

# Thinking About Coercion in the Context of Prostitution: Japan's Military 'Comfort Women' and Contemporary Sexually-Exploited Women

**Onozawa Akane and Kitahara Minori**

**Introduction and Translation by Caroline Norma**

**Abstract:** Feminist thought leaders Onozawa Akane and Kitahara Minori discuss in dialogue the contemporary relevance of the Japanese military scheme of wartime sexual slavery. They identify the recruitment tactics of Japan's pornography and prostitution businesses today as similar to those used in the wartime trafficking of women, and suggest that low level comprehension of women's human rights means male demand for prostitution continues unhindered in Japan, as it has throughout modern history. The two authors suggest that the social context of women's prostitution, which occurs in conditions of gender equality, must be emphasized in order to combat victim-blaming ideas about women's 'choice' and voluntarism in being sexually exploited. They canvass policy alternatives against prostitution like the law currently in operation in South Korea and France that penalizes sex industry customers.

**Keywords:** Prostitution, comfort women, Japan, sexual exploitation, abolitionism, JK business, child pornography

## Introduction

Campaigning in support of the former Japanese military 'comfort women' conventionally adopts rhetoric against military sexual violence and supports recognition of the rights of women in war. This approach advocates a view of military sexual slavery as deriving primarily from

conditions of war, colonialism and militarism, in contrast to peacetime systems of prostitution. Emerging in Japan today, however, is an additional view of wartime military sexual slavery as connected to systems of civilian prostitution both past and present. This alternative *abolitionist* perspective, which is a view of prostitution as sexual violence regardless of its wartime or peacetime occurrence, connects the history of Japanese military wartime brothels to the sex industry of today. It puts military sexual slavery in a context of the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls within Japan and the colonies. On this basis, the sexual exploitation of the contemporary sex industry in Japan is viewed as critically relevant to discussion of the historical military sexual slavery system.

This alternative approach to 'comfort women' campaigning is currently being waged through collaboration between two Tokyo-based groups: the Violence Against Women in War Research Action Center ([VAWW-RAC](#)) and People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence ([PAPS](#)). VAWW-RAC in 2017 hosted a two-part seminar series titled "The 'comfort women' problem and contemporary sexual exploitation and violence" that featured PAPS member Miyamoto Setsuko speaking in May, and feminist attorney Tsunoda Yukiko in July. Miyamoto discussed her newly published book (*AVshutsuen o kyōyōsareta kanojotachi*) documenting coerced filming in Japan's

pornography industry.<sup>2</sup> VAWW-RAC's advertising of her talk emphasised the fact that 'young women today are tricked and manipulated into coerced sex acts that are made to look voluntary. These are the same recruitment tactics that were used against the Japanese military "comfort women"'. Similarly linking military sexual enslavement of women to Japan's sex industry of today, Tsunoda spoke about discrimination against former 'comfort women' arising on the basis of their prostitution, noting that this discrimination is similarly exercised against women in Japan's sex industry today who fail to attract public sympathy and support regardless of the violence visited upon them.<sup>3</sup>

Following Tsunoda's workshop, for the August international day of the former 'comfort women', the National Action Campaign for Resolution of the 'Comfort Women' Problem group held day-long workshops in both Tokyo and Osaka that combined presentations about the 'comfort women', 'JK' businesses (i.e., recruitment and brokering agencies involving Japanese underage girls) and Japan's pornography industry.<sup>4</sup> Advertising for the conference stressed the similarity of exploitation facing young women recruited into Japan's sex industry and the wartime experience of the 'comfort women'. One of the conference speakers was Kitahara Minori who discussed the overlapping nature of problems of wartime sexual slavery and contemporary sexual exploitation. Together with Onozawa Akane, the analyses of both authors were published in the July 2017 edition of the magazine *Shūkan Kinyōbi*, and are translated below.

Onozawa is a prominent Rikkyo University historian of the military sexual slavery system. In 2010 she published a book describing 'comfort facilities' (*ian shisetsu*) created in wartime Japan in 1944 by an agency of the Home Ministry. Nearly 5000 of these brothels operated during the final year of the war.

Onozawa's work on the history of the 'comfort women' is remarkable for linking military sexual slavery to Japan's pre-war sex industry. Kitahara is a well-known popular writer of feminist books who speaks at events in support of the former 'comfort women' on the side of those critical of Park Yuha and her controversial book *Comfort women of the empire*.<sup>5</sup> She regularly comments in Japanese media on issues of sexual exploitation affecting girls and young women. These issues have been regularly covered in Japan's mainstream media over the past year since legal and policy action was taken against sex businesses extorting and intimidating young women. Policy action was taken early on by local governments in Aichi and Osaka prefectures, but has recently spread to Tokyo. A 2015 civil case spurred the action, together with a country visit by the UNSpecial Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children in the same year. *Komeito has led efforts in the coalition government since 2017 to tackle the problem.*<sup>6</sup> (CN)

*In the following discussion, Onozawa Akane (OA) and Kitahara Minori (KM) reflect on the problem of coerced pornography filming that has come to widespread public attention in Japan, and offer their views on the inability of many victims to comprehend coercion and harm in a context of 'voluntary' agreement to be in pornography.*

KM: In the case of both pornography and prostitution, liberals put forward arguments about the need to protect 'free speech' and 'worker rights' in the sex industry, and oppose restricting 'speech' even in the context of the current debate about coerced filming in Japan's pornography industry. Some argue that improving the employment conditions of women in the industry will protect their rights as workers. But these arguments overlook the entrenched sex discrimination that underpins the huge sex industry operating in Japan.

OA: Criticising the prostitution or pornography

industries brings allegations of conservatism, moralism, or disrespect for women in the sex industry, and the insistence that employment in these industries is the same as work in any sector. But work in the sex industry is not the same as employment in other sectors, and distinguishing ‘employment’ in the prostitution and pornography industries does not amount to criticism of women in these industries. Nor does criticism of prostitution and pornography reflect a conservative outlook. Rather, vigorous criticism of sex entrepreneurs aims to stem the tide of young women unwittingly finding themselves in dangerous environments where their safety is not secured.

people who sought help from social workers for involvement in the sex industry or attempted recruitment into it. The book describes concrete and explicit examples of their experiences and the hardships suffered as a result. I don’t know of any other book that does this. Victims are described as being coerced into pornography through rape, threats of public exposure, and extortion through illegal contracts requiring financial compensation for non-fulfillment. Techniques that hide the coercion involved, even from the victim herself, such as taking advantage of inexperience or a star-struck desire to get into show-business, were also used against the young women described in Miyamoto’s book, and show how ‘personal responsibility’ is a ruse that fundamentally underpins the recruitment activities of the sex industry.



Chakuero business entrance, Akihabara, 2013 (photo: Caroline Norma)



Miyamoto Setsuko’s widely discussed book *Women coerced into pornography* (Chikuma Shobō, 2016) draws on over 260 cases of

There are even women who have been out of



the industry for a number of years, but who still suffer. Sometimes they suffer to the extent of wanting to kill themselves. Their suffering is aggravated by the fact that they have no means of taking out of public circulation pornographic footage taken of them. Among the various forms of coercion women experience, stigmatisation from the public is not the only problem. Even women who 'volunteer' to be in pornography can later experience distress, and this can continue for many years. In other words, victims are robbed of their sense of self-worth through the experience of being in pornography.

KM: Among the women who have come forward for assistance are some whose experience of pornography is many years past. I think there is a need to stress the classic feminist analysis of their experience as one of sexualisation or 'sexual commercialisation'. We need to move past the over-simplified concern that this strong critique of objectification stigmatises women in the sex industry.

### Money-based mediation of relations between the sexes

OA: Some question why, under capitalism, we might object to the commercialisation of sexual relations when, after all, all activities are commercialised. This argument is distorted because, in fact, there are many aspects of social relations that are not commercialised. For example, friendship is not usually an object of purchase. Money tends to enter the picture when men seek sex with certain women. Another argument is that, if we liberate sexuality from the person, then prostitution will no longer be experienced as a problem. It becomes a mere bodily activity or service. This kind of criminal logic excuses the actions of sex buyers and silences the voices of the real women who suffer hardship in the sex industry.

KM: Recent sex industry legalisation in a number of countries has caused feminists opposing the sex trade to be seen as behind the

times. But, it must be remembered, these countries are still a minority. The approach that Amnesty International advocates is the decriminalisation of prostituted people. Further to this, the governments of France and some Scandinavian countries criminalise customers of the sex industry. Behind this approach of penalising sex buyers, rather than sellers, is an intention to suppress demand for prostitution. In Japan, by contrast, the *Law to Regulate Adult Entertainment Businesses* effectively nullifies the *Prostitution Prevention Law* and allows men to buy women with ease because no law criminalises their patronage of businesses that operate under various guises of 'health services' or 'walking dates' but which mediate the prostitution of women. There's no attempt to reduce demand for prostitution. We might wonder why Japanese people are so tolerant of it.



Five-floor Akihabara pornography shop, 2013 (photo: Caroline Norma)

OA: The techniques of recruitment used by Japan's pornography industry today are the same tactics the sex industry has been deploying in this country for hundreds of years. The industry leads women to think they cannot escape pornography by enforcing illegal contract clauses. It also takes advantage of the naivety and desire for celebrity of young women who are pushed into signing contracts. In 2014, a pornography production company sued a woman for the astounding sum of 24.6 million yen for non-fulfillment of contract. Ultimately the court did not uphold the terms of this contract. But this kind of tactic is exactly that used by prostitution entrepreneurs of Japan's pre-war sex industry. It reflects a remarkable lack of comprehension of human rights in this country.

Historically speaking, Japan has been a country very tolerant of prostitution buying for its male population. The notion that men achieve maturity through prostituting a woman has even existed historically. Recent research has confirmed that historical tolerance of men buying women in the sex trade was one driver of the development of wartime brothels and recruitment of military 'comfort women'. The research shows sex industry entrepreneurs developing large-scale prostitution systems in pre-war Japan that were directly capitalized upon by Japan's military in wartime. Much of the organization and logistics needed for the comfort station network of military brothels came from Japan's civilian sex industry.

KM: Historically, Japanese men have supported the development of a culture of romanticism about the buying of women for prostitution. This culture promotes the idea that the sex industry is victimless. Now, we have a sex industry very much shaped by this neo-liberal, laissez-faire approach to human rights in which bystanders' rights are the only ones protected, and not the victims of the industry itself. For example, child pornography of any description

is fine in Japan as long as real-life children aren't used in its production. To oppose these materials as being more than mere 'fantasy' is to infringe upon the sexual preferences of others, it is said. The sex industry is seen to be an important part of the lives of these men who promote the idea that they belong to a 'sexual minority'. These arguments weaken resistance to the sexually violent depiction and prostitution of pre-teenage girls in Japan, and circulate at a time of back lash and hostility towards this underage cohort.

Popular discourse these days promotes the sex industry as a last-resort refuge for poor women. While we cannot describe women in prostitution as one homogenous population, regardless of personal circumstances, the pornography and prostitution industries structurally enact female sexual exploitation. Transacting them is mostly men. The suggestion that the sex industry can be professionalised, or that prostitution is harmless as long as we know women are 'consenting' or 'choosing' it, seems dubious in the context of a society so permissive in relation to male sexuality, and one like Japan with a burgeoning sex trade.



### Is coercion the only problem?

OA: Even if a contract for pornographic filming is not fraudulently drafted, this does not mean a woman must fulfill the terms of a contract she has signed 'voluntarily'. In the civil damages suit I mentioned brought by a pornography production company, the court refused to see people as contractually obliged to engage in sexual activity, so the woman respondent won the case on the ground that she had not been in breach of contract. It is important that women in the sex industry now understand that they are legally free to refuse sex acts or anything else specified in contracts arranged by producers.

KM: The South Korean government in 2004 enacted a prostitution law that criminalises pimps and sex industry customers while offering protection and rehabilitation for women in prostitution. It does, however, establish two categories of women in

prostitution--those who are coerced and those who choose, and this feature complicates the law. Women must prove the extent of their coercion and manipulation in the sex industry. Eliminating the coercion and manipulation of women in the sex industry is, of course, important, but the more we professionalise the industry through emphasising women's 'freely chosen' entry into prostitution contracts, the harder it becomes for women to prove lack of consent.

OA: Women in distress now seeking help include even those who 'voluntarily' agreed to be filmed in pornography. Through the work of Miyamoto Setsuko and her colleagues listening carefully to women approaching the Pornography Survivors Consultation and Support service, it is clear that women suffer hardship on more grounds than simple outright coercion in the filming of pornography.

KM: Even for those of us not sharing their experience, being a woman alone is enough to understand the nature of their hardship. Going into convenience stores in Japan and seeing pornographic magazines, one is made aware of the widespread trivialisation and denigration of female sexuality. It is on this continuum of the pervasive objectification of women that we have the problems of the pornography, prostitution and sexual exploitation industries, I believe.

OA: To take an example from history, Yajima Kajiko of the Japan Christian Women's Organization joined the anti-prostitution abolitionist movement after enduring the violence of an alcoholic husband and coming to see men who drank and bought women in prostitution as a problem. The abolitionist movement was waged by non-survivors of prostitution, and on this basis has been endlessly criticised for discriminating against prostituted women. But abolitionists like Yajima had their own consciousness of the phenomenon they opposed. While survivors'



voices are very important, it is also important for non-survivors to think of problems like pornography and prostitution as their own. Without their activism, these problems won't be solved.

### Women are always the problem

KM: I doubt whether the issue would have attracted so much attention in Japan if it hadn't been referred to as the problem of 'coerced filming in pornography'. In reality, women are victimised in the filming of pornography when the shoot goes further than they agreed to, or when the footage is broadcast over the internet without forewarning. Society, including its pornography consuming male members, may decide that 'force' is the real problem. But is it really the case that an absence of force, which is so easily understood as wrong, means the industry is operating without doing harm? I think this leaves us with a society that shines no light on problems of male sexuality and the demand for pornographic products.

OA: A society that admits the sex industry as a problem only to the extent that outright coercion is found to exist is a society very similar to that which produced the 'comfort women' problem. It is a society that has particular difficulty recognising as victims former 'comfort women' of Japanese nationality, because some of these women were prostituted before their internment in military brothels. In reality, the prostitution of the time was wholly organised through trafficking, so these women were victims of coercion. But identifying even the slightest exercise of free-will on the part of these women tends to deprive them of any recognition as victims. Underpinning this tendency is a strongly entrenched belief in the naturalness of men buying women for prostitution, and so acceptance of the view that prostitution exists as a commercial enterprise. But we need to take a broad view of the social context in which women 'choose' to enter the sex industry. This

context includes factors like female poverty and the cultural normalisation of prostitution.

KM: Men's autonomous decision-making is not questioned when it comes to the topic of prostitution or sexual violence. In rape trials, for example, things like the marital status of the parties or the sexual satisfaction (of men) are the main focus. The assumption is that the man is inevitably driven to be sexually violent. It's commonly thought that sexual violence can be reduced in society by men using women in prostitution, for example. Because the premise is that male sexuality cannot be controlled, in other words, personal responsibility for sexual behaviour is subsumed to the idea of a naturally occurring male sexuality. By contrast, women's intentions are always subject to examination: how much did she resist? did she contractually agree to it of her own will?, etc. We must change this disparity in the standing of men and women that creates a double standard in matters of sexual practice in Japan.

On the female side, too, I feel we have to rid ourselves of the 'ailment' of seeking male approval through sex. Women tell ourselves stories about female worth deriving from male approval, with this worth obtainable through sex with men. We say things like we want sex with men because we are 'lonely'. But will we be forever trapped in this state? We are better off freeing ourselves of it. In fact, we must. This, after all, is what feminism is for.

OA: The idea that male sexuality is uncontrollable continues into the present as a legacy of Japan's pre-war legalized sex industry.

### What is freedom of expression?

KM: It's a tragedy that women live in a society subject to male approval, or what we believe them to be approving of. These considerations of male approval reach deep into every aspect of our lives. In the debate over pornography, there are loud voices that protest any

regulation of pornographic expression. But there exists no world as permissive as pornography for allowing all manner of discrimination and violence, as long as genitalia are not explicitly shown. The more extreme the expression, the more profitable the industry. Through its materials, the pornography industry somehow manages to immobilize people's awareness of human rights. In other words, when human rights violations of women are made pornographic, recognition of their harm and violation fades from view.

OA: At the very least, we should be thinking about what might constitute free speech for the people who are filmed in the production of pornography.

KM: The circulation of materials that commodify the expression of the violation of women's rights is something that needs discussion. Pornography is of course a peculiar form of expression in that it depicts actual

sexual activity. But, even setting aside the nature of the content of the products themselves, the making of pornography still carries high physical risk for the women who appear in it. The cultural enjoyment of filmed pornography is a 20th century phenomenon, but we need to remember that the sex industry boom of this era left in its wake an infinite number of voiceless women. There are very few men now who have not seen pornography, and I think that men too are victims of pornography in some respect. Men are becoming reliant on pornography through its cultural saturation, and through the message it sends about the uncontrollability and animal-like nature of male sexuality. I think the pornography industry needs people who can create materials that convey this kind of awareness of gender. If we continue down the path the industry is currently on in terms of supposedly 'professionalising' and purportedly 'cleaning up' its activities, the nightmare for women in the pornography business will continue to worsen.

**Kitahara Minori** is a non-fiction writer who has published more than ten single and co-authored books. She established in 1996 a business called Love Peace Club in Tokyo that sells "adult goods" for women. Her published books include *Poisonous Woman*, *Patriotic Wives* (coauthor), and *Sex and Country* (coauthor). See an interview of by Ami Chibana [here](#).

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**Dr. Onozawa Akane** is a professor of history at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. She is the author of the 2010 monograph *Kindai Nihon shakai to kōshō seido: minshūshi to kokusai kankeishi no shiten kara* that examines policies of modern Japan's licensed prostitution system and the movement to abolish it. Her "The Comfort Women and State Prostitution" ([Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State's Assault on Historical Truth](#), edited by Rumiko Nishino, Puja Kim and Akane Onozawa, Routledge, 2019) explores in depth the links between prewar Japan's sex industry and the "comfort women" system of military prostitution. She researches a range of topics relating to prostitution in Japanese history.