

The Comfort Women: an Analysis of Forced Sexual Labour Camps Around International Military Bases

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Abstract: The establishment and flourishing of sexual labour camps around military bases, especially around foreign ones, has been a matter of international contestations based on arguments of human rights and moral ethics. These camps are perceived as tactical measures and a necessity on the part of armed services in order to keep the soldiers ‘motivated’ which most often leads to gross human rights violation and crimes against women and children. These vulnerable ones are coerced, abducted, bought and trafficked into the camps which results in assault and often deaths, spreading of venereal diseases etc and is facilitated by a complex and unending web of local and international criminal network. This paper attempts to critically analyze forced sexual labour issues along with inter-related problems of human trafficking and prostitution.

Keywords: Comfort Women, Prostitution, Military Base, Sexual Labour, Trafficking

1. INTRODUCTION

The particular issue under study, though fairly thought about and researched, fails to attract much attention amongst the study of various discourses. It, however, remains a widely prevalent phenomenon bringing much criticism to the way military operations are handled and carried out. It adds to one of the various reasons why international military operations violating sovereign spaces of other states must not be carried out. However, this issue remains largely contested as such operations and the assistance provided thereafter can prove to be inevitable in the face of the existence of certain sovereign states and keep them from falling back in anarchy as well as for maintaining regional stability and international peace at large (notwithstanding the various discredits to such operations).

As a matter of innate interest in women’s issues in general and issues of women in conflict in particular, this paper has been written as an honest attempt to give its readers a standardised all-round understanding of the concerned issue along with other concerns of women during wartime and how they are inter-related to each other. While most of the issues would be dealt with briefly and in general, the focus shall be on the ‘comfort system’ or the practice of providing the services of the prostitutes to the soldiers around established military bases. The language used is lucid and simple for easy and proper understanding of the core issues.

2. WHY MILITARY INTERVENTION?

In contemporary times, the nature of international conflict has had a change in its nature mostly from inter-state conflicts to intra-state conflicts, generally known as civil wars and conflicts. These conflicts are characterized by inter-ethnic clashes, rivalry amongst rebel groups and warlords and massive numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs). While the state is entrusted with the protection of its people, in these cases, state itself can be the perpetrator of such violence with little or no regard for international protocols and mandates. Another reason for conducting military operations is to combat terrorism which has emerged as a major issue for the last decade and beyond.

These military operations are mostly conducted under the aegis of United Nations (UN), the global organizational which, along with its principal and subsidiary organs and agencies, has the major mandate of conducting international relations. These operations, authorized by UN are called peace operations comprising of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace building . This trifurcation was done and mentioned in AnAgenda for Peace in 1992 by the then Secretary General, Boutros BoutrosGhali. Chapter VII of UN Charter gives the mandate to carry out operations, also known as ‘peace interventions’, where the nation states may unitedly take the decision of carrying out such operations under ‘exceptional’ conditions. However, there is acute scepticism with the motives and methods of the deciding states, mostly the permanent five (P-5) of the UN Security Council (UNSC). ‘The two main factors influencing the course and content of UN actions with respect to internal conflicts are the extent to which the interests of one or more members of the P-5 are engaged, and the extent to which the conflict in question poses a threat to international peace and security.’ [1] These operations are carried out by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations under the authorization of UNSC. ‘In some cases, non-UN enforcements have been endorsed respectively by the Security Council to give them legitimacy. Regional bodies are encouraged to tackle problems, under Chapter VIII of the Charter, provided the efforts are compatible with the spirit of the Charter. Sometimes referred to as subcontracting or burden sharing, it means that regional organizations or groups of states, with a special interest in a crisis, are authorized to deal with it.’ [2] For example, such operations may be carried out by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) etc.

3. THE SOLDIERS’ PSYCHE

Social norms during times of conflict are disrupted as “soldiers often operate far from home, with new sexual opportunities and motives. Social taboos are lifted and relationships disrupted leading to increase in promiscuity.” [3] An atmosphere of lax sexual regulations is developed in these base camps where it is a common understanding that such activities are an integral part of the operation and a secret that shall never be disclosed back home. This peer support and understanding can be understood as the breeding ground of crimes that they were mandated to resist in the first place. This heightened sexuality amongst soldiers creates several tactical problems: these women may serve as intelligence agents for the enemy; aggressive sexual behaviour and incidences of rape amongst the soldiers may affect the operational goal by losing credibility amongst the

local population; and lastly, spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and venereal diseases (VDs) have a seriously degrading effect on the health as well as morale of the entire contingent. [4] Soldiers have time and again been accused of sexually assaulting and raping local women (and men), custodial torture and humiliation of the detained, conducting operations which trespass concerns for local culture and, thus, ignore its implications on the local population. Women, thus, have been brought under military control in the past and through sexual camps around military bases, Rest& Relaxation(R&R) stops etc to regulate and keep the men within disciplinary boundaries. These women are often trafficked, abducted and forced into prostitution as well as sold by family members in order to repay their own debts.

4. PROSTITUTION AROUND MILITARY BASES

‘The presence of prostitutes around military bases and the state regulation of sex workers who serve soldiers have been common features of European, U.S., and Asian military systems, especially in situations of imperial occupation or colonial domination.’ [5] The act and flourishing of military prostitution is advanced by the notion that soldiers would be reluctant to serve in operations away from home, unless there is a steady access to sexual services for them. Historically, some states are known to have officially established sexual labour camps such as Japan and Germany during the Second World War. “German military issued orders forbidding prostitution except in military-regulated brothels. Secret agents could then coerce any desirable woman into sex, by threatening to report her as an unlicensed prostitute, which would lead the military to put her under its control and send her to a military brothel.” [6] The phenomenon of military prostitution had been quite prevalent during the Second World War most often established under the supervision of the national military. However, after the end of the war and beginning of trials for war crimes and destruction of evidence and classified government documents, the evidence for such camps have been erased and most often have not been acknowledged by the successive governments as it would have led to the acceptance of violation of international treaties prevailing during that time and so, payment of reparation to the violated. In the present time, owing to international criticism and the pledge to take up concerns of women in conflict seriously and incorporate them in peace operations, the system of ‘licensed prostitution’ has been abolished and the military agencies are expected to condone such practices publicly and take up necessary actions against the accused in case of complaints received, if any.

It is believed that soldiers in such operations remain under tremendous stress coupled with an environment that is foreign with no familial support and most often which is accompanied by high levels of distress and lingering danger. Under such conditions, recreation becomes imperative. It is by following this notion that R & R bases are created. Though it is a complex web of demand and supply and consists of middlemen, it is the women and often children who have to bear the consequences. Women who are stricken by acute poverty during wartimes are the most vulnerable ones. They are often sold by relatives and family members who are paid in advance to pay off their impending debts. These women are assured or given an option of quitting the profession once they are able to repay the loan. This, however, fails to happen as over time, heavy rates

of interest and further debt money gets accumulated which the women are never able to repay. Women are also abducted from places such as neighbourhood, bus stands etc where middlemen are often in the lookout for such vulnerable women who try to escape the lives of hopelessness. They are made false promises of procuring lucrative and better jobs. Apart from this, in places with conservative culture where women have to stay under rigorous social customs, women are brought in through international trafficking. This is a vicious network where persons at all levels are involved, including government officers, peacekeepers etc. This issue came to the fore and attracted worldwide criticism for the first time during the Bosnian war. The involvement of peacekeepers in such crimes erodes the legitimacy of such operations. Another reason for the rising concern is the constant outsourcing of such operations to private contractors. These contracting companies do not follow any prescribed benchmark for recruiting personnel and are not largely accountable to government agencies. This leads to escape of the erring personnel without any punishment for the committed crime under the granted jurisdictional immunity from the host states. 'Prostitution and traffic in women are not perpetuated based on whether or not women want to do prostitution or are forced into it. Prostitution is a male consumer market. The intense public focus on women's will, her "choice" or her "right to prostitute" deflects attention from the primary fact that prostitution exists first because of male customer demand. What matters is that there are female bodies provided for sex exchange. How or why they get there is irrelevant to the market.' [7] "Such a relentlessly male point of view reveals that what happens to the sexually vulnerable female body is still secondary, incidental, something off in the corner, never at the center of "male" concerns." [8]

The women who are forced into military sex trade most often survive in sub-human conditions and are overworked. The pimps procure as many customers as they can, neglecting the health concerns of these women. The number of customers they cater to per day can go up till sixty to eighty, not taking into consideration the violence and assault they go through in these sessions. 'Pimps control prostitutes through (1) physical abuse; (2) physical control of prostitutes' children, with threats to keep the children as hostages if prostitutes leave; (3) serious threats of physical harm, including murder; (4) keeping prostitutes in continuous states of poverty and indebtedness; and (5) ensuring that [they] have no freedom to move outside unaccompanied.' Prostitutes who do not bring enough money home may be beaten and scarred.' [9]

"Perhaps the crime of raping the brothelized goes unnoticed because of the sheer numbers involved... To survive, women will sell themselves. One reason women will sell themselves during war is to feed their children. Men destroy towns and villages, crops and animals, and then the girls left alive are forced into survival sex with the conquerors." [10] In order to escape from the pain and misery momentarily, they get prone to excessive alcoholism and drug abuse. This leads to the flourishing of drug rackets around such bases adding up to the prostitutes' debt amount. 'All prostitutes at some stage of their careers become addicted to the use of narcotics and as such form a profitable market for the dope "pusher". Once a prostitute or her pimp becomes definitely addicted to the use of narcotics, she is forced to stay in the racket necessary to satisfy her or his dope craving.' [11] Another issue related to prostitution is the vulnerability of being infected by sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or venereal diseases (VDs). The practice of ca-

tering to multiple customers over time, often with or without protection leads to such diseases, both to the women as well as the soldiers. Though in the system of 'licensed prostitution', the health of both the partners were monitored by the military doctors, it was inefficient in keeping a check on the spread of such diseases. These women, once retired from their profession, are unable to blend into the society, often left with no other form of employment, thus, pushed into a life of poverty and misery which might lead them to indulge in anti-social activities or work as panderers.

The majority of women, who are socialized to be obedient wives and selfless devoted mothers, are taught to regard virginity to be more precious than life itself, while a small number of women are trained to entertain men professionally, offering bodily services for sexual recreation.[12] This binary of women's roles creates an environment where the women playing the latter are discriminated against in the society, often by the people who have availed their services. This hypocritical attitude of the majority of the society leads to social ostracization and lifelong misery and poverty for these women.

Prostitution and trafficking are inter-related crimes. Though it flourishes as a localised business, it is a lucrative trans-border business and requires the involvement of various agencies, state as well as non-state actors. "Trafficking involves the abduction of women and girls (in some cases boys) for the purpose of transporting them across borders to locations where they are forced to work in brothels or as domestic or industrial "slaves." Conflict and post-conflict environments provide favourable conditions for trafficking because of the poverty that war causes. Traffickers who promise families they will look after their daughters, by providing employment as domestic workers in another country, take advantage of the destitute circumstances of war-affected households" [13]

Article 3, paragraph (a) of the 2000 UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children defines trafficking in persons as:

"The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits that achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."

While trafficking mostly involves the supply of labour for sexual services, it may also be done to supply cheap labour as domestic workers, labourers etc in countries which have high demand for such jobs as well as for forced organ donation. This is most often done through illegal means and the victims are forced into a debt cycle which they are never able to come out of. It is a basic violation of human rights and has been addressed in international laws and conventions. 'Generally speaking, the circuits seem to be a sort of informal, cooperative working arrangement between brothel-keepers, panderers and prostitutes. However, they maintain extensive contact with one another in regulating the flow of prostitutes from brothel to brothel, city to city and state to state.' [14] Women and children are mostly trafficked into prostitution. During and post conflict, this business is flourished with the presence of the military and security personnel there. Prostitution

may or may not be the causal factor for human trafficking, however, most definitely has a correlation.

5. THE 'COMFORT' SYSTEM

The term 'comfort women' was coined by the Japanese military during the Second World War which is widely known and used for the women who served as prostitutes around the military bases.

"The institution of military "comfort stations," where sexual needs of Japanese soldiers were met under the supervision of the state... existed in Japan and abroad wherever Japanese troops were stationed until the end of the Pacific War in 1945. In view of the fact that prostitution was licensed and actively regulated by the state in imperial Japan, the provision of "comfort women" for the military may be seen as an instance of state control over soldiers' sexual behavior" [15] 'These women forced into prostitution were euphemistically called ianfu in Japanese or comfort women. During World War II, Japan forced 100,000 to 200,000 women from all over Asia into prostitution.' [16] Based on a few documents indicating the ratio of Japanese soldiers to the comfort women, historians roughly estimate that the number ranges from 80,000 to 280,000 [17]

'The majority of the young females recruited as comfort women came from lower classes. Many were deceived by "human traders" who lured them with promises of well-paying jobs only to deliver them to brothels and military comfort stations. Some, however, chose to leave home, not out of economic necessity but in search of independence and freedom from domestic violence against and gendered mistreatment of daughters.' [18] 'The women were mobilized from many Asian countries, including Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, and even some Dutch women in Indonesia were victimized [19]. But Japanese government documents suggest the majority of the young women were from Korea, Japan's colony at that time.' [20]

"The former Japanese Army and Navy created the comfort women system to serve their own needs; the military decided when, where and how "comfort stations" were to be established and implemented these decisions, providing buildings, setting regulations and fees, and controlling the management of comfort stations; the military was well aware of the various methods used to bring women to comfort stations and of the circumstances these women were forced to endure. The Japanese military comfort women system was literal sexual slavery in a far more thorough and overt form. Japanese government and military were fully and systematically involved in planning, establishing and operating the comfort women system. Second, these so-called "comfort stations" were established in almost every area they occupied. Third, it was clearly sexual slavery, organized and controlled by the military, and it constituted sexual, racial, ethnic, and economic discrimination and the violation of the rights of women. Fourth, although one of the reasons given by the Japanese military for introducing the comfort women system was to prevent the rape of local women by soldiers, rape was not eliminated. Rape and comfort stations existed together. Fifth, this system violated numerous international laws, including laws against enslavement and the transportation of minors across national borders. Finally, the suffering of the women involved did not end with liberation. Many comfort women

were unable to return home. Some still remain where they were abandoned. Former comfort women have suffered the after effects of disease, injury, psychological trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as social discrimination for their pasts.” [21]

The women had to go through strict STD examinations every week which was most often harrowing and humiliating for the women. ‘Another feature of the licensed prostitution system was the establishment of so-called pleasure quarters where prostitutes were required to live and where their lives and bodies were involuntarily subject to constant state surveillance.’ [22] The Japanese practice of the ‘comfort system’ led to the popularization of such cultures across its colonies such as Korea, Philippines, Indonesia etc leading to the flourishing of such businesses across the country. This led to setting up of sex tourism after the end of the war which continues even today and is highly popular amongst tourists across the world and serve as a major revenue earner for the country.

6. CONCLUSION

The establishment of sexual labour camps around military bases are often substantiated by the necessity of the soldiers and as a preventive measure to restrict the soldiers from indulging in violation and rapes of local women which might lead to outrage and retaliation amongst the natives, thus, questioning the legitimacy of peace operations. This, however, leads to a gross form of violation of human rights and flourishing of inter-state illegitimate trade and services. The colonial system of the ‘comfort women’ led to the rise of sex tourism and commercialization, especially across South-East Asia such as in Thailand, South Korea, Japan etc. Thailand presently serves as world’s largest R & R stop for soldiers as well as international tourists.

This consumer culture and trade in flesh is a lucrative source of revenue for the national governments, which resultantly show reluctance in taking stringent actions against the organized racket. Women’s concerns of sexual, mental and emotional abuse, assault and trauma take a backseat for the national policymakers, who are influenced by capitalist motives but are immune to gendered concerns in general. In the longer term, this gives rise to a violent culture in the society as rape and sexual violence does not remain confined within the brothels itself. It is a habit which affects the society at large and fans criminal motives in a human being which creates social problems of assault, molestation, rape, incest, paedophilia etc.

The onus, thus lies upon us at all levels, to choose to create a society which is safer for the generations to come and congenial for respectable and honourable upbringing. “By understanding how and which complex power dynamics and ideologies of gender and sexuality have been mediated in constructing military prostitution, we may shift its positionality toward a better place, reconstitute it in a different way, and eventually deconstruct it.” [23]

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