

Transnational and Japanese Activism on Behalf of Indonesian and Dutch Victims of Enforced Military Prostitution During World War II

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Article Summary

This article considers the experiences of Dutch and Indonesian women in enforced prostitution for the Japanese military during World War Two and the activism of prominent survivors and their supporters from the 1990s. It highlights how and why Japanese activists have continued to support these women and why Dutch and Indonesian women have rarely engaged in joint activism. It analyses how Dutch and Indonesian women's stories are presented together in a 2015-2016 exhibition at the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo and how women's and soldiers' testimonies are used to advocate further redress from the Japanese government and to challenge military sexual violence against women. The article assesses how a sustained focus in transnational activism on Japanese responsibility and the Japanese imperial context potentially leads to overlooking how localised forms of patriarchy and the specific context of this former Dutch colony affected women's experiences and their post war treatment.

Keywords

'comfort women', activism, Women's Active Museum of War and Peace, Indonesia, Netherlands, Japan war responsibility, Japanese occupation of the Netherlands East Indies.

Length: 9,900 words

In July 2015 the Women's Active Museum in

Tokyo opened a temporary exhibition on Indonesian and Dutch survivors of enforced military prostitution by the Japanese military during World War Two. The exhibition detailed how during the Japanese occupation of the former Dutch colony of the Netherlands East Indies (1942-1945) the Japanese military forcibly detained Indonesian and Dutch women to serve in military brothels. It presented accounts of the war-time experiences and activism of the most famous survivor activists from each country. Although there has been some scholarly attention to Dutch activism, there is very little research to date on Indonesian activism. Furthermore these two cases have not yet been considered together despite the fact that Dutch and Indonesian women were victimised in the same colony.¹

This paper examines the relationship between the Dutch and Indonesian cases and the role of Japanese activists in supporting related activism. Firstly I examine what we know about the system of enforced military in the Netherlands East Indies based on historical records and the testimonial accounts of prominent survivor activists of Indonesian and Dutch background. Secondly I trace how activism on behalf of both groups of women developed with Japanese support and how these women are differently positioned as a result of the former colonial relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands. I also assess why Dutch and Indonesian women have rarely come together in activism. Finally I analyse the content of the recent Japanese exhibition on Indonesian and Dutch survivors:

how the women are presented and how women's testimonies are used alongside soldier's testimonies in the exhibition.

The Context of the system in the Netherlands East Indies

The system of Japanese enforced military prostitution is rooted in the history of Japanese imperialism and state endorsed prostitution. Long before the creation of Japan's formal and informal empire, Japanese entrepreneurs established brothels throughout Asia in which Japanese women worked.² The Japanese government established a licensed prostitution system in Japan in the late nineteenth century, and this system was replicated in its colonies following, for example, the annexation of Korea in 1910.³

The Japanese army institutionalised the so-called 'comfort women' system during the fifteen year war in China.⁴ The system, which was extended throughout the empire, was based in part on the belief that the provision of women was necessary to satisfy the 'sexual needs' of soldiers. This was underpinned by the myth that men, and particularly soldiers, as archetypal men have 'an uncontrollable sex drive'.⁵ Military brothels were also established to guard against sexually transmitted diseases that might weaken soldiers by means of the provision of condoms and regular health checks of women detained within them.

Prior to the Japanese occupation, there was a longstanding practice in the colony of Dutch men forming relationships with local women as concubines until the number of European women increased in the late nineteenth century. Concubines had no rights within these relationships and no claim to children from these unions. Both local and Dutch women engaged in various forms of sex work catering to both local and Dutch men. Unfree labour was also widespread.⁶

There have been several studies of how the so

called 'comfort women' system worked in the Netherlands Indies.⁷ Replicating patterns elsewhere and carrying over from traditions in the local prostitution industry, 'comfort facilities' were diverse, including 'movie theatres, bars, restaurants, hotels and comfort stations' across army and navy controlled areas.⁸ The Japanese initially 'recruited' from among Indonesian sex workers with encouragement from the nationalist leader Sukarno.⁹ Indonesian women were also tricked into forced prostitution with promises of becoming performers, getting an education or training as nurses in distant locations. Some were sent to far-off islands or even to other countries based on these promises, only to find themselves working in brothels.

As in the case of Korea there is evidence that local officials and families were sometimes complicit in providing women for the system.¹⁰ In his 2001 study based on the testimonies of Javanese women re-located to the remote island of Buru, Indonesia's famous novelist Pramoedya Anata Toer highlighted this complicity.¹¹

Figures on the total number of 'comfort women' are imprecise due to the fact that many women died or were killed at the conclusion of the war, but estimates range from 20,000 to 200,000 women, the majority of whom are believed to have been Korean.¹² Figures for the number of Indonesian women are also imprecise. The Ex-Heiho Forum, an organisation of former auxiliary military forces for the Japanese in Indonesia that also tried to advocate on behalf of all war victims, claimed to have documented 22,454 cases of women who experienced sexual violence at the hands of the Japanese military and civilians.¹³ Meanwhile, in 1994, the Dutch government estimated in an official report that 200-300 Dutch and Indonesian women were 'recruited' into the system.¹⁴ There were thus a great many more Indonesian than Dutch women affected.

In Dutch colonial society, being Dutch was determined by whether or not a person had a Dutch father and was born of a legal union.¹⁵ The legal category ‘European’ thus included children of mixed descent, who were known as Indos. Within the context of colonial society Dutch women generally enjoyed a more privileged status than local women, including greater prosperity and access to education.¹⁶ Following Japan’s December 8, 1941 invasion of the Dutch East Indies, Dutch women were selected from women in Japanese run internment camps and put to work in brothels in Java, Sumatra, Celebes, Ambon, Flores and Timor. Some of these women had been sex workers before the war.¹⁷ Tanaka notes that the Japanese army exercised far more caution in the recruitment of Dutch women requiring these women to, for example, sign contracts confirming they were ‘volunteers’ in order not to contravene the Geneva convention on trafficking in women. Some Dutch women were released and replaced by Indonesian women when superior commanders feared consequences from the Dutch government.¹⁸

camps to serve in brothels in Semarang in central Java. These cases are well documented because they were investigated in post-war trials organised by the Netherlands. With the exception of two trials in which crimes against Indonesian women were investigated, the Dutch prioritised the investigation of the forced enslavement of Dutch women. Tanaka argues that this, combined with the fact that Indonesian women survivors of the system were also interviewed primarily regarding crimes against Dutch women, reveals Dutch colonial attitudes about Indonesian women as less worthy of justice than Dutch women.¹⁹ The emphasis on crimes against Dutch women is curious given that around half the post war trials of Japanese were for crimes against Indonesians.²⁰ It may be that the sense of outrage amongst Dutch prosecutors was stronger for cases of rape of Dutch women. Whatever the reasons, despite occurring in the same occupied territory, Indonesian women’s experiences of rape during the war were long neglected from world attention.



Internment camp in Batavia, c. 1945

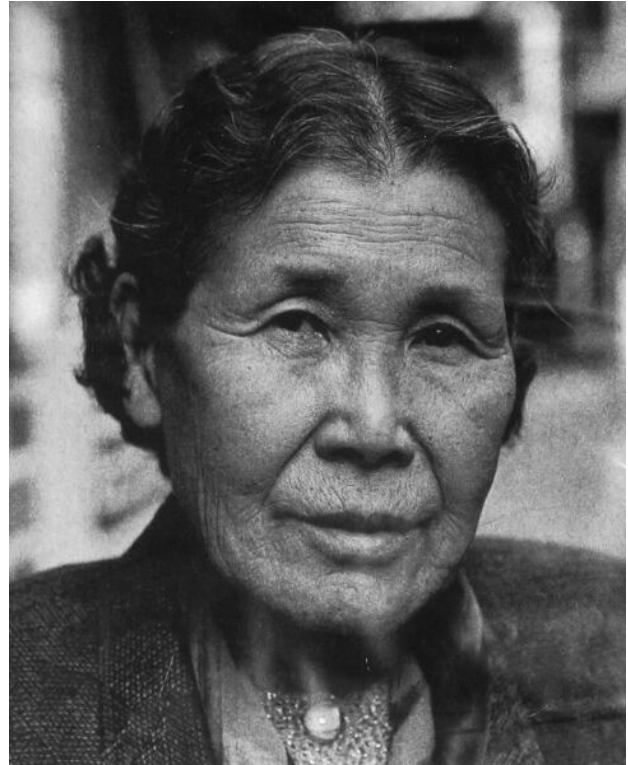
The most detailed records from the Netherlands East Indies are those concerning Dutch women who were taken from internment



Commemoration of Dutch female victims during the Japanese occupation at memorial in former palace of Bronbeek (Netherlands), 1985.

Dutch and Indonesian Survivor Activists and Responses to Their Activism

The existence of the system of military prostitution was common knowledge in affected societies, but it was not a topic of public debate or controversy until the 1990s when, as historian Carol Gluck puts it, the so-called ‘comfort women’ issue ‘came into memory’.²¹ One reason for this was that rape had not received substantial attention as a specific kind of war crime. Further, it was a topic that many considered shameful due to widespread cultures of shame among rape survivors and the common attribution of blame to victimised women. Views about the system began to change when Korean researcher Yun Chong Ok drew attention to patterns in military sexual violence by the Japanese army.²² Sexual violence generally was receiving increased global attention at this time and Japanese and Korean feminist activists in particular connected this historical issue to ongoing cases of militarised sexual violence around military bases in Korea and Japan.²³



Kim Hak Sun

In 1990 Korean activists formed the ‘Korean Council for Women Drafted into Sexual Slavery by Japan’ (the Korean Council) and began to demand redress from the Japanese government for Korean survivors. When their demands were ignored, they began a court case against the Japanese government. In the context of a case brought by the Korean Council in 1991 Korean survivor Kim Hak Sun (1924-1997) became the first to give public testimony about her wartime experiences. The impact of this testimony in the context of a compensation claim was to introduce a new framing around the issue of the comfort women or a ‘retrial’ of history as Ueno Chizuko puts it.²⁴ The public testimony of Korean women triggered women from different countries around the globe to testify. Only a small number of survivors have, however, spoken out.



Jan Ruff O'Herne, 1942

After watching television footage of Kim, Jan Ruff O'Herne, a survivor of Dutch origin (with a Dutch-Indonesian grandmother) then resident in Australia, decided to tell her story. In her memoir she states:

I could see that the Asian 'comfort women' needed the support of European women. This had happened to Dutch girls too. Rape in war must be recognised as a war crime. Perhaps when a European woman came forward, Japan would take notice.²⁵

Her comments reveal an awareness of her specific positionality on this issue. She felt that because of her 'European' background she would have access to different audiences and potentially be able to assist 'Asian' women.

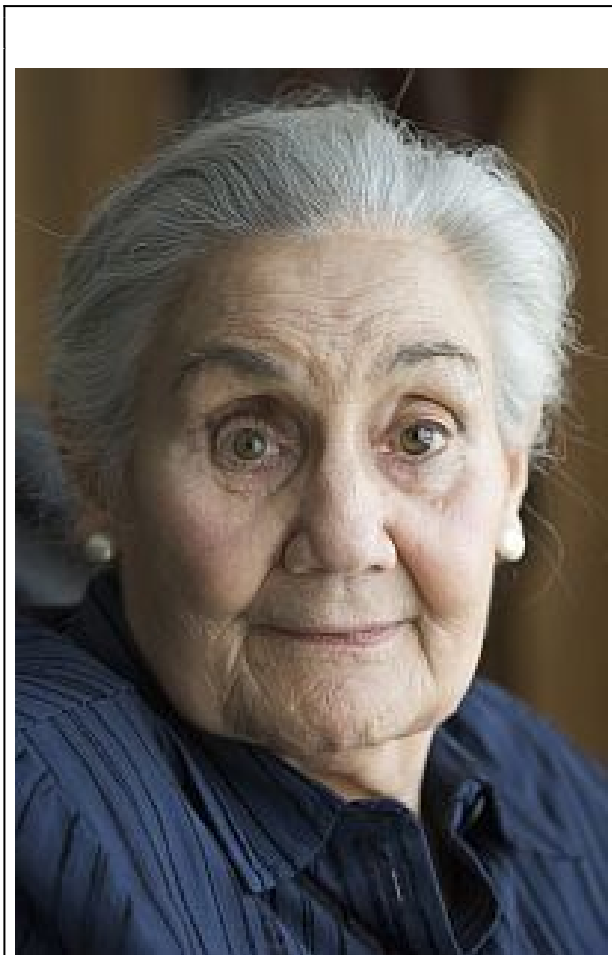
In her memoir O'Herne records that at age 21

she was selected from a line up of girls and women aged seventeen and above at the Ambarawa Internment Camp and taken away by truck with 15 other women. She was forced to work in a former Dutch colonial house in Semarang serving Japanese military officers.²⁶ As the war was ending O'Herne was placed in a segregated camp. She notes with pain that Dutch people referred to it as a 'whore camp'.²⁷ This observation highlights the stigmas attached to her experience amongst the Dutch community. With the exception of her mother and her husband, she largely remained silent about this experience during her post war life in England and then Australia where she moved in 1960.

In the early years of her activism O'Herne was supported by organisations in the Netherlands and Japan. Dutch war memory is dominated by memories of the German occupation at home. Yet the suffering of the Dutch East Indies community has increasingly been recognised through, for example, The Indisch (Indies) Monument in The Hague and annual commemoration at the monument on 15 August, the date of Japan's surrender.²⁸ The motor of Dutch activism for compensation for war time suffering of forced labourers and those held in internment and POW camps is the Foundation of Japanese Honorary Debts (Stichting Japanse Ereschulden).²⁹ The Foundation was established in 1990 following the formal end of the Cold War, during which Japan had served as a key ally of the United States and the Netherlands. Members of the Foundation who formerly lived in the colony, share a strong sentiment of resentment of the Japanese for destroying the colony that they once ruled and called home. Some also resent Indonesians for resisting the Dutch attempt to retake the colony in 1945 and attacks on members of the Dutch community in this period.³⁰

When the issue of compensation for the 'comfort women' was escalating, the

Foundation requested that O’Herne become a witness at the 1992 International Public Hearing in Tokyo concerning Japanese war crimes and post war compensation. The Hearing was a joint Korean-Japanese initiative supported by the Korean Council, the Japanese Bar Association and other Tokyo-based human rights citizen’s groups. Japanese supporters of this Hearing represent a group of people who collectively ‘reject the war time imperialist project’ and call on the Japanese state to take responsibility for war time victimisation and make amends for that past.³¹



Ellen Corry van der Ploeg

At the time of the 1992 hearing O’Herne’s story was reported in the Dutch media alongside that of another Dutch survivor, Ellen Corry van der

Ploeg.³² Van der Ploeg like O’Herne was of partial Indonesian heritage. In 1944 she was chosen with other women aged 15 to 25 in the Halmaheira internment camp in Semarang allegedly to work in a cigarette factory. She was then forced to work in a number of different brothels. She reports that she was greatly encouraged by O’Herne’s testimony because although she had tried to speak out about her experiences as early as 1947, she found almost no support amongst fellow survivors who feared jeopardising their post war lives by revealing their stories.³³ O’Herne and van der Ploeg participated in many regional and international forums and hearings on the issue of war compensation mostly alongside Korean women. In response the Dutch government commissioned a report into the issue in 1993.³⁴

O’Herne quickly became one of the most recognisable public faces of the transnational movement for former comfort women. Through her memoir published first in English in 1994 and subsequently in Japanese and Indonesian she became famous.³⁵ She has featured in many media interviews and several documentaries including a documentary directed by her daughter Carol Ruff, with Ned Lander.³⁶ Because of her high profile she made an early contribution to extending the ‘comfort women’ issue beyond one that primarily concerned Japan and Korea.³⁷

As the only woman of Dutch background resident in the Netherlands to go public, van der Ploeg published an authorised biography of her life in Dutch in 1995.³⁸ A collection of the stories of several other women of Dutch background was published in Dutch in 2013, but under conditions of the anonymity of interviewees.³⁹ The fact that only two women of Dutch background have been willing to go public with their stories suggests that Dutch survivors have been as reluctant as women from so called ‘Asian’ cultures to share their stories.



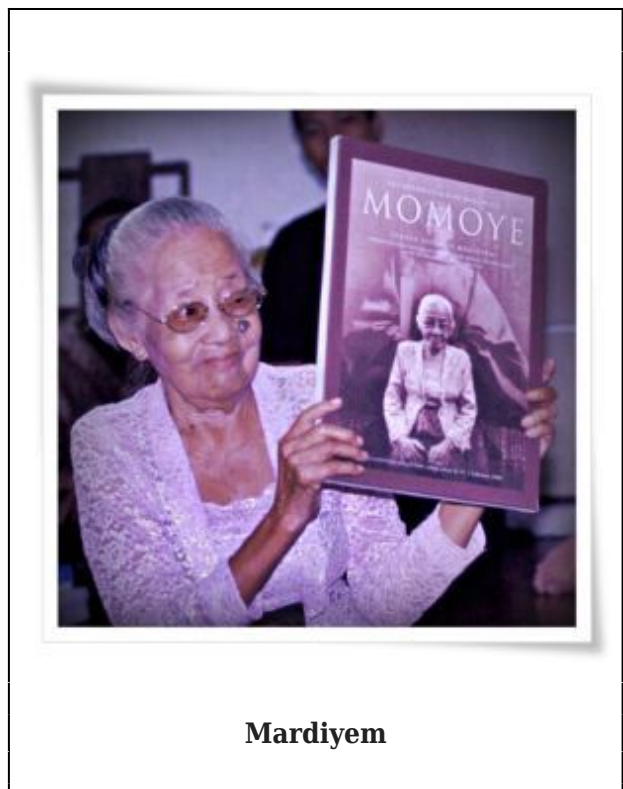
Poster of Tuminah

The first Indonesian to come forward with her story was the Javanese woman Tuminah (born in 1927) of Solo. Her story was published in July 1992.⁴⁰ Tuminah is an interesting case because she has been open about the fact that she was a sex worker prior to being forcibly ‘recruited’. In her account to Kompas newspaper she revealed that her father had sold her virginity to a Dutch man for five rupiah (gulden).⁴¹ Her testimony alludes to the operation of colonial patriarchal class hierarchies according to which poor local women could be purchased for sex.⁴²

Tuminah was providing for her family when she was hunted down by the Japanese military along with other sex workers after their

advance into Solo. She was then held at the Fuji Inn and not allowed to leave. Tuminah did not engage in extensive activism on the issue. Her story was largely popularised by Kimura Kōichi a Japanese theologian then resident in Indonesia, to whose church community Tuminah belonged.⁴³

The most famous Indonesian survivor, Mardiyem, reported her experiences following a call for all victims of the war to register at local Legal Aid branches throughout Indonesia. This call was the result of a visit in April 1993 of five Japanese lawyers from the human rights commission of the Japanese Bar Association. The Association was seeking evidence of Indonesian victimisation during the war.⁴⁴



Mardiyem

In her memoir Mardiyem provides a longer version of her war-time story.⁴⁵ She recounts how an Ambonese woman, Zus Lentji, who was living in Yogyakarta at the time and working as a musician, told Mardiyem about a job opening as a performer in the island of Borneo. With the encouragement of Zus Lentji and another

performer in the group, she signed up to go as a thirteen year old. After a long journey by ship to Borneo her recruiters disappeared and she soon discovered that there was no performing job. Before long she was set up in a brothel in the suburb of Telawang near Banjarmasin, the administrative capital for the navy in Southern Borneo. Mardiyem was repeatedly raped and beaten by Japanese soldiers and she suffered a forced abortion at age fifteen. After the war she returned to her home in Yogyakarta. She shared her story with her husband, but not with others until the 1990s.

Short versions of Mardiyem's story first appeared in Indonesian newspapers in the 1990s accompanying coverage of her related activism. A fuller account appeared in one of the first Indonesian accounts of the comfort women system, published in 1997.⁴⁶ The most detailed version of her life story was published in her 2007 Indonesian memoir co-authored by the Japanese and Indonesian activists Kimura Kōichi and Eka Hindra respectively.⁴⁷

Mardiyem frequently travelled to Japan in the 1990s and early 2000s to provide testimony and represent Indonesia in regional meetings related to war redress. She received media attention in Japan during her visits and as a result of the 2001 documentary about her by the young Japanese filmmaker, Kana Tomoko.⁴⁸

What is interesting about the stories of both Tuminah and Mardiyem is the hints within them of societal factors that contributed to women's oppression. In the case of Tuminah her family was complicit in selling her off to meet their living costs. In Mardiyem's case it was local people who deceived her into signing up to move to Borneo under false pretences. I make this point not to undermine the fact that the Japanese military perpetrated the greatest harm to these women, but to open up the question of how we might understand their experiences in terms of broader structures of power in colonial Indonesian society. Sarah Soh

has made a similar call for an understanding the experiences of Korean women in terms of a grounded analysis of the diverse experiences of Korean survivors in terms of colonial rule and gendered structural violence in the context of a capitalist system and patriarchal Korean and Japanese societies.⁴⁹ Tuminah's story similarly reveals insights into the patriarchal Javanese culture of the 1940s according to which a daughter's virginity could be sold and she could be expected to earn income for the family through sex work. This context contributed to her plight.

Attitudes towards Mardiyem and other women who went public in Indonesia were mixed partly due to ambiguous attitudes toward the war. Although there has been some recognition of the suffering especially of forced labourers (romusha), attitudes about the period are varied. One reason for this is that when it was becoming clear that Japan would lose the war, the Japanese supported Indonesian preparations for independence.⁵⁰ Another reason is that many Indonesians including President Sukarno collaborated with the Japanese. The Japanese Occupation has also been overshadowed in Indonesian national memory, by the more 'heroic' ensuing independence struggle from 1945 to 1949 against the Dutch. The increasing focus on morality that accompanied the religious renewal in the 1990s, and the common view that women should be the guardians of societal morality, also contributed to limited sympathy for survivors of the system.⁵¹

In the 1990s the Japanese Bar Association and the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia) drove Indonesian activism.⁵² The Foundation was one of only a few human rights organisations allowed to operate during the military dominated Suharto era (1966-1998). Members of the Suharto government, however, remained cautious of this activism instead prioritising good relations with the government of Japan,

which following the rise of the Suharto regime had provided economic aid and investment.⁵³ Meanwhile Indonesian survivors called for compensation from the Japanese government for their suffering.

The position of the Japanese government with regard to responsibility for the system and compensation was and remains that all debts were officially settled in the post war treaties with the Netherlands, Indonesia and Korea in 1956, 1958 and 1965 respectively. Yet in the 1990s officials made some concessions on this issue. Firstly following Japanese researcher Yoshimi Yoshiaki's findings of evidence in the Defence Archives that proved the military's role in establishing brothels in the 1930s, along with Korean women's testimony, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi made a personal apology to South Koreans during a visit in 1992.⁵⁴ Then in 1993 Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei made one of the most significant government statements on the issue in which he admitted that 'comfort stations' were established under the authority of the military, that in many cases women were recruited against their will, and that the military sometimes also took part in this recruitment.⁵⁵ In the context of previous denials of military responsibility and denials of coercion this was very significant.

Further to this in 1995 the Japanese government established the Asian Women's Fund (Josei no tame no Ajia Heiwa Kokumin Kikin/Asian Women's Friendship and Peace Foundation). The Fund was to provide compensation payments of \$20,000 to individual survivors from private donations by Japanese citizens accompanied by a personalised letter of apology for each recipient from the Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi. Korean activists rejected the Fund because payments were not to come directly from the Japanese government and they pressured Korean women not to accept the money.⁵⁶

Indonesian activists were open to negotiations with the Fund, but the Indonesian government wanted to quickly resolve this issue. The Minister of Social Affairs, Inten Soeweno, therefore signed a deal with the Japanese government in March 1997 whereby the Ministry would receive a lump sum of 380 million yen over ten years to establish and support 62 nursing homes in the towns where 'comfort' facilities had operated that would be open to surviving women and other elderly persons.⁵⁷ The decision not to make individual payments to victims and instead to provide money for nursing homes infuriated Indonesian activists and survivors. They were not consulted regarding the deal and very few survivors took up the offer of residence in these homes.

In the Netherlands the Foundation for Japanese Honorary Debts did not want to deal with the Fund. Instead the Dutch Foreign Ministry negotiated for Dutch survivors via a specific organisation.⁵⁸ In 1998 the Dutch Project Implementation Committee, arranged for Dutch survivors to receive money directly from the Japanese government as opposed to private donations. This was achieved by categorising the payments as part of the health and welfare division of the Fund, which the Japanese government directly funded.⁵⁹ Sixty-four people of Dutch background accepted payments from the Fund under conditions of anonymity. Ruff O'Herne and van der Ploeg, however, declined to take money from the Project because they viewed the Fund as an insult to survivors.⁶⁰

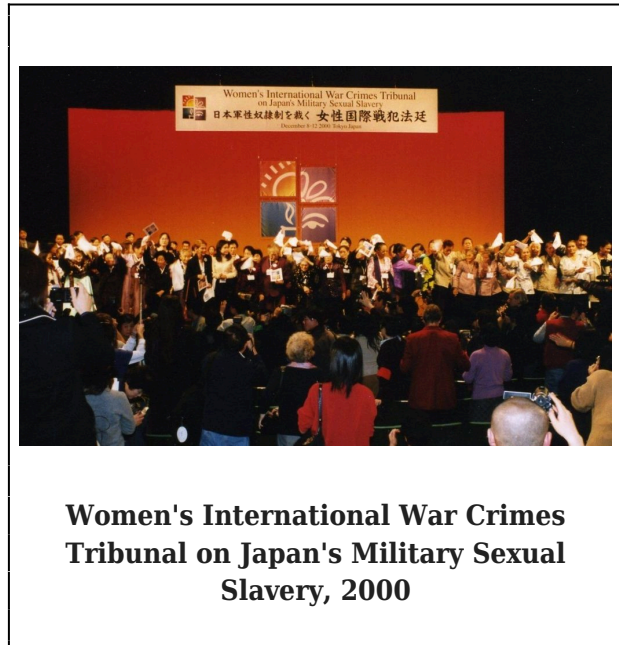
Bringing Indonesian and Dutch Women Together Japanese Activism and Transnational Solidarity

As detailed above Japanese activists have supported both Dutch and Indonesian survivor activists in their pursuit of redress from the Japanese government. They have used many methods to promote awareness of this case including legal trials and public education

campaigns. These activists tend to position themselves in opposition to a supposedly unified view on the war held by ‘the Japanese government’. Yet even among government officials there does not appear to be a consensus on how to deal with the legacies of the war. Philip Seaton argues that Japanese views on this topic vary depending on people’s experiences and connections to the war. Out of a sense of loyalty to soldiers who died or who survived the war, some veterans and politicians defend the past actions of soldier’s and military leaders.⁶¹ Some politicians, however, such as Kōno Yōhei and Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi have taken more conciliatory approaches.

A key issue for activists, however, is the lack of legal recognition of the claims of individual survivors. By 1998 activists in Korea and Japan in particular interpreted the failure of multiple court cases brought by surviving women against the Japanese government as evidence of ongoing denial of legal responsibility.⁶² It was in this context that the Japanese journalist and women’s rights activist Matsui Yayori, who had long supported survivors, formulated the idea of holding a people’s tribunal.⁶³ Matsui was co-founder of the Asia Japan Women’s Resource Centre and the Violence Against Women in War Network (VAWW). These two organisations and the two most active survivor organisations the Korean Council and the Filipino organisation, ASCENT were key organisers of the tribunal.⁶⁴ The idea for the tribunal was inspired by increased attention to sexualised violence law in international law. This included the United Nations’ International War Crimes Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and the International Criminal Court, all of which prosecuted crimes of sexual violence.⁶⁵ People’s tribunals carry no legal weight, but they use international legal conventions to make moral claims for justice. The 2000 Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery held in Tokyo focused on the legal

responsibility of the Japanese government and former Emperor to appropriately compensate and acknowledge surviving women through direct individual compensation.



The tribunal brought together sixty-four surviving women from historically divided countries such as North and South Korea and countries with other relationships of occupation and colonisation such as East Timor and Indonesia, and Indonesia and the Netherlands. The focus on the tribunal was women’s experiences at the hands of the Japanese military and their collective demands for redress from the Japanese state.

The tribunal was a rare occasion in which Indonesian and Dutch survivors came together. Many of the women who testified were already among the public faces of each national movement. Ruff O’Herne and van der Ploeg, for example, represented the Netherlands. Mardiyem and three other activists Emi, Suhannah and Suharti represented Indonesia.⁶⁶ There did not appear, however, to have been close relationships between Dutch and Indonesian survivors, possibly due to their complex colonial relationships. Although Mardiyem is not critical of Dutch colonialism in

her memoir, she seems to have most closely identified with Korean survivors at the tribunal: seeking out a Korean survivor, for example, to embrace despite the fact they did not share a common language.⁶⁷ Meanwhile at a press conference preceding the tribunal at which she was seated beside Mardiyem, O’Herne explained to the media she was speaking out on behalf of ‘Asian’ women as a ‘European’ woman and in that context she specifically acknowledged Korean and Filipino survivors, but did not mention Indonesian survivors.⁶⁸ This may be related to the fact that survivors from Korea and the Philippines have been more active internationally.⁶⁹ But it may also be related to unresolved tensions over Dutch Indonesian relationships.

In her 1995 memoir, for example, O’Herne reveals that after the Japanese surrender she experienced an attack on her camp in which one of her friends was knifed and killed by pro-Republican Indonesian forces, whom she describes as terrorists ‘spurred on by Japanese anti-Dutch propaganda’.⁷⁰ Here she refers to the 1945 attacks on Dutch and Eurasians mentioned above. O’Herne’s reticence towards Indonesian survivors may thus in part be explained by her post war experiences and the related trauma of leaving her country of birth.

Indonesian women similarly looked to Korean, not Dutch, women for solidarity perhaps because of a strong sense of rupture with the Dutch colonial past brought about by the 1945-1949 independence war. Intense anti-imperialist resentment of the Dutch and their continuing economic influence on Indonesia as well as their continuing retention of Western New Guinea extended into the 1950s and early 1960s under the firmly nationalist President Sukarno.⁷¹

Shortly after the tribunal when Matsui fell terminally ill she called for a museum dedicated to the memory of the tribunal and of the survivors of the system. Using money

donated from her estate and raised through fundraising, the VAWW Network opened the⁷² Solidarity, for them, is based on a history within the Japanese women’s movement of rigorous critiques of Japanese imperialism and of women’s implication in supporting the empire, combined with a heightened awareness and rejection of the process of women’s co-optation by the Japanese state.⁷³ They continue thus to emphasise the Japanese government’s responsibility.



WAM Entrance Room permanent exhibition “Women Who Opened the Doors to Memory”. Photograph supplied by the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace.

Located on one floor of a building at Waseda University’s Shinjuku campus in Tokyo, the museum provides a permanent exhibition featuring portrait-style photos of 150 survivors, including women from Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, the Netherlands and Indonesia who gave their permission to the museum to share their photographs, names and experiences. The permanent exhibition space labelled ‘Women Who Opened the Doors of Memory’ documents with photos and captions the first women to speak out from each country including: Kim Hak Sun, Jan Ruff O’Herne and Tuminah. Visitors then proceed to the larger

resource room housing a map of all known ‘comfort stations’ across Asia, a small library, a study area and an exhibition space with thematic rotating exhibitions focusing on different national cases.

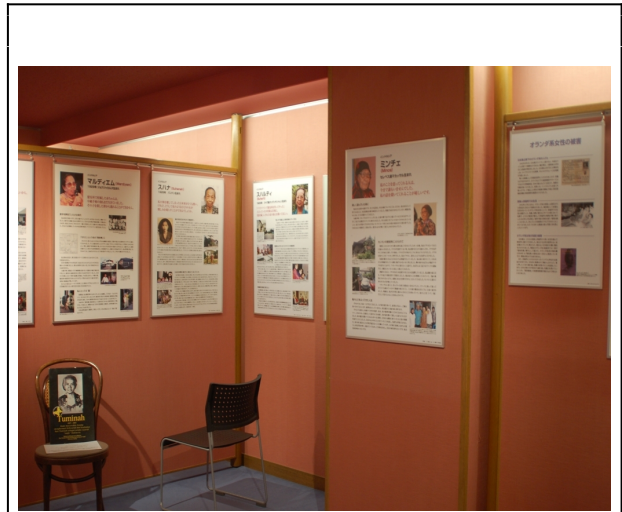
The 2015 exhibition entitled ‘Under the Glorious Guise of Asian Liberation: Indonesia and Sexual Violence under the Japanese Military Occupation’ provides a critique of positive views of the occupation held by some Japanese veterans and politicians. For example, Fusayama Tadao, a communications officer based in Sumatra during the war, has promoted the view in various publications that Japan’s campaign in Southeast Asia was for purely for Asian self defence, Asian brotherhood and Asian liberation from ‘white oppression’.⁷⁴



Japanese War Time Propaganda, WAM Exhibition *Under the Guise of Asian Liberation: Indonesia and Sexual Violence under the Japanese Military Occupation*. Photograph supplied by the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace.

The museum staff challenge this view by contrasting Japanese wartime propaganda about the war with illustrations of the most oppressive aspects of the occupation including forced labour and starvation.⁷⁵ An accompanying photograph, for example, shows

malnourished Indonesians in a hospital at the conclusion of the war.



Profiles of Indonesian Survivors, WAM Exhibition *Under the Guise of Asian Liberation: Indonesia and Sexual Violence under the Japanese Military Occupation*. Photograph supplied by the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace.

The main focus of the exhibition, however, is women’s stories. Two walls of the exhibition, for example, feature some of the most prominent Indonesian and Dutch survivors. For each woman a portrait, along with photographs of their activism, is presented with a brief biography. In combining a focus on their wartime experiences with their activism, the curators stress the women’s agency in seeking redress for their suffering and choosing to go public with their stories. Consistent with their feminist outlook the curators highlight the women’s experiences of victimisation, but avoid presenting the women as helpless victims with no agency.⁷⁶

Tuminah’s story is profiled on one wall of the exhibition. The inclusion of her story in the museum is notable, given that some activists have sought to exclude survivors who were sex workers prior to the war from the movement for redress on the basis that they feel they need

to profile women whose testimonies fit the so-called ‘paradigmatic story’ of a young virgin deceptively recruited into the system.⁷⁷ The motivation for this is a fear that the inclusion of former sex workers would fuel accusations from those on the Japanese right that all women in the system were ‘professional prostitutes’ and that there is thus no basis to their claims for compensation. This view of course overlooks the fact that women who were formerly sex workers were also subject to forcible detention and rape.

Mardiyem’s story appears next to that of Tuminah along with those of the other women who participated in the tribunal (Suhannah and Suharti). The stories of Ruff O’Herne and van der Ploeg are profiled on another wall. Dutch women’s experiences are contextualised with further information in another panel explaining the internment of Dutch people with accompanying photographs of women and children in the camps.⁷⁸

The stories of the two groups of women sit somewhat awkwardly together. There is a natural correlation between them because they were abused in the same occupied territory. Yet at the same time they represent different stories that are complicated by another colonial/ post-colonial relationship.

A notable aspect of the exhibition is the inclusion of evidence from soldiers documenting their involvement in the system. Former Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s (1982 to 1987) role is highlighted next to the profile of Suharti. A panel featuring an extract from his 1978 memoir describes him having established a ‘comfort station’ at Balikpapan, where Suharti was held.⁷⁹ The display includes a photograph of Nakasone as a young man and various press statements in which he denied that he had established a comfort facility and instead claimed he had only set up a facility for men to play (Japanese) chess. The panel text notes that Nakasone

repeatedly refused to meet Suharti who sought to question him when she travelled to Japan in 2009.⁸⁰

The purpose of this panel is to draw attention to official complicity in this system and to ongoing denials of this complicity by Japanese officials. Nakasone has long been a target of activists. The Indonesian prosecution team used the same extracts from Nakasone’s memoir in the 2000 tribunal to prove military complicity in the system.⁸¹ Activists behind the exhibition are also highly critical of the views of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō regarding this issue. Unlike Nakasone he was not involved in the war but his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, was an unindicted Class A War criminal suspect released from prison in 1948, who later served as prime minister.⁸² Activists charge that Abe was involved in censoring the 2000 NHK documentary on the tribunal.⁸³ Further to this, during Abe’s first term as Prime Minister (2006-2007), he contradicted the Kōno statement and insisted that the women had never been subjected to forced recruitment by the military.⁸⁴

At the time this exhibition was launched in 2015 Abe was serving a second term as Prime Minister. A year earlier he appointed Nakasone’s son, former Foreign Minister Nakasone Hirofumi, to oversee a commission to revisit the Kōno statement and ‘restore Japan’s honour with regard to the comfort woman issue’.⁸⁵ Japanese activists continue to criticise Abe’s rejection of their demand for further redress. Soldiers’ testimony is also used in the exhibition, however, for other purposes.

Memories in Conflict: Survivor and Soldier Testimony



Exhibition Map, 'Sexual Violence by the Japanese Army in Indonesia', WAM Exhibition *Under the Guise of Asian Liberation: Indonesia and Sexual Violence under the Japanese Military Occupation*. Photograph supplied by the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace.

The most striking feature of the 2015 exhibition at WAM is the map titled 'Sexual Violence by the Japanese Army in Indonesia', which hangs across the longest wall. The juxtaposition of photographs and testimonies covering different islands and locations below the map highlights the multiple locations of stations across the Indonesian archipelago. This, in turn, reinforces understanding of its systematic and organised character with 'facilities' in each region that the navy and army were stationed.

Below the main map are photographs of survivors and of former 'comfort stations' and further testimonies. The accounts are organised by island: including Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Sulawesi, Buru Island, Bali, West Timor, Sumba and West Papua. The brief testimony extracts highlight the women's ages and backgrounds, how and under what circumstances they were 'recruited' and abused, and how they survived after the war. Probably because so few Dutch women have gone public, the great majority of women featured here are Indonesian, with only one

Dutch woman mentioned. In addition the map profiles three Korean women and one Taiwanese woman who were forcibly relocated to the archipelago during the war.

The exhibition draws on the work of a small number of Japanese activists such as Kawata Fumiko and Kimura Kōichi who have collected testimonies from Indonesian survivors since the 1990s.⁸⁶ It also draws on testimonies from Indonesian women presented in regional forums for survivors. Yet fifty-three of the seventy-three photographs and short testimonies used in the map were sourced from the joint photographic documentary project called *Troostmeisjes* (the Dutch word for 'comfort girls') by the Dutch journalist and anthropologist Hilde Janssen and the Dutch photographer, Jan Banning. Over two years they collected testimonies and photographs of 120 surviving women across different islands of Indonesia. This resulted in a Dutch language book on the women's experiences, a touring photographic exhibition, an exhibition guidebook and a film.⁸⁷ The exhibition toured several cities in Europe and Indonesia and finally visited Japan with the support of WAM staff in October 2015, a few months after the WAM exhibition opened.⁸⁸ The stated purpose of the photographic exhibition was to help remind the world of this injustice against Indonesian women.⁸⁹ The photographic exhibition drew attention to the case of Indonesian survivors and provided important material for the WAM exhibition.

The many short extracts and photographs of individual women are mobilised to contrast in particular with soldiers' memory. Alongside each survivor's testimony highlighted in pink, is a soldier's testimony highlighted in beige. The practice of using soldier's testimony and memoirs alongside survivor memory dates at least as far back as the 2000 tribunal where two soldiers testified alongside 64 women.⁹⁰ Soldiers' testimony has been used in a number of WAM exhibitions including a 2009-2010

exhibition entitled ‘Testimony and Silence-Former Soldiers Facing up to their Crimes’. On the WAM website staff frame that exhibition in terms of an examination of how men talked about rape and ‘comfort stations’ and whether they saw themselves as perpetrators or ‘victims’. The previous exhibition focused on ‘Japan’s post-war indifference to its wartime and post-war responsibilities, focusing especially on sexual violence’.⁹¹



Sri Sukanti

The use of soldiers’ memory alongside women’s testimonies is striking. The map, for example, includes a photograph of the aged Indonesian survivor Sri Sukanti and the following text:

Two Japanese soldiers took me from the home. Although my father and mother resisted, they forcibly brought me to the mansion, known as the Papak building located nearby. There was a Japanese soldier called Ogawa, and I was forced to take a bath and to change my clothes like a doll, and was repeatedly raped till the morning. I was nine years old.⁹²

Sukanti’s reference to feeling like a doll and

her disclosure of her very young age sets up the trope of the ‘stolen innocence’ of young girls, a trope which is frequently used to powerful effect in activist circles.⁹³ Her story is juxtaposed with a description, by the soldier Harami Keiji, of women who worked in the system. Harami notes

all ianfu consisted of local women [...] as to Surabaya, many of them had dark skin and were precocious. Having said that, however, most of them were up to 25 years old, and there was one girl who looked like a primary school student.⁹⁴

The soldier’s casual observation that there may well have been a young girl amongst the women appears flippant.

The soldiers’ accounts, which are drawn from published memoirs, provide lurid discussions of which women offered the best sexual experiences and how long intercourse took.⁹⁵ One second-hand account from a soldier about another soldier’s experience suggests that after ‘making love with a 40 year old ianfu and being comforted for just an hour... he really appreciated it’ so much that ‘I think it was love’.⁹⁶ These extracts need to be understood in the broader context of memoir writing amongst soldiers.

From the early 1950s there was an increase in popularity of writings by former military men in Japan. In the 1970s the Vietnam War combined together with the emergence of war-time stragglers in Southeast Asia triggered a mini boom in interest in war time experiences.⁹⁷ Haruko Taya Cook notes that preceding the increase in survivor testimonies, veterans had occasionally referred to so called comfort women, but they had done so ‘with few feelings of guilt or responsibility towards the women themselves.’⁹⁸ One explanation she provided for this was that Japanese memoirs of war tend to be centred on the self and not on the people impacted by Japanese person’s actions. Based

on a sample of twenty memoirs of former Japanese soldiers Kanō Mikiyo found a similar attitude of nonchalance as soldiers recounted stories of rape or forced prostitution. In her view, however, the accounts were explicit and framed in terms of the men's sexual needs, their ability to take or use women at will and the exoticism of their sexual experiences with women from other countries.⁹⁹ Her reading of the memoirs alerts us to the militarised culture within which these men operated in which they were expected to display so called masculine behaviours and in which people were classified according to an imperial hierarchy.

In including soldier's testimony in this exhibition and previous exhibitions the curators seek to reveal a lack of critical thinking about military sexual violence amongst soldiers and others in society. Their strategy could, however, be taken further to think about why soldiers participated or declined to participate in rape. In her analysis of war-time rape in the former Yugoslavia, as in the example above in the exhibition, Price notes that rapists sometimes referred to their acts of sexual violence in terms of romance or love. She interprets this parody of romance as being one way of heightening the victim's humiliation or as a charade perhaps revealing uncertainty about the soldiers' actions.¹⁰⁰ In a similar way the soldier Harami's observation about the possibility of a primary school aged girl being amongst the women at one comfort facility could also be an acknowledgement of the soldier's malaise about what he observed.

The purpose of juxtaposing these descriptions of soldiers' and women's experiences according to museum curator Yamashita Fumiko is to highlight just how large a gap there is between survivor and soldier interpretations of the system.¹⁰¹ She makes this point on the basis of the intention of museum staff to honour surviving women's accounts of experiences of sexual violence. Her comment implies, however, that women's stories are unmediated

in the sense of more accurately representing what happened from the point of view of the women.

Testimonies provide one of the most powerful ways of bringing to life the history of subaltern people whose experiences of oppression are unlikely to be documented in written form due to illiteracy or a relative lack of power. As scholars we need to treat testimonies of survivors of violence with respect. Yet because most women only began to speak publicly about their experiences of sexual violence from the 1990s onwards, fifty years after the war there are issues concerning the reliability of testimonial accounts with regard to recollection of specific facts, dates and events.¹⁰² The activist context within which most testimonies have been given has undeniably encouraged women to present their stories in terms of human rights abuses perpetrated against them by a clearly identifiable and comfortably distanced party, Japanese soldiers, for whose actions the Japanese government now bears responsibility.¹⁰³ The sustained focus on Japanese responsibility might however lead survivors to de-emphasise or exclude certain factors from their stories such as cases where their families or local communities have been complicit in betraying them.

Some accounts from surviving women in the exhibition, for example, hint at family complicity in the system. In her testimony Sidah from Yogyakarta, Central Java, revealed how her father, who was a ward mayor, instructed her to become the wife of a military officer. She twitched with fear upon meeting the man and was later sent home when she was eight months pregnant with their child.¹⁰⁴ Although the local contexts surrounding sex work and views on women in colonial society are not discussed in detail in the WAM museum, the stories of Tuminah and Sidah in particular begin to hint at some of this complexity.

Conclusions

My examination of what we know about the system of enforced military prostitution in the Netherlands East Indies suggests that there were some complex factors that enabled this system to operate including local and colonial cultures of patriarchy. Dating back to the Dutch sponsored post war tribunals, crimes against Dutch women were prioritised over crimes against Indonesian women. Overall Dutch and Indonesian activism on this issue has been reinforced by Japanese activist support.

There has been very little joint Dutch and Indonesian activism due to ongoing tensions in the former colonial relationship between the two groups of women. For their part, Japanese activists have continued to push for greater solidarity across the transnational movement for redress for survivors. In a 2015-2106 they presented the stories of Indonesian and Dutch women together in a WAM exhibition. Here they honoured the survivors and insisted that Japanese people should know of their experiences. They presented not only accounts of women's suffering, but also of their activism and post war lives. Criticisms of Japanese imperialism are, however, so emphasized in the

museum that other factors in colonial society that created enabling conditions for the system are not fully explained. If activists seek to effect change further research needs to be done to fully grasp how a range of factors in society contributed to the system in different locations, without conceding to a neo-nationalist position according to which all blame is shifted away from the Japanese military towards local recruiters.¹⁰⁵ The use of soldiers' testimony in the exhibition is a potentially powerful tactic if it can be combined with the promotion of further theorisation about why some soldiers continue to rape women and why some do not.

This article is an outcome of my Australian Research Council funded project FT20130100957. I would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Mayuko Itoh and Faye Chan who have prepared all translations from Japanese into English and Dutch to English respectively. All Indonesian translations are mine. I would also like to thank Vera Mackie, Robert Cribb and Mark Selden for constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper and my interviewees for their assistance.

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Notes

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