"Comfort Women"
by Gloria J. Palileo

They’re known as “the Lolas” (“the Grandmothers”). But they’re not your average grandmas. While women of their age -- late 60’s to 80’s -- reminisce about the good times of their youth, these Filipino women relive harrowing experiences that they had kept secret, even from loved ones, for almost fifty years. While most women probably have their grandchildren or friends for an audience, these Filipino women have the world as their stage. And while most women of their age probably blame personal indiscretions for unfortunate incidents in their past, these Filipino women hold the Japanese Government accountable.

From different parts of the country, one by one these "Lolas" came forward -- some in defiance of their family’s demand for continued silence -- in response to mass media appeals by women’s groups. They and thousands of other Asian women would have taken to their graves World War Two’s best-kept secret had it not been for an elderly Korean woman named Kim Hak Sun. During the Asian Conference on Traffic in Women held in Seoul in December, 1991, she broke down and revealed to a shocked audience that she was a sex slave of the Japanese Imperial Army during World War Two. The half-century Japanese cover-up of the existence of military “comfort stations” in Japanese-occupied Asian countries had begun to unravel. And the “comfort women” (a literal translation of the Japanese term jugun Ianfu) now have a face and a voice. But the feminist advocates had to reassure the anonymous Filipino victims repeatedly: “It was not your fault,” before the first “Lola” responded. “Lola Rosa” -- after sharing her secret with her grown children and receiving their support -- went public.

“At two in the afternoon, the soldiers came. Some of them were brought by truck to the garrison. My work began, and I lay down as one by one the soldiers raped me. At six p.m., we rested and ate dinner. Often I was hungry because our rations were so small. After thirty minutes, I lay down on the bed again to be raped for the next three or four hours. Every day, anywhere from ten to over twenty soldiers raped me. There were times when there were as many as thirty: they came to the garrison in truckloads. At other times, there were only a few soldiers, and we finished early.” (Maria Rosa Henson, Comfort Woman, Slave of Destiny, 1996, page 64).

"Lola Rosa" was detained by a Japanese sentry as the carabao-driven cart she was riding in passed by a military checkpoint. It was 1943 in Japanese-occupied Philippines, and she was 15 years old. After nine months, she was liberated by Filipino guerillas. In print, on television and radio, before audiences at local, national and international conferences of women’s and human rights groups and other venues, the "Lolas" told and retold their stories.

"Lola Catalina" was just 12 in 1943 when -- for one month -- she was kept in a garrison where she was regularly raped by several Japanese soldiers. "Lola Anastacia, now 74, was first forced to watch as the soldiers tortured her husband in Fort Santiago in Manila, and then was detained for five months to sexually service the soldiers.

"Lola Nenita" was a wife and mother of preschool children when a military truck bearing the emblem of the "Rising Sun" stopped at her house, took her to the Regan barracks in Albay and then transported -- with other women -- to a military outpost where for one year and two months, the women were routinely raped by Japanese soldiers. When "Lola Nenita" resisted the first assault, she was severely beaten. During their "rest periods," the women had to cook and do the laundry for their captors-- but they were never allowed to talk. They escaped when the Americans came and "Lola Nenita" returned home only to be thrown out by her husband and ostracized by relatives. She had brought dishonor to the family. Her children were forbidden from calling her "Mother," and she had no contact with them since then.

In 1944, when "Lola Lucia" was 15, five Japanese soldiers came and dragged her, her parents and sister out of their house. After bayoneting her parents to death and disemboweling and mutilating her sister -- who had refused to go -- the soldiers took her to a two-story garrison where one by one soldiers, from dusk to daybreak, came into her room. She and the other women escaped when the soldiers became preoccupied with the American liberation forces. (Excerpts from Update on Filipina Victims of Sexual Enslavement by Japanese Armed Forces during World War II, Special Issue published by Lila-Filipina [Task Force on Filipina Comfort Women] in collaboration with the Asian Women’s Human Rights Council, 1995).

A task force created in July, 1992, by a coalition of women’s organizations served as a support group to help the "Lolas" -- now in their 60’s and 70’s, with a few in their 80’s -- to come out and tell their stories. And with the cooperation of Filipino and Japanese lawyers’ associations, the task force has authenticated the accounts of a couple of hundred surviving Filipina "comfort women," in addition to women who were victims of random rapes by Japanese soldiers. Some of the "comfort women" also experienced chance rape, usually multiple rapes, before or after their sexual enslavement in a "comfort station." At age 14, "Lola Rosa," for instance, was gang raped on two separate occasions before her conscription as a "comfort woman."

The number of documented bona fide "comfort women" is probably just a fraction of the survivors. Many more probably chose -- or were prevailed upon by relatives--not to come forward. In Iloilo, for example, although a Japanese document dated March 10, 1942 listed nineteen "comfort women" examined for venereal disease by a Japanese doctor, not one in that area had responded to the task force’s three-month long media blitz. Two "comfort stations," one now a defunct hotel and the other a decaying two-story house that still stands amidst tall grass -- both of which the task force discovered with a former captain of the Japanese Imperial Army as a guide -- would forever keep secret the unspeakable crimes that were committed against girls and young women, who just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Who knows how many of them continue to suffer in silence? Or how many died before they could tell their story? Or how many were killed or died during their captivity? Some of the "Lolas" had seen fellow "comfort women" being bayonetted or beaten to death -- because they contracted a venereal disease from the soldiers; because a soldier had failed to reach orgasm; or for any
reason. Some of the "Lolas" lost consciousness during the long hours of unrelenting abuse. And they were the lucky ones. Other died during the night.

There were nameless casualties of war that neither the defeated Japanese Imperial Army nor the victorious American Forces -- with the acquiescence of their own government -- had agreed to acknowledge, much less account for. A 1994 report by the International Commission of Jurists (a Geneva-based United Nations human rights group which investigated the "comfort women" issue) showed that the Allied Forces had "extensive documentary and other evidence immediately after the war about the comfort stations." The war tribunals, however, prosecuted only the cases involving 35 Dutch "comfort women" who were in Indonesia, then a Dutch colony, when the war broke out.

Historians estimate that only thirty percent of the 100,000 to 200,000 "comfort women" in the occupied Asian countries survived their enslavement. And many of them died before they could share their pain with a now sympathetic world. In a village in Pampanga, for instance, only 82 of about 500 women -- many of them herded to a nearby garrison after the village menfolk had been massacred before their eyes -- are alive today. (Manila Chronicle, March 9, 1997).

But, like their counterparts in Korea and other Asian countries, those who did survive now demand justice. They demand individual letters of apology from the Japanese Government. They demand just compensations as victims of war crimes. And they demand that the Japanese Government fully document with systematic research the military sexual enslavement of women in the Japanese-controlled countries of Asia and to re-write Japanese historical accounts of World War Two to include "comfort stations" and "comfort women." And they will not be denied! In faded dresses and worn-out shoes, they march in front of the Japanese Embassy and occasionally in front of the officers of their own government. Their emaciated arms and hands -- now arthritic from old age and decades of washing clothes and cleaning houses for a living -- hold protest signs. They have given testimonies before national and international judicial and investigative bodies. They have given press conferences to local and international journalists and reporters.

In one such press conference held in Tokyo in 1993, a young Japanese reporter approached 70 year old "Lola Anastasia" after she had talked about her bondage in a garrison in Manila. In tears, he knelt before her and confided that the commander, who raped her first and passed her on to the other soldiers, was his grandfather.

Various Japanese high government officials at various times have also shown their remorse and have offered their apologies to the "Lolas" and have given assurances that Tokyo is "looking for ways to express its remorse." The worldwide media attention on the "comfort women" issue and mounting contrary evidence from war archives in Japan, Washington D.C., among others, have finally forced Japan to give up its initial claim that the "comfort women" had served voluntarily -- for money. But Japan continues to insist that the claims for compensation by the "comfort stations" survivors were covered under the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 and the 1956 Reparations Agreement between Japan and the Republic of the Philippines. As proof of their "sincere remorse," however, the Japanese have offered to help the "Lolas" through the Asian Women's Fund, a privately funded charitable organization. Although many are in poor health and most, if not all, are in dire poverty, these women have refused tokens of remorse. The "Lolas" want the Japanese Government to accept responsibility for the "comfort stations" and for Japan and the world to define as a war crime the Japanese Imperial Army's sexual enslavement of women and girls during World War Two.

So the "Lolas" have taken on the Japanese Government. With financial and legal assistance from Filipino and Japanese human rights groups and private citizens, the "Lolas" filed in April, 1993 a class action suit at the Tokyo District Court, just as their Korean counterparts had done in December, 1991, and the Chinese and Dutch "comfort women" two years later. They demand fair compensation as victims of a terrible war crime.

During the interval of almost five years between the filing and the last court hearing in late 1997, two of the "Lolas" had died. One was "Lola Rosa." And if the Tokyo District Court takes much longer to make its decision, the issue may be academic, at least for some of the "Lolas" who are now in poor health.

These women may not get justice before they die, but they will not be nameless. In April, 1998, Yamaguchi District Court Judge Hideaki Chikashita decided in favor of three Korean women, and, calling their sexual enslavement by the Japanese Imperial Army a "fundamental violation of human rights," awarded each of them $2,300. How much is justice or human dignity worth?

Author's Notes: In the summer of 1997, during an extended visit to the Philippines (which was home until I came to the United States thirty some years ago), I got to meet survivors of the Japanese Imperial Army's sexual slavery camps during World War Two and visited with them at different venues, including Lola Rosa's funeral, and at a shelter called the "Lola House" where they gather regularly, and also at a fund-raising event where a couple of the "Lolas" were called upon to recount their experiences on the stage.

Ms. Melia Sancho, the moving force of the Lila-Filipina, a task force of victims and their advocates (created under the auspices of the Asian Human Rights Council-Philippine Section) has been most helpful in providing access to many of the sources for this article. Various Philippine newspapers were also a source.