

Interview

## **“Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace” —Creating a Space for Hub of Activism for Peace and Gender Justice**

Tuesday 20 February 2007, by [MUTO Ichiyo](#), [NISHINO Rumiko](#) (Date first published: 22 August 2005).

**Muto: The Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery held in December 2000 was of great significance for post-war Japan. In many ways, we were entering a new period of the post-war era during this time. The trend towards legitimatising pre-war nationalism and glorifying the Japanese military became obvious especially after the tribunal. The tribunal was an epoch making event, shedding new light on the Japanese Empire by piercing through it not only with general war crimes but also with gender justice from a women’s standpoint.**

In 1991, for the first time in history, Ms. Kim Hak-Sun revealed herself as a former “comfort woman.” Since then, many people from various countries have begun conducting research on the issue. Matsui Yayori and others proposed the idea of the tribunal and gathered power from Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere. How would you evaluate the tribunal right now?

Nishino: The purpose of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery was as follows: to make clear what kind of crime the “comfort women” system [hereafter referred to as Japan’s military sexual slavery system] was and who will bare responsibility for it; to hold the Japanese government legally liable for the war, including reparations; to end the cycle of impunity for wartime sexual violence against women; to contribute to the advancement of women’s human rights around the world by preventing such violence.

At the tribunal, we made a decision to accuse high-ranking officers of the military as individuals for their criminal liability because we thought it was important to clarify the criminal responsibility of those who were in charge of the military sexual slavery system. At that point, about 40 people headed by the Showa Emperor Hirohito and Tojo Hideki, the wartime prime minister, were prosecuted. Then we also emphasized the state responsibility of Japan for its crimes committed during the war, as well as for its postwar dealing of the crimes. Moreover, we brought charges against the governments of former Allies as well. The final judgment of this tribunal stated that former Allies were also responsible for the current problems leftover in the aftermath of the Tokyo Tribunal of War Criminals, in which the Allies found exempt the Showa Emperor of his responsibility for the military sexual slavery system, and failed to impeach the system as a war crime, despite its recognition of the existence of “comfort stations” in the process.

The Final Judgment issued in The Hague was massive in volume, consisting of 1,094 paragraphs (265 pages in English). Ten defendants, including the Showa Emperor, were found guilty, and the Japanese government was found liable for compensation for its unlawful acts both during and after the war. The criminal liability of the perpetrators in the military sexual slavery system was recognized and the state responsibility of the Japanese government was clarified. In addition, the Judgment presented a universal precedent for the world to follow. That is, the idea that wartime

violence against women is a crime and that exempting anybody who commits this crime from penalty is unacceptable. It was significant that the court decided that the actions of the Wartime Japanese Military were war crimes even without retrospective application of the current international law. Precisely because this decision had such a significant implication, however, the mass media and the authorities in Japan ignored the tribunal and avoided dealing with it.

On the other hand, the tribunal caught a great deal of attention from the overseas media. The French newspaper *Le Monde* pointed out that the cause of the amnesia which Japanese society seems to suffer from lies in the fact that Japan failed to question the Emperor's responsibility for the war and that this failure has remained as the nation's black hole. The Japanese media, it said, covered almost nothing about the tribunal because the tribunal made the Emperor's responsibility for the war crimes clear. The *Hangyore* (Korean newspaper) also reported the tribunal's final judgment and titled the article "The World Turns Its Attention, Japan Keeps Its Silence." Articles of overseas newspapers showed the world's perplexity by and analysis of the Japanese media's silent response to the tribunal decision. I think this outside perspective provided quite an accurate insight into the current situation of Japanese society regarding the issue.

Following WWII, the Japanese people never accused Emperor Hirohito of war crimes. This history of impunity has continued for 60 years. In dealing with war crimes, the international community has recognized that an investigation for fact-finding, reparations for the victims/survivors, and punishment for the responsible are the three minimum requirements as written in the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the UN Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995. The Japanese government, however, has addressed none of these three requirements. In terms of investigation, the Japanese government released only a few official documents concerning the Japanese military and never acknowledged the military sexual slavery system as a war crime. Although there have been 10 cases in which victimized women from several countries filed civil suits against the Japanese government for reparations, most of the decisions rejected their claims and did not recognize the government as responsible. As for punishment, post-war Japan has considered it taboo even to talk about punishing war crimes. We cannot expect punishment in criminal suits given that the Japanese court denies war responsibility of the state even in civil suits. This is why we decided to organize the tribunal as a "tribunal of the people."

The issue of war crimes and impunity has been left untouched, as it would undoubtedly explode if explored and this has significant meaning in Japanese society.

As can be seen clearly in the current history textbook issue, there seems to be an emerging trend of reconstructing the symbolism of the Emperor system in order to ascertain the emperor as a spiritual symbol of Japanese nationals. The trend is no longer a "black hole" as described in *Le Monde*. But it is rather actively promoted. The government is now pushing the idea of an (North) East Asian Community. But I think it is impossible to build such a community without addressing and recognizing history. Considering this, the tribunal's attention to the issue of impunity for Japanese war crimes held great significance, and I believe this attention should be nurtured and acknowledged.

**Muto: Punishment means punishing those who violated certain standards. Impunity means not to punish those who violated the existing standards. But Japan seems to deny even the existence of standards, doesn't it?**

Nishino: I agree. There are some people who try to refute the aggression of the war. They are basically not willing to recognize the military sexual slavery system as a war crime.

**Muto: It seems that not only right wing groups but also the government, working together**

**with these groups, is creating a theory to legitimize the war.**

VAWW-NET Japan (who participated as a main organizer in the tribunal) filed a lawsuit against NHK in July 2001 [NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai) is a public broadcasting agency in Japan]. This was in order to make clear why the documentary program, "Wartime Sexual Violence to be questioned," broadcast on January the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001, was far different from the initial production plan explained to VAWW-NET Japan when NHK requested its corporation. The lawsuits revealed a close link between the ideology of some governmental officials, particularly Abe Sinzo (the then acting director general of the Liberal Democrat Party and the current Chief Cabinet Secretary) and Nakagawa Shoichi (the then Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry and the current Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries), and the right wing. The contemporary political connection between the government and the right wing, however, is actually not new but it has been there since the 1990s.

"Rekishi Kento Iinkai" (the history study committee), was established in August 1993 by the Liberal Democrat Party. It aimed to summarize the "Great East Asian War" (Asia-Pacific War) in its own right. It consisted of 105 'hawks' from members of both the Lower and the Upper Houses and held 10 meetings from October 1993 to February 1995. They concluded in their summary report of 1995 that the "Great East Asian War" was not an aggressive war but was in fact a self-defensive war for Asian liberation and autonomy, and that there were no such war crimes as the Nanjing Massacre or the military sexual slavery system. Moreover, it emphasized the necessity of "fighting for a new history textbook" in an attempt to eliminate the descriptions of aggression and assault in the war, and proposed to develop a "Japanese nationals' movement" to make its perception of the war and history take root in the public consciousness.

It was indeed Abe and Nakagawa representing the postwar generation who took the initiative to put this attempt into practice. The proposal to develop the mass movement resulted in the emergence of a Diet members' caucus, the Association of Young Lawmakers Considering History Education and the Future in Japan, and a right-wing civil group called Tsukuru-kai, or Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. It was very strategic of them. Shimada Yoichi, the editorial supervisor for Tsukuru-kai's civics textbook, called the revised history book by Tsukuru-kai "a significant part of the conservatism revolution which aims to establish a nation with power to achieve emphasizing the traditional values and realizing justice throughout its domestic and foreign politics." He is also the vice president of National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKIN) and a professor at Fukui Prefecture University.

Contemporary Japan is often described with the word "conservative swing" but it can also be seen as a move towards the "conservatism revolution," to borrow their words. This revolution is a movement to re-establish a pro-war nation by oppressing media, oppressing education, and oppressing freedom of thought, as well as freedom of speech and expression. The post-war period, especially after the 1990s, could be considered as the preparatory period for this process. For our movements, however, the past decade was the "decade of silence" when steps towards resolving the issue of discrepancy in perceptions of history and reparations for the victims of war crimes were hampered. We keep losing our lawsuits concerning the military sexual slavery system.

**Muto: I think the last decade you named the "decade of silence" was at the same time the "decade of fighting." It was in this era when the issues of the military sexual slavery system and reparations for the victims of the war were socially made visible and taken to court. Due to the growing awareness among the public of these issues, it became impossible for the state to get out of its responsibility and thus had to give way to us in some respects.**

In 1995, there was the "Murayama Statement" under the cabinet decision in which the then prime minister recognized reparations for those who had been victimized by the military sexual slavery

system as an issue to be sincerely dealt with. The Asian Women's Fund was founded after this as the source for the reparations. But this fund was only to achieve a quasi resolution by collecting private donations in order to give "atonement" money, as it was not a means of state reparations, which many former "comfort women" demanded. So, would you say that the tribunal was challenging those counter trends and pushing the responsible parties for the military sexual slavery system on the issue of impunity to the forefront?

Nishino: While the issue of the military sexual slavery system came to be known in Japanese society in the early 1970s, the issue wasn't shared as a human rights issue as the victims were invisible. When the victimized women came out during the 1990s, the issue arose as one of reparations for war victims. In response to that, feminists made a major change in the perception of the issue by suggesting that the sexual slavery system should be approached as a grave violation of women's human rights and violence against women.

There was severe violence against women during conflicts such as in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s. Rape was widely deployed as a tactic under the name of "ethnic cleansing." Victimized women in former Yugoslavia were, however, encouraged by the victims of Japan's military sexual slavery system who stood up and made their voices heard. I was moved when I saw these Yugoslavian women standing with pictures of the protests or the placards of the former "comfort women" in Asia. The accusation of the victims who have suffered from being former "comfort women" for more than half a century gave courage to those who are now suffering from wartime violence and led them to take legal actions in order not to face suffering for another half century. Nevertheless, although the International Criminal Tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda recognized the violence against women as a crime, neither specified it as a crime against humanity. There still has been no state apology or reparations for violence against women as a crime beyond general crimes.

In August 2005, we organized a global campaign called August Action to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII to tackle the issue of Japan's military sexual slavery. Part of the campaign was a global petition to call for pressure from the UN and the ILO. It was to strongly urge the Japanese government to finally comply with the international community's recommendations and come up with an official apology and legal reparations to the victims of sexual slavery. This action was proposed and implemented at the International Solidarity Council Demanding Settlement of Japan's Past, which was held in Korea. As a result, more than 550 thousand signatures in total were collected not only from Japan or other Asian countries but also from the US, Switzerland, Germany, and so on; I was amazed. Also we conducted worldwide collective action on August the 10<sup>th</sup>, appealing for legitimate solutions to the military sexual slavery issue in various countries such as the US, Canada, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and Singapore as well as many cities in Japan including Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto, Fukuyama, Hiroshima, and Fukuoka. It became the wish for the whole world to solve the issue of Japan's military sexual slavery system.

The victims changed their consciousness through the activism of the tribunal. The sexual slavery issue is now perceived as a symbol of wartime violence against women around the world and as central to the campaign for the elimination of violence against women. The International Criminal Court never deals with incidents that occurred before its inception. Thus, for those women with no other way out, tackling the military sexual slavery system is a fight to retrieve their dignity and justice and is worth staking the rest of their lives on.

The Japanese government expresses apology for the victims but it is indeed all talk and no action. I would like to emphasize that, at the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, evidence underwent careful scrutiny under international laws and it was ruled that the Japanese military

sexual slavery system was a war crime in terms of the then established international laws. It is historically significant that the injustice, which had never before implicated the Japanese Emperor's commitment to the war crime, was revealed and inscribed in history. In this sense, the tribunal and all ongoing actions to call for solving the sexual slavery issue would probably be a revolution, a feminist revolution, or a women's revolution, that contributes to enhancing democracy. It will be great when the time comes that Japanese society becomes mature enough to accept the voices of the victims calling for justice as a legitimate right. What we are doing now is to counter the government that only pays lip service to the victims and to establish a democracy in Japan by which justice for victims is acknowledged in a real sense.

**Muto: Apparently, for those who are involved in the "conservatism revolution" you just mentioned, the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) where activists like yourself seek to achieve the tribunal's decision is the enemy in the frontlines. That is why they confront it with virulent hatred.**

Nishino: Based on all the fights at the tribunal and efforts to build the Women's Active Museum, I truly think that "memory" is a larger theme.

**Muto: In terms of the reformists' history textbook issue as well, it seems that the "conservatism revolution" is eager to shroud all "memories" with their version of history. That is, they are trying to hold control of "memory."**

Nishino: It is impossible to erase a historical incident as long as the victims of it exist. At the beginning of the 1990s, many former "comfort women" in various Asian countries came out and some trials and life support activities for the victimized women began. Since then, many people have hoped for an activists' hub for recording and memorizing wartime violence against women and the war crimes by the Japanese military, as well as for fighting to achieve a future in peace. The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace is an active museum movement. In other words, it is an action for Japanese society to regain its "memory." We are hoping to be actively engaged in enhancing civil consciousness of the issue by shedding light on the experiences of war victims and oral history in addition to encouraging people to share memories of war that are not written in textbooks and are not taught at schools.

The active museum movement was inspired by the movement in Germany to have retrieved historical memories about the Nazis. German citizens held a geographic exhibition of terror in an effort to remember what happened in places that were related to the Gestapo in Germany, which had been totally forgotten. Our activism is not only aimed at building a memorial museum but also aimed at retrieving memories of war and changing citizens' attitudes and perceptions towards the issues related to war. I would like to always keep in mind that a resource center has a role of more than just storing and providing information for the public, and also why we need to provide the information.

Our friend, Matsui Yayori, who was a leading feminist journalist and who passed away in December 2002, expressed her desires for such a museum as her last will and testament. When I told Yayori that it might take at least 5 years to build the museum, she said "you had better finish it within 2 or 3 years." At that time, in her sickbed, she was infuriated by news reports such as the repeated bashing of Koreans in response to the alleged kidnapping of Japanese by North Korea or the American invasion of Iraq. I think she was sensing an urgent need for our movement to move on to the next step by opening the museum as soon as possible as a stronghold to make the tribunal's decisions tangible.

It costs a lot to build and run a museum. We have been organizing the "100 million yen campaign" to

raise the funds. Some donated enormous amounts of their inheritances, while others donated 1,000 yen every month off their pensions. The messages from those people leave me a strong feeling that the museum is built on the hope and the conscience of the current Japanese society.

Nowadays, the Japanese media does not cover people's struggles, does it? The media covered only a little of the anti-Iraq war protests. With little media coverage, some people just don't know that there are people who can share their uneasy feelings and concerns over the Iraq war and who are fighting against it. In reality, there are so many people like them in Japan and we sense those people's voices gathering towards us.

To introduce more concrete activities we have done, we opened the "'Comfort Women' Information Hotline" on the mornings of August the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005. We did this 10 years ago as well. At that time even NHK made an announcement about it by inserting tickers. Since then, things have changed and we didn't have enough time to advertise it this time; we didn't expect many people to respond. To our surprise, all five telephones for the hotline started ringing immediately after we opened it at 9 am on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and they never stopped ringing. We received 50 phone calls on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 22 on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Most of the people who called us were the former Japanese male soldiers. Not all of them support the call for reparations or apology from the government. Many of them actually stated that they didn't force women but the women voluntarily served them. Nevertheless, I came to know that there are many former soldiers who wanted to tell somebody about their experiences. I think, like the victims, the former soldiers are getting old and are thus urged to pass on their experiences before they die.

There were valuable testimonies. For example, some soldiers forcibly took some girls in a sailor-style school uniform, meaning that they must have known that the young women were secondary school pupils, or some Korean women were forced into leaving for the battlefield from Kure port in Hiroshima, a major military port of the time.

When asked why they hadn't told anyone about this until then, they answered, as expected, that they didn't have a space to tell. They could never tell their wives or children about the experience. It is also such a sensitive issue within Nippon Izokukai, or the Japan War-Bereaved Association, that people can't talk about it straight away. Especially right now when the issues of Yasukuni Shrine -- if the war dead should be enshrined there as national heroes or not -- and of contesting perceptions of history are drawing much of the public attention. They just cannot call their fellow soldiers who fought and died for their country rapists. This is why the former soldiers tend to make the point that the "comfort women" were not forced. Despite the difference in ideas, motivations, and constraints of the former soldiers, they were indeed eager to talk about their experiences in the war anyway.

Thanks to the Hotline, I recognized again that we wouldn't be able to go beyond the discrepancy between conflicting memories if we continue to perceive the former soldiers as total opponents or treat them in mere confrontation. We are now perhaps paying the debt of post war Japan that has forced into silence those who have always wanted to talk about the war.

### **Muto: Can you tell us about your aspirations for the museum?**

Nishino: Now and then, a woman who is victimized is labeled a "dirty woman" or "disgraceful to her family." In Islamic countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, their own families have killed many female victims of sexual assault. What allows this type of "honor killing" is the ideology of chastity in patriarchal society that perceives sexual assaults on women as "shameful" or "dishonorable" to the family. Because such gendered ideology is still prevailing in society, victimized women are likely to stay silent.

What it means for victimized women to achieve justice is to make society recognize that sexual violence is a crime and that perpetrators are to be punished in all cases. That would be the first step in salvaging the victims' dignity and to prevent repeated acts of sexual violence.

The museum has five principles: (1) to focus on wartime sexual violence with the viewpoint of gender justice, (2) to collect and exhibit documents which clarify the responsibilities of the perpetrators along with facts and testimonies of individual victims, (3) to make the museum a hub for activities to achieve peace and a non-violent future, (4) to be organized as a grassroots movement disconnected from the state power, and (5) to advance solidarity of movements beyond national borders. I hope to make the museum a place where we can join the life and the existence of each of those women who have survived through suffering from sexual violence. We can learn, remember, and share their experiences in order to make a difference together.

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**P.S.**

\* From Japonesia website. Translated by Chris Harritt, Matsumoto Makiko, Takamiya Yuka.  
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