹ Members of this group say that the Japanese military used sexual enslavement to castrate Asian men and terrorize and dehumanize Asian women as a way of occupying and colonizing their countries.

By contrast, groups of Japanese feminists see the issues of comfort women, sex tourism, and forced prostitution as sex discrimination and part of a pattern of universalized gender-based violence against women. The Asian Women’s Association was founded during the early 1980s to protest Japanese men’s sex tourism. Japanese feminists also have started a campaign labeling prostitution not as “selling sex” but as “buying sex.” They blame the men who buy the women’s bodies. Women’s actions during the 1990s have helped conceptualize various versions of violence
against women’s bodies, and women have claimed that women’s bodies have been turned into battlefields where all sorts of sexual abuse and violence operate such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, marital rape, and pornographic culture. However, Japanese women waited until the comfort women themselves began to speak before they acted. Since then, several groups—local and national—have established networks to support the comfort women and put pressure on the Japanese government to acknowledge its responsibility and indemnify them.

The third cluster of organizations are Korean Japanese women’s groups that focus on the issue of comfort women and emphasize that a structure of sexism joined with racism allowed the Japanese army to institutionalize the practice of using comfort women. (Most Korean Japanese are the descendants of Koreans forcibly taken to Japan during the colonial era.) Korean Japanese women in Japan have no civil rights so that they have also been discriminated against in terms of nationality and ethnicity as well as gender. Women in this third grouping recognize that their commitment to the issue of comfort women may well raise their consciousness on gender and racial issues and may encourage them to search for their own identities as a minority within Japanese society. As a symbolic action, they have undertaken a protest against a condom manufacturer, Okamoto Rubber Manufacturing Company, which makes the condom called “Attack Champion” (Totsugeki Ichiban). The original version of this condom was distributed to Japanese soldiers by the Imperial Army to protect them from venereal disease.22

Trafficking in women and violence against women also occur at military bases. This was pointed out at the Asian Tribunal in March 1994 by Takasato Suzuyo, an Okinawan municipal councilor and activist.23 She has been protesting practices at the U.S. military bases on the island. This problem should not be left out of an examination of sexual exploitation and violence for several reasons. First, it shows that the institution of military sexual slavery transcends a historical time and place, wartime and peacetime. Second, it clarifies the close relationship between militarization and commodification of women’s bodies and the inherent gender perspectives of militarism. It shows that military bases systematize vio-
lence in general and justify violence against women in particular. Third, it reveals that women in Japan (including Okinawa) are still victims of war. The Okinawa women’s protest against sexual exploitation around the U.S. military bases may enable Japanese women to transcend the historical designation of Okinawan women as victims and mainland women as victimizers because all women share the responsibility to attack prostitution and sexual slavery.

Of the American military bases in Japan, 75 percent are on Okinawa Island. When the U.S. military replaced Japanese forces, the new occupier developed its own tradition of military prostitution. As long as the bases exist, the people still live in a state of war; military culture and codes pervade the whole island, and violence is the dominant reality. According to the November 28, 1949, issue of *Time* magazine, 29 individuals were murdered and 18 were raped by American soldiers during the previous six months on Okinawa.24 There could very well have been more rape cases. During the 1950s, brothels were built around the American bases, and since then trafficked women from other countries, such as the Philippines and Thailand as well as Japan, have been working in a condition of systematic forced prostitution that could be called another version of military comfort women.

For American soldiers, women in Okinawa are “others” in terms of sex, race, and ethnicity. Women’s bodies have been threatened both by U.S. soldiers and by American culture. The military newspaper *Pacific Stars and Stripes* offered a review of criminal cases around the bases from July 1993 to July 1994. It reported, for example, that an American soldier raped a Japanese woman, escaped to the United States, and was arrested there. However, when his court case was about to begin in Japan, the victim withdrew her complaint.25 The Tokyo Declaration adopted at the Asian Tribunal in 1994 stated that women in Okinawa demand that international laws and enforcement mechanisms be used to close down the U.S. bases on the island.

We have seen the tragedy and have heard the silenced voices. Unless sexual violence and the commodification of bodies are eliminated, there will always be comfort women. Look, for example, at the group rapes in Bosnia. We need new strategies, new
politics, and new paradigms to confront this issue. The system of trafficking in women’s bodies demonstrates clearly that colonialism, capitalism, sexism, and racism are linked. War justifies violence against women because it needs violence for its own destructive use of power. To stop war, we have to recognize the violence against women and understand the causalities. We must look at patriarchal, pornographic, social, and cultural structures and acknowledge victims as courageous survivors.

Since the Vienna World Human Rights Conference in 1993 and the preconferences in various regions for the Beijing World Women’s Conference, a number of global campaigns against gender-based violence are under way. Nongovernmental organizations and groups have been mobilizing to make military sexual slavery both in World War II and the present an international issue, using laws for international human rights. These laws declare violence against women to be a violation of human rights that impedes the United Nations’ agenda of equality, development, peace, and women’s economic independence.

A global women’s movement has encouraged women to establish a network to halt sex trafficking, to unify the peace movement, and to form support groups for former comfort women. Japanese women have been establishing close networks with women in other Asian countries to change the political and cultural structures that allow men to exploit women’s sexuality. The Japanese government is sensitive to international pressure. Women’s collective voice can be a great force for change. We need additional international pressures to push the Japanese government to take full responsibility for past and present sexual abuses.

To regain the autonomy of women’s bodies as a whole, we have to keep recreating a climate that encourages women to speak out against gender-based violence. We have to deconstruct the apparatus of male-centered sexuality and culture that celebrates masculinity and the commodification of bodies. To be less vulnerable to seductive voices of smugglers, Asian women need more economic opportunities; new structures of peace and social harmony must be created.
The Vienna Declaration and Program of Action adopted at the fourth World Human Rights Conference in 1993 states, “Gender-based violence and all forms of sexual exploitation are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, and must be eliminated. This can be achieved by legal measures and through national and international cooperation in such fields as economic and social development, education, safe maternity and health care and social support.”

From a global perspective, we have to stop war. We have to monitor more closely the new militarism in Japan, the growth of the military budget, the attempt to allow the dispatch overseas of “self-defense” corps troops under the guise of peacekeeping operations, and the attempt to amend the constitution that prohibits armaments in Japan. We must also stop Japan’s move to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council without first fulfilling its legal obligations to the war victims in Asia, especially to the comfort women.

NOTES


3. Kono Han o Tokutameni, 8.


5. Watanabe, “Militarism, Colonialism and Trafficking of Women.”


11. Lisa Go's speech was given at the symposium on "Violence against Women and Women's Human Rights" held at the Kyoto YWCA in March 1994.


14. Ibid.


16. Yuko, "Struggle with Trafficking in Women."


21. Watanabe, "Militarism, Colonialism and Trafficking of Women."


