

**Commentary on “Women, the State, and War:  
Understanding Issue of the ‘Comfort Women’”  
by Prof. Yumiko Mikanagi**

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As research and publication on the “comfort women” of World War Two (Pacific War) have been proliferating in English, Japanese, and Korean in recent years, analytical and ideological perspectives on the historical phenomenon also have become more varied (e.g., nationalist and post-colonial critique, gender/feminist analysis, military history; legality/war crimes, human rights, literature). But few offer ways to synthesize analytically the many aspects of the “comfort system” as a military, political, and social (or anti-social) institution. Professor Mikanagi’s essay, however, pushes us toward such analysis. It emphasizes the importance of explaining how gender ideology, racism, organizational politics, elite concerns over Japan’s international image, and a military culture of violence *together* engendered the system of militarized sexual slavery.

Professor Mikanagi’s emphasis on the Japanese military’s organizational logic, as well as the competition among the military and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, and Finance is particularly compelling. For one, she demonstrates that contrary to common assumptions about the “natural” sexual needs of soldiers needing outlets and the “inevitability” of sexual abuse of women in wartime, the “comfort system” was the consequence of policy actions, inactions, and power-seeking among state agencies and officials. In other words, state power and organizational energy are responsible for shaping cultural norms and gender ideologies into a system of sexual abuse of women (and control over men). The notion of the state as “organized violence” is highlighted in her point: “In sum, violence and contradiction within the military gave rise to the need to

compensate for the psychological and physical damage inflicted upon soldiers.”

At the same time, the author avoids a monolithic conception of the Japanese state. She illustrates how the different positions and negotiations over competing norms, influence, and resources that in some instances were not directly related to the “comfort women” affected the evolution and organization of the comfort system. For example, she observes that the Home Ministry had reservations about the “comfort system” because of its concern over violating the international conventions on the suppression of trafficking in women and children, which Japan had ratified in 1925. Such points lead us to contemplate the “what if’s” about power and politics: What if different ministries and agencies had had more power relative to the military? What if there had been civilian control over the military, as scholars of World War One have queried? What if political systems had been different so as to facilitate accountability for state actions and inactions, as Kantian notions of democratic peace might lead us to consider? The point here is not to reflect on ideal situations or counter-factual navel-gazing, but rather to illustrate that indeed politics, power, and policies directly are responsible for the comfort system and that they also can be applied for the prevention of similar abuses today in many parts of the world.

Lastly, Professor Mikanagi’s insights about the influence of international factors, namely the Japanese state’s concern over international prestige and “face,” on the creation of the “comfort system” are relevant to us today as we engage in efforts to generate and build international norms. She notes that

the system of comfort women is consistent with the Japanese government’s historical attitude toward the West: the Japanese government would make formal changes in order to convince the world that Japan was a modern nation. (In case of comfort women, the military replaced rape with the system of comfort women.) At the same time, however, Japan would maintain the substance of its

political and cultural practices. (This meant that, in the case of comfort women, the Japanese soldiers were continuously allowed to rape women from occupied areas.)

In short, states adapt selectively to international pressures and standards regarding ethics and norms, but without systemic changes in ideology, organization, and policies that enable the enforcement of such norms within and among states, "upward harmonization" will lack substance and durability. This warning applies particularly to politics and policies regarding women and masculine privilege.