

Chapter 2: The “Comfort Women = Victims” Stereotype Broken Down

Seeing the facts as they are

Ramseyer and I have one point in common. It is one of the reasons why I support Ramseyer.

Both of us see what happened as what happened, as is, and do not adhere to any specific view, ideology or morality. In addition, we find the greatest pleasure in daring to do what is regarded as taboo and to make people realize that what they previously thought was correct is actually wrong.

Ramseyer’s recent subject of research includes unlicensed/licensed prostitution and the comfort women system. Both were legally permissible in those days but not morally permissible. Those who are of the view that prostitution is disgusting, immoral and inhumane will not take up a subject like this in the first place.

Put morality aside for now. The fact is that prostitution as business is a major industry and contracts (those who are reluctant to use this term can call them “arrangements”) clearly exist and it is obvious that the fundamentals of economics are at work. It is not surprising that legal economists, like Ramseyer, take an interest in delving into what economic mechanisms come into play.

When one investigates the sex industry, one should reserve judgment as to whether the sex industry is morally right or wrong. One should also avoid wondering how miserable or unhappy these women were. What one should focus on are legal-economic matters: the up-front cash advance, term of service, share and earnings.

The uniqueness of Ramseyer’s papers “Indentured Prostitution in Imperial Japan: Credible Commitments in the Commercial Sex Industry” and “Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War” is in how he analyzed the sex industry of Japan in terms of legal economics without being shackled by conventional stereotypes or morality.

Those who have attacked Ramseyer the fiercest have been by and large feminist historians and feminist scholars, and one can understand their reason for attacking

Ramseyer. For them, prostitution itself is the exploitation of women's bodies and minds, of violence and oppression, and they cannot see it for anything else.

To critics, whether it was in the past or the present, legal or illegal, it really does not matter. Seeing prostitution as business is, to critics, outrageous. In the sex industry, to critics, women are always the victim and that making money to carve out a new life is absolutely unheard of.

To critics, prostitution is "living a life of shame" and once fallen, no one can live openly ever again. Critics see former prostitutes as "sex slaves plunged into Hell" stereotypes. To critics, prostitutes are always victims.

"Credible commitments"

In reality, there were many prostitutes who did not fit the critics' stereotype. That is, comfort women earned a lot of money, shortened their term of service and carved a new life for themselves.

Of Japanese licensed prostitutes, some opened restaurants and others became a nurse or even a teacher after the end of their term.

These women successfully climbed the social ladder: they started out in unfortunate circumstances of extreme poverty and climbed their way to top through the sex industry. In other words, they were not always passive victims.

This phenomenon should not be surprising as there were "credible commitments" between the comfort women and their owners. This system allowed parties to encourage the other parties to make choices that were ultimately favorable to their own interests, which can be described below.

In making a contract, the problem is knowing whether or not the other party will honor the contract. With regard to the sex industry, women demanded a guarantee that the owners will allow them to earn money. At the same time, the owners demanded a guarantee that the women commit to their work and bring in profits. Accordingly, the owners paid them an advance and roughly determine the term of service.

On one hand, by getting an upfront payment, the women believe that the owners will allow them to make money, since the owners need to recover the upfront payment.

The owners, on the other hand, believe that the upfront payment and the pre-determined term of service will prompt the women to do their best in generating revenue.

This is called “credible commitment” and this benefits both the women and the owners. Therefore, both parties are satisfied. That is what Ramseyer made clear in his previous statistical work on women engaged in the sex industry.

Contrary to popular thinking, the owners did not unduly exploit their women or unilaterally extend the term of service. If they did, then the women would have lost enthusiasm for their work, would have become reluctant to give customers good service and to earn money—and in extreme cases may have even run away. That is, the “credible commitment” functions effectively with benefits to both sides. If either side does anything against the interests of the other, no one benefits.

The “sex slaves plunged into Hell” stereotype forced by feminists

Thus “credible commitment” enabled women in the sex industry to be social ladder climbers rather than just merely oppressed victims.

It is not even possible for feminism researchers and feminist historians to visualize such a way of life as they see prostitutes with clouded eyes, in the stereotypical way, of “sex slaves plunged into Hell”.

In his article, Ramseyer applied an unclouded view of the comfort women system and he has made clear that credible commitments are applicable— a remarkable achievement.

Many people who criticized the Ramseyer article claimed that the comfort women contracts “were not based on voluntary agreement.” However, primary sources show that comfort women all signed a letter of consent, in their own hand together with their legal guardians, and concluded a contract, whether oral or written. Otherwise, they would be unable to get a license to work as a comfort woman.

Certainly, there may have been different levels understanding, such as being deceived, forced or persuaded by their parents or brokers. When signing, the women probably wished that they did not have to sign, if at all possible.

Once the letter of consent was signed, however, it was regarded as an agreement. It is the same with us today. Ramseyer does not make an issue of how the women felt when they signed. How the women felt on signing is not on record and cannot be objectively demonstrated. Ramseyer's only issue is whether the women signed or not. If a letter of consent is signed and sealed, it means that a contract is in effect. Without a contract, it is impossible to obtain a license at a police station, even with a signed and sealed a letter of consent from her legal guardian.

The same holds true with the revenue earned by the women. Ramseyer does not make an issue of how the comfort women felt when they went to comfort stations or what they felt when they offered sexual services to numerous men.

What he focuses on is how much money they were making and whether this enabled them to shorten the term of service and to save their money for later in life. Ramseyer critics do not understand this point either.

In "Comfort Women Controversy: (1) Did they really return home with empty hands?", Lee Young-hoon points out that not a few of these women built houses back home and even bought land.

Having said that, women who bought real estate with their own money were lucky but those who had left their money in savings accounts were hit by postwar hyperinflation and obliged to live a hard life. However, this misfortune befell tens of millions of Japanese as well.

Even more unfortunate were women who met the end of the war in battlegrounds. In the postwar chaos, they could not readily come home. When they finally got home, they were unable to withdraw their money. This happened to many Japanese as well.

Some of the comfort women, who may have been among those struck by misfortune like these, claim that they were given absolutely no money.

However, their loss was the result of Japan's defeat and collapse rather than a flaw within Ramseyer's legal economic model and does not invalidate his model. Without Japan's defeat, those women, as with licensed prostitutes, would have surely led a better life than before, climbing up the social ladder. However, even with Japan's defeat, at the very least, some comfort women led better lives than before they became comfort women.

The feminist historians' forced "sex slaves plunged into Hell" stereotype is insulting to some women. The heart-felt communication between Japanese soldiers and comfort women described by Park in *Comfort Women of the Empire* in no sense fits the relationship between sexual exploiters and sex slaves.⁽³⁷⁾ Comfort women as human beings have dignity and their pride. They would not be at all pleased to be "subjects of research" and to be pitied by postwar elites who were raised in a far more favorable environment than they were. The former comfort women will say, "We are not research subjects but human beings. What do you know?"

Only the poor know poverty. Only comfort women know what being a comfort women was all about.

Notes

(37) *Comfort Women of the Empire* pp. 69 - 101 in particular.