

[AI Index: ASA 22/002/2006]

Still waiting for justice

Women survivors of Japan's sexual slavery system

After six decades...

Up to 200,000 women and girls were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military before and during World War II. They were enslaved and repeatedly raped for months or years. Many were tortured and ill-treated – beaten, stabbed or burned with cigarettes. Most were less than 20 years old – some as young as 12.

Humiliated and ashamed, the survivors (who were described euphemistically as “comfort women”) remained silent for decades. They were severely traumatized and for more than 50 years most of them suffered isolation, shame, mental and physical ill-health and poverty. A large proportion never married. Many were unable to have children due to internal injuries or sexually transmitted diseases.

Finally, in the early 1990s, survivors spoke out.

In 1992, irrefutable evidence emerged proving the involvement of the Japanese government in the establishment and organization of the sexual slavery system. Japanese officials subsequently issued several apologies, but these have not been acceptable to survivors because they did not specify the violations committed and side-stepped Japan's obligations under international law.

After much criticism, the Japanese government set up a private-sector fund – the Asian Women's Fund – to distribute “atonement money”. Survivors continue to demand compensation directly from the government of Japan. They insist on their right to full reparation, including complete public disclosure and accurate accounts in historical records and textbooks of the human rights violations committed against them.

The surviving women are now elderly. Each year more of them die. They cannot and must not be made to wait any longer for justice.

[caption]

South Korean former “comfort women” demonstrate, as they do every Wednesday, outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul.

[end of caption]

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“My husband died in 1975 during the Indonesian invasion and never knew what I had experienced.”

“The Chief of the village was threatened by the Japanese soldiers and he ordered us to work for the Japanese. We would be visited by Japanese soldiers who forced us to have sex. There were many men, they exchanged one another. In one night it could have been 10 or more. I could not walk properly and my abdomen felt like I would die. We were treated like animals. I slept like a dead person.

“Even after I was married I couldn’t tell my husband what had happened to me. When I think about the experience now I still feel ashamed. But I want to take the issue further; I want the Japanese government to apologise to us, to recognize their actions and the suffering they caused us.”

[caption]

Ines de Jesus comes from a village in Ermera District, East Timor (now Timor Leste).

[end of caption]

“I think about the past. No one would understand my pain.”

“I couldn’t bear the torment at the comfort station. I tried to commit suicide three times by drinking antiseptic, but I didn’t die. I stayed alive to come back to see my grandma.

“Upon return to Taiwan, my uncle cursed me: “Our family can’t have whores.” So I had to leave home again. To survive, I cooked, did laundry, mended clothes.

“I now make a living by selling coconuts. I live in a makeshift shed of corrugated iron right beside my coconut stand. In the dark and empty market every night, I am the only person.

“I often drink alone at night, cup after cup, to forget about the pain.”

[caption]

Taiwanese survivor Chen Tao’s life was changed forever on 4 June 1942 when she was seized by a Japanese policeman on her way to school and taken to the Indian island of Andaman.

[end of caption]

© WRFT (Women’s Rescue Foundation of Taipei)

We call on the government of Japan to:

Accept full responsibility for the “comfort women” system in a way that publicly acknowledges the harm that these women suffered and restores the dignity of the survivors;

Apologize fully for the crimes committed against the women;

Provide adequate and effective compensation to survivors and their immediate families directly from the government;

Include an accurate account of the sexual slavery system in Japanese educational text

books on World War II;

and to:

Publicly denounce sexual violence against women, whenever and wherever it occurs;

Ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as a guarantee that such crimes will never be repeated with impunity.

“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.”

“We were raped every night. I cut off all my hair during that period to make myself look as unattractive as possible. I cut my hair until I was quite bald, but it did not help me; I became a curiosity object.

“When the war was over we had no counselling, we were too ashamed to talk about it anyway. 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. 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.

“These things still happen, it’s still going on. I see myself as a campaigner for women’s human rights, for all women around the world.”

[caption]

Dutch survivor Jan Ruff O’Herne was 19 years old when the Japanese invaded Java in 1942. After being held in a prison camp for two years, the Japanese military took her to a “comfort station” where she was repeatedly raped for three months.

[end of caption]

© Kevin de Lacy

“I can’t feel any pain now – my flesh is all dead. My life was totally ruined.”

“There were so many bombings, it was really intense. The Japanese soldiers went mad; they cut the breasts off the girls and stuck them to the wall of a cave.

“They took my clothes off – I was so small, they were so big, they raped me easily. I was bleeding, I was only 14; I was seriously hurt. They all raped me.

“I can’t describe what happened; I don’t know when these feelings will pass. I was so ashamed I could not depend on anybody, so I lived alone in life.

“In 1961 I tried to kill myself, I jumped in the Mapo River but a man saved my life, he was fishing at the time. I thought about killing myself often.

“I can smell the men, I hate men. I feel tired, I feel really tired. Nobody knows my pain.

The Japanese government should see me, realize what they did. They have to admit what they did.”

[caption]

South Korean survivor Kang Soon-ae was born in Japan and returned to Korea with her father at the age of 12. When queuing for food one day she was seized by Japanese military police officers. She was sent first to Hiroshima, and then to an army camp on Palau in the South Pacific.

[end of caption]

Take action
Help achieve justice

Get involved with Amnesty International’s work to secure justice for these women – part of the worldwide Stop Violence against Women campaign.

Find out more:

- Contact Amnesty International in your country, at the address in the box, or at Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street, London ODW, UK.
- Visit the Amnesty International website, www.amnesty.org/actforwomen
- Support our work:

I would like to join the Stop Violence against Women campaign. Please send me more information.

- I would like to join Amnesty International. Please send me details.
- I would like to make a donation to support Amnesty International’s work:

Credit card number:

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Signature:

Please send the form to the address in the box, or to Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, UK.

Amnesty International is a worldwide movement of people who campaign for internationally recognized human rights. At the latest count, there were more than 1.8 million members, supporters and subscribers in over 150 countries in every region of the world.

Amnesty International’s Stop Violence against Women campaign focuses on one of the greatest human rights scandals of our time. From birth to death, in times of peace as well as war, women face discrimination and violence at the hands of the state, the community and

the family. Working with women's rights activists and human rights groups, Amnesty International's campaign exposes acts of violence against women and demands that these violations are acknowledged, publicly condemned and redressed.

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Justice is long overdue

[photo captions]

Esmeralda Boe (deceased)

Lola Tarcila

Lola Orlencia Martinez

Lola Hilaria

Lola Ammonita (deceased)

Gil Won-ok

Lee Doo-soon

Hwang Keun-joo

Lola Lita

[end of photo captions]

“Sometimes I want to be reborn, reincarnated as a woman and have a baby and a happy life. Whenever I see other people visited by their grandchildren, I wish I had some, I feel envious of them. I feel lonely.”

[caption]

South Korean survivor Lee Ki-sun was kept in a “comfort station” for seven years and raped every day. She was unable to have children and never married.

[end of caption]

“We want our experience to be written in history so the next generation and others in other countries will know what happened to us.”

“For two months I was tied to three other women [by a rope]. There was a distance of 0.5 metres between us so we could do chores. We all had to go to the toilet and wash together.

“At night all four of us were raped. Five men a night raped me, the soldiers alternated, so there were different men each night – they were patrol forces so the troops changed all the time. If I refused they'd slap and hit me.

“I was never able to tell anyone but everyone in the village knew I had been taken. People who knew I was taken, including friends, talked about me behind my back. So I couldn't spend time with them any more.

“If the Japanese hadn't done this to me maybe I would have been a different person, it's about lost opportunities.”

[caption]

Survivor Lola Pilar from the Philippines was raped when soldiers raided her village. Her family then fled the area. A year later she was abducted.

[end of caption]