

# The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace: Its Role in Public Education

Nishino Rumiko

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*This is the second article of a three part series introducing historical museums in Japan and their role in public education on issues of war, peace, war crimes and reconciliation. The [first article](#) is Takashi Yoshida's "Revising the Past, Complicating the Future: The Yushukan War Museum in Modern Japanese History." The [final article](#) is by Mr. Kim Yeonghwan, the former associate director of [Grassroots House Peace Museum](#) who describes the peace and reconciliation programs that the Museum sponsors.*

### I. The "Comfort Women" Issue and the Origins of the Women's Active Museum (WAM)

What we euphemistically call the "comfort women" system was a violent system initiated by the Japanese state to coerce women into sexual slavery and deprive them inhumanely of bodily control, pride, security, future and hope. In August 2005, sixty years after Japan's defeat, we opened the [Women's Active Museum \(WAM\) on War and Peace](#) in Tokyo in order to preserve the history and memory of the wartime violence committed by the Japanese military against women. The museum is small, occupying only 1,238 square feet.



Entrance of WAM



Inside WAM



Inside WAM

There were three reasons that we opened WAM. The first was to preserve records of the Women's International Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery (hereafter, the Women's Tribunal), which was held in Tokyo in December 2000 with judges from five continents who specialize in international law.



Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery

The second was to honor the women of Korea, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Malaysia, Burma, Papua New Guinea, Guam, and Japan who dealt with trauma, psychological suffering, and physical torment not only during the war, but also in the postwar period, as a result of their maltreatment. The third was to establish a base

for peace and human rights activism in order to wipe out wartime violence against women and to promote a more trusting relationship between Japan and its neighbors in Asia.

## II. Remembering the Women's Tribunal

Since 1991, when Kim Haksoon publicly testified to her suffering as a "comfort woman," victims across Asia began to share their experience openly. One of the reasons these women kept silent for half a century was that they lived in societies that emphasize the virtue of chastity. As a result, they worried about social discrimination and prejudice or being labeling as "shameful" or "filthy."

Another reason why these victims were hesitant to speak out was that wartime sexual violence against women has rarely been tried as a war crime. The twentieth century was full of war and, without exception, all of these wars and military conflicts involved sexual violence against women. In these wars, women were exploited as tactical and strategic weapons, treated rather as war trophies than human beings, and forced to become sex slaves of men as "wives" and "comfort women" against their will. Yet it was only recently that the definition of "war crimes" was understood to include sexual violence against women. In my view, the lack of attention to sexual violence has contributed to the repeated occurrence of sexual violence in war. For these reasons, women remained silent about their traumas in the face of the mistaken social view that the victims were "shameful."

The Women's Tribunal in 2000 was established to secure justice for those women who stood up after fifty years of silence. It was an international people's tribunal supported by a wide range of people across the globe. The goal was to try those who were responsible for Japan's wartime sexual violence.

Sixty-four surviving victims participated in the tribunal, testifying before a gathering of more



than one thousand people from around the world. The survivors told their stories, sometimes through tears, of their struggles during and after the war. For example, Maxima Regala de la Cruz, who was abducted from her town in the Philippines in 1944 at the age of fifteen, testified that she and her mother “couldn’t tell anyone or we could be executed. It was so shameful so we dug a deep hole and covered it.” Her testimony was one of the examples that illuminated the trauma that the survivors experienced during the postwar years.

On December 4, 2001, the final judgment issued in the Hague found all ten of the accused, including Emperor Hirohito (not as an individual, but as the Supreme Commander of the Imperial Army and Navy) guilty of crimes against humanity and called on the Japanese government to provide remedial measures to fulfill its responsibility. They stated the need for Japan to “acknowledge fully its responsibility and liability for the establishment of the ‘comfort system,’ and that this system was in violation of international law” and to “issue a full and frank apology, taking legal responsibility and giving guarantees of non-repetition.”[1] The judgment was based not only on the testimonies of the survivors and massive numbers of documents but also on the testimonies of Japanese veterans, historians, international lawyers, and psychologists who specialize in the study of trauma.

Preserving the historical memory of the victims and survivors of Japan’s wartime “comfort system” will contribute to recovering their honor and preventing similar violence against women in the future. In addition, their stories shed important light on the need to overcome the past and suggest ways that reconciliation might be accomplished.

### III. Five Principles of the Museum

The museum has five guiding principles that it hopes will help create a future without violence

against women. The first is to focus on wartime sexual violence and support justice, without gender bias. In doing so, we try not to fall into the trap of empiricism and pay substantial attention to the testimonies and oral histories of the survivors and victims. The second is not only to gather and exhibit data on individual victims, but also to try to articulate who is responsible for the victimization. For this reason, we do not just exhibit artifacts of “comfort women”; we also detail the military’s system of command, structure, and operations through the testimonies of veterans and other accounts. The third is to create an action base that will promote a non-violent future. To achieve this goal, we hold meetings and promote events that will help the survivors of Japan’s wartime sexual violence gain some justice. The fourth is to operate the museum without financial support from any government. Instead, we derive our support from a non-profit organization we founded called the Human Rights Foundation for Women’s War and Peace. The museum has two full-time staff, and a twenty member steering committee that meets once a month to operate the museum. Operating expenses come mainly from membership fees and donations from the public. The fifth is to promote a popular international movement across national boundaries. With this in mind, we try to build an international network to strive toward a peaceful and non-violent future.



## Staff



Collections/Documents

## IV. Activities and Problems

Since 1997, the year all junior high school textbooks started to discuss the “comfort women” issue, historical revisionists have increased their challenges to public education. They have claimed that “comfort women” were professional prostitutes and that the women were not forced into sexual servitude. Seventeen years have passed since the survivors identified themselves publicly, and we have been fighting against these revisionists who, nonetheless, seem to be gaining in strength and influence in Japan.

Right-wing extremists have occasionally harassed us at the museum, yet we continue to receive the support of many dedicated members and donors. We have organized special exhibitions on the Women’s Tribunal, journalist Matsui Yayori who dedicated her life to battle discrimination and violence against women, and the Korean “comfort women” who were left behind after Japan’s defeat and not repatriated. In June, we are planning to have a special exhibition on “comfort women” for junior high-school students. We have also coordinated public lectures and forums to educate the public. We have interviewed veterans, done field work in various nations in Asia, conducted archival research, made documentary films, and published testimonies,

booklets, and monographs.

Growing numbers of high school students, college students, and people in their twenties are coming to the museum. Some schools make field trips to our museum a part of their curriculum. Although we still receive harassing e-mails, I believe the museum is gradually expanding its role in public education.



Student Visitors to WAM



Student Visitors





Visitors from Kusazu, Gunma



Workshop at the museum

## V. The Role of WAM in East Asian Reconciliation

WAM is an active museum that tries to rescue hidden memories of women forced into sexual slavery in order to alter public consciousness. It is modeled after the “Topography of Terror” exhibition in Berlin – a project that came to fruition with the help of many ordinary citizens. The exhibition was established on the site of the former headquarters of the German Secret State Police and the offices of the SS leadership and the Reich Security Main Office. It was there that the Germans planned the killing of Jews and other crimes against humanity. The Allied bombing left the headquarters in ruins, and what was left was

subsequently demolished. Nonetheless, ordinary people worked to influence politics and create an exhibition space that would preserve the history of war and the memory of those crimes committed by the Reich. Gerhard Shoenberner, a representative of the project, stated that he hoped to establish a museum that not only displayed records of victimization, but that would also become a center of information, education, and empowerment which could help transform each individual into a socially active citizen. Our museum follows this concept.

Recently, the former Minister of Education Nakayama Nariaki, led about 130 lawmakers of the Liberal Democratic Party in submitting a proposal to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo requesting to revise Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei’s 1993 statement that acknowledged that the military was “directly or indirectly involved in the establishment and management of comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women” and extended the government’s “sincere apologies and remorse to all those ... who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”[2] Nakayama and his fellow politicians urged Abe to state that neither the military nor the police were directly involved in the coerced abduction of women, although private business people might have been involved in such activities. Responding to the request, Abe stated the government could find no evidence to support the idea that “comfort women” had been abducted through coercion. Abe’s remark invited critical responses from other countries. Such remarks from the Japanese government makes its “apology” look insincere and prevents reconciliation in Asia.

In order to further reconciliation in Asia, Japan needs to squarely “face the historical facts,” as Kono stated in 1993. And to accomplish this, it is essential to have a history of imperial Japan that can be shared with the countries

victimized by Japan's expansion into an empire. To remember Japan's role as a perpetrator, in my view, is neither shameful nor counter to Japan's national interests. In order to promote reconciliation in Asia, Japanese society must do its best to recover the honor of the victims of Japan's colonial aggression and to prevent the same gross violations of human rights from happening again. To settle our historical problems once and for all, I firmly believe, it is essential for us to form a cross-national and cross-ethnic community across Asia.

[1] The Hague judgment is available [here](#).

[2] Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei on the result of the study on the issue of "comfort women" on August 4, 1993, available [here](#):

The Government of Japan has been conducting a study on the issue of wartime "comfort women" since December 1991. I wish to announce the findings of that study.

As a result of the study, which indicates that comfort stations were operated in extensive areas for long periods, it is apparent that there existed a great number of comfort women. Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day. The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases

they were recruited against their will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitment. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere.

As to the origin of those comfort women who were transferred to the war areas, excluding those from Japan, those from the Korean peninsula accounted for a large part. The Korean peninsula was under Japanese rule in those days, and their recruitment, transfer, control, etc., were conducted generally against their will, through coaxing, coercion, etc.

Undeniably, this was an act, with the involvement of the military authorities of the day, which severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.

It is incumbent upon us, the Government of Japan, to continue to consider seriously, while listening to the views of learned circles, how best we can express this sentiment.

We shall face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterate our firm determination

never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history.

As actions have been brought to court in Japan and interest has been shown in this issue outside Japan, the Government of Japan shall continue to pay full attention to this matter, including private researched related thereto.

*Nishino Rumiko is Director, Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, Tokyo.*

For other articles on Japanese and East Asian museums and history education illuminating

issues of war, peace and war atrocities, see:

[Kirk A. Denton, "Heroic Resistance and Victims of Atrocity: Negotiating the Memory of Japanese Imperialism in Chinese Museums"](#)

[Frederick R. Dickinson, "Biohazard: Unit 731 in Postwar Japanese Politics of National 'Forgetfulness'"](#)

[Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka, "Exhibiting World War II in Japan and the United States"](#)

[Philip Seaton, "Family, Friends and Furusato: 'Home' in the Formation of Japanese War Memories"](#)

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