

Until Justice is Served: “Comfort Women” and The Reckoning of Japan

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From the dawn of military conflicts and wars, governments and armed forces have counted the bodies of women and girls among their most valuable and effective weapons of war. Systematic rape, sexual enslavement and exploitation, humiliation, and degradation of women have been and remain today key weapons used for political conquests and the destruction of communities.

In the late 20th century, the [International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia](#) (ICTY) and [the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda](#) (ICTR) were the first international courts that explicitly recognized wartime sexual violence as a crime against humanity and rape as a weapon of war, respectively.

The history of the so-called “comfort women” constitutes one of the gravest examples of such government-sanctioned war crimes.

Prior to and during World War II, Japan's Imperial Army established a wide network of brothels, dubbed “comfort stations,” in its zones of combat specifically designed for military use. From the [United Nations](#) to the scholarship of [historians](#) to the testimonies of survivors, evidence shows that Imperial Japan engaged in systematic human trafficking for the purposes of sexual servitude.

Over 200,000 women and girls throughout Asia and the Pacific, including the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Korea and China, were trafficked into such military [brothels](#) specifically built to accommodate the 220,000 Japanese military personnel. On an average day, 10 military servicemen paid, or were offered, to rape the women and girls in these “comfort stations;” that number would increase to 30 or 40 a day before and after battles.

The Allied forces rescued a few of the women in 1945, but others were sex trafficked anew when the [U.S. military](#), which occupied Japan, perpetuated the “comfort” system for the U.S.’s own systemic sexual abuse, trafficking thousands more women and girls into officially organized brothels.

The “comfort women” who survived experienced lifelong illnesses and injuries. After 50 years of anonymity, with feelings of shame and fear of exposure, a number of [survivors](#) came forth to speak the truth about the mass rapes, physical torture [and sexual trauma](#) they endured as “comfort women.”

Inspired by the brave public testimonies of these survivors, the Korean women’s movement, in particular, led international efforts to pressure Japan into accepting legal responsibility for their war crimes. A Japanese journalist, [Matsui Yayori](#), wrote about the “comfort women” in the newspaper Asahi Shimbun, marking the first time any major newspaper had addressed these wartime crimes.

Today, with only a few dozen “halmonis” (grandmothers) still living, they and their families continue pushing for recognition of the crimes they suffered at the hands of the Imperial Japanese government. To this day, the survivors and the families of these enslaved women and girls, the majority Korean, await justice, reparations, and an official apology for the war crimes Japan perpetrated against them.

Regardless of our nationalities or countries of origin, we must all care deeply about justice for “comfort women,” bearing witness to injustices that have no boundaries either in space or time. Forgetting is not an option.

The former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced there was no evidence the Imperial Japanese Army had forced Asian women into military brothels during World

War II. He ordered the revision of textbooks in [Japan](#) and [around the world](#) to delete or dilute the sections on “comfort women,” pressured [Japanese newspapers](#) to retract articles covering the subject and called on foreign governments to remove references of these war crimes from official documents.

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women launched a [change.org](#) petition calling **on the Japanese government to end all such efforts including in foreign textbooks, newspapers, historical records, and official [United Nations](#) and other [government documents](#). The global petition also urged that Japan affirm and apologize for its wartime engagement in the human trafficking and institutionalized sexual enslavement of women and girls.**

A year later, in March 2016, at the occasion of Grandma Yong-soo Lee’s visit to New York City, the UN Correspondence Association hosted a press conference at the United Nations on International Women’s Day, where the august Grandma Lee condemned the backdoor deal between Japan and South Korea. In December 2015, the two governments had declared “final and irreversible resolution” of the “comfort women” issue, without any public deliberations. The deal was later incapacitated thanks to the leadership of Grandma Lee, her sister survivors, and supporters from around the world. The Korean American Forum of California had invited me to present and connect the plight of “comfort women” with the current day scourge of human trafficking and the sexual violence against women during military conflict.

Throughout the years, slight gestures of hope sometimes surfaced from the Japanese government, giving hope to the “comfort women” that a reckoning could soon arrive. Only vague statements and empty [apologies](#) would however ensue.

In 1993, for example, then Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yohei Kono, acknowledged that “the Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the ‘comfort stations’ and the transfer of ‘comfort women.’” Known as the [Kono Statement](#), it was not deemed official and didn’t offer government reparations to survivors and to the families of “comfort women.” It also failed to embrace the magnitude of the crimes committed.

We fear that the new Prime Minister, Yoshihide Suga, will continue this unacceptable denial. When Mr. Suga was Japan’s chief cabinet secretary under Abe he condemned [memorials](#) dedicated to “comfort women.” He said of one of those [statues in South Korea](#), which appeared to depict Abe kneeling and bowing before a “comfort woman,” that if the depiction were true, it would be an “unforgivable” breach of international protocol. We will continue to stand in solidarity with the survivors and their families and call for accountability.

In the spring of 2016, I had the immense privilege to join a ceremony at a “comfort women” memorial in New Jersey. Two special guests at the event were [Holocaust survivors](#), Ethel Katz and Anita Weisbord, who movingly spoke of their exceptional friendship with the Korean “halmonis.” Holding each other’s hands, they said that both groups shared journeys of torture and survival, unfathomable loss and a deep thirst for justice. These nonagenarian women stood before the world in the name of remembrance. To tell us that we are connected. To urge us to hold to account governments for their complicity in unleashing [organized rapes](#), paid for or not, that amount not only to crimes against humanity, but to [femicide](#).

Honor is bestowed upon governments that recognize their role in perpetuating human rights violations and fulfill their responsibilities as members of the international community to work toward democracy and equality for all. A government’s honor is based on truth, reconciliation and justice, not denial of inconvenient history. Acknowledging Imperial Japan’s role in the human trafficking, sexual servitude, and other atrocities committed against the countless “comfort women” is essential to Japan's national honor.

The WWII “comfort women” survivors are disappearing from this earth as aging requires, but their testimonies resonate as loudly as the first day they rose to speak their truth. We and the generations to come will ensure that their stories reverberate until justice is served.