

## Overview of the “comfort women” issue for the teachers

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The term, “comfort women,” refers to the system of militarized sexual slavery perpetrated by the Japanese government during the 1930s and 1940s in areas under its colonial and wartime command. Beginning with Japan proper and extending to Korea, China, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and numerous Pacific Islands, the system’s estimated tens to hundreds of thousands of victims and survivors are euphemized along with the structural history involved together as “the comfort women.”

At best, the expression is incorrect and hurtful. At worst, it denies what happened: to begin, there was no “comfort” for those trapped against their will and raped up to 40 times per day over the course of years at a time in buildings established by the Japanese state for its soldiers and civilian employees working for the military throughout the Japanese empire. As Eika Tai explains, “According to military records, the purposes of the creation of comfort stations were to prevent soldiers from committing rape in occupied areas and contracting sexually transmitted diseases. However, Yoshimi (Yoshiakai, a leading historian on the issue), found that soldiers never stopped raping local women.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, there are recorded accounts throughout Southeast Asia of young boys and men ensnared into a historical system that numerous international lawyers, judges, human rights activists, and victims’ advocates have determined as a state-sponsored crime against humanity.

How as teachers do we make sense of all of this? On the one hand, we cannot. In short, the thought of the practical aspects and context of this history for those of us who have not endured such terror in many ways makes it too difficult to get our heads around to explain it. On the other hand, we can learn to examine and describe this history to students as the criminal act it was. To begin, we have to teach the meaning of the words involved — as difficult as they are. Most important is to learn ways to explain in the classroom that rape is always and forever an act of violence: it is not sex. I have had students use the Oxford English Dictionary among others to understand that the verb means an act of force, most often with violence involved and against the will of the person to whom it is happening. For decades, deniers of this history have tried to distract from this basic element involved by quibbling over whether or not the victims involved were “coerced” or “forcibly coerced” into the system. International lawyers have strongly disputed this line of argument by demonstrating that the legal notion of “coercion” incorporates “deception” and “trickery” in addition to “force.” Put differently, if, for example (as many cases demonstrate), a 16-year-old girl from what we now would call South Korea found herself sold by a local official into the Japanese military that means she was “coerced” against her will and knowledge regardless of the local official’s ethnicity. When this young woman would then find herself in some far-flung outpost of the Japanese empire such as Saipan or Rabaul or even within Japan proper, she was housed against her will at what international law now defines as a “rape camp” — regardless of the term used at the time.

Survivors make clear that this is how they would like current and future generations to learn about what happened to them on an individual and collective level in order to end the ongoing practice of targeted sexual violence during wartime. For this reason, above all, survivor groups

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<sup>1</sup> Eika Tai, *Comfort Women Activism: Critical Voices from the Perpetrator State* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2020).

and their supporters work together today with survivors of ongoing systems of wartime targeted sexual violence in areas such as Nigeria, Iraq, and other places where similar histories are occurring. As teachers, it is essential to listen to survivors teach us how their history should be taught.