

# Sexual enslavement

by [Mieke Holkeboer](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

*War's Dirty Secret: Rape, Prostitution, and Other Crimes Against Women.* Edited by Anne Llewellyn Barstow. Pilgrim, 257 pp., \$19.95.

In 1943 when Woo Yun Jae was just 16 years old, she was ripped away from her family and village in Korea by two men she had never met, put on a military truck, brought to a station, placed on a train with blacked-out windows and taken to China. There she was delivered to a Japanese military "comfort" station to which she had been allocated for the sexual pleasure of the soldiers. Shortly after her arrival, a Japanese soldier attempted to sexually assault her and brutally beat her. Woo tried to kill herself. A few days later, more than 20 soldiers raped her repeatedly. This was the beginning of her personal war within the greater war of Japanese aggression, an ordeal that would go on for many months. When in 1944 Japan was defeated in that part of China, the soldiers abandoned the military camp where Woo was being held, and some Korean journalists helped her to get a ticket home.

Because of the physical and psychological trauma of the repeated rapes (up to 30 and 40 a day for some women) and poor conditions (living in three-by-five foot cubicles and receiving monthly chemical injections meant to reduce cases of sexually transmitted diseases among soldiers), only about one-fourth of the estimated 200,000 women brought into this system are thought to have survived the war. While the vast majority of these women (around 85 percent) were Korean, women from other colonized Asian nations and some Dutch women were forced into "imperial service" in the comfort stations.

The cultural and social shame associated with this tragedy meant that many of the surviving women, like Woo, choose not to reveal what had happened to them during these lost months and years, even to their immediate families. Woo married and for more than 50 years never told her husband or her son about her ordeal. Her story and those of over 40 other victims, former soldiers and others were gathered in 1993 by the International Commission of Jurists and are one of the subjects of this collection edited by Ann Llewellyn Barstow.

At the end of the book Barstow poses a question: If at the close of World War II the former comfort women could have told the world about what had happened to them--and been heard--would the Serbs have dared to build rape camps in 1993? Barstow's question is ultimately an even broader one: If the comfort women had testified at the original Tokyo war crimes trial (for which, interestingly, evidence about sexual slavery had been gathered and was not used), would fewer rapes and rape camps have been used as weapons of war and genocide in the past half century? And would the lives of these surviving women have been different--less alienated, more full? What indeed is the relationship between storytelling, whether circumscribed by a trial or set down in a book, and the prevention of future atrocities and/or healing from those of the past?

Whatever the answer, the importance of *War's Dirty Secret* lies in the stories it tells. Alongside gender, ethical and legal analyses, this book gives center stage to testimonies and first-hand accounts of women's experiences of sexual and other violence in war. From Taiwan, Rwanda, Haiti and elsewhere, the stories reverberate not only with loss, but with the energy of women and communities rebuilding after loss.

Yet this is no armchair message about the resilience of the human spirit. If, as contributor Jennifer Butler reminds us, both telling and listening are political acts, then the book's essays call us to critically engage these stories. Through telling and listening we become tethered to one another, and in telling and hearing women's stories in particular we create communities of action and help to break long silences about women's experiences of war.

There are very different forums for this storytelling, with vastly varying legal and moral implications. A book like this is one. Judicial forums are another. Recent developments in the international legal arena--including, since this book's publication, the declaration by the International War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) that rape can be prosecuted as a crime against humanity, and Amnesty International's recommendation that violence against women be prosecuted under the United Nations Convention on Torture--are indications that women's stories and analyses are being heard in new ways.

Still, trials, with their narrow focus on the mechanisms of prosecution and prevention, must not serve as the sole forums for women's stories of violence. It is not merely that trials achieve justice at the expense of reconciliation. There are real

limitations to the scope of trial-born justice. They may leave the victim(s) retraumatized and their pain unacknowledged.

Other forums for women's stories of violence cannot replace but must run parallel to the legal system. The Global Women's Tribunal, held at the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, was one such forum. The tribunal's 33 testimonies challenged the justice of international human rights law and its failure to protect women. In calling on legal institutions to become alert to the suffering of women, the tribunal achieved justice of a broader kind. It brought violence against women into the consciousness of an international public and acknowledged the women whose testimonies it highlighted.

*War's Dirty Secret* was published just prior to yet another groundbreaking forum, the weeklong Tokyo Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, convened by groups from nine countries to call upon the Japanese government to accept legal responsibility for what was done to the comfort women. As a "people's tribunal" this was a nonlegally binding and nongovernmental means of doing justice. While the *Wall Street Journal* and others called the tribunal a "mock trial," it nevertheless did real work as it sought to establish a truthful record of systematic sexual violence and to restore a measure of dignity to the women who had been sexually enslaved, about 60 of whom traveled great distances to testify.

In 1993, in the face of irrefutable evidence of high-level involvement in the military comfort stations, the Japanese government withdrew its denials. The prime minister acknowledged Japan's moral responsibility, but declared that its legal responsibility had already been addressed in bilateral treaties with each of the affected countries. Disavowing any responsibility to pay individual reparations and refusing to issue any admission of guilt, the Japanese government in 1995 nevertheless established the Asian Women's Fund to offer compensation to the comfort women (the fund itself contained only private donations). Although many of the comfort women are elderly and in need of medical and other care, the majority of them refused the fund monies as insulting and continued to insist upon the need for governmental reparations.

The Tokyo tribunal not only rejected this governmental distinction between legal and moral responsibility (were such a distinction legitimate, argued chief prosecutor Ustinia Dolgopol, moral responsibility would surely go beyond legal responsibility), it turned the distinction on its head. It employed the legal framework and evidence available at the time of the original Far East trial (where the Allied Powers failed to

prosecute these crimes against women) to create a theater for moral responsibility, the scope of which did not exclude but reached far beyond that of the Japanese government.

According to chief judge Gabrielle Kirk-McDonald, the scope of moral responsibility ultimately included the Allied Powers for their failure to prosecute these crimes over 50 years earlier. And the tribunal charter's apportioning of moral accountability was even broader, declaring itself "mindful of the moral responsibility of every member of the global civil society . . . to restore justice for the women victims and survivors of wartime sexual violence." Several of the women who testified spoke of the responsibility they felt toward one another and women globally to break the silence.

Because the tribunal focused on restorative rather than retributive justice, it linked the justice of a truthful historical record and the psychological, social and spiritual healing of these women. Indeed, expert witness Lepa Mladjenovich, a psychotherapist from Belgrade, insisted that a proper government apology with reparations would enable the former comfort women to overcome some measure of the psychological and social damage brought on by their experience. By linking the women's stories to both justice and healing, the tribunal made two important points: that storytelling as a means of establishing the truth is political, public and a matter of justice; and that justice, while public and an important foundation for a nation's political life, equally and profoundly impacts individual lives.

Justice, in other words, is made meaningful within the frame of an individual life. The comfort women testified to their miscarriages, shame and, for a few, lasting relationships or even the birth of children. In return, in the tribunal's peculiar moral theater, some dignity was restored to them through the healing acknowledgment of their pain. And yet such storytelling cannot remain within the supportive tribunal setting any more than it can remain a private affair.

For those comfort women who have lived or brought suit in Japan, the fight for justice has been waged (largely unsuccessfully) in the district courts and in activist opposition to groups like the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. Threatened by the stories of these women's experiences, textbook "reformers" want to teach Japanese youth a whitewashed version of their country's past.

The stories in *War's Dirty Secret* are not easy to read, in part because of their difficult subject matter and in part because these are not just stories about the past. Violence against women continues worldwide. And for the women who have suffered

violations, the violence continues in the form of chronic insomnia, physical ailments, children born of rape and ruptured communities. Rape and genocide, as contributor Vivian Stromberg explains, are "crimes in perpetuity." How can we respond? "All forms of violence are connected," says Pauline Muchina in her chapter on Kenya; "therefore, our struggles need to be connected." Wherever there are women, there are untold stories of violence. Some justice can be found through listening and telling.