Emotions and activism for former so-called “comfort women” of the Japanese Occupation of the Netherlands East Indies☆

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S Y N O P S I S

This paper begins to chart the history of the understudied topic of Indonesian activism for the so-called ‘comfort women’ of the Japanese military from World War Two. It asks how and why activists in the specific historical context of New Order Indonesia, the cultural context of Indonesia, the global rise in human rights claims and a new openness to war redress in Japan were variously constrained and enabled in their advocacy. Drawing on recent research into the history of emotions and social movements the paper analyses how and why Indonesian activists appealed to certain emotions to gain support within Indonesia and Japan for compensation. A focus on emotions and the political and cultural contexts surrounding early Indonesian activism allows us to better understand the local framing, reception and outcomes of this global protest movement in Indonesia.

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Introduction

From the 1990s onwards, a small number of women from Asia and the Netherlands began to publicly identify themselves as survivors of the enforced prostitution imposed by the Japanese military during World War Two, in the context of new claims for war reparations and new recognition of rape as a war crime. Lawyers, women’s rights activists and other claimants for war-time damages supported them in this process. The movement became truly transnational relying on networks of people across the region of Asia. Yet most of the voluminous and impressive literature analysing this transnational activism focuses on Japan and Korea, with very little scholarly attention to Indonesia. One reason for this is that Indonesian activism has been far more limited, yet it represents an important part of the story.

Focusing on the 1990s this paper begins to chart the history of early Indonesian activism for survivors of the system. Activists are defined as persons engaged in advocacy for historical justice in the form of recognition, apology and/or compensation for survivors of the system. They include survivors, lawyers, human rights activists and other persons seeking justice for their treatment during the war, including former Indonesian soldiers serving in the Japanese army. I ask how and why activists in the specific historical context of the military-dominated New Order regime (1966–1998), the cultural context of Indonesia, the global rise in human rights claims and a new openness to war redress in Japan were variously constrained and enabled in their advocacy. To understand both the constraints and enabling factors more fully, the paper examines the socially coded emotions surrounding sexual violence, and how and why activists appealed to certain emotions to gain support within Indonesia and Japan for recognition and compensation.

☆ Note concerning images and copyright. The three photographic images have been scanned from the 1996 Ex-Heiho Forum Report which I accessed through the NIOD library in Amsterdam. The Ex-Heiho Forum no longer operates in the same form and its members would be over 90 years old at this stage, if alive, and are not readily contactable.
The concept of emotions is first discussed before I outline the system of the ‘comfort women’ in Indonesia and more general Indonesian views about the Japanese Occupation in the context of this post-colonial relationship. Next the paper sets out the global context in which activism began. I examine Indonesian reactions to global activism as a way of analysing the cultural and emotional concepts first used to frame the issue and Indonesian survivors’ experiences. I highlight how specific ideas about women, shame and rape within Indonesian Islam initially constrained the disclosure of experiences of sexual violence. The paper then begins to analyse three different forms of Indonesian activism: by Indonesian and Japanese lawyers in a joint collaborative project to register surviving victims, by Mardiyem an Indonesian survivor and by former members of the Indonesian auxiliary forces for the Japanese army. Here I reflect comparatively on reasons why Japanese activism may have lagged behind Korean and Japanese activism on this issue, and indeed awaited prodding from Japanese lawyers, and explain the reasons for shifts and continuities in the emotions expressed within activism and the purposes of these expressions. I examine the limited support provided by the Indonesian government and the reasons for this, including the concept of national shame. Lastly the paper analyses another intervention on this topic by an Indonesian lawyer and an activist writer. They wrote an Indonesian publication on the ‘comfort women’ system, and the experiences of Mardiyem, that offered a more nuanced explanation of this issue in a publication designed to challenge societal views about survivors. I argue that a focus on emotions allows us to better understand the local framing and reception of this protest movement in Indonesia and gradual shifts in the framing of this issue.

Throughout this paper I use the terms ‘survivors’ and/or so-called ‘comfort women’ to refer to survivors of enforced prostitution imposed by the Japanese military during World War Two. In Indonesia the Japanese term jiyun ianyu (military comfort woman) or just ianyu (comfort woman) is most commonly used. The term ‘comfort women’ is, however, highly contested because it implies giving comfort whereas survivors and activists often describe the experience as one of forced sexual slavery and/or repeated rape. The term ‘comfort women’ however remains the most well-known label for the system. When applying the term I signal its contestation through the use of inverted commas.

Using emotions as a way to analyse the efficacy of activism

Since the pioneering work of Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) scholars of social movements have begun to pay more attention to emotions in social action and social relations. Focusing on the movement against child sexual abuse that emerged out of feminist anti-rape campaigns, for example, Whittier (2001), p. 236 observed that activists tried to transform the emotions of ‘shame, grief and fear’ into ‘feelings of pride, anger, joy in life, and a sense of connection to others’. Across the literature on ‘comfort women’ activism, Park (2010) has analysed the specific mobilisation of the emotions of shame and dignity in activism from the perspectives particularly of Korean and Japanese positions on this issue. In her close examination of the Korean context in which survivors have spoken out, Sarah Soh (2008), pp. 80–92 points to the cultural concept of han connoting pain, sadness and a knot of regret, analysing how this affects survivors’ narration of their experiences. In Indonesia there are, similarly, culturally specific ideas associated with the emotions people may feel or express in response to the experience of rape such as the concept of aib (stain), which fits in with very specific ideas of shame brought upon a family. There are also culturally specific emotions that convey anger, such as the emotion of sakit hati (wounded heart), that have shaped Indonesian activism for the ‘comfort women’.

Across the literature on emotions and social movements and emotions in history, however, there are multiple definitions of what constitutes emotions. One of the most useful approaches to thinking about emotions is the concept of ‘emotional practices’ developed by Monique Scheer (2012). Drawing from practice theory, this concept reflects the understanding that emotions are shaped by habitation and social context, and emerge from “bodily dispositions conditioned by a social context, which always has cultural and historical specificity” (Scheer, 2012, p. 193). This approach allows for an analysis of emotions as felt, as well as managed, regulated, cultivated, performed, named and communicated. It also allows us a way to understand the local cultural framing surrounding the emotions that multiple actors have used and abused as part of, or in response to, Indonesian activism on this issue.

Throughout this paper, I analyse the ‘emotional practices’ of survivors and/or activists. The most dominant emotions used in Indonesian activism are shame, humiliation, anger, honour and dignity. The expression of these emotions and specific variants of them is nuanced by gender and cultural norms. The emotions survivors convey in activism and public statements of course do not capture all the emotions that they felt in their lives, which may have also included joy based on other life experiences. I do not mean to suggest that survivors are bound by those emotions. Instead, I would like to highlight the performance of particular emotions, or their use as a rhetorical strategy in activism and the cultural contexts surrounding these performances, as a way of better understanding activism and its effects.

As a historian I believe it is important to pay attention not only to expression of emotions in a cultural context, but to also understand the surrounding historical and political contexts within which this activism occurred. The concept of the ‘emotional–institutional context within which social movements do their emotion work’ proposed by Flam (2005a), p. 4 is useful for thinking about this connection. In Indonesia the ‘emotional–institutional context’ of the 1990s included the military-dominated Suharto regime (1966–1998) and an increasingly devout Muslim-majority society. Throughout the paper I reflect on the historical and cultural contexts surrounding this activism in the early to mid-1990s.

The ‘comfort women’ in the Netherlands East Indies and Indonesian views about the occupation and survivors of the system

There are very few empirical studies of the so-called ‘comfort women’ system during the Japanese Occupation of the Netherlands East Indies (1942–1945). So-called ‘comfort’ facilities were diverse, including ‘movie theatres, bars, restaurants, hotels and comfort stations’ (Horton, 2010, p. 186). Often hotels
and old-style Dutch houses were converted into ‘brothels’. The Japanese initially ‘recruited’ prostitutes with encouragement from the nationalist leader Sukarno (Adams, 1965, pp. 220–221). Women were also tricked into sexual slavery with promises of becoming performers, getting an education or training as nurses in distant locations. Some were sent to distant islands or other countries based on these promises, only to find themselves working in forced prostitution. The most detailed records in existence are those concerning Eurasian and Dutch women who were taken from internment camps to serve in ‘brothels’ in Semarang (Tanaka, 2002, pp. 72–77). The reason these cases are more thoroughly documented is that they were investigated in post-war trials organised by the Netherlands. Only the forced enslavement of Dutch and Eurasian women was investigated in the immediate post-war period.

Indonesian attitudes towards the Japanese Occupation have always been ambiguous. The Japanese were at first welcomed by Indonesians because they quickly defeated the white colonial power of the Netherlands and promised a brighter shared future based on Asian co-prosperity with the Japanese as leaders (Reid, 1980, pp. 13–23). Mark (1999) has argued that there is a lingering ambivalence towards the Occupation, due to extensive local collaboration and the nationalist desire for a simplified story of Japanese cruelty and Indonesian resistance. Another reason for this ambivalence is that the Japanese assisted Indonesians in preparing for independence, which was declared by Sukarno on 17 August 1945 shortly after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The ambiguity is, I believe, also connected to Indonesia’s continuing economic dependence on Japan after the war and the strengthening of economic ties during the Suharto regime. In the context of the emerging Cold War, the United States stipulated in Article 14 of the 1951 San Francisco Treaty that Japan should pay ‘service reparations’ to Southeast Asian countries, focusing on the provision of equipment for industrial production rather than monetary payments. The reason for this was to help build the Japanese economy, so as to make Japan an Asian regional power that would hold influence over Southeast Asian countries in the context of the Cold War (Suehiro, 1999, pp. 87–100). Following on from this, in 1958 Indonesia signed a treaty with Japan, which included payment of US $223 million over 12 years, the cancellation of trade debt of US $177 million and $400 million in economic aid. The money was used largely for Indonesian construction projects. The treaty supposedly settled all war debts.

The anti-communist Suharto regime that came to power after a brutal attack on the Indonesian Communist Party, fostered strong economic ties with the US Cold War ally Japan. During Suharto’s New Order, Japan became one of the biggest contributors of aid and investment in Indonesia (Bahri, 2004, pp. 42–43). During this time, with the exception of the 1974 anti-Japanese Malari riots over Japanese investment, which were quickly repressed by the military, there was no critical reckoning with the Japanese Occupation nor with Japan’s ongoing economic influence over Indonesia.

The beginnings of transnational activism and Indonesian responses

South Korea is the home of the most persistent activism on the ‘comfort women’ issue. Here, in contrast to Indonesia, critiques of the much longer period of Japanese rule (1910–1945) have been more thorough. This is in part due to the direct Japanese colonisation of Korea for a much longer period, and the treatment of Koreans as ‘imperial subjects’, but it is also due to the impact of the democratisation of Korean society commencing in the late 1980s. This process triggered a critical reconsideration by democracy activists of Korea’s relationship with the former colonial power of Japan. ‘Comfort women’ activism began from the late 1980s, following the socialisation of South Korean academic and feminist Yun Chong Ok’s research into Korean ‘comfort women’ during the war. She carried out this research due to wider concern across the Korean feminist movement about Japanese sex tourism in Korea at this time. In response, women’s organisations in Korea and Japan took up this issue (Gluck, 2007, pp. 67–68).

South Korean feminists and women’s rights groups linked the ‘comfort women’ issue with prostitution and sexual violence around military bases in Korea. One of most high profile activist organisations is the ‘Korean Council for Women Drafted into Sexual Slavery by Japan’, known in short as the Korean Council. The Council was formed in 1990 in response to the refusal of the Japanese government to investigate the ‘comfort women’ issue. Over time the Council has attracted stronger support from Korean society and the Korean government, for the problematic reason that the issue was increasingly seen in terms of a crime against the Korean nation, versus against individual women (Yamashita, 2011, p. 372).

Activism has, however, as Vera Mackie (2005, p. 208) eloquently notes, always been carried out in ‘a transnational space’ and always in relation to Japan. Within Japan there are diverse views on the legacies of the war. This includes those on the political right who believe all war debts have already been settled and that the Japanese should not look too negatively on their history. There are also many vocal critics of Japan’s role in the war and committed activists such as Japanese lawyers who have played a role in international advocacy for war-time survivors of forced labour and the ‘comfort women’ system. Japanese feminist scholars and women’s rights activists have supported advocacy, largely because of their increasing recognition of Japanese women’s implication in Japanese imperialism and an associated wariness of women being co-opted by the Japanese state (Mackie, 2005, pp. 212–212).

Throughout the 1990s, women’s organisations from South Korea and Japan held solidarity meetings across the region to support women survivors in their advocacy for justice. Some major milestones in the transnational movement in the 1990s included the 1992 International Public Hearing Concerning Japan’s Post-war Compensation, supported by Japanese lawyers and historians, that led to the founding of the Centre for Documentation on Japan’s War Responsibility. In 1993 the Centre produced a research report for the Japanese government. Reflecting widespread international support, in 1994 the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) published the report ‘Comfort Women the Unfinished Ordeal’, and in 1995 the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, which highlighted the issue of violence against women, passed resolutions in support of survivors. The 1996 Report by Special Commissioner on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, recommended that the Japanese government pay compensation and began to describe the system as ‘military sexual slavery’. The International Criminal Tribunal
for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda used new ideas about the ‘comfort women’ system as an example of systematic rape in wartime.

From the early 1990s, public awareness of the issue was increasing due to a new media focus on women’s testimonies as survivors felt emboldened to speak out. Carol Gluck (2007, p. 69) suggests that globally the media in fact played a role in ‘generating the activism’. This process began in late 1991 when Korean survivor, Kim Hak Sun, put herself forward as a plaintiff in the class-action suit against the Japanese government. The claimants supported by the Japanese lawyer Takagi Kenichi demanded 20 million yen for each of the thirty-five victims represented (Soh, 2008, p. 82). The most famous Dutch survivor, Jan Ruff O’Herne (1997), p. 137, acknowledged that it was after watching television footage of Kim Hak Sun speaking out that she decided to go public with her story. Turning our attention to how the Kim Hak Sun case was covered in the Indonesian media as it unfolded, and some of the first published interviews with Indonesian survivors, provides insights into how the issue was initially framed before activism on this case began in Indonesia. It also alerts us to some of the culturally specific emotions that surviving women felt or were expected to express due to cultural codes around their experiences. This is important context for understanding later Indonesian activism.

The leading Indonesian magazine Tempo reported Kim Hak Sun’s story and announced the first official Japanese apology for the ‘comfort women’ system from Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi. The reporter asked whether Indonesian women would soon follow Korean women in making claims. Six months later a special edition of Tempo profiled cases of Indonesian survivors based on a journalist’s efforts to seek out surviving women. Across these reports survivors emphasised a range of experiences, including working in restaurants and bars, before being recruited to work in brothels or being taken as ‘wives’ by Japanese soldiers and civilians. In these early reports the women did not represent themselves as victims of rape largely, I believe, because they were not yet exposed to the discourses of the wider movement, which enabled women to reframe their experiences in terms of human rights crimes.

Most women were unwilling to give their names for fear of bringing shame to their families or being the object of scorn in the eyes of their neighbours. In Malay cultures the term that members of family might feel due to the actions of a close relative (Collins & Bahar, 2000, p. 41). Malu like the English word ‘shame’ is closely associated with sexuality. This word is in fact the root word for genitals (kemaluuan). Malu for women is often associated with self-restraint and an expectation that they will guard themselves against embarrassment and shame (Collins & Bahar, 2000, pp. 42–45). Sometimes journalists and survivors used the stronger word terhinaan (humiliation) for the shame the women experienced due to being raped by Japanese soldiers and the ongoing social stigmatisation they suffered as a consequence.

By the 1990s, ideas of shame surrounding the breaking of moral societal codes were increasingly strong in Indonesia. Ute Frevert has argued that, over time and across different societies, communities have placed differing emphases on ideas of honour and shame. In nineteenth-century Europe, for example, members of the lower classes were subject to less strict rules of conduct whereas higher classes were preoccupied with female ‘purity’ and ‘shame’ due largely to concerns about paternity and inheritance (2011, pp. 71–72). In this context attacks on a woman’s honour were seen as attacks on her husband or father, due to the idea that they were the proprietors of women. In Indonesia, ideas about what is shameful have also changed over time. According to Tanaka (2000, pp. 47–48), in the Dutch colonial period, for example, prior to the Japanese Occupation prostitution was widespread and tolerated, perhaps in part as a way for impoverished women to support themselves and their families. However, after the war and particularly from the 1970s onwards, religious values grew stronger leading to an increased emphasis on morality. Suharto’s New Order government assigned women the role of upholding morality (Collins & Bahar, 2000, p. 56). Hence, a common referent for women engaged in prostitution in Indonesia today is wanita tuna susila (WTS, women lacking morals) (Hull, Subiyanti, & Jones, 1999, p. 4). Furthermore, Indonesian concepts of morality are tied to the Islamic concept of zina, meaning illicit sex or sex outside marriage, which is forbidden in Islam. The Islamic religious revival of recent decades also meant vehement public condemnation of women who had supposedly committed zina, which extended to women perceived to have engaged in prostitution (Bennett, 2007, p. 372).

It was in this social climate that a Tempo journalist highlighted the ongoing obstacle which prevented former ‘comfort women’ from identifying themselves as such, namely the concept of aib which is Arabic for ‘stain’. This concept is critical to understanding the ‘feeling rules’ that have inhibited some survivors of rape in Indonesia from speaking out. The term aib is consistent with the Islamic emphasis on purification of the body before prayer, after sexual relations and during the fasting month, and implies a sense of being unclean or impure. It implies that these women’s bodies are defiled, but by implication that disclosure of their experiences may also, due to the collective notion of shame, ‘stain’ the reputations of those around them. It thus reflects strong taboos about disclosing instances of sexual violence.

It is important to recognise these particular constraints that may have prevented some Indonesian survivors from speaking out, yet taboos about disclosing experiences of sexual violence are more universal across cultures than is often acknowledged, and they are not specific to Asian cultures as is sometimes implied. Commenting on Western societies, for example, Helen Flam notes that the emotion of shame is inscribed through classificatory systems that force them to think of themselves as inferior in terms of morals, skills, appearance and so on (2005b, p. 22). The fact that in these early reports some Indonesian survivors expressed feelings of fear of shame, suggests that they may have internalised the status of morally inferior citizens ascribed to them by some in broader society. Alternatively they may have been expressing the emotions that society expected them to express.

Changing international norms and events contributed, however, to the possibility of new framings of the ‘comfort women’ issue in the early 1990s as a human rights crime against the women (Mackie, 2005, p. 209). This included more generalised attention to violence against women in war, following reports of rape camps in the former Yugoslavia, and the subsequent trials of perpetrators at the International
Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) (Ueno, 1999, 136; Soh, 2008, p. 33). In this period activists in Japan and Korea at least began to link military culture with violence against women, and to conceptualise rape as a human rights crime. Accompanying this shift was the emergence of new ‘emotional practices’ to talk about this past centred on the mobilisation of the emotion of anger. Survivors in particular thus began to modify the feelings they expressed and to rename the emotions they felt in light of the new language of rape as a human rights crime. These shifts gradually influenced the language of Indonesian survivor activists and human rights activists.

**Early Indonesian activism through the legal aid institute**

In the early 1990s, in the context of a military-dominated regime and strong controls on women’s activism, there were only a few women’s organisations. Following the brutal repression from 1965 of members of Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, the Indonesian Women’s Movement), the most active women’s organisation in terms of support for the most oppressed Indonesian women, and tight state control of women’s activism, feminist Rahayu (1996) observed that by the 1990s women’s organisations were focusing on avoiding cooptation by the state. At this stage they prioritised supporting women who faced discrimination including generalised violence against women, assisting with income generation and engaging in public campaigns to improve the position of women. Unlike the case of Korea, they did not have a strong focus on violence against women until after the socialisation of the outcomes of the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, which prioritised ending sexual violence against women. This factor, combined with the lack of robust Indonesian critiques of the Japanese Occupation, meant that Indonesian activism on the so-called ‘comfort women’ did not start of its own accord. Instead it only began in earnest following a Japanese-led initiative.

In April 1993, lawyers from the Japanese Bar Association (Nichibenden) visited the Indonesian Advocates Association (Persatuan Advokat Indonesia, PERADIN) in Jakarta, to request the collection of evidence on Indonesian war victims. The Human Rights Protection Commission within the Bar Association was conducting a fact-finding mission into Japanese war crimes as part of the association’s commitment since its founding in 1949 to protect human rights and uphold social justice (Japan Federation of Bar Associations, 2015, p. 2). The evidence collected by the Association was to be used at a symposium of the Japanese Bar Association to be held in October that year on war damages, with the potential for a legal case against the Japanese government. The case was passed on to LBH (Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia), the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, hereafter LBH), which was one of only a few human rights organisations allowed to operate during the Suharto era. LBH called on all war victims, including former ‘comfort women’ and former forced labourers, to register at their local LBH offices.

According to Budi Hartono, an LBH representative from Yogyakarta, a key inspiration for women survivors in Indonesia to speak came from the intervention of Japanese lawyers who encouraged Indonesian survivors to reconceptualise their experiences in terms of the violation of their rights and convinced them that this problem could be negotiated with Japanese representatives (Hartono & Juliantoro, 1997, pp. 175–180). Thereafter the Yogyakarta branch of LBH registered survivors and worked together with Japanese activists. Over one thousand one hundred women turned up to the offices of LBH Yogyakarta, because of expectations that this would lead to the payment of compensation, even though the Japanese Bar Association was cautious not to overpromise on this issue.

Most surviving women were prepared to register their details and provide accounts of their experiences of ‘recruitment’, detention and violence, often for the first time to LBH officers for validation. Many, however, did not want to go public with their stories because of the extra scrutiny this would attract (Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, personal communication, 2014). When the survivor Mardiyem went to LBH headquarters in Yogyakarta to register and tell her story, the lawyer in charge of this case, Budi Hartono, promptly called journalists to his office. They immediately started photographing Mardiyem, which she did not appreciate (Hindra & Koichi, 2007, pp. 198–199). She stated that she did not want to reveal her name for fear of being ridiculed by her neighbours and because she feared her son who was working in Jakarta might be angry with her or shocked by the story. Mardiyem’s primary concern was to avoid public shame for her family. Like many other survivors, she was in fact only prepared to disclose her story because her husband had already passed away.

I suspect the reason Budi Hartono called journalists after hearing Mardiyem’s account is because of her particularly harrowing story and the potential public impact of its broader circulation. At age thirteen, before she had begun to menstruate, Mardiyem was deceived by another Indonesian woman into thinking she was signing up for work as a performer on the outer island of Borneo (now Kalimantan). When she arrived in Kalimantan after a train and boat trip from Yogyakarta (Central Java), which took several days, one of the doctors who first inspected her genitals for disease, raped her. She was then forced to have sex repeatedly with more men until she was bleeding profusely. Thereafter she was raped many times a day in a boarding-house overseen by a cruel Japanese man named Cikada. Mardiyem recounted how Cikada forced her to have an abortion at five months by squeezing her stomach until the foetus was expelled. After seeing her child born alive it was taken away from her (Hindra & Koichi, 2007, pp. 124–126).

Mardiyem’s story is truly shocking especially because of her young age and her forced abortion. It is because this case so strongly contravened societal norms that I believe Hartono called journalists to report on the story. Hartono was attempting to use Mardiyem’s story to create what Jasper (1998), p. 409 has referred to as a ‘moral shock’ in society, in the hope of attracting recognition of the suffering of these women and thus more support for their case. Mardiyem’s story quickly became a sensation and was reported in at least five newspapers. In these reports she demanded an apology from the Japanese government to her personally in written form and also to the Indonesian government. Yet reporting on her story prompted no response from the Indonesian government.

This may have been because neither she, nor the group of women she represented, were seen as worthy of government support due to the high value placed on relations with Japan.
and the low value attributed to these largely poor and ageing women with, in the government’s view, questionable moral backgrounds. It may also have been connected to the general disregard by the military-dominated regime for any victims of human rights abuses. At the very least, however, this case increased public exposure to the idea of rape as a human rights crime for which someone could seek redress.

With the support of LBH lawyers Mardiyem went on to become the most vocal of the Indonesian survivor activists, and once she disclosed her story to the media she continued to speak on this topic in public forums, including forums in Japan and Korea where she represented Indonesian women on this issue. In 1995 Mardiyem, accompanied by Budi Hartono, attended the International Forum on War Compensation for The Asia Pacific Region in Tokyo. Here she provided the first international testimony from an Indonesian survivor (KOMNAS HAM & JAJI (Comp.), 2010, p. 21). She thus chose to tell her harrowing story repeatedly to multiple audiences, in the hope that she could secure compensation from the Japanese government for herself and for other Indonesian survivors, especially the women who were detained with her in that so-called ‘boarding-house’ in Borneo.

LBH staff were instrumental in promoting Mardiyem as the icon of the Indonesian movement. One reason for this is that her story fits well with what some scholars have referred to as the model survivor story, in that she was duped, a virgin, tried to resist, suffered physical harm and was unpaid. In the context of societies that adhere to strict ideas around women’s morality, women who conform to this kind of story are more likely to receive empathy and support (Ueno, 2004, p. 89). The activist need to make the most solid case for compensation has sometimes led to a simplification of the wide range of experiences of former ‘comfort women’ and the elevation of the stories of a few women.

In Mardiyem’s published statements, following global trends she increasingly emphasised the emotion of anger resulting from her traumatic experiences. She stated, for example:

To forget the events of the past is very difficult, especially if I remember the first time I was tortured and raped by them. Honestly the effect has been that I cannot at all forget the sakit hati that I feel.10

The term sakit hati is a culturally specific term drawing on the two words of sakit meaning ill or sick and hati which refers to the centre of the body, ‘the seat of emotions’ approximating the idea of the heart in English (Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001, p. 206). In one of the few detailed studies of this specific emotion, Rees and Silove (2011), p. 106 observed that in relation to poor treatment during the Indonesian occupation of their homeland, West Papuan refugees described the core features of the emotion sakit hati as including ‘chronic resentment and anger closely related to being ill-treated or exposed to wrong doing by others.’ Sakit hati thus encompasses more than just the emotion of anger (marah). It includes a sense of resentment leading to potential aggression and/or action to achieve restitution (Rees & Silove, 2011, p. 107). The culturally bound emotion of sakit hati, that Mardiyem used represented an Indonesian adaptation of the broader articulation by ‘comfort women’ activists of anger directed at the Japanese government (Ueno, 1999, p. 137).

Mardiyem occasionally, however, also addressed her anger at fellow Indonesians who she felt offered so little understanding. This occurred, for example, when a former forced labourer who was also registering at LBH as a wartime victim said to her, ‘Oh you had it easy as a Japanese captive, all you had to do was to work in bed’ (Hindra & Koichi, 2007, p. 199). In her memoir, written years later, she recounted that she almost threw an ashtray at him. She wrote:

Hearing his words I was so angry (marah) at him. He did not know that the suffering of a woman who is forced to provide sexual services is so deep. I not only suffered being physically beaten, but also suffered spiritually for decades, together with feeling that would not go away that I had done wrong. Society still stigmatised us as prostitutes and immoral girls, even though this happened decades ago (Hindra & Koichi, 2007, p. 199).

In sharing this anecdote she wanted Indonesians to know about the societal lack of understanding of her experience. The taunting that Mardiyem was subjected to by this former forced labourer and by members of society may be related, not just to the perception of her immorality, but also to the fact that she had sexual relations with Japanese men. In post-war Europe, women who had sexual relations with enemy soldiers, whether voluntarily or through rape, were stigmatised by their own societies on the basis of the idea that these women had violated national honour (Frevert, 2011, pp. 78–79). A similar dynamic seems to have been at work in Indonesia. Yet, with a new way of interpreting her experiences, Mardiyem persisted in trying to convince others to recognise her suffering and the suffering of the other Indonesian women survivors.

It is possible that the limited societal support for tackling issues related to the war is related to a lack of a thorough post-colonial critique of Indonesia’s relationship with Japan. In a 1996 article on this activism for example, an Indonesian journalist headlined the article ‘Demands put towards our saudara tua’, meaning older siblings, in this context, ‘our older brother’, meaning Japan, and culturally designates the idea of elders who are to be respected and followed.11 Deferential views towards Japan, either as a past ruler or as an ongoing economic power, seemed to have produced an expectation that Indonesian activism on this case would be deferential to the position of the Japanese government.

The Ex-Heiho communication forum’s international advocacy for the ‘comfort women’

Although ‘comfort women’ form the most well-known case of wartime compensation claims against the Japanese government, other groups including forced labourers and former soldiers serving as auxiliary forces have also pursued compensation over time. Indonesian men who served as Japanese auxiliary military forces were known as Heiho. Indonesian Heiho served in both the Japanese army and navy to augment Japanese forces. They were given military training and were involved in combat, transport, construction, anti-aircraft artillery, mine sweeping, surveillance and guarding prison camps (Sato, 2010, p. 506). In 1991, spurred by global movements, the Ex-Heiho Communication Forum (Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho), headed by a former Heiho and trained
lawyer, Tasrrip Rahardjo, began pursuing compensation from the Japanese government for two-thirds of their wartime wages not paid for their service alongside Japanese soldiers. The Forum was assisted in making these claims by the Japanese-run International Committee for Asia Pacific War Victims Claiming Compensation for the Asia Pacific Region, a regional group that advocated for an extensive range of war victims including Korean survivors of atomic bombings in Japan.

The Ex-Heiho Communication Forum seized upon the global attention that the ‘comfort women’ issue was attracting. While Legal Aid was registering survivors, the Forum also began to advocate for Indonesian ‘comfort women’. In August 1992, following the high profile case of Kim Hak Sun, Rahardjo demanded US $700,000 compensation on behalf of Indonesian women survivors from the Japanese at a meeting of the International Committee in Tokyo. By 1995, the ‘comfort women’ issue was the most prominent case in war-related compensation claims against Japan. In 1993, the Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary, Kono Yohei, issued an apology to surviving victims based on the findings of Japanese research into the ‘comfort women’ system, noting the direct and indirect role of the Japanese military in the forced recruitment of women. A year later, the International Commission of Jurists recommended compensation of $40,000 for every survivor who came forward. This produced strong expectations from survivors of the system that compensation was imminent.

Because the Ex-Heiho Forum was the main point of contact in Indonesia and because surviving women were not organised independently, in 1995 the International Committee requested that the Ex-Heiho Forum provide more information on former Indonesian ‘comfort women’. The Forum prepared a simple questionnaire to record brief biodata on the women and their answers to 25 multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire focused on coercion and maltreatment to establish harm (Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho, 1996, p. 60). The Forum presented the results of the questionnaire in 1996 in a report to the Committee. The report provided some background on the system in Indonesia including its impact. It featured short extracts from interviews with surviving women. In a report from the Sukabumi branch of the Ex-Heiho Forum, Eddy Mardjuki noted that one of the effects of the system was that many women felt they could not return to their homes after the war because they felt aib, stained (Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho, 1996, p. 38). They were afraid that others in their communities would find out about what had happened to them.

Accompanying the report was a set of photographs. Several of the pictures showed elderly women lining up to register at LBH offices. Others featured haunting historical images. One image showed a young woman wearing a dress sitting with her legs slightly parted and staring blankly at the camera with a sullen expression on her face (see Fig. 1). The caption to the photograph reads: ‘Always ready waiting for the ninth visit’. Then in brackets the caption continues: ‘a towel is always ready beside her’. The image draws the viewers’ eyes to an object in the photograph that conjures the physical experience of the woman having to repeatedly wipe herself after being raped. Another photograph featured a portrait shot of an older woman staring at the camera (see Fig. 2). The caption reads ‘an elderly former comfort woman’, again followed by text in brackets: ‘who feels disgust when she looks at men’. The last photograph is that of a child, the result of rape (see image 3). Here the caption reads: ‘The child of a Heitai [Japanese soldier] who was just left behind (where is his father?)’ (Fig. 3).

Similar to the case of the shocking story of Mardjiem, the inclusion of these photographs in the report was designed to move the reader, to evoke the horror of the women’s ordeals and the long lasting effects of these experiences. In his work on holocaust imagery, James Young has suggested that ‘images and pictures of faces... affect us viscerally, evoking emotional, parasympathetic responses over which viewers have little control; that is, we respond to pictures of people as if they actually were people’ (1988, pp. 163–164). Alongside the inclusion of the more sterile questionnaire results, the photographs humanised the survivors.

What motivated the Ex-Heiho Forum to advocate on behalf of former Indonesian ‘comfort women’ and how can we analyse the politics of this advocacy? Empathy for other victims is one motivating factor across a collective of victims. Indeed, members of the Forum stated that they were documenting this case “to provide assistance to victims of brutal sexual assault” (Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho, 1996, p. 11). Nevertheless, they were not documenting the suffering of former ‘comfort women’ solely for the purposes of the survivors. In the opening pages of the report, for example, the authors reminded the committee of its August 1995 recommendation for the government and people of Japan to quickly pay compensation to all victims of the Second World War in the Asia Pacific (Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho, 1996, p. 2).

Throughout the 1990s, human rights activists began to advocate a new cosmopolitan demand for democratic states to uphold human rights (Levy & Sznaider, 2010, pp. 6–12). Appealing to this new activism trend, the Ex-Heiho Forum stated that “without payment of compensation to all victims, an apology has no meaning, instead it becomes a lie to the international public” (Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho, 1996, p. 2). In the 1996 report, they thus tried to emphasise a sense of collective victimhood and therefore a collective claim for compensation. At least one aspect of this claim is problematic. That is to say, these men served under the command of the Japanese military. Moreover a scholar of the Occupation has suggested that Heiho soldiers also used ‘comfort women’ (Sato, 2010, p. 506).

It is possible that as men with a connection to the Japanese Occupation, Ex-Heiho felt they should advocate on behalf of women survivors due to a patriarchal assumption that men are ‘expected to restore honour whereas women are often deemed incapable of doing so’ (Frevert, 2011, pp. 67–68). The military nature of this organisation, the fact that many Ex-Heiho had continued with careers in the Indonesian military after the war, and the dominance of the army in Indonesian politics from 1965 to 1998, all reinforced patriarchal ideas about male honour.

Even though the Forum quoted from the then recent January 1996 UN report by Radhika Coomaraswamy, which characterised this particular system as military sexual slavery, members of the Forum did not critique broader military practices. The report noted, for example, ‘wherever there are military forces women always follow which leads to prostitution’ (Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho, 1996, p. 11). This framing
attributes no blame to militaries for prostitution. Instead, it is the women who prostitute themselves who are the problem. In the context of a military-dominated regime such as Indonesia's New Order, critiques of the military would have been difficult, but I believe members of the Forum were so focused on attributing blame to the Japanese, that they did not see the parallels with the practices of the Indonesian military which also regularly used sexual violence against women (Aditjondro, 1997). This omission, whether deliberate or not, is perhaps also due to their own military backgrounds and/or to a firmly nationalist view of history.

Members of the Ex-Heiho Forum used heightened interest in the 'comfort women' to advocate for compensation for all so-called wartime victims. In presenting themselves together with the women as a collective of 'Indonesian victims' they replicated problematic established tropes in Indonesian popular historiography that all Indonesians suffered equally during the Occupation (Mark, 1999, pp. 72–84). In this process, the female victims were reduced to being numbers and exhibits in the larger case of claiming the unpaid wages of Indonesian men. This reminds us that within activism emotions can be used not only for altruistic, but also for opportunistic purposes.

The early handling of this case suggests that there was not a strong supportive environment for this issue in Indonesia. There was also an apparent insensitivity to the gendered dimensions of rape as a crime, and the difficulties for Indonesian women in revealing their traumatic experiences to anyone, let alone to the men of their generation.

Demands ignored: the Indonesian government and the Asian women's fund

The Indonesian government's support of former Indonesian 'comfort women' was highly problematic. This is best exemplified by the government’s decision to accept money from the Asian Women's Fund. The Asian Women's Fund was a private fund consisting of donations from the Japanese public with some government support and letters of apology from the Prime Minister. It began to pay out money from 1996 onwards. The Fund was very controversial amongst activists and the Korean Council in particular, because the Japanese government framed the AWF as an expression of moral rather than legal responsibility. Some activists continued to advocate for a more genuine apology and for compensation directly from the Japanese government.

Perhaps due to the fact Indonesian activists seemed less vocal, the AWF did not originally acknowledge that there were 'comfort women' from Indonesia. This led to protests from Indonesian activists. In an effort to quash the activists' demands, however, the Indonesian Minister of Social Affairs, Inten Soeweno, signed a deal with the AWF in November 1996 whereby the Ministry, and not the individual victims, would receive a lump sum of 380 million yen to establish nursing homes in the towns where 'comfort' facilities had operated. The Minister argued that she refused to respond to the issue on 'an emotional basis', stating that she was most concerned to protect the women's 'honour'. In making this statement she...
mirrored ideas promoted in both colonial and post-colonial Indonesia that Indonesian women should serve as representatives of the morality and thus world standing of the Indonesian nation. These ideas were often expressed as a way, in particular, to differentiate the modesty and morality of Indonesian women from the alleged immorality of ‘Western’ women, such as in the context of whether or not Indonesian women should be allowed to participate in beauty pageants, which some felt devalued and inappropriately sexualised women (Von Winchelen, 2010, p. 103). The impact of Islamic revival, with its associated rejection of Western modernity from the 1980s onwards, only accentuated this trend.

In another press statement, Inten Soewono argued that the government had decided not to give the money to individual women, on the basis that ‘it is the culture of the Indonesian nation never to open up an issue that forms a stain (aib) for Indonesian women.’ She thus used ideas of national culture, honour and women’s shame to defend her decision not to compensate the survivors directly. This framing is strikingly similar to the government of South Korea’s position that, precisely because the women’s honour, which according to government officials translated as the nation’s honour, had been violated they would seek direct redress from the Japanese government (Yamashita, 2011, 371–372).

The decision not to allow individual payments was infuriating to Indonesian activists and survivors alike. In a press interview Mardiyem continued to emphasise the suffering she had experienced:

’Until now I still often cry. My heart (hati) is broken. My ideals and my love were frustrated. I feel this even more when I remember the Japanese at that time, with provision tickets that they bought beforehand, who enjoyed my body unimpeded. They lined up as if they wanted to watch a movie.’

By using references to her bodily emotions and the powerful metaphor of soldiers lining up as if to watch a movie, Mardiyem drew attention to the continuing impunity of the Japanese soldiers amidst her ongoing suffering. Here she appeals in particular for recognition of the loss of dignity she experienced at the time and the ongoing sense of a failure to acknowledge this abuse.

Budi Hartono from LBH reacted to the government’s AWF decision by deciding to write a book with Dadang Juliantoro, a writer and activist, about the ‘comfort women’ system to better educate the Indonesian public about this issue, in the hope of attracting greater acknowledgement of these women as victims. The book entitled The Forced Suffering of Women: The Stories of Jugun Ianfu during the Japanese Occupation was written with great sympathy for the survivors, and outlines how these women were affected by being continuously stigmatised as ‘prostitutes’ (Hartono & Juliantoro, 1997, Fig. 2. An elderly former comfort woman (who feels disgust when she looks at men). Source: Forum Komunikasi Ex-Heiho [Ex-Heiho Communication Forum] (1996, 134).
In contrast to previous press reporting on this case, and the report of the Ex-Heiho Forum, this book provided far more contextual analysis of the reasons for the ongoing suffering of these women, critiquing not just the Japanese government, but also aspects of Indonesian culture that had exacerbated the women’s suffering.

These new critiques were possibly a response to the increasing attention paid by women’s activists in Indonesia of domestic violence and the related socialisation of new ideas about gender-based oppression amongst Indonesian lawyers. Nursyahbani Katjasungkana (personal communication, 11 September 2014), who headed the Jakarta branch of the LBH at this time, noted the long struggle within the organisation to include cases of violence against women, especially rape, in annual Legal Aid reports. She noted that many LBH lawyers referred cases of divorce and child abuse to her because they did not know how to deal with these situations and could not see their connections to human rights.

However, paralleling a trend in Korean activism, the abuse of the women is framed in the book in terms of a crime against the nation. The authors state that the degradation of these women reflected just how much the Japanese held Indonesians in contempt. They refer to this experience as the lowering of the women’s honour (Hartono & Juliantoro, 1997, pp. 4–5). The activist intention here is to connect the Indonesian collective identity to the emotions of shame and humiliation (see Jasper, 1998, p. 415). Nevertheless the scholar You-me Park argues that the emphasis on ‘shame’ rather than ‘injury’ elides the discussion of crime and regresses into purely moralistic condemnation which in turn is built on the assumption that women’s ‘chastity’ is a valuable possession’ (2010, p. 208). By using emotions, activists thus tread a cautious line between eliciting empathy for the victims and diverting attention from the Japanese military which authorised this criminal system. They also potentially reinforce patriarchal ideas.

The authors of this book dedicated a whole chapter to Mardiyem’s story. They wanted it to act as a reference point for readers, and to spare her the torment of having to retell her story over and over again. The account was thus a written testimonial of her wartime experiences. As Schaffer and Smith (2004), p. 3 observed life stories help put ‘a human face to suffering’ and can be used by activists for the purposes of ‘moral suasion’. The authors of the book intended the book to function in this way. This may have been one of the first books in Indonesia to narrate the story of a survivor in a human rights case. It was only possible to publish this book because it did not focus on human rights crimes committed by the Indonesian military, which by then had an atrocious record of sexualised violence against women. The book is a remarkable achievement for its focus on one survivor’s story, and it established Mardiyem as the most iconic Indonesian survivor of ‘comfort women’ the system.

Conclusions

International activism on the ‘comfort women’ issue from Korean survivors and Japanese activists largely triggered
Indonesian activism. Despite this important trigger, Indonesian survivors and activists faced numerous challenges in escalating the case for historical justice on behalf of Indonesian survivors. When survivors first began to speak out about this issue, they were inhibited by collective ideas of shame and in particular the culturally specific idea of rape causing a stain (aih) upon the family. Surveillance of women’s morality was particularly strong in the 1990s, due to the impact of religious resurgence and the values promoted by the military-dominated New Order regime.

In this context, activists tried to generate support for survivors by emphasising the harrowing story of Mardiyem, who was not only young and deceptively recruited, but also forced to undergo an abortion. They used her story in an effort to produce a moral shock. In public statements, Mardiyem framed her emotional response to her experiences in terms of sakit hati, an enduring resentment towards Japanese soldiers and an internalised sense of shame, which is consistent with the gendered coding of shame in Indonesia. She expressed anger at both the Japanese soldiers for her treatment and at the Japanese government for failing to adequately acknowledge her suffering. In her activism however, she also directed some anger at Indonesians, including former Indonesian forced labourers who were seeking redress for their treatment, for their lack of empathy with her experiences and for on-going societal discrimination against so-called ‘comfort women’.

As we have seen, members of the Ex-Helio Forum used heightened interest in the ‘comfort women’ to advocate for compensation for all so-called wartime victims. They used photographs and accounts from the women to emphasise the horror of the system in order to make collective claims for all ‘Indonesian victims’ of the war. In this process, women survivors were reduced to being numbers and/or exhibits in the larger case of claiming the unpaid wages of Indonesian men. This reminds us that within activism, emotions can be used not only for altruistic, but also for opportunistic purposes.

Despite their primary motivation of maintaining strong relationships with the largest donor country, Japan, Indonesian government representatives drew on concepts of women’s shame and national shame to argue against paying individual compensation for victims. Here they replicated patriarchal ideas about honour and sexuality. Activists from Legal Aid began to criticise patriarchal aspects of Indonesian culture, including a predisposition towards blaming women for prostitution and rape. However, in an effort to broaden the support base for Indonesian survivors, they still resorted to framing this case in terms of national honour. This framing has never, however, taken a strong hold in Indonesia, perhaps because sexual violence against women is not rated as a high priority for redress amongst members of the government. Whereas this paper has dealt only with the first six years of Indonesian activism and activism has continued up to the present, it offers clues as to the ongoing challenges that the movement faced.

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Endnotes


2. Ibid.


6. For a discussion on the use of this term in media reporting about the May 1998 rapes see Siegel (1998, p. 93).


9. Pengakuan Para Ianfu: Kandungannya Dipaksa Digugurkan [The testimony of an Ianfu: She was forced to terminate her pregnancy], Kedaulatan Rakyat, 27 April 1993; Wanita Penghibur Melapor ke LBH: Siang Melayani Tentara, Malam Sipil [Comfort women reported to legal aid: They entertained soldiers by day, civil servants by night], Bernas, 27 April 1993; Pengakuan Bekas Ianfu: Sehari Saya Harus Melayani 20 Orang [The testimony of a former Ianfu: I had to service 20 men a day], Jawa Pos, 29 April 1993; ‘Seorang Ianfu’ dan ‘Romusha’ Mengadu ke LBH Yogyakarta [An Ianfu and a Romusha reported to legal aid Yogyakarta], Kompas, 29 April 1993.


11. Tuntutan pada Sadaura Tua [Demands put towards our older brother], Media Indonesia, 25 August 1996.


15. For more on the debates about the fund and its contentious framing of the issue, see Mistui (2008, pp. 52–55).


17. Memorandum of understanding between the Department of Social Affairs the Republic of Indonesia and the Asian Women’s Fund concerning promotion of social welfare services for elderly people in Indonesia, www.awf.or.jp/e3/indonesia-00.html.


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