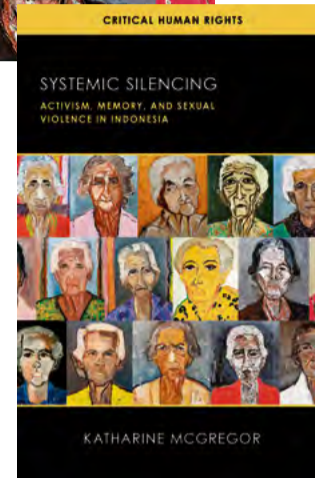




# Reckoning with Historical Sexual Violence

A Conversation with Kate McGregor



In the 1930s and 1940s, the Japanese military imposed a system of prostitution across East and Southeast Asia. Since the 1990s, survivors of the system, euphemistically called “comfort women,” have sought recognition of and redress for the sexual violence they endured. Kate McGregor’s new book – *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory and Sexual Violence in Indonesia* – explores this history, its fallout, and ongoing activism of its survivors in the context of Indonesia. Kate McGregor is Professor in Southeast Asian History in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne.

**Benjamin Linder:** The topic of your book has to do with the system of prostitution that was enforced by the Japanese military during the Asia Pacific War. What can you tell us about this system of prostitution, and specifically about the lives of the women who were victimized by it?

**Kate McGregor:** The system originated in China in the 1930s. It’s often dated to around 1932, and also it was often correlated with the Rape of Nanjing incident. The Japanese military began to organize a system of enforced military prostitution, and this system was organized on the basis of several assumptions, particularly about male soldiers and Japanese soldiers. Those assumptions included the fact that the soldiers needed to have access to sex, basically, so the women were there to provide that sex. Another rationale was that it was meant to protect the health of the soldiers because of the potential for venereal disease. So the plan was to also control the health of these women so that the soldiers would not get infected with venereal diseases. The third kind of rationale was that it would prevent sexual violence against other women. However, all of these rationales actually need to be challenged. First, this assumption about male sexuality is problematic – but also the assumption that it would prevent the rapes of other women, because we know that there was still sexual violence outside of the system. So this was really a bit more of a myth in the end.

The women in the system were “recruited” – I use that word with inverted commas – by various means. That could be women who were already working in sex work, who were forced then to work in this system. It could also include girls and women who were abducted from their homes or the street, or also girls and women who were duped into the system by means of false promises of, for example, education abroad or jobs abroad.

Once they were in the system, these girls and women were subjected to daily rape by the soldiers. They had to work long hours to serve the soldiers, and they didn’t have control over their work hours. They were also subjected to forced medical checks in order to ensure the protection of the soldiers. And they were also usually held in circumstances of detention – they were not free to leave the places where they were held. So they often had to work six days a week at least, and then they were not free to leave at any time of the day that they wanted to. They were also guarded. In addition, the women were subjected to other forms of physical violence, especially if they tried to resist, they might have been beaten. And some women were taken a long way from their homes – for instance, there were examples of Korean women who ended up in Java.

**BL:** You mentioned that this very violent system occurred in many places where the Japanese occupied, but your work is particularly concerned with Indonesia. So can you tell us how the system played out specifically in Indonesia during the Japanese occupation there from 1942-1945?

**KM:** I studied in detail what happened in this territory, which was formerly the Netherlands East Indies but became Indonesia after independence. There were a lot of similarities that I could see with the research that had already been conducted, for example, on China or on Korea in particular. We know that women were subjected to similar methods of “recruitment” to other places. The man who became the president of Indonesia, President Sukarno, famously offered women who’d been working in sex work in the island of Sumatra to be the first women offered to the Japanese soldiers, on the basis that this would protect the honor of other Indonesian women. But there was still this pattern of

duping Indonesian girls and women into the system by the Japanese military. There were also patterns of local collaboration as well, which we also know about in China and Korea to various extents. In Indonesia, local collaboration meant things like a village head might be complicit in, for example, “supplying” 20 women at the request of the Japanese military. But as I say in my book, we need to contextualize all of this with the understanding that it was a situation of occupation and coercion. Everybody was probably facing different pressures, but we do know that there was complicity from local people as well. One interesting difference in Indonesia, perhaps, is that several Dutch women also ended up in this system. Around 200 to 300 Dutch women is estimated – were taken from internment camps, so slightly different to the other patterns of “recruitment.” But they ended up in similar circumstances in the so-called “comfort stations,” where again, they were subjected to being guarded and to limitations on their freedoms, etc.

**BL:** There seems to be a deep and troubling link between imperial ambitions and sexual violence. In general terms, what was the gender ideology undergirding the kind of hyper-nationalist and expansionist project of Japan in the early 1940s?

**KM:** I am more of an expert on Indonesia, but I tried to learn as much as I could about Japan in writing this book. The gender ideology was generally characterized by a view that male sexuality – especially the sexuality of soldiers – is characterized by this inherent need for sex, and that women should be available to fulfill this need. So ideas of patriarchy were really accentuated in this system. The same seemed to also apply to not only Japanese soldiers, but also to Japanese civilians who were stationed in the colony. So thinking of that Imperial

dimension, there was a sense, in terms of the way that the Japanese approached local society in Indonesia, that everything was there as a resource for them. That’s the way they approached the natural resources of the country, but also male labor – in terms of the forced laborers who were required to build railways or infrastructure – and also the women.

**BL:** Turning back to the women themselves, who were victims of this system? Can you tell us about what their experiences might have been like? What were their lives actually like?

**KM:** Well, we don’t have the complete life stories of many of it is these women, but it would be really interesting to look at the extent to which women of different classes ended up in this system. My assumption would be that people of a certain class may have been able to sometimes have more resources to resist, in terms of whether they could pay somebody or get somebody else to volunteer in their place. So there may have been more capacity to resist, although it was very difficult to resist. You could be met with violence if, for example, the Japanese military identified a woman that they wanted in the system and she resisted. There are some cases where fathers are killed on the spot because they try to resist, so it was very difficult. But in terms of the women who ended up in this system, some of the most striking stories for me were women who maybe were so desperate for work because of the circumstances also of the Japanese occupation. It was so difficult to even find enough to eat, and people wanted to support their families, so that also made women who were in a more economically vulnerable position more likely to perhaps be duped into the system. And then once in the system, I think it depended on whether they were taken far from home or whether they were in their local society. Some women, as I said, were taken far from home, and that might have made a difference in terms of whether they had any contact with their family at all. For some women who were very young girls and women, this also could have potentially been their first sexual experience. So I think it was very traumatic for a lot of the women, but it’s also evident that from the start of their experience – although a lot of the experiences and narrated many years later – a lot of women almost immediately felt shame about what had happened to them. Even though they were not to blame, they still blame themselves because of ways of understanding sexuality and the expectation that women must guard their morality. So I think there was almost immediately this process of self-blaming and feeling shame about what had happened to the women.

**BL:** This is obviously a really dark story with a lot of trauma involved. What was the experience of doing this research and writing about these women’s experiences like for you?

**KM:** Yes, I must acknowledge it is an incredibly difficult topic. But if there is something more positive about this story, it is the fact that I tried to also cover survivor activists. The women that I focus on – some of them did try to voice their experiences and to turn around those feelings of shame into a feeling of actually “No, I was wronged.” For me, that’s an incredibly important story. The other more positive side of this story is the solidarity that this movement generated, including between people from Indonesia and people from Japan. So yes, the first half of this book – where I do talk about the women’s experiences and really draw out what happened to them – is quite harrowing material. But, again, I think I just felt a sense of responsibility to contextualize this story, and to tell this story as much as I could.

This transcript has been heavily edited and abridged. The original audio includes a wealth of further details and discussion. To hear to the full conversation, listen and subscribe to *The Channel* podcast: <https://ias.asia/the-channel>