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Comfort Women:
Exploring the Phenomenon and the Patriarchal Structures That Delayed Its Exposure and Recognition

Relatrice: Prof.ssa LORENZA PERINI

Laureanda: GIULIA MUFFATO

Matricola n. 2040198

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the issue of the so-called "comfort women" has garnered increasing scholarly and public attention, both within the countries directly affected and in the broader international community.[1] A growing body of literature, activism and policy debate has explored this complex and painful chapter of history from a variety of perspectives. Diverse actors – academics, survivors, feminist organizations, state institutions and international bodies – have each highlighted different critical dimensions of the issue.[2] Yet, despite this evident and increasing interest, the comfort women system remains an unresolved historical injustice, lacking a clear or satisfactory resolution to this day.

From its inception, the system of military sexual slavery under Imperial Japan impacted a wide spectrum of individuals – across lines of gender, ethnicity and age. Nevertheless, for nearly fifty years, the issue remained hidden, silenced by political agendas and social stigma. Survivors, for their part, were often compelled to bury their trauma deep within, many pretending never to have been involved in order to avoid shame and ostracization. Meanwhile, those responsible for perpetrating these atrocities either actively suppressed the truth or shamelessly denied the credibility of the survivors' accounts.

[1] A master's thesis by Wenjie Li indicates that feminist framing of the comfort women issue has evolved over time, particularly between 2015 and 2020/2021, reflecting changes brought about by the feminist movement in media coverage. It emphasizes a qualitative shift from nationalist narratives to feminist perspectives emphasizing women's human rights, based on an analysis of 40 articles from major English-language media outlets including The New York Times, The Guardian, The Japan Times and The Korea Times. See Wenjie Li, *Feminist Framing of Comfort Women in News Media*, Master's thesis, Södertörn University, 2021

[2] For instance, academic scholars such as C. Sarah Soh have emphasized the interplay between colonialism, patriarchy, and nationalism in the politics of memory surrounding the *comfort women* issue; see: C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Survivors like Kim Hak-sun played a pivotal role in breaking decades of silence by testifying publicly in 1991, catalyzing a transnational movement for justice. Feminist organizations such as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (KCWS) have continuously organized protests, including the ongoing *Wednesday Demonstrations*, and engaged in legal and political advocacy. State responses have varied: Japan's official apologies (e.g., the 1993 *Kono Statement*) have been widely contested for their ambiguity and lack of legal accountability. International bodies such as the UN Commission on Human Rights have condemned Japan's conduct; notably, the 1996 report by Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy classified the system as a crime against humanity and called for reparations.

This context prompts a critical question: beyond the legal, historical and diplomatic challenges that have delayed recognition, to what extent has patriarchy itself contributed to the prolonged silencing and marginalization of the comfort women issue? History has shown repeatedly that, in times of conflict, it is women who often bear the brunt of the violence – abducted, separated from their families and subjected to bodily and moral violations. But in this case, patriarchal structures appear to have played an even more persistent role in shaping how the issue has been denied, distorted or dismissed – both during and after the war.

This thesis sets out to examine the issue of comfort women through the lens of gender and structural power. The first chapter provides the historical background necessary to contextualize the establishment and functioning of the comfort women system. It begins by analyzing the pre-war period in Japan, with particular attention to the imperialist expansion pursued by the Japanese government and military in the early 20th century. Among the early manifestations of Japan's imperial expansion was the formal annexation of Korea in 1910, a development that granted the Japanese government both the authority and, in its view, the justification to exploit the Korean population as a colonial subject.

In this framework, young Korean women and girls were specifically targeted – through deception, coercion and abduction – to be transported to military-occupied territories and forced into sexual servitude as comfort women. These women were often transported from Korea to various locations across Asia where Japanese troops were stationed, including China, the Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia. Upon arrival, they were placed in so-called "comfort stations", where they were subjected to systemic sexual exploitation, inhumane treatment and profound psychological trauma. Life in these facilities was characterized by repeated acts of violence, coercion and dehumanization, reducing the women to instruments of wartime utility under the guise of military necessity.

Although no official documentation has survived detailing the precise number of women involved in this system, numerous scholars have attempted to reconstruct

its scope through survivor testimonies, military records and secondary sources.[3] Their findings point to a non-negligible number of victims, suggesting a system both vast in scale and deeply embedded in the wartime infrastructure of the Japanese Empire.

Importantly, the end of World War II did not bring about a clear or immediate resolution for the women subjected to the comfort system. Rather than closure, the aftermath of the war saw deliberate efforts to obscure the system's existence – through the destruction of documents, the denial of state responsibility and, in some cases, the violent elimination of survivors to prevent the emergence of testimony. Consequently, the trauma endured by these women did not conclude with the cessation of hostilities; instead, they were left to carry the enduring physical and emotional scars in silence. The profound stigma associated with their experiences, combined with widespread societal indifference and patriarchal structures, contributed to decades of invisibility and marginalization. It was only much later, beginning in the late 1980s, that the issue gradually re-entered public consciousness through the mobilization of feminist activists seeking justice and historical recognition.

The second chapter focuses on the re-emergence of the comfort women issue from the late 1980s to the present, tracing its evolution through alternating moments of acknowledgment and denial. Following the first public testimony of a Korean survivor in 1991, other victims gradually began to come forward, breaking decades of silence. Supported by feminist activists and civil society organizations, they initiated a transnational movement demanding recognition, accountability and justice. This mobilization played a crucial role in bringing the issue onto both national and international agendas.

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[3] Scholars have offered varying estimates of the number of women subjected to military sexual slavery based on fragmented archival records, testimonies, and circumstantial evidence. Yoshimi Yoshiaki was among the first Japanese historians to uncover official military documents confirming the direct involvement of the Japanese army in managing the *comfort stations*; see: Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, trans. Suzanne O'Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). By contrast, conservative historian Hata Ikuhiko has provided lower estimates and argued for a less centralized role of the military, emphasizing voluntary prostitution and economic factors; see: Hata Ikuhiko, *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*, Trans. by Jason Michael Morgan (Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2018)

Although the following decades saw some institutional responses – including initiatives such as the Asian Women's Fund in the 1990s and the 2015 bilateral agreement between Japan and South Korea – these efforts were frequently criticized for lacking sincerity, legal clarity and, most importantly, survivor participation. The recurring cycle of recognition followed by retraction highlights the persistent influence of patriarchal values, which continue to shape public discourse, historical memory and policy decisions. Despite mounting international pressure and the involvement of global human rights institutions, a meaningful and durable resolution remains elusive. This enduring impasse suggests the need to move beyond formal legal frameworks and diplomatic gestures to examine the deeper cultural and ideological structures at work. As this thesis argues, patriarchy has been a constant force in determining not only the lived experiences of the women during wartime but also the postwar treatment of their claims, the politics of redress and the limits of reconciliation.

It is precisely on the structural presence of patriarchy that the third chapter centers its analysis. While the influence of patriarchal systems is evident throughout the thesis – shaping the origins, development and aftermath of the comfort women issue – this chapter offers a focused examination of how deeply embedded gender hierarchies have contributed to the persistence of inequality in both Korea[4] and Japan. It begins by exploring the historical and cultural foundations of patriarchal norms in the two societies, highlighting the traditional beliefs that reinforced male dominance and placed women in a condition of subordination and inferiority.

Patriarchy not only underpinned the establishment of the comfort women system, but also informed the language, attitudes and justifications used by Japanese soldiers and officials, often reducing women to mere instruments of service. The derogatory and objectifying terms used to refer to comfort women exemplify how gendered power imbalances were normalized and institutionalized. However, the impact of these hierarchies did not end with the war. The postwar treatment of survivors, the marginalization of their voices and the reluctance to engage with their

[4] Throughout this thesis, the term "Korea" is used to denote either the Korean peninsula prior to its division after World War II or the contemporary Republic of Korea (South Korea). When referring to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), this will be stated explicitly.

demands for justice all reflect the enduring influence of patriarchal structures. Even in the aftermath of the issue's re-emergence, responses have often been shaped by gendered assumptions, undermining the legitimacy of survivor testimony and framing the debate in ways that obscure systemic violence.

The continued absence of a clear and just resolution to the comfort women issue serves as a stark reminder of how far the struggle against gender discrimination still has to go. Despite increasing awareness and mobilization, the resistance to fully acknowledging and addressing gender-based violence remains a testament to the resilience of patriarchal norms in both public and institutional spheres.

This thesis employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology aimed at uncovering the structural, cultural and discursive dynamics underlying the comfort women issue. The research draws from a wide range of textual sources, including academic literature, survivor testimonies, governmental and institutional documents, as well as media reports and public statements. These materials are analyzed not merely for their content, but for the ways in which they frame, legitimize or challenge dominant historical narratives. Particular attention is given to the gendered and colonial dimensions of these texts, with the aim of understanding how power operates through language, representation and institutional response. The methodology is thus both analytical and critical, seeking to expose the enduring influence of patriarchal and imperial logics in shaping how the comfort women issue has been remembered, denied or politicized across time and space.

To support this approach, the thesis engages with a variety of sources produced by scholars, activists, institutions and survivors from Korean, Japanese and international contexts. These materials reflect a diversity of perspectives shaped not only by disciplinary orientation, but also by the cultural, historical and political environments in which they were produced. Differences in terminology, emphasis and interpretative framing are acknowledged and examined critically, as they often reveal underlying ideological tensions – particularly in relation to patriarchy and national identity. Rather than smoothing over these divergences, the thesis incorporates them to highlight the contested and deeply politicized nature of the discourse. Among the sources are survivor narratives, legal documents, scholarly

debates and records from institutions such as the Asian Women's Fund. Some of these downplay coercion or reject the label of "sex slaves", while others center survivor agency and call for full reparations. Their inclusion is not intended to validate all viewpoints, but rather to illuminate the power dynamics and cultural frameworks that continue to shape how the comfort women issue is understood and addressed.

The selection of this topic stems from the author's deep conviction regarding the urgent need to recognize and address gender-based suffering – not only in extraordinary circumstances such as war, but also in everyday life, where gendered violence, discrimination and marginalization remain pervasive and often normalized. The comfort women issue serves as a striking and painful emblem of the broader mechanisms through which patriarchal systems perpetuate silence and impunity. By examining this case, the thesis seeks to shed light on the structural injustices that have historically silenced women, while also situating their experiences within a larger continuum of gender-based oppression that transcends temporal and geographic boundaries.

In the contemporary context, the call to acknowledge and confront these injustices is more pressing than ever. Movements across Asia have demonstrated not only the resilience of survivors but also the growing collective awareness of the need for societal transformation. These movements are not merely reactions to isolated events, but expressions of a long-suppressed demand for dignity, justice and recognition. They challenge deeply rooted gender norms and call into question the systems that continue to protect perpetrators while stigmatizing victims.

Therefore, this thesis is not solely an academic investigation, but it is also a political and ethical commitment to amplifying women's voices, especially those that have been deliberately silenced or systematically ignored. The aim is to contribute – albeit modestly – to the broader struggle for a more just, equitable and inclusive society, in which women are no longer made to bear the burden of violence in isolation, nor blamed for the harms inflicted upon them. The road toward such a society is long and filled with resistance, but the momentum of feminist activism today suggests that meaningful change is both necessary and possible.

1 – SETTING THE CONTEST

1.1 – THE EVOLUTION OF JAPANESE EXPANSIONISM FROM 1868 TO 1945

In 1868, the ruling authority of Japan's feudal era, the Tokugawa shōgun (“great general”), was overthrown, leading to the restoration of the emperor as the supreme leader. Adopting the reign title Meiji (“enlightened rule”), this significant event became known as the Meiji Restoration.

At the beginning of Emperor Meiji's rule in 1868, Japan was militarily weak and characterized by a predominantly agrarian society with minimal technological progress. Governance was fragmented among numerous semi-autonomous feudal lords. Additionally, Japan had been coerced into signing treaties with Western powers – namely Europe and the United States – which restricted its sovereignty over foreign trade.

During the following two decades domestic reform was the primary focus, aiming to restructure Japan's social and economic institutions in accordance with Western models. The elimination of feudalism facilitated profound social and political transformations. The populace gained newfound freedom to select occupations and relocate without constraints. By fostering political and financial stability, the government created favorable conditions to invest in emerging industries and technologies.

To increase industrialization, the government undertook extensive infrastructure projects, including the construction of railways, shipping lines, telecommunication systems, shipyards, mines, munitions factories and consumer goods industries producing essential commodities such as sugar, glass, textiles, cement and chemicals. However, these ambitious developments imposed a heavy financial burden. Consequently, in 1880, the government opted to privatize most of these enterprises, incentivizing private sector involvement through subsidies and other support mechanisms. Some samurai and merchants, who invested in these industries, established powerful corporate conglomerates known as zaibatsu, which dominated Japan's emerging industrial landscape.

In parallel, the government introduced a national education system and promulgated a constitution, forming an elected parliamentary body called the Diet. These measures aimed to create a stable environment for national advancement, acquire Western respect and fortify support for the modern state.

To renegotiate the unequal treaties imposed in the 1850s, Japan embarked on a comprehensive legal overhaul, adopting criminal and civil codes inspired by French and German legal frameworks. In 1894, Western powers finally recognized Japan's legal reforms by agreeing to revise these treaties, thereby acknowledging Japan's emerging status as an international equal, though not yet a global power.

Japan's aspirations for regional influence led to war with China in 1894 over control of Korea, which had historically been a vassal state of China. Due to Korea's strategic location, Japan was concerned about potential Russian invasion. The swift and decisive Japanese victory resulted in Japan gaining control over Korea and acquiring Taiwan as a colony. The unexpected outcome alarmed several European nations.

At this time, Western powers were expanding their influence in China. The French, exploiting their colony in Indochina (modern-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), pursued interests in southern China. The British too sought control over South China, including the Yangtze Valley, while the Russians, extending their railway through Siberia and Manchuria, focused on North China. Following its victory over China, Japan secured special privileges on the Liaotung Peninsula alongside its control of Taiwan. However, this triumph was short-lived, as France, Russia, and Germany quickly pressured Japan to relinquish its claims on Liaotung. Ironically, major Western powers coerced China into granting them strategic ports and economic concessions, with Russia later seizing the very territory Japan had been forced to abandon.

Angered by these developments, Japan concluded that military strength was essential for maintaining sovereignty and securing equitable international treatment. By 1904, as Russian interests in Korea resurged, Japan, now militarily fortified, engaged in war against Russia. Japan's surprise naval assault on Port

Arthur in 1905 secured its dominance in the China Sea and solidified its colonial presence in Korea, positioning Japan as a formidable power in East Asia. [5]

1.1.1 – JAPAN BETWEEN 1912 AND 1941: FROM IMPERIAL AMBITIONS TO WAR

The Meiji era's reforms fundamentally reshaped Japan's domestic and international standing. By successfully countering Western imperialist pressures, Japan not only preserved its sovereignty but also emerged as a colonial power. During the Taishō period (1912-1926), demands for political representation and social freedoms gained traction. Japanese society and governance exhibited greater openness compared to previous and subsequent eras, earning this period the designation of "Taishō democracy".

One reason for this democratization was Japan's unprecedented economic prosperity prior to World War I. Rising income levels, expanded leisure opportunities and improved education, supported by the growth of mass media, transformed Japanese urban life. As increasing numbers of people moved to cities, exposure to foreign influences grew, weakening the traditional authority of extended families. Industrialization itself eroded conventional societal norms, instead promoting efficiency, autonomy, materialism and individualism. The emergence of a "mass society" in Japan during this period bore striking similarities to the "Roaring Twenties" in the United States. Furthermore, growing political awareness led to demands for universal male suffrage, which was achieved in 1925. Political parties gained influence, and between 1918 and 1931, they were strong enough to appoint their own prime ministers.

However, Japan's economic prosperity did not last. Following World War I, the country plunged into a severe economic depression, weakening the optimism of the Taishō period. Political corruption eroded confidence in democratic institutions, leading to an expansion of government and military authority at the expense of parliamentary power. A few giant businesses, known as the zaibatsu, gradually took control of the advanced industrial sector. Additionally, Japan's foreign relations

[5] Weatherhead East Asian Institute, *The Meiji Restoration and Modernization* (https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_meiji.htm, March 24, 2025)

deteriorated due to trade disputes and international disapproval of its growing influence in China. Nevertheless, Japan's success in competing with European powers in East Asia reinforced nationalist sentiments, fostering the belief that further territorial expansion was both achievable and necessary.

Japan's dependency on natural resources and the persistent resistance from Western nations against its regional ambitions facilitated the rise of militarist factions. Diplomatic uncertainties enabled right-wing militarists to gain control over foreign policy, eventually extending their influence to domestic governance. With military leaders exerting significant power, Japan embarked on a series of aggressive campaigns across Asia, culminating in the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.[6]

1.1.2 – JAPAN'S RISE AND FALL: FROM PEARL HARBOR TO SURRENDER IN TOKYO BAY

The Japanese expansion across Asia and the Pacific in the early stages of World War II was remarkably successful. Despite frequently being underestimated by their adversaries and often facing numerical disadvantages, the highly disciplined and well-trained Japanese forces secured victories against American, British, Australian and Dutch troops, along with their local allies. The territorial gains were vast: within six months of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Empire extended from Manchuria in the north to the Owen Stanley Range in New Guinea to the south; to the west, its reach spanned from the borders of India's Assam to the Gilbert Islands in the South Pacific. There was even discussion within the Japanese Navy General Staff regarding a possible invasion of Australia. However, the army's heavy engagement in China rendered this plan unattainable, as Tokyo lacked the military resources to effectively secure the territories it had already occupied.

By June 1942, the Allied forces were struggling, while Japan held several strategic advantages. The Japanese military had the opportunity to fortify its newly acquired territories and establish a deep defensive perimeter. Moreover, unlike the naval forces of its opponents, the Imperial Japanese Navy remained largely intact. From

[6] *Ibidem.*

this position of relative strength, Japan could, in theory, maintain its defensive line and deploy naval forces as needed to reinforce positions or counter U.S. fleets.[7]

Map 1. Japanese expansion. Source: RANE. Copyright RANE 2025. Used with permission.

The turning point in the Pacific War came with the Battle of Midway. Japan's rapid territorial expansion had overstretched its military capacity, making it increasingly difficult to defend its vast empire. The defeat at Midway was the first major U.S. victory against Japan and marked a decisive shift in the conflict. The battle altered the balance of naval power in the Pacific, enabling the United States to assume the

[7] RANE Network Inc. Stratfor, *Japan's Territorial Expansion 1931-1942* (https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/japans-territorial-expansion-1931-1942, March 24, 2025)

offensive. The Allies soon initiated campaigns in the Solomon Islands, particularly at Guadalcanal, and in New Guinea.

In August 1942, the United States launched their first major assault of the war at Guadalcanal, employing innovative landing craft to secure a strategic airfield on the island. This move disrupted Japanese efforts to threaten supply lines to Australia and New Zealand. The campaign resulted in intense combat, including seven major naval battles, three large-scale land battles and sustained aerial engagements as both sides sought to control Henderson Field. After six months of intense fighting, U.S. forces ultimately prevailed, marking the first significant step in the broader Allied counteroffensive in the Pacific.

Following the victory at Guadalcanal, Allied forces advanced toward Rabaul in New Britain. By March 1943, after a series of arduous battles, they had gained control of northern Papua New Guinea. Rather than attempting a direct assault on the heavily fortified Rabaul, American military strategists designed an alternative approach: instead of attacking directly, they would use aerial and naval forces to isolate it while focusing their ground offensives on less-defended territories. This strategy, later known as “island hopping”, enabled U.S. forces to bypass well-fortified Japanese positions, cutting them off from supplies and reinforcements. As a result, isolated Japanese garrisons suffered from starvation and disease, significantly weakening their defensive capabilities. By leveraging the vast distances of the Pacific, this strategy provided a strategic advantage for the United States in its campaign against Japan.

By early 1944, much of the southwest Pacific was under Allied control. By February, the central Pacific campaign had also made significant progress, with sustained naval and aerial strikes severely weakening Japanese defensive positions. Following a series of intense and costly battles, most of the central Pacific islands were secured. The capture of the Marshall and Mariana Islands during the summer allowed U.S. forces to establish airfields for long-range bombing raids on Japan. The Marianas were particularly valuable as they provided a base for the new B-29 bombers, which had the capability to reach the Japanese mainland. As preparations

for an aerial bombardment campaign intensified, military leaders debated the next steps for the Pacific offensives.[8]

The United States' deployment of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, brought the Pacific War to a decisive turning point – a conflict that, for Japan, had begun in northern China in 1931. The devastation caused by the bombings, combined with the Soviet Union's entry into the war and its rapid invasion of Manchuria, triggered a profound crisis within the Japanese leadership. With U.S. forces already in control of Okinawa and preparing for a potential invasion of the Japanese home islands, the prospect of total defeat became undeniable.[9] In this context, Emperor Hirohito recognized that there was no time to lose in seeking more favorable conditions for peace. Nevertheless, Japan's Supreme War Council remained deeply divided on how to proceed. Confronted with this internal impasse, Hirohito made what would later be called the "sacred decision" at 2:30 a.m. on August 10: to accept the Allied terms of surrender, on the sole condition that the imperial prerogative of His Majesty as a sovereign ruler be preserved[10]. This decision was subsequently ratified by the cabinet. On August 15, the emperor addressed the nation and the world through a historic radio broadcast, announcing the Imperial Rescript on Surrender.[11] The formal capitulation of Japan followed on September 2, 1945, aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.[12]

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[8] The National WWII Museum, *The Pacific Strategy, 1941-1944*, Published March 31, 2025 (https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/pacific-strategy-1941-1944, March 31, 2025)

[9] James Dobbins, John G. McGinn, Keith Crane, Seth G. Jones, Rollie Lal, Andrew Rathmell, Rachel Swanger, Anga Timilsina, *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, RAND Corporation 2003, p. 25

[10] Gaimusho [Foreign Ministry], ed., *Shusen shiroku* [Historical record relating to the termination of the war] (6 vols., Tokyo, originally 1952; annotated and expanded version, 1977-1978) Vol. 4: pp. 139, 142; Sanbo Honbu, comp., *Haisen no kiroku*, o kiroku [A record of the defeat] (Tokyo, 1979), p. 362. Cit. in Sadao Asada, The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration, in *Pacific Historical Review*, Nov., 1998, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Nov., 1998), pp. 477-500

[11] Sadao Asada, The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration, in *Pacific Historical Review*, Nov., 1998, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Nov., 1998), pp. 477-500

[12] James Dobbins, John G. McGinn, Keith Crane, Seth G. Jones, Rollie Lal, Andrew Rathmell, Rachel Swanger, Anga Timilsina, *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, RAND Corporation 2003, p. 25

1.2 – THE INSTITUTION OF MILITARY COMFORT STATIONS

By early 1932 at the latest, military comfort stations were established to serve the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers under state supervision. These facilities operated both in Japan and in areas occupied by Japanese forces until the Pacific War ended in 1945.[13] Given that prostitution was legally permitted and closely regulated by the state in imperial Japan, the use of comfort women for the military can be viewed as a form of state oversight over soldiers' sexual conduct.[14] During Japan's colonial rule over Korea from 1910 to 1945, Korean women were subjected to sexual exploitation, while Japanese women were encouraged to marry early and have numerous children to support the nation's vision of motherhood.[15]

Starting around 1937, when Japan's army invaded China and carried out mass atrocities against Chinese women, including the infamous Nanjing Massacre, the Japanese military intensified its recruitment of Korean women for forced sexual labor. At that time, comfort women from Japan, many of whom were former prostitutes, were already being used, but some had venereal diseases. To curb the spread of infections and reduce sexual violence against women in occupied regions, military leaders proposed recruiting unmarried Korean women, assumed to be virgins and free of disease, to serve as comfort women for Japanese soldiers.

In the same period, Japan implemented an aggressive assimilation campaign in Korea, which included the “Pledge of the Imperial Subjects”, mandatory display of the Japanese flag, emperor worship and participation in Shinto rituals. Koreans were also required to adopt Japanese names as part of efforts to erase their cultural

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[13] Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Jugun lanfu Shirygshu* [Collection of reference materials on military comfort women] (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten, 1992); "Documenting the Truth: The Japanese Government and the 'Comfort Women' Issue," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, Massachusetts, March 1994. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1227

[14] Sheldon Garon, "The World's Oldest Debate? Prostitution and the State in Imperial Japan, 1900-1945," *American Historical Review*, 98:3 (1993), pp. 710-32. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1227-1228

[15] Miho Ogino, "Abortion and Women's Reproductive Rights: The State of Japanese Women, 1945-1991", in *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*, Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p. 71. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1228

identity. These policies laid the legal foundation for Japan's mobilization of Koreans into its imperial war efforts. By 1939, the government had fully enforced systematic conscription of both Korean men and women into the *Chŏngsindae*[16], a labor force serving Japan's war machine.

As the Sino-Japanese War expanded into the Pacific War in 1941, Japan's conscription of Korean laborers became increasingly systematic and mandatory. Nearly six million Koreans were forcibly drafted as soldiers or laborers during the war, making up about 20% of Korea's population. It is crucial to recognize that, although the drafting of women was legalized in 1942, their recruitment was deliberately framed as "voluntary". In reality, many women were deceived, pressured or coerced into service, stripping them of any true agency or choice in their fate. This allowed the Japanese government to deny, until 1993, any claims of coercion in the enlistment of Korean women into the *Yŏja Chŏngsindae*.[17]

While some women in the *Chŏngsindae* did work in factories and hospitals, many were deceived by false promises of fair wages and were instead sent to military comfort stations. Others were pressured into joining the Labor Service Corps, while

[16] The Korean term *Chŏngsindae (정신대)* is derived from the Japanese *Teishintai (挺身隊)*, meaning "volunteer corps". In Japan, *Teishintai* referred broadly to civilian volunteer groups during World War II and could include both men and women, depending on the context. In Korea, however, *Chŏngsindae* came to refer primarily to young women who were mobilized for wartime labor, particularly in factories. Over time, the term became closely associated with the girls and women who were deceived or coerced into serving as "comfort women" (*ianfu*, *慰安婦*) for the Japanese military. As a result, *Chŏngsindae* in Korean discourse has become a gendered term, used to denote the victims of military sexual slavery, despite its broader and originally non-sexual meaning. See Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', *Social Science Japan Journal*, Apr., 2000, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Apr., 2000), pp. 67-68

[17] The term *Yŏja Chŏngsindae* (*여자 정신대*), meaning "women's volunteer corps," is derived from the Japanese *Joshi Teishintai* (*女子挺身隊*), which referred to unmarried women mobilized for wartime labor, especially in factories, during the final years of World War II. While the Japanese usage distinguished between general labor mobilization (*Teishintai*) and the women's corps (*Joshi Teishintai*), in Korea the term *Chŏngsindae* (*정신대*) alone eventually came to be widely used — without the gender modifier — and became strongly associated with the victims of military sexual slavery, despite its original reference to labor mobilization. See Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', *Social Science Japan Journal*, Apr., 2000, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Apr., 2000), pp. 67-68

some were abducted outright.[18] Even schoolgirls as young as 12 to 14 years old from Cholla Province were forcibly conscripted into sexual slavery.[19]

As a result, the term *Chŏngsindae* is widely associated with "military comfort women" in the Korean public consciousness, as many of these women were conscripted under that name. In South Korea today, surviving comfort women are commonly referred to as *Chŏngsindae halmŏni* (grandmothers), while the official term used is *Ilbonkun wianbu* (comfort women for the Japanese military).[20]

1.2.1 – Comfort Stations: Hidden Numbers

Comfort stations were established across Asia. A report from the head of the Reward Section of the War Ministry, dated September 3, 1942, provides specific figures: North China - 100, Central China - 140, South China - 40, South Asia - 100, South Sea - 10, Sakhalin - 10, totaling 400 comfort stations.[21]

The Asian Women's Fund documentation committee reports that comfort stations were extensively established throughout urban areas in the Yangtze River basin, with archival data indicating approximately 125 such facilities in that region alone – figures that align closely with the War Ministry's 1942 estimates. Additionally, the committee estimates the presence of about 30 comfort stations in the Philippines, more than 50 in Burma, and more than 40 in Indonesia, amounting to a total of more than 120 across these three countries. In the South Sea region, particularly in locations such as Rabaul in the Solomon Islands, records document approximately 20 facilities, including both army- and navy-operated stations. [22]

As shown in Map 2, the number of comfort stations appears significantly higher when taking into account not only those recorded in official Japanese documents,

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[18] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1227-1229

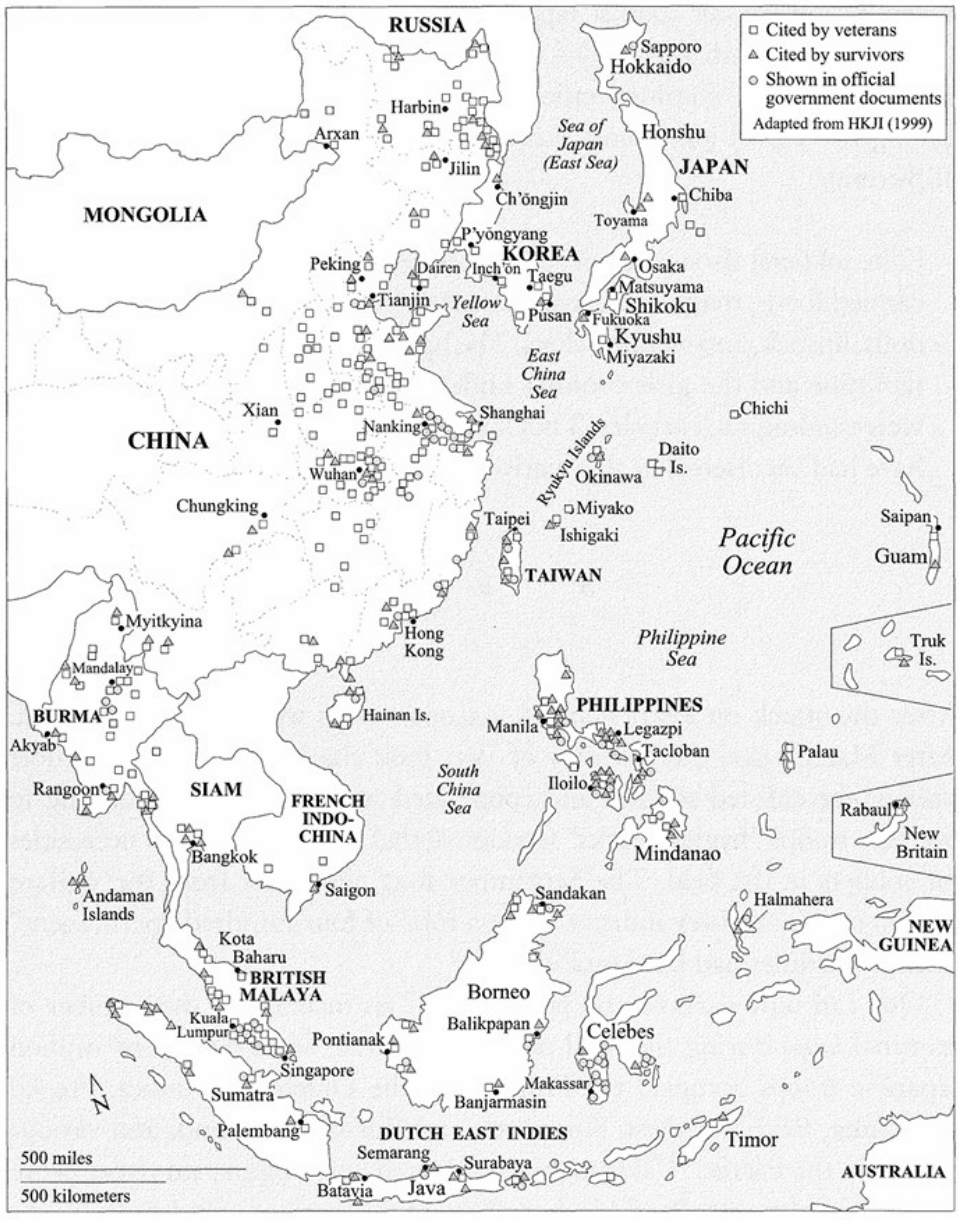
[19] Study by the Korean National History Compilation Committee, reported in *Korea Times* (Los Angeles edition), June 15, 1992. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1229

[20] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1229

[21] Head of the Reward Section of the War Ministry, *"Report on Comfort Facilities"*, September 3, 1942. Cit. in Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)

[22] Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)

but also those identified through the testimonies of survivors and former soldiers. If one were to rely solely on official records, the figures would be notably lower. The map thus underscores the extensive and systematic presence of comfort stations across the territories occupied by the Japanese military.[23]



Map 2. Major military comfort stations. Adapted from Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 138.

[23] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 137-140

There has been no comprehensive survey to accurately determine the number of women taken to former Japanese military comfort stations, the proportion of Korean victims, or how many never returned from the battlefields. A major challenge in establishing a definitive figure is the lack of official records with complete data.[24] As a result, existing estimates rely on research-based approximations rather than concrete documentation, which will be analyzed in detail in the following sections.

The estimated number of comfort women varies depending on the assumptions and methodologies used by researchers. One common approach is to analyze the total number of military personnel stationed overseas during the Pacific War and estimate how many soldiers were assigned per comfort woman. This method also factors in the turnover rate, as some women were brought in to replace those who were repatriated or otherwise removed from the system.[25]

Name of Scholar	Year of Publication	Number of Military Personnel	Parameter	Replacement	Number of comfort women
Ikuhiko Hata[26]	1993	3 million	one for 50 soldiers	1.5	90,000
Yoshiaki Yoshimi[27]	1995	3 million	one for 100 soldiers	1.5	45,000

[24] Asian Women's Fund, On the Issue of Wartime "Comfort Women" (August 4, 1993), in *Documents of the Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-03.html, April 13, 2025)
[25] Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)
[26] Ikuhiko Hata, *Showa-shi no Nazo wo Ou (Inside Japan's Showa Years, 1920s to 1980s), Volume 2,* Bungeishunju, 1993. Cit. in Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)
[27] Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Jugun Ianfu (The Wartime Comfort Women)*, Iwanami Shoten, 1995, English translation, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in Japanese Military during the World War II*, Columbia University Press, 2000. Cit. in Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)

			one for 30 soldiers	2	200,000
Su Zhiliang[28]	1999	3 million	one for 30 soldiers	3.5	360,000
				4	410,000
Ikuhiko Hata[29]	1999	2.5 million	one for 150 soldiers	1.5	20,000

These estimates largely depend on the assumed ratio of military personnel per comfort woman and the frequency of replacements. A notable historical record states: «A group of comfort women was brought in – 1 woman for every 100 soldiers». This statement comes from an April 1939 report by the head of the medical squad of the 21st Army in Shanghai, as documented in a memo within the Operations Journal of Setsuzo Kinbara, Chief of the Medical Affairs Section in the War Ministry's Medical Affairs Department.[30]

Applying this ratio of 1 comfort woman per 100 soldiers and assuming that, on average, a soldier visited a comfort station once per month, it can be estimated that each woman was visited by approximately five soldiers per day. This calculation includes an estimate of ten days off per month, primarily accounting for periods when comfort women were too ill or physically unable to work, rather than actual designated rest. In fact, official time off was extremely limited – typically only one day per month, and rarely two for holidays. However, some comfort stations did not even grant a single day of leave.[31]

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[28] Su Zhiliang, *Showa-shi no Nazo wo Ou (Inside Japan's Showa Years, 1920s to 1980s), Volume 2,* Bungeishunju, 1993. Cit. in Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)

[29] Ikuhiko Hata, *Ianfu to Senjo no Sei (The Comfort Women and Sex in War)*, Shincho-Sha, 1999. Cit. in Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)

[30] Setsuzō Kinbara, "*Central Records from Setsuzō Kinbara's Work Log*, Vol.1, 1-a," April 15, 1939, Northeast Asian History Foundation (https://kyeol.kr/sites/default/files/resources/J-6.pdf, April 11, 2025)

[31] Asian Women's Fund, *Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html, March 31, 2025)

1.2.2 – From Suffering to Silence: Life in Comfort Stations

Comfort stations were often operated by civilian proprietors, but the military exercised strict and direct control over many aspects of their operation. The military provided or constructed the buildings for these stations, some of which were located within military bases, while others were in nearby villages. Security was managed by the military and key operational aspects such as working hours, holidays, pricing and the assignment of clients were all dictated by military authorities. Medical examinations for sexually transmitted diseases were conducted by military doctors. Additionally, the military appointed management committees and, in many instances, issued tickets for soldiers visiting these stations. [32]

Women at these stations were forced to provide sexual services to numerous soldiers and officers. Comfort stations typically operated for long hours, often from 9:00 or 10:00 AM until late evening. For example, a regulation from the Morikawa unit stationed in Huarongzen designated specific hours for different ranks – soldiers were permitted entry from 10:00 to 18:00, while noncommissioned officers were allowed from 19:00 to 21:00.[33] Each visit was limited to an hour.[34]

At most comfort stations, soldiers were required to pay a fee, either directly or indirectly. The collected money was generally divided between the proprietor and the comfort women, but it was unclear whether the women ever received their share.[35] Documents indicate that fees varied based on nationality, with Chinese women receiving 1 yen, Korean women 1.5 yen and Japanese women 2 yen.[36]

Inside the stations, a "reception" area displayed photographs of the comfort women, labeled with their assigned Japanese names, allowing soldiers to choose their

[32] Asian Women's Fund, *The Life in Comfort Stations* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-09.html, April 1, 2025)
[33] Asian Women's Fund, *The Life in Comfort Stations* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-12.html, April 1, 2025)
[34] The 2nd Independent Heavy Siege Artillery Battalion, *Regulation for the use of Comfort Stations*, March 1938, *Shiryoshusei*, Vol. II, pp. 351-258
[35] Asian Women's Fund, *The Life in Comfort Stations* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-12.html, April 1, 2025)
[36] The 2nd Independent Heavy Siege Artillery Battalion, *Regulation for the use of Comfort Stations*, March 1938, *Shiryoshusei*, Vol. II, pp. 351-258

preferred person. Outside of each room there was a nameplate; if the plate was turned toward the wall, it signified that the room was occupied.

The military supplied soldiers with condoms, which had a military code name that translated to "Assault No. 1" in Japanese. Additionally, a venereal disease prevention ointment was distributed for application on the women before and after intercourse. However, many soldiers disregarded these preventive measures, leading to numerous pregnancies among the comfort women. [37]

In the documentary *63 Years On*, former comfort woman Lee Soo-San recounted that after becoming pregnant, she was beaten in the stomach in an attempt to induce a miscarriage. When this failed, she was forced to continue working despite her pregnancy. Eventually, she was taken to a military hospital, where her uterus was surgically removed along with the fetus, ensuring she could never conceive again.[38]

As Japan's war situation worsened, conditions in the comfort stations became even more unbearable. The women were forcibly relocated alongside the retreating military, stripped of any personal freedom. When the Japanese army withdrew from Southeast Asia, some women were abandoned, while others shared the fate of the defeated soldiers. Many perished, while some managed to escape and find protection with the Allied forces.[39]

Although the Pacific War officially ended on August 15, 1945, the suffering of many surviving comfort women did not. Returning home was often difficult due to the deep stigma they faced. Many chose to remain in foreign lands rather than endure the shame associated with their past. Some Korean women taken to China were only able to return to South Korea in the 1990s.[40]

In *63 Years On*, Lee Soo-San also described how, after being left in China following the war, she decided not to return to Korea. She found work in an inn, where she eventually met her husband. Unable to conceive due to the trauma she had suffered,

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[37] Dong-won Kim, *63 years on*, Streaming video, Dreamville Entertainment Co., Ltd. May 2008
[38] *Ibidem.*
[39] Asian Women's Fund, *The Life in Comfort Stations* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-12.html, April 1, 2025)
[40] *Ibidem.*

they adopted a child. While her husband knew of her past, she never found the courage to reveal the truth to her son.[41]

Many of those who did return home carried severe physical and emotional scars, struggling to rebuild their lives. In the same documentary, Pilar Frias shared that she married in 1949, but her husband abandoned her after learning about her past, as she had not entered the marriage as a virgin.[42]

Many survivors suffered from chronic health issues, venereal diseases, and infertility. In the documentary *The Apology*, former Chinese comfort woman Cao Hei Mao shared her devastating experience:

> I gave birth to two children, one girl and one boy. I had to strangle the baby as it was conceived at the comfort station. When the baby died, it impacted me deeply. I was impregnated by the Japanese soldiers. I almost died giving birth […] I was so scared. I gave birth in the field […] I had the baby on my way home. I had to throw it away. I was damaged so badly I could never bear any more children.[43]

For many survivors, marriage was impossible. Those who did marry often concealed their past, unable to share the weight of their suffering. Grandma Cao later revealed that when she was contacted for the documentary, she saw it as an opportunity to finally break decades of silence and share her story with the world and, more importantly, with her adoptive daughter, who had been unaware of her tragic past.[44]

Even decades after the war, the trauma of the comfort women persisted, leaving them to endure lifelong suffering, much like the years they spent trapped in military-controlled stations.

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[41] Dong-won Kim, *63 years on*, Streaming video, Dreamville Entertainment Co., Ltd. May 2008
[42] *Ibidem.*
[43] Tiffany Hsiung, *The Apology*. Streaming video. PBS, National Film Board of Canada, American Documentary, Inc. April 2016
[44] *Ibidem.*

2 – THE RISE OF THE ISSUE

2.1 – THE START OF THE CHALLENGE: A STEEP PATH AHEAD

It would be inaccurate to claim that the Japanese public was entirely unaware of the presence of comfort women during the war. Those who had served in the military generally had at least some awareness of their existence. However, the matter was not widely recognized or addressed as a broader societal issue. From around 1965 onward, individuals engaged in Japan-Korea relations typically knew about the comfort women system and acknowledged it as one of the most brutal consequences of Japan's colonial rule over Korea. Still, the survivors were largely regarded as figures of the past, rather than as individuals seeking justice.[45]

In 1943, as the war neared its end, a campaign began in Korea to recruit girls for volunteer labor corps, primarily for work in munitions factories. At the time, rumors began to circulate that those who joined would be coerced into becoming comfort women. Although the Japanese Governor-General's office dismissed these claims as baseless and malicious, the denial only served to deepen public suspicion. This suggests that by 1945, knowledge of the comfort women system was not absent in Korean society. Nonetheless, even after Korea's liberation, the topic remained largely unspoken – perhaps deliberately avoided.[46]

It wasn't until after South Korea's democratization in 1987 that the issue began to be publicly addressed and seriously discussed.[47] Although books on the *Chŏngsindae* had been published in Japan since the 1970s,[48] it was not until the late 1980s that feminists and Christian women in both South Korea and Japan began actively politicizing the matter.[49]

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[45] Asian Women's Fund, *How did the Comfort Women Issue come to light?* (https://awf.or.jp/e2/survey.html, April 7, 2025)
[46] *Ibidem.*
[47] *Ibidem.*
[48] For example, II-Myon Kim, *Tenno no Guntai to Chosenjin lanfu* [The emperor's forces and Korean comfort women] (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobo, 1976). Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1232
[49] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1232

In April 1988, the Korean Church Women United (*Han'guk Kyohoe Yosong Yŏnhap*) organized the International Conference on Women and Tourism on South Korea's Chejudo Island. During this event, Yun Chung-Ok of Ewha Womans University presented her research on the *Chŏngsindae* issue, drawing connections between the experiences of comfort women in colonial Korea and the contemporary phenomenon of kisaeng[50] tourism. By January 1989, women's organizations in South Korea had staged a demonstration in Seoul opposing the government's decision to send a representative to Emperor Hirohito's funeral. They also issued a letter urging the government to address the *Chŏngsindae* issue.

A major political opportunity for feminist activists arose in May 1990, during South Korean President Roh Tae-woo's state visit to Japan. Ahead of the visit, South Korean women's organizations presented a list of demands to the Japanese government, including an official investigation into the *Chŏngsindae* system and a formal apology. During a state banquet for President Roh, Emperor Akihito expressed regret for the suffering caused by Japan's colonial rule.[51] However, the issue suddenly resonated with the people of the Republic of Korea after a government representative on the House of Councilors' Budget Committee answered a question from a Diet member on June 6, 1990:

> After listening to elderly people and piecing together what they say, it appears that the wartime comfort women were taken by private entrepreneurs to different places, going where the military went. Frankly, even if one were to conduct an inquiry into the circumstances, it would not yield any results.[52]

In the Republic of Korea, Japanese Councillor Motooka's response was met with strong criticism for rejecting the involvement of the Japanese state and military and for dismissing the possibility of an investigation. On October 17, 1990, 37 women's

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[50] A kisaeng (*기생*) was a traditional Korean entertainer skilled in arts like music, dance, and poetry, often employed to entertain men of higher social status. The role of kisaeng is often compared to that of geisha in Japan, though their social and historical contexts differ. See Byong Won Lee, Evolution of the Role and Status of Korean Professional Female Entertainers (Kisaeng), in *The World of Music*, 1979, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1979), pp. 75-76

[51] *Ibidem.*

[52] Rumiko Nishino and Motokazu Nogawa, The Japanese State's New Assault on the Victims of Wartime Sexual Slavery, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, December 21, 2014, Volume 12, Issue 51, Number 2

organizations in South Korea, in collaboration with a group studying the volunteer corps, issued a joint declaration condemning the Japanese government representative's remarks. They presented six demands to the Japanese government[53], in the form of an official letter to Prime Minister Kaifu before his October 1990 visit to Seoul:[54] a) to acknowledge that the comfort women were forcibly taken; b) to issue a formal apology; c) to conduct an investigation to uncover the truth and make the results public; d) to build a memorial for the victims; e) to provide compensation to the victims or their surviving families; and f) to create educational programs to raise awareness of the historical context of the issue.[55] That November, multiple women's groups united under the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan [KCWS][56], led by Yun Chung-Ok and Lee Hyo-Chae.[57] These demands received extensive coverage in Japan toward the end of the year, and the matter was once again brought up in the Diet.[58]

In August 1991, Kim Hak-sun, a widow in her late sixties, became the first Korean woman to publicly testify about her experiences as a comfort woman for the Japanese military during the Pacific War.[59] Later that year, under the sponsorship of the Association of Pacific War Victims and Bereaved Families, she and other Korean survivors filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government for wartime damages. Additional legal actions followed, including a 1993 lawsuit in which four

[53] Asian Women's Fund, *How did the Comfort Women Issue come to light?* (https://awf.or.jp/e2/survey.html, April 7, 2025)
[54] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1232
[55] Asian Women's Fund, *How did the Comfort Women Issue come to light?* (https://awf.or.jp/e2/survey.html, April 7, 2025)
[56] The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan [KCWS] (*Chŏngsindae munje taech'aek hyŏpŭhoe*) is a group founded in 1990 that advocates for justice and reparations for survivors of the "comfort women" system, providing legal and public support for the victims. Throughout the text, it will be referred to either as the Korean Council or *Chŏngdaehyŏp*
[57] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1232-1233
[58] Asian Women's Fund, *How did the Comfort Women Issue come to light?* (https://awf.or.jp/e2/survey.html, April 7, 2025)
[59] Comfort women testimonies mark the 30th year, *Dong-A Ilbo*, August 16, 2021 (https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20210816/2858239/1, May 03, 2025)

former *Chŏngsindae* members demanded an official apology and $2.29 million in compensation for their forced relocation to Shimonoseki.[60]

In general, survivors and activists have called for a formal apology, financial compensation, the construction of a memorial and revisions to Japanese history textbooks to ensure accurate education on the comfort women issue.[61]

2.2 – BREAKING THE SILENCE: THE DEMAND FOR JAPAN'S APOLOGY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

One of the most controversial aspects in the public discourse surrounding the issue of military comfort women in both South Korea and Japan has been the question of Japan's official responsibility. It was not until mid-1992 that the Japanese government formally acknowledged its administrative and supervisory role in the establishment and maintenance of the so-called "comfort stations".[62] This recognition followed the publication of official documents discovered by Professor Yoshimi, which demonstrated the state's direct involvement in the system.[63]

In the absence of effective governmental action in either country, Lee Hyo-chae, co-chair of the Korean Council, submitted a formal petition to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) on March 4, 1992. The petition requested an investigation into the abuses committed by Japanese authorities against Korean women during the Second World War and called upon the international community to urge Japan to provide compensation to the victims.[64] As a result, the issue was officially included in the agenda of the Commission's August 1992 session in Geneva. During the meeting, representatives from the *Chŏngdaehyŏp*, as well as a former comfort woman, offered public testimony. Due in large part to sustained lobbying by feminist and human rights activists, the UN Sub-Commission on the

[60] *Korea Times*, January 6, 1993. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1233
[61] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1231-1233
[62] *Ibidem.*
[63] For example, Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)
[64] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1234-1235

Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities condemned the comfort women system as a crime against humanity and a clear violation of international treaties prohibiting forced labor, [65] such as those Japan had signed in 1932.[66]

Despite eventually acknowledging the state's involvement, the Japanese government continued to deny, until 1993, any use of coercion in the recruitment of Korean women and refused to accept the possibility of paying individual reparations.[67] The prevailing discourse among state officials, scholars, and opinion leaders – largely male-dominated – tended to frame the matter as one of financial indemnity, while insufficient attention was given to the systemic violations of the victims' fundamental human rights. Since the public testimony of survivor Kim Hak-sun in 1991, debates in both South Korea and Japan have remained fractured and dynamic. Korean feminist Yun Chung-ok noted that even among Japanese feminist circles, there was often reluctance to support calls for legal accountability for those responsible for the sexual exploitation of comfort women. [68]

The Wednesday demonstrations that began in January 1992 in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul brought together former victims, staff from the *Chŏngdaehyŏp* and supporters who chanted slogans demanding apology, justice and compensation.[69] Meanwhile, in Japan, some former military personnel rationalized the abuse as an inevitable aspect of warfare and asserted that suffering during

[65] Alice Y. Chai, Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics: The *Chongsindae/Jugunianfu* ('Comfort Women') Movement, *Korean Studies*, no. 17 (1993), pp. 67-91. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1234-1235

[66] In 1932, Japan signed the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, which aimed to combat human trafficking and forced labor. Despite this, Japan later argued that the comfort women system did not violate international law, as Korea was considered part of Japan's territory during its colonial rule (1910-1945). This view was used to dismiss claims that the comfort women were victims of forced labor or sexual slavery, as Japan framed the issue as an internal matter rather than an international one. Additionally, Japan drew on its tradition of licensed prostitution at home to excuse the system of sexual slavery abroad, framing the exploitation of women as a continuation of domestic practices rather than a violation of international norms. See L.H.M. Ling, Review of *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, by Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 1, no. 2 (2001), pp. 314-317

[67] *Han'guk Ilbo*, July 7, 1992. August 4. 1992. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1235

[68] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1235

[69] *Ibidem.*

wartime was universal.[70] Others accused the Korean side of seeking financial gain from colonial grievances. In reaction to such claims, some segments of Korean society proposed foregoing demands for monetary compensation from Japan and instead advocated for national fundraising efforts to assist the survivors directly,[71] viewing such actions as a means of preserving Korean dignity and moral autonomy. In December 1992, a nationwide fundraising campaign was launched in South Korea. By June 1993, the initiative had gathered 200 million won, a fifth of its intended goal.[72] Simultaneously, Buddhist communities contributed to the effort by initiating plans for a dedicated care facility, the House of Sharing (*Nanum-ŭi chip*), to provide shelter and support for the women.[73] By early 1995, seven survivors were residing in a temporary facility in Seoul.[74]

The South Korean government, under President Kim Young-sam, later aligned itself with this non-material compensation model. In March 1993, Kim declared that the state would cease to pursue financial reparations from Japan, instead emphasizing the need for a thorough investigation, full disclosure and an unequivocal apology. This stance, framed as a moral high ground in future bilateral relations, was supported by legislation that granted each survivor a one-time payment of five million won and a monthly stipend of 250,000 won starting in 1995. Many South Koreans viewed these measures as appropriate and dignified responses to the historical injustice.[75]

Japan appeared to interpret President Kim's position as conciliatory. In mid-1993, following public hearings with Korean survivors, the Japanese government officially acknowledged the use of coercion in the recruitment process and

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[70] Rumiko Nishino, *Jugun lanfu* [Military comfort women] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 1992). Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1235

[71] *Han'guk Ilbo*, February 12, 1992; *Chosun Ilbo*, July 5, 8, 1992. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1235

[72] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1235-1236

[73] Committee for the Construction of the Nanum-ŭi chip, "*Nanum-ŭi chip Charyŏjip* [Collection of reference materials] (Seoul: Author, 1993). Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1236

[74] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1236

[75] *Ibidem.*

recognized the breach of humanitarian norms,[76] issuing the *Kōno Statement*, which admitted military and governmental involvement in the establishment of the system and expressed "sincere apologies and remorse" for the suffering inflicted.[77]

In November 1994, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) recommended that Japan issue interim reparations of USD 40,000 to each survivor.[78] Shortly thereafter, a collective of 105 lawyers – with both Korean and Japanese professionals – issued a public statement asserting the Japanese government's legal obligation to provide reparations under international law.[79] In response to increasing international pressure, Japan formulated a compensation proposal in December 1994 that sought to raise non-governmental funds for one-time payments to the victims. This initiative, however, was rejected by the *Chŏngdaehyŏp*, which insisted that reparations must come directly from the Japanese state as the responsible entity.

While official dialogue remained constrained by nationalistic undertones, women's rights organizations and feminist activists from South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand formed transnational alliances to demand justice. One notable example was the 1995 Asian Women's Solidarity Forum held in Seoul, which issued a resolution denouncing Japan's attempt to deflect legal responsibility through private donations.[80]

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[76] Ken'ichi Takagi, The War Compensation Issue of Japan: Its Development and Assignments, paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, Massachusetts, March 1994. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1236

[77] Asian Women's Fund, Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of "Comfort Women" (August 4, 1993), in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-02.html, April 13, 2025)

[78] Ustinia Dolgopol and Snehal Paranjape, Comfort Women. An Unfinished Ordeal (Geneva, Switzerland: International Commission of Jurists, 1994), p. 105. The ICJ, a nongovernmental organization headquartered in Geneva, is composed of distinguished jurists from around the world who work toward full observance of the provisions in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1236

[79] *Han'guk Ilbo*, November 29, 1994. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1237

[80] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1237

Subsequently, Japan revised its approach by establishing the Asian Women's Fund,[81] intended to provide financial assistance to survivors and support initiatives addressing gender-based violence.[82] Though primarily funded by private contributions, the Japanese government pledged to allocate public funds toward the medical and welfare needs of former comfort women.[83] And yet, it is precisely this shared responsibility in the public character of the Fund that rendered ambiguous the identification of the actor that would properly assume the moral responsibility of the nation. This ambiguity was also evident in the dual logic in which, on one hand, the government claimed it was unable to provide individual compensation to the victims and, on the other hand, the Fund asserted that its compensation was granted also on behalf of the government.[84]

Despite the willingness demonstrated by the establishment of the Asian Women's Fund, the Japanese delegation notably refrained from addressing the issue of comfort women at the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, even as it actively participated in sessions concerning gender-based violence in armed conflict.[85]

In light of this, many perceived Japan's actions not as a genuine gesture of accountability, but rather as a problematic attempt to placate the victims[86] – one

[81] The "Josei no tame no Ajia Heiwa Kokumin Kikin" (*財団法人女性のためのアジア平和国民基金*), known in English as Asian Women's Fund (AWF), is a non-governmental organization (NGO) established in July 1995 with the Japanese government's support

[82] "Today's Japan," TV news show aired on channel 32, San Francisco, June 15, 1995; pamphlet published by Asian Women's Fund, supplied by Glenda Roberts. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1237

[83] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1237

[84] Yasuaki Ōnuma, *Japanese War Guilt and the Postwar Responsibility of Japan*, paper presented at Harvard University, March 3, 2001, published in Japanese as *Nihon no sensō sekinin to sengo sekinin*, in *Kokusai Mondai*, 2001, quoted in Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Rana Mitter, *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post–Cold War in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 36. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 91

[85] *Chosen Ilbo*, September 14, 1995. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1237

[86] Elazar Barkan, Sex Slaves: Comfort Women and Japanese Guilt, in The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustice, W.W. Norton &Company, New York 2000, cit., p. 59. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 92

that risked being interpreted as a form of coercive appeasement, intended to curb the survivors' ongoing recourse to legal action.

To further complicate the matter, compensation was granted only upon formal request and solely to those individuals who were officially recognized as former comfort women by the local authorities of their respective countries. This system further discriminated against victims who, fifty years later, were required to prove both that they had not engaged in prostitution prior to the war and that they had been forcibly recruited into the Japanese military brothels. Moreover, this led to an additional layer of discrimination against those who, though recruited "voluntarily" due to poverty, had endured the same coercive conditions within the comfort stations.[87]

As such, the fundamental criterion for receiving compensation from the Fund rested on the ability to demonstrate that the victim had been forcibly recruited. It is therefore not surprising that, for the majority of survivors, the refusal to accept Japanese compensation became a matter of personal – and, indeed, national – pride.[88]

In both Korea and Taiwan, movement leaders have urged survivors to present a united front in rejecting the Asian Women's Fund (AWF), describing the Fund's offer as a deceptive tactic by the Japanese government to evade legal accountability. In these countries[89] [90], survivors are able to refuse the AWF compensation because

[87] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 92
[88] *Ibidem.*
[89] As of 2002, 36 surviving Taiwanese former comfort women, identified by the Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation, received a monthly allowance of NT$15,000 (approximately ¥60,000) from the Taiwanese government to subsidize their living expenses. See Asian Women's Fund, Projects by Country or Region – Taiwan, in *Atonement Project of the Asian Women's Fund*, (https://www.awf.or.jp/e3/taiwan.html, April 19, 2025)
[90] In South Korea, the new administration of Kim Dae Jung, who became president in March 1998, decided, although it had not intended to demand state reparations from Tokyo, to contribute 31.5 million won (then 3.1 million yen) in May of that same year, along with an additional 41.8 million won raised through donations by the Citizens' Coalition. This money was to be distributed as a fixed monthly allowance for living expenses to those who had chosen to oppose the Asian Women's Fund initiatives. The Seoul government granted this sum to 142 victims, excluding 11—7 who had accepted the Japanese financial compensation and 4 who had not signed the written pledge and had accepted the Fund's benefits. See Korean comfort women compensated, *BBC News*, March 29, 1998 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/despatches/71239.stm). Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), pp. 92-93. [English translation mine]

the governments provide monthly support and other welfare benefits, which enables them to follow the formal stance of the movement's leadership.[91]

Despite this, in January 1997, seven Korean survivors accepted the AWF offer, which not only angered the movement leaders but also divided survivors into supporters and critics of the leadership's position. The rhetoric used by some in Korea likened the acceptance of the Fund to a "second rape" of the survivors by Japan, with money as the enticement. In response, the Korean Council launched a fundraising campaign in the fall of 1997 and lobbied the newly elected Kim Dae Jung administration.[92] This resulted in the South Korean government providing special support payments of 31.5 million won[93] (approximately US$26,000) to about 140 survivors (excluding the seven who had accepted the AWF compensation) in May 1998. The payment was conditional on the survivors signing a pledge not to accept any funds from the AWF. The Korean Council regarded this as a "victory" in its three-year campaign against the Fund and pledged to continue its efforts for direct compensation from the Japanese government.[94]

In July 1998, in alignment with the Korean Council's position, Seoul formally requested that Tokyo cease payments from the AWF atonement fund and reconsider the allocation of the Fund's resources. In response, Wada Haruki[95] reached out to the Korean Council to inquire about its stance on altering the parameters of the Fund's project. The leaders of the *Chŏngdaehyŏp* suggested that the Fund redirect its resources toward educating future generations about the issue of comfort women. On July 16, eight dissatisfied survivors (primarily those who had accepted

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[91] Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), p. 228

[92] *Ibidem.*

[93] The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, *Han'guk Chŏngsindae Munche Taech'aek Hyŏpūihoe*, vol. 13 (June 1998), p. 4. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), p. 228

[94] *Ivi*, p. 3. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 228-229

[95] Professor at the renowned University of Tokyo and one of the promoters of the Asian Women's Fund. Wada has written numerous works related to North Korea and the relations between Japan and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He is also the Secretary General of the National Association for the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between Japan and North Korea. See Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), pp. 89-90

the Fund's compensation in January 1997) came together to express their desire to receive payments from the Korean government and to call for public investigations into both the Korean Council and the House of Sharing, a Buddhist support organization for survivors.[96]

This attitude from Korea and Taiwan, which hindered the operation of the Fund's activities, was interpreted by the Japanese side as a profound inability to understand the "goodwill" on which the compensation projects were based.[97] Indeed, although Wada had admitted that the manner in which the Fund dispensed compensation "could not leave a good impression"[98] he also emphasized that Japan's admission of its moral responsibility was a much more effective system for resolving complicated cases like the comfort women issue, as it could easily lead to a genuine legal recognition of the matter.[99] He argued that, as demonstrated by some criminal cases, an immediate recognition of legal responsibility would certainly lead to legal compensation, but not necessarily to sincere official apologies.[100]

Despite the dissent and opposition, from August 1996 until the dissolution of the Fund on March 31, 2007, the organization successfully provided compensation, social and healthcare support and delivered the Prime Minister's letter of apology to 364 former comfort women[101] – 11 in the Republic of Korea, 274 in the Philippines and Taiwan and 79 in the Netherlands.[102] In Indonesia, however, the

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[96] The Korean Council, *Han'guk Chŏngsindae Munche Taech'aek Hyŏpūihoe*, vol. 14 (September 1998), p. 19. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), p. 229

[97] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 93

[98] Chris Hogg, Japan's Divisive 'Comfort Women' Fund, *BBC News*, April 10, 2007, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6530197.stm, April 12, 2025)

[99] Haruki Wada, *Moral Responsibility and the Asian Women's Fund in Moral Responsibility and Reconciliation*, International Expert Meeting, Tōkyō, January 14-15, 2005, pp. 93-94. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 93

[100] *Ivi.* p. 94. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 93

[101] Asian Women's Fund, Statement by President of AWF Murayama on the Scheduled Closing of the AWF in 2007, in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-33.html, April 12, 2025)

[102] The number of comfort women from the Netherlands is this high because a significant group of Dutch women, primarily from the former Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), were forcibly taken and exploited in military-run brothels during the Japanese occupation. This case is among the most well-documented instances involving European victims and was notably addressed in postwar

Fund's projects were implemented differently, and as a result, the exact number of victims who benefited remains uncertain.[103]

However, the Fund did not operate in the People's Republic of China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Malaysia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, or Japan (countries where there had been direct testimonies). In this regard, Wada Haruki was only able to explain the exclusion of China and North Korea from the projects. The inactivity in China was due to the reluctance of the Chinese government, which refused to cooperate in any way with the Fund; while in North Korea, the Fund could not operate because no diplomatic relations had yet been established between the two countries.[104] Furthermore, countries or regions where the victims of the comfort women system had not yet come forward publicly were also excluded from the projects, such as Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, India, Guam, the Solomon Islands, Palau, and other Southeast Asian islands. In these cases, moreover, Japan has never conducted any investigations aimed at providing "humanitarian" assistance to the survivors.[105]

2.2.1 – Apology or Evasion? Hashimoto's Letter and the Struggle for Official Responsibility

Another reason for intense debate was the letter drafted by Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto, which was delivered to each victim along with the compensation from the Fund. The content of this letter sparked controversy even before it was written. Initially, Prime Minister Hashimoto had expressed his intention not to issue any

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Dutch and international legal proceedings. See Asian Women's Fund, *Women made to become comfort women – Netherlands* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e1/netherlands.html, May 10, 2025)

[103] In the Netherlands and Indonesia, the Fund's activities took different forms. In the Netherlands, the 79 victims received only social and healthcare support, along with the letter, following a formal request. In Indonesia, at the explicit request of the country's government, the decision was made to build 69 healthcare facilities for the elderly, with former "comfort women" given priority for entry. However, in practice, this did not occur. See Asian Women's Fund, Statement by President of AWF Murayama on the Scheduled Closing of the AWF in 2007, in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-33.html, April 12, 2025); and Chris Hogg, Japan's Divisive 'Comfort Women' Fund, *BBC News*, April 10, 2007, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6530197.stm, April 12, 2025)

[104] Chris Hogg, Japan's Divisive 'Comfort Women' Fund, *BBC News*, April 10, 2007, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6530197.stm, April 12, 2025)

[105] NGO Shadow Report to CEDAW, *Japan The "Comfort Women" Issue*, 44th Session 2009, New York (https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/ComfortWomen_Japan_cedaw44.pdf, April 12, 2025)

form of apology. This led to the anger and immediate resignation in May 1996 of Miki Mutsuko, wife of former Prime Minister Miki Takeo (1974-1976), who was one of the most popular figures among the nineteen promoters of the Fund. Her resignation attracted both Japanese and international media attention, contributing to the tarnishing of the Fund's image.[106]

This situation forced Hashimoto to reconsider his stance and publicly apologize for what had occurred with Miki.[107] Three months later, in August 1996, his letter, along with one from the Fund's President, Hara Bunbei, was delivered to the first four Filipino victims.[108] The letter said the following:

> Dear Madam,
>
> On the occasion that the Asian Women's Fund, in cooperation with the Government and the people of Japan, offers atonement from the Japanese people to the former wartime comfort women, I wish to express my personal[109] feelings as well. The issue of comfort women, with an involvement of the Japanese military authorities at that time, was a grave affront to the honor and dignity of large numbers of women. As Prime Minister of Japan, I thus extend anew my most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women. We must not evade the weight of the past, nor should we evade our responsibilities for the future. I believe that our country, painfully aware of its moral responsibilities, with feelings of apology and remorse, should face up squarely to its past history and accurately convey it to future generations. Furthermore, Japan also should take an active part in dealing with violence and other forms of injustice to the honor and dignity of women. Finally, I pray from the bottom of my heart that each of you will find peace for the rest of your lives.
>
> Respectfully yours,
>
> Ryutaro Hashimoto, Prime Minister of Japan[110]

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[106] Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), p. 225

[107] *Ibidem.*

[108] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 94

[109] This word was omitted from the texts after 1998

[110] Asian Women's Fund, Letter from Prime Minister to the Former Comfort Women (1996), in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-12.html, April 12, 2025)

Hashimoto's letter, primarily aimed at avoiding the issue of state compensation for wartime crimes,[111] contained expressions such as “apologies and remorse” and references to the “honor and dignity of large numbers of women”, yet it failed to acknowledge Japan's acts of aggression or colonial rule. In contrast, Hara's letter explicitly recognized the involvement of the Japanese military in the establishment of comfort stations, acknowledging both coercion and deceit in the recruitment of the women. While both letters referenced Japan's “moral responsibilities”, Hara's letter repeatedly included the phrase “in cooperation with the Government of Japan”. [112]

However, it was Hashimoto's use of “my personal feelings” that sparked outrage among activists advocating for state compensation, as it underscored the idea that the letter represented the sentiments of an individual rather than the official position of the Japanese government. (The inclusion of said term in the “provisional” English translation of the Japanese phrase “*watashi no kimochi* [my feeling]” remains unexplained,[113] though from 1998, when Obuchi Keizo succeeded Hashimoto as prime minister, the English translation of the letter no longer contained said term).[114]

The Prime Minister's letter did not seem to have changed the survivors' views on the “goodwill” of the Japanese compensation, as it did not express the strong moral cooperation from the government. Instead, it increasingly indicated that the return to power of the Liberal Democratic Party would lead to a new political refusal concerning the comfort women issue.[115]

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[111] Cf. *Asahi Shimbun*, August 16, 1996. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), p. 225

[112] Asian Women’s Fund, Letter from AWF President to Former Comfort Women (1996), in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-13.html, April 12, 2025)

[113] AWF, *Josei no tame no Ajia Heiwa Kokumin Kikin/ Asian Women 's Fund*, pp. 10-11. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), p. 225

[114] Chunghee Sarah Soh, Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women", in *Pacific Affairs*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), p. 226

[115] Elazar Barkan, Sex Slaves: Comfort Women and Japanese Guilt, in The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustice, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2000, cit., pp. 56-57. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 96

2.3 – FROM APOLOGY TO DENIAL: THE CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

Since the emergence of the comfort women issue in the early 1990s, modest yet nonetheless significant milestones have been achieved in advancing recognition and accountability. A pivotal moment in this regard was the statement issued on August 4, 1993, by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei. In this declaration, the Japanese government officially acknowledged the involvement of military authorities in the establishment and management of the so-called "comfort stations", and extended a formal apology to the survivors.[116]

These apologies were subsequently reaffirmed by Prime Minister Hosokawa in 1993[117] and later by Prime Minister Murayama in both 1994[118] and 1995[119]. In the same period, as previously discussed, the Asian Women's Fund was established – an initiative that emerged during a phase of relative political openness under the brief leadership of Murayama Tomiichi of the Social Democratic Party. A phase, this, marked by a willingness to address historical accountability. Murayama played a key role in the creation of the Fund and committed the country to the principle of compensation, albeit through private channels.[120]

Despite the goals achieved, the rise to power of Hashimoto Ryūtarō in January 1996 – a well-known nationalist and president of the influential Association of War

[116] Asian Women's Fund, Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of "Comfort Women" (August 4, 1993), in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-02.html, April 13, 2025)
[117] Seiichiro Noboru, Japanese War Apology, *Los Angeles Times,* August 29, 1995 (https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-08-29-me-39980-story.html, April 13, 2025)
[118] Asian Women's Fund, Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the "Peace, Friendship, and Exchange Initiative" (August 31, 1994), in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-04.html, April 13, 2025)
[119] Asian Women's Fund, Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama On the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the End of the War (August 15, 1995), in *Documents of Japanese Government and the AWF* (https://www.awf.or.jp/e6/statement-10.html, April 13, 2025)
[120] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 98

Bereaved Families (*Nippon Izokukai*)[121] – marked a return to a more repressive stance by the Tokyo government regarding any attempts to engage in dialogue over Japan's wartime responsibilities. That same year also witnessed the emergence, under the leadership of Fujioka Nobukatsu, of a neo-nationalist movement that openly opposed the activities of the Fund and propagated the view that Japan could not, under any circumstances, be held accountable for the acts of abduction and enslavement for which it had been accused.[122]

This movement, known as *Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho o tsukurukai* (Association for the Creation of New History Textbooks – hereafter referred to as *Tsukurukai*), had the explicit goal of "correcting" historical narratives by removing events perceived as undermining Japanese national pride. It aimed to promote a "comfortable and reassuring interpretation of wartime history", one in which crimes such as the system of comfort stations were notably absent.[123] Under the leadership of Fujioka, the movement launched a full-fledged campaign against the comfort women issue, characterizing it as a baseless scandal fabricated in the 1990s to politically discredit Japan.[124] No other wartime atrocity was denied with such intensity by neo-nationalist circles: every aspect of the issue was refuted – including its very

[121] The Association of War Veterans and Bereaved Families (*Nippon Izokukai — 日本遺族会*) is a widely spread organization throughout Japan, founded in 1947 but officially established as a legal entity (*zaidan hōjin*) in March 1953. The activities of the Izokukai aim to honor the spirits of those who died in war, support the families of the fallen, promote morality in assisting and comforting these families, cultivate character and contribute to the establishment of a peaceful country. Additionally, with government support, periodic pilgrimages are organized, which include visits to temples and mausoleums where the fallen of World War II are commemorated. See Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 96

[122] Gavan McCormack, The Japanese Movement to "Correct" History in L. Hein-M. Selden, *Censoring History*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2000, pp. 59-63. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), pp. 96-97

[123] R. Caroli, *Le tendenze revisionistiche nella produzione culturale giapponese*, "Atti del XXII Convegno di Studi sul Giappone" (Aistugia, Cortina d'Ampezzo 10-12 settembre 1998), Venezia, Aistugia, 1999, p. 86. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 97

[124] Gavan McCormack, The Japanese Movement to "Correct" History in L. Hein-M. Selden, Censoring History, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2000, p. 60. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 97

existence, the forced recruitment of women, the coercive nature of the comfort station system and, consequently, any claim to apology or compensation.[125]

We cannot be surprised, then, if it is precisely the crimes committed against women that are most readily subject to denial, marginalization or erasure in dominant historical narratives. Gender-based violence, particularly when institutionalized and perpetrated during wartime, has long occupied a precarious place within collective memory, often regarded as peripheral or inconvenient to national self-representation. The rejection of the comfort women issue by neo-nationalist movements reflects this broader tendency to delegitimize experiences that challenge patriarchal and militaristic visions of history.

The *Tsukurukai* directed its campaign specifically against the formulation of official apologies and the acknowledgment of both moral and legal responsibility on the part of Japan. Central to its argument was the rejection of the notion of forced recruitment, which the victims consistently testified.[126] According to Hata[127] and Fujioka, the so-called military "comfort women" were merely professional prostitutes who had been generously compensated for their services in Japanese military brothels, in a manner comparable to that of Western troops.[128] This position was grounded in the claim that no written documentation existed to confirm acts of abduction, the use of force, or other coercive methods that would have compelled these women into the military comfort station system.[129]

Following the Liberal Democratic Party's return to power in 1996, neonationalist narratives increasingly found support within government institutions.[130] This

[125] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 97

[126] Ikuhiko Hata, *No Organized or Forced Recruitment: Misconceptions about Comfort Women and the Japanese Military*. Tokyo: Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, 2007

[127] Ikuhiko Hata is a Japanese historian and professor emeritus at Nihon University, known for his revisionist views on Japan's wartime history. He has contributed extensively to the scholarly debate surrounding the comfort women issue, advocating interpretations that challenge the established narratives regarding coercion and state responsibility

[128] Nobukatsu Fujioka, "Comfort Women: Professor Ramseyer's Indomitable Argument", *Japan Forward* (https://japan-forward.com/comfort-women-professor-ramseyers-indomitable-argument/, April 13, 2025

[129] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 97

[130] *Ibidem.*

alignment was particularly visible in two key moments: first, in 2001, when the Ministry of Education approved a school textbook produced by the *Tsukurukai* organization, which notably omitted any reference to the comfort women issue[131]; and later, in 2007, when Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, during deliberations on U.S. House Resolution 121 (discussed further below), argued that Japan could not assume legal responsibility, citing the absence of documented evidence confirming the forced recruitment of these women.[132]

This reflection on the comfort women issue also engaged the publishing sector. Between 1992 and 1996, there was a significant increase in publications on the topic.[133] This media attention could be interpreted in light of both the strong international pressure exerted by women's movements seeking state reparations and the growing domestic public interest, fueled by awareness campaigns led by social movements and the circulation of historical documentation. During this period, numerous museums, memorials, and associations were established,[134] offering a new historical interpretation of the wartime period and supporting the demands of the former comfort women for legal recognition.[135]

The sharp decline in public attention to the comfort women issue from 1997 onwards can be interpreted as a result of the ongoing economic crisis, which

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[131] Association for the Creation of New History Textbooks, *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho* [*New History Textbook*], Tokyo, Fusōsha Publishing, 2001

[132] Norikazu Doro, On the Question: Why Do We Have to Apologize Again and Again? - Give Us a Break, in *The Truth about the Comfort Women*, translated by Shirakaba Kyoikukan, August 12, 2014 (https://www.shirakaba.gr.jp/home/tayori/k_tayori157EN.htm, April 19, 2025)

[133] For the publications released between 1990 and 1998, see the study conducted by Kenji Tsutsui, *Redressing Past Human Rights Violations: Global Dimensions of Contemporary Social Movements*, "Social Forces", LXXXV, 1, 2006, pp. 331-354. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 98

[134] In 1991, the establishment of Pīsu Ōsaka (Osaka International Peace Center) and the Kyoto World Peace Museum marked a significant milestone. In 1992, the Ritsumeikan University Peace Museum, Kawasaki Peace Museum, and Saitama Peace Museum were founded. By 1995, the Oka Masaharu Memorial Nagasaki Peace Museum was created. Additionally, existing institutions such as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (1994) and Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum (1996) updated their exhibits, shedding light on the atrocities committed by the Japanese during the war. See Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of "The Rape of Nanking": History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 135-136. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. *Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, no. 15 (2011), p. 99

[135] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. *Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, no. 15 (2011), pp. 98-99

redirected concerns in various sectors of Japanese society. In response to this social unease, the neonationalist group led by Fujioka and the conservative government of the Liberal Democratic Party, as previously mentioned, challenged the apologetic policies of the early part of the decade. It is clear, therefore, that in this context, public focus shifted away from the past in favor of addressing present and future concerns.[136]

2.4 – AN INTERNATIONAL CALL FOR OFFICIAL APOLOGY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

At the international level, the establishment of the Fund with the support of the Japanese government was welcomed as a positive first step in acknowledging the issue, but it was not seen as a definitive solution. In 1996, the United Nations issued a formal condemnation, with Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy explicitly holding Japan responsible for the forced sexual enslavement of tens of thousands of women during World War II. In her report to the UN Human Rights Commission, Coomaraswamy called for the identification and prosecution of the perpetrators, reparations for the victims, and a formal written apology from the Japanese government. Additionally, she recommended that this dark chapter of history be included in educational curricula to ensure future generations understood the full extent of the crime.[137] These calls for justice closely aligned with the longstanding demands of the *Chŏngdaehyŏp*. However, Japan continued to resist formal legal responsibility,[138] and despite these international efforts, the issue remained unresolved on the global stage.

This led to growing frustration among international advocacy groups and victims' organizations, who felt that Japan's refusal to take meaningful action left the survivors without justice. In response to this ongoing denial, various Asian women's movements came together to form the Tokyo International Women's

[136] *Ivi.* p. 99
[137] *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 7, 1996; *Han'guk Ilbo*, February 8, 1996. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1226
[138] Japan asks author of 1996 UN sex slave report to make retractions, *Global Times*, October 17, 2014 (https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/886828.shtml, April 22, 2025)

Tribunal in 2000, a significant step in highlighting the issue on a global scale and pushing for accountability.[139] By 2007, the pressure from international actors reached its peak, with the U.S. House of Representatives, prompted by Korean and Chinese organizations, ratifying Resolution 121 (H.Res.121) on July 30.[140] The resolution stated:

> […] that the Government of Japan
>
> (1) should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces' coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as 'comfort women,' during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II;
>
> (2) would help to resolve recurring questions about the sincerity and status of prior statements if the Prime Minister of Japan were to make such an apology as a public statement in his official capacity;
>
> (3) should clearly and publicly refute any claims that the sexual enslavement and trafficking of the 'comfort women' for the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces never occurred; and
>
> (4) should educate current and future generations about this horrible crime while following the recommendations of the international community with respect to the 'comfort women'.[141]

This resolution, which clearly stated that the comfort women issue had not been adequately resolved by the Japanese government, urged Tokyo to take action in favor of the surviving victims, whose numbers were dwindling year by year.[142] Equally significant was the response from the Japanese Embassy's website:

> The draft House Resolution (H.Res.121) is erroneous in terms of the facts. The Japanese government has acknowledged the 'comfort women'

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[139] Education for Social Justice Foundation, *2000 Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery* (https://www.e4sjf.org/2000-womenrsquos-international-war-crimes-tribunal-on-japanrsquos-military-sexual-slavery.html, April 22, 2025)

[140] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. *Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, no. 15 (2011), p. 99

[141] GovTrack.us., *H.Res. 121 — 110th Congress: A resolution expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces' coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as "comfort women", during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II*, July 30, 2007 (https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hres121, April 19, 2025)

[142] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. *Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, no. 15 (2011), p. 100

> issue and has offered formal apologies on many important occasions; the government and the people of Japan have already taken concrete measures for the victims (Asian Women's Fund); and this issue is not neglected in the public school education of Japan.
>
> It concluded: (1) The draft House Resolution (H.Res.121) is erroneous in terms of the facts. (2) Its adoption would be harmful to the friendship between the US and Japan. (3) Prime Minister Abe has reaffirmed the 1993 statement. [143]

In response, Mindy Kotler, director of Asia Policy Point, a non-profit research center based in Washington, who was tasked by Senator Mike Honda to draft the official H.Res.121, stated:

> A definitive and official statement from the government must meet one of these four conditions:
>
> (1) a bill discussed by the Diet. The Prime Minister, representing the Cabinet, submits a bill to the Diet (Art. 72), which becomes law upon approval by both the Lower House and the Upper House (Art. 59), and with the signature of the responsible minister and the countersignature of the Prime Minister (Art. 74);
>
> (2) a statement from a minister of the Cabinet in a plenary session of the Diet;
>
> (3) a statement from the Prime Minister in an official communiqué when abroad;
>
> (4) a statement ratified by the Cabinet, known as a cabinet decision (kakugi kettei).
>
> In practice, none of the first three examples of official statements are possible without a cabinet decision. A cabinet decision is the definitive expression of official government policy in Japan. Thus far, in regard to the Comfort Women, none of these conditions have been met.[144]

Following Kotler's statement that the apologies issued thus far could not be considered official, as they did not meet any of the established criteria, Kinue Tokudome[145] reached out to the Japanese Embassy for clarification on the matter.

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[143] Kinue Tokudome, Passage of H.Res. 121 on 'Comfort Women,' the US Congress and Historical Memory in Japan, *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, August 30, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/kinue-tokudome/2510/article, April 19, 2025)

[144] *Ibidem.*

[145] Kinue Tokudome is a Japanese-American writer and advocate engaged in historical reconciliation between Japan and the United States. She founded the U.S.–Japan Dialogue on POWs and has written extensively on wartime issues, including the Japanese military's system of sexual slavery. See Kinue Tokudome, Passage of H.Res. 121 on 'Comfort Women,' the US Congress and Historical Memory in Japan, *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, August 30, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/kinue-tokudome/2510/article, April 19, 2025)

In their response, the Embassy asserted that all apologies issued by the Japanese government, including the Kono Statement, were official. However, they did not acknowledge that, in a reply to written questions from Lower House member Tsujimoto Kiyomi on March 16, 2007, Prime Minister Abe had clarified that the Kono Statement was not officially endorsed by a cabinet decision (*kakugi kettei*).

She further emphasized that, as a non-governmental organization, the Asian Women's Fund should not be considered a legitimate means to resolve the comfort women issue. In addition, she pointed out the troubling trend of the comfort women reference gradually disappearing from Japanese textbooks. [146]

Congressman Michael Honda,[147] who was appointed to draft and introduce H.Res.121, stated in an interview conducted by Tokudome that the resolution was merely an official call from the U.S. Congress. Informed by the Korean and Japanese women's movements active in the United States, Congress had become concerned about the growing influence of Japanese neonationalists who sought to distort and erase Japan's wartime past. The resolution, therefore, urged the Japanese government to take concrete humanitarian actions toward the victims. The purpose of this measure was not to attack or humiliate Japan but to challenge Japanese leaders in order to direct the 'comfort women' issue toward a clear and proper resolution.[148]

The news that the U.S. House of Representatives was working on House Resolution 121 reached Japan in the early months of 2007, sparking significant attention. While this wasn't the first time Congress had debated such a resolution, this particular discussion attracted an unusually high level of international attention.[149]

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[146] *Ibidem.*

[147] During the debate over Resolution 121, a smear campaign was organized in Japan against Congressman Honda. The Sankei Shimbun newspaper accused him of being bribed by Korean and Chinese activist groups, claiming these groups had significant connections to the Chinese government. See Kinue Tokudome, The Japanese Apology on the "Comfort Women" Cannot Be Considered Official: Interview with Congressman Michael Honda, *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, May 2, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/kinue-tokudome/2438/article, April 19, 2025)

[148] *Idem,* The Japanese Apology on the "Comfort Women" Cannot Be Considered Official: Interview with Congressman Michael Honda, *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, May 2, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/kinue-tokudome/2438/article, April 19, 2025)

[149] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Japan's 'Comfort Women': It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word), *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, March 1, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/tessa-morris-suzuki/2373/article, April 19, 2025)

On March 1, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe responded to the resolution by claiming that there was "no evidence" that the recruitment of comfort women had been "forcible in the narrow sense of the word". He further elaborated during a Diet committee debate a few days later, clarifying that for the recruitment to be considered "forcible in the narrow sense", it would have involved "officials breaking into houses like kidnappers and taking people away".[150] While Abe seemed to acknowledge that the recruitment could be deemed forcible "in a broader sense", he firmly rejected any historical responsibility, making it clear that neither he nor his administration would offer an apology, regardless of the outcome of the U.S. Congressional resolution.[151] Foreign Minister Taro Aso also criticized the U.S. resolution, asserting that it was "not based on the facts".[152]

Following the adoption of U.S. House Resolution 121 in July 2007, several other national legislatures passed similar motions. Later that year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on December 13, 2007, calling on Japan to accept historical and legal responsibility for the system of comfort women. Likewise, the Canadian House of Commons unanimously passed Motion 291 on November 28, 2007, and the Dutch Parliament approved a similar motion that same month, all demanding a formal apology and redress for the victims.[153] In 2008, this momentum extended to East Asia, with the South Korean National Assembly adopting a resolution on October 27 urging Japan to take responsibility and issue an official apology,[154] followed by the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan passing a comparable resolution on November 11.[155] These developments reflected an emerging

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[150] *Mainichi Shimbun*, evening edition, 5 March 2005. Cit. in Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Japan's 'Comfort Women': It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word), *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, March 1, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/tessa-morris-suzuki/2373/article, April 19, 2025)
[151] *Nikkei Sokuho Nyusu*, 5 March 2007. Cit. in Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Japan's 'Comfort Women': It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word), *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, March 1, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/tessa-morris-suzuki/2373/article, April 19, 2025)
[152] Japan anger at US sex slave bill, *BBC News*, February 19, 2007 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6374961.stm, April 19, 2025)
[153] Amnesty International Japan, *JAPAN: European Parliament adopts resolution on comfort women*, December 14, 2007 (https://www.amnesty.or.jp/en/news/2007/1214_788.html, April 21, 2025)
[154] Sue-young Kim, National Assembly Urges Japan to Apologize to Comfort Women, *Korea Times*, October 27, 2008 (https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/20081027/national-assembly-urges-japan-to-apologize-to-comfort-women, April 21, 2025)
[155] Amnesty International, *Taiwan and South Korea call for 'comfort women' apology*, November 18, 2008 (https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2008/11/taiwan-and-south-korea-call-039comfort-women039-apology-20081118/, April 21, 2025)

international consensus around the need for historical accountability and victim-centered justice in relation to Japan's wartime conduct.

While international pressure played a key role in demanding historical accountability from Japan, divisions on the issue also emerged within Japan itself. Notably, several local governments expressed support for a more transparent and conciliatory approach. On 28 March 2008, the Takarazuka City Council in Osaka passed a resolution urging the Japanese government to take responsibility for the comfort women system. This was followed by a similar resolution by the Kiyose City Council in Tokyo on 25 June, and later by the Sapporo City Council in Hokkaido on 7 November.[156] These municipal-level actions illustrate that domestic public opinion in Japan was not monolithic; rather, there existed a segment of civic and political actors advocating for acknowledgment and redress, even in the face of official reluctance at the national level.

2.5 – THE 2015 AGREEMENT AND ITS FAILURE TO CLOSE THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

Following the wave of international and domestic resolutions in 2007 and 2008 addressing the comfort women issue, the matter continued to evolve through ongoing civil society efforts, despite a lack of meaningful legal or diplomatic advancements. A key expression of this sustained activism has been the Wednesday Demonstration, first held on January 8, 1992, by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. Timed to coincide with a visit by the Japanese Prime Minister to South Korea, the protest demanded an official apology and legal reparations. These weekly gatherings, held in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, have since become the longest-running demonstration on a single human rights issue. To mark the 1,000th protest on December 14, 2011, a bronze statue – known as the "Statue of Peace" – was installed opposite the embassy, depicting a seated young girl representing the victims' unresolved suffering and enduring demands for justice.[157]

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[156] *Ibidem.*

[157] Education for Social Justice Foundation, *Wednesday Demonstration* (https://www.e4sjf.org/wednesday-demonstration.html, April 21, 2025)

Figure 1. A Statue of Peace in South Korea, similar in design to the one installed in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Public domain image, retrieved from Borders of Memory (https://bordersofmemory.com/dispute-map-locations/comfort-women-statue)

Despite the visibility of these actions, tensions between South Korea and Japan deepened during this period. The issue remained unresolved at the diplomatic level, and friction increased as some Japanese political leaders, including former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, publicly questioned the evidence regarding the coercion and the military's role in the establishment of the comfort women system.[158] In November 2015, just before the announcement of a formal agreement between the two governments, Japan requested the removal of the statue in Seoul.[159] Moreover,

[158] Norikazu Doro, On the Question: Why Do We Have to Apologize Again and Again? - Give Us a Break, in *The Truth about the Comfort Women*, translated by Shirakaba Kyoikukan, August 12, 2014 (https://www.shirakaba.gr.jp/home/tayori/k_tayori157EN.htm, April 21, 2025)

[159] Whan-Woo Yi, Japan steps up demands for removal of 'Girl Statue', *Korea Times*, November 12, 2015 (https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20151112/japan-steps-up-demands-for-removal-of-girl-statue, April 21, 2025)

the Japanese government has expressed opposition to the installation of similar memorials in cities such as Berlin,[160] Busan,[161] and Philadelphia.[162]

This climate of historical denialism and intensifying controversy provided the background for the so-called 2015 Agreement, which sought to close the matter definitively. However, it soon became apparent that survivors and civil society actors regarded the deal as neither adequate nor just.

The 2015 agreement itself was unprecedented in form and ambiguous in content. Rather than producing a formal treaty or jointly signed statement, the two foreign ministers issued a verbal announcement, with Japan pledging roughly 1 billion yen (around USD 8.5 million) to fund a new South Korean foundation intended to support the remaining victims. In exchange, Seoul committed to refrain from publicly criticizing Japan on the issue, including in international forums such as the United Nations, so long as Tokyo upheld its commitments. As part of the agreement, Japan acknowledged the involvement of military authorities in the system and expressed "deep remorse and heartfelt apology" through its foreign minister. However, Tokyo continued to reject any suggestion of legal responsibility,

[160] Japan Calls for Removal of 'Comfort Woman' Statue in Berlin, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 8, 2020 (https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/10/08/national/diplomacy/comfort-women-statue-wartime-sexual-slavery-Berlin/20201008184400535.html, April 21, 2025)
[161] Sang-Hun Choe, 'Comfort Woman' Statue Reinstated Near Japan Consulate in South Korea, *New York Times*, December 30, 2016 (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-wwii-japan.html, April 21, 2025)
[162] Craig R. McCoy, "Advocates and Opponents Clash in Hearing Over Korean 'Comfort Women' Statue Proposed for Queen Village," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 19, 2022 (https://www.inquirer.com/arts/korea-comfort-women-japan-philadephia-statute-memorial-war-crime-arts-commission-20220919.html, April 21, 2025)

maintaining that the matter had been conclusively resolved by the 1965 normalization treaty between the two nations. [163] [164]

The response was swift and critical. Many survivors were neither consulted during negotiations nor in agreement with its outcome.[165] Of the then-surviving women, only a minority accepted the offered funds,[166] while others petitioned the UN to assess the deal's compliance with international human rights standards.[167] Subsequent statements by Japanese officials, including continued denial of coercion[168] and refusal to recognize the term "sex slaves",[169] fueled further outrage and calls for accountability. The South Korean foreign ministry strongly rebuked Japan's backtracking, urging it to honor both the letter and spirit of the agreement and to take concrete steps toward restoring the dignity of the victims.[170]

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[163] The 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (commonly known as the "Treaty on Basic Relations") was a treaty signed to normalize relations between the two countries following the end of Japanese colonial rule over Korea. It established diplomatic and economic relations and addressed issues such as property claims and reparations. The treaty included a provision in which Japan provided financial compensation to South Korea, but the treaty's provisions have been contentious, particularly regarding the issue of "comfort women." Japan maintains that the treaty resolved all claims, including those related to wartime sexual slavery, while South Korea and survivors argue that it did not adequately address the issue of forced sexual slavery during the war. See Jinyul Ju, The Japan-Korea Dispute Over the 1965 Agreement, *The Diplomat*, October 23, 2020 (https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/the-japan-korea-dispute-over-the-1965-agreement, April 21, 2025)

[164] Justin McCurry, Japan and South Korea Agree to Settle Wartime Sex Slaves Row, *The Guardian*, December 28, 2015 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/28/japan-to-say-sorry-to-south-korea-in-deal-to-end-dispute-over-wartime-sex-slaves, April 21, 2025)

[165] *Idem*, Former Sex Slaves Reject Japan and South Korea's 'Comfort Women' Accord, *The Guardian*, January 26, 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/26/former-sex-slaves-reject-japan-south-koreas-comfort-women-accord, April 21, 2025)

[166] Ji-hye Jun, Japanese Fund to Be Paid to Victims, *The Korea Times*, February 5, 2016 (https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/20160205/japanese-fund-to-be-paid-to-victims, April 21, 2025)

[167] Mi-hyang Kim, Ten Former Comfort Women Petition UN over Dec. 28 South Korea-Japan Settlement, *Hankyoreh*, January 29, 2016 (https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/728501.html, April 21, 2025)

[168] Jin-kyu Kang, "Japan Denies Forced Nature of Sex Slaves in Statement," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 31, 2016 (https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2016/01/31/politics/Japan-denies-forced-nature-of-sex-slaves-in-statement/3014619.html, April 21, 2025)

[169] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Examines Reports of Japan*, February 16, 2016 (https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2016/02/committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-examines-reports-japan, April 21, 2025)

[170] Yun-hyung Gil, In Message to UN, Japan Again Denies Official Responsibility for Comfort Women System, *Hankyoreh*, February 1, 2016 (https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/728785.html, April 21, 2025)

The South Korean government under President Moon Jae-in reassessed the agreement's legitimacy, deeming it deeply flawed due to the lack of victim input.[171] Although the Moon administration did not seek formal renegotiation, it shut down the foundation created under the deal in 2018.[172] That same year, comfort women survivors appealed to the government to refer the matter to the United Nations Committee Against Torture, but their request was not accepted.[173]

In December 2021, the comfort women issue once again became the focus of international attention following the publication of a controversial article by Harvard Professor J. Mark Ramseyer, who challenged the credibility of survivors' testimonies and depicted the women as having been voluntary prostitutes. The article drew widespread condemnation from scholars, activists, and the public, who accused it of historical distortion and victim-blaming. [174]

By late 2022, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol had yet to articulate a clear policy approach to address the unresolved issue. While his August 15 National Liberation Day speech emphasized the need to improve relations with Japan, it notably omitted any mention of historical justice or concrete plans regarding the comfort women.[175] Critics expressed concern that his administration might adopt a more conciliatory stance toward Japan, potentially downplaying the coercive nature of the comfort women system.[176] Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Park Jin later

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[171] Joyce Lee and Hyonhee Shin, South Korea Says 'Comfort Women' Deal Flawed but Japan Warns Against Change, *Reuters*, December 28, 2017 (https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-korea-says-comfort-women-deal-flawed-but-japan-warns-against-change-idUSKBN1EM057/, April 21, 2025)

[172] 'Comfort Women' Deal to Stand?, *DW*, January 9, 2018 (https://www.dw.com/en/south-korean-minister-says-seoul-not-seeking-renegotiation-of-comfort-women-deal-with-japan/a-42075602, April 21, 2025)

[173] Hye-mi Seo, Survivor of 'Comfort Women' System Urges Moon to Refer Issue to UN Anti-Torture Body, *Hankyoreh*, January 26, 2022 (https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1028921.html, April 21, 2025)

[174] Yuji Hosaka, Why Did the 2015 Japan-Korea 'Comfort Women' Agreement Fall Apart?, *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2021 (https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/why-did-the-2015-japan-korea-comfort-women-agreement-fall-apart, April 21, 2025)

[175] Full text of South Korean president Yoon's Liberation Day speech, *Korea Times*, August 15, 2024 (https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20240815/full-text-of-south-korean-president-yoons-liberation-day-speech, April 21, 2025)

[176] Pyong-gap Min, The 'Comfort Women' Issue Is an Issue of Human Rights of Victimized Asian Women, *Hankyoreh*, May 3, 2022 (https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1041442.html, April 21, 2025)

affirmed the official status of the 2015 Agreement, signaling a possible return to previous frameworks despite their contested legitimacy.[177]

However, the issue remained unresolved within South Korea, where tensions persisted between diplomatic considerations and demands for historical justice. The 2023 Seoul High Court ruling marked a pivotal moment: by ordering the Japanese government to compensate 16 plaintiffs – survivors and their families – it effectively reopened the legal and moral debate surrounding the 2015 Agreement. The court emphasized that state immunity could not override fundamental human rights, signaling a shift toward a more assertive judicial stance on the matter.[178]

Yet, this legal progress occurred alongside growing divisions within the advocacy community. The 2024 Supreme Court conviction of former lawmaker and activist Yoon Mee-hyang for misappropriating funds intended for survivors deeply affected public trust.[179] While some viewed the ruling as a necessary step toward accountability, others feared it could delegitimize broader efforts to seek justice and reparations.[180]

Despite these challenges, the issue retained visibility in South Korean public life. Survivors like Lee Yong-soo continued to campaign for recognition through legal means and public testimony, insisting that any resolution must center the voices of those directly affected.[181] Meanwhile, the Yoon administration maintained a cautious diplomatic approach, reiterating the official status of the 2015 Agreement

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[177] S. Korea's Next Top Diplomat Calls 'Comfort Women' Pact with Japan Official, *Kyodo News*, April 20, 2022 (https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/04/d339e55f4de9-s-koreas-next-top-diplomat-calls-2015-comfort-women-pact-official.html, April 21, 2025)

[178] Jung-Woo Cho, Appellate court orders Japanese government to compensate wartime sexual slavery victims in Korea, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, November 23, 2023 (https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2023-11-23/national/socialAffairs/Appellate-court-orders-Japanese-government-to-compensate-wartime-sexual-slavery-victims-in-Korea/1920063, April 22, 2025)

[179] *Idem*, Top court upholds sentence on ex-lawmaker who embezzled funds meant for wartime sexual slavery victims, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, November 14, 2024 (https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-11-14/national/politics/Top-court-upholds-sentence-on-exlawmaker-who-embezzled-funds-meant-for-wartime-sexual-slavery-victims/2177863, April 22, 2025)

[180] Hyonhee Shin, South Korea Top Court Upholds Conviction of 'Comfort Women' Activist over Embezzlement, *Reuters*, November 14, 2024 (https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-top-court-upholds-conviction-comfort-women-activist-over-2024-11-14/, April 22, 2025)

[181] Ga-yoon Kim, Korean survivor entreats Germany to protect ‘comfort women’ memorial in Berlin, *Hankyoreh*, May 23, 2024 (https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1141817, April 22, 2025)

while avoiding overt engagement with survivors' demands. This stance drew criticism from civil society groups, who argued that it risked sidelining justice in favor of geopolitical expediency.[182]

By early 2025, the comfort women issue in South Korea remained highly contested – a site where law, memory, and diplomacy intersected. While survivor activism and judicial rulings kept the matter in the national spotlight, the government's reluctance to pursue new avenues of redress underscored the enduring complexities of reconciling past atrocities with present-day statecraft.[183] As of February 2025, only seven of the 243 women officially registered with the government as former comfort women were still alive, all aged 90 or older.[184] This dwindling number has intensified calls from civil society for the government to prioritize survivor-centered justice before it is too late.

[182] Byung-chan Ko, Lee Calls 2015 'Comfort Women' Deal Inadequate; Yoon Nonresponsive to Survey, *Hankyoreh*, February 17, 2022 (https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1031545, April 22, 2025)
[183] London Korean Links, *Remembering 'Comfort Women': Politics of memory and international perspectives*, February 25, 2025 (https://londonkoreanlinks.net/2025/02/25/remembering-comfort-women-politics-of-memory-and-international-perspectives/, April 22, 2025)
[184] Min-Sik Yoon, Number of Surviving Victims of Japan's Forced Labor Falls Below 700, *The Korea Herald*, March 1, 2025 (https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10430639, April 22, 2025)

3 – THE ROLE OF PATRIARCHY IN THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

Throughout the entire thesis, the presence of patriarchy has emerged as a persistent – though often subtle – force shaping and reshaping the comfort women issue. This chapter will focus more explicitly on the role of patriarchy, with particular attention to its manifestations in South Korea and Japan. Although patriarchy will initially be introduced as a unified and general structure, the reader will gradually come to see that its expression varies significantly between the two national contexts. One of the most common analytical mistakes is to treat patriarchy as a monolithic and static phenomenon; however, it is in fact highly heterogeneous and dynamic, presenting itself in various forms and intensities depending on the sociopolitical and historical context.

A shared point of origin for both South Korean and Japan is the foundational influence of Confucianism. Introduced in Korea during the Yi dynasty and in Japan during the Tokugawa and Meiji periods, Confucianism established moral codes emphasizing hierarchy, filial piety and clearly defined gender roles.[185] Central to Confucian thought is the ideal of patriarchal authority: the eldest male holds the highest respect and authority within the family and women are expected to be obedient caretakers, devoted primarily to domestic responsibilities. This philosophy promotes male superiority and prescribes women's subservience, which historically justified gender inequality and limited women's social and economic roles in both countries.[186]

Despite this common heritage, the trajectories of patriarchy in South Korea and Japan have diverged significantly, especially under the pressures of modernization and capitalist development. In South Korea, the Confucian patriarchal system became deeply institutionalized through legal frameworks such as

[185] Flora Arifahsasti and Kurniawaty Iskandar, The Effect of Confucianism on Future Birth Rates in South Korea and Japan, in *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)*, Volume 5, No 2, May 2022, p. 8307

[186] Midha Aanchal, Kaur Savreen, S. Niveditha, Confucianism and Changing Gender Roles, in *International Journal of Advance Research, Ideas and Innovations in Technology*, Volume 4, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 347-352

the *hojuje* (family-head system),[187] which legally enshrined male dominance in family lineage and decision-making. This codified patriarchy, combined with rapid industrialization and capitalist development, created a "compressed modernity" where traditional male authority remains pervasive and absolute within families and society. Women's roles have been slow to change and, despite increasing female education and workforce participation, Confucian norms continue to reinforce male dominance and female subordination in everyday life and social expectations.[188]

In contrast, Japan's patriarchy, while also rooted in Confucian values like filial piety and male authority, has been shaped more by social expectations and state ideology than by explicit legal codification. The Japanese model emphasizes the coexistence of women's productive labor (workforce participation) and reproductive labor (housework and childrearing), framed by the ideal of the "good wife, wise mother".[189] Though this dual expectation places heavy burdens on women, Japan has developed more state policies[190] supporting working mothers, such as improved childcare and paternal leave, reflecting a somewhat more flexible adaptation of patriarchy in the context of capitalist modernization. Nonetheless, traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities still strongly influence women's lives, maintaining gender inequality in both the family and workplace.[191]

These distinct trajectories have had lasting effects on how each country has approached the comfort women issue. In both contexts, patriarchal structures

[187] The now-abolished Korean family headship system was rooted in a traditional Confucian model of family registration, which was formally introduced during Japanese colonial rule through the 1917 implementation of the *hoju* system. The term *hoju*, meaning "head of the family," referred to a male figure who held legal authority over family affairs, including matters such as inheritance, adoption and divorce, among others. See Doowon Suh, The Dual Strategy and Gender Policies of the Women's Movement in Korea: Family Headship System Repeal through Strategic Innovation, in *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (May 2011), p. 132

[188] *Ibidem.*

[189] Luisa Fernanda Villa, Classic patriarchal values and their effects on working Japanese women, in *Revista Mundo Asia Pacífico*, Vol. 8, No. 14 (2019), pp. 60-69

[190] Japan's aging population and shrinking labor force led Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to promote "womenomics" as part of his broader economic strategy to boost female workforce participation. However, his credibility on gender issues has been questioned, as during his first term (2006–2007) he criticized both state and grassroots efforts for gender equality and sex education, portraying them as threats to traditional family values. See Luisa Fernanda Villa, Classic patriarchal values and their effects on working Japanese women, in *Revista Mundo Asia Pacífico*, Vol. 8, No. 14 (2019), p. 68

[191] Flora Arifahsasti and Kurniawaty Iskandar, The Effect of Confucianism on Future Birth Rates in South Korea and Japan, in *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)*, Volume 5, No 2, May 2022, p. 8315

influenced not only the wartime establishment of the system but also the ways in which the issue has been acknowledged, resisted or silenced in the decades since. Today, Japan and South Korea remain profoundly divided in their treatment of the comfort women legacy – a divergence rooted in the different forms that patriarchy continues to take within their respective societies.

3.1 – THE ROLE OF PATRIARCHY IN THE COMFORT WOMEN SYSTEM

Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as «a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women».[192] In a patriarchal system, gender roles are strictly enforced, with women relegated to subordinate positions, primarily defined by domestic duties and reproduction, a concept that extends beyond the domestic sphere into wartime contexts. This mindset permeates the wartime ideology of imperial Japan, which Chunghee Sarah Soh[193] describes as "patriarchal fascism".[194] In this system, women were not only viewed as subordinate to men but were further objectified, with their bodies exploited for military use. The comfort women system vividly illustrates this logic, where women's autonomy was systematically stripped away and their bodies

[192] Sylvia Walby, Theorising Patriarchy, *Sociology*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May 1989), p. 214

[193] Chunghee Sarah Soh is a Korean-American sociocultural anthropologist and professor at San Francisco State University. She specializes in issues related to women, gender and sexuality, with a particular focus on the historical and sociopolitical aspects of the "comfort women" during World War II. See Institute for Corean-American Studies, *Chunghee Sarah Soh Bio*, last modified September 25, 2013 (https://www.icasinc.org/bios/soh.html, May 10, 2025)

[194] Fascism, as defined by a Webster dictionary, is "a political philosophy, movement, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition." In her analysis of imperial Japan's wartime state, Chunghee Sarah Soh uses the term "patriarchal fascism" to characterize the hegemonic ideology of the regime. Soh's concept of "patriarchal fascism" not only incorporates the traditional aspects of fascist rule, such as authoritarian governance and military dominance, but also underscores the deeply embedded androcentric nature of Japan's state ideology. Soh contends that this ideology was built upon a popular belief in male superiority, which was fundamental to the functioning of the state and its treatment of women, especially in the context of the comfort women system. This term, "patriarchal fascism," thus serves to illustrate the intersection of fascist authoritarianism with a patriarchal worldview that institutionalized the exploitation and dehumanization of women during the war. See Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 69

institutionalized as sexual “gifts” to soldiers, reinforcing a structure where their worth was reduced to their utility in maintaining male morale and military efforts.[195]

These women, viewed not as individuals with autonomy, but as mere instruments for soldiers' sexual satisfaction, were embedded within a system that stripped them of dignity and agency. In the psychology of gift-giving, there is often an expectation of reciprocity. In the case of the comfort system, soldiers were seen as obligated to repay the emperor’s favor by dedicating themselves to the war effort, contributing to the sense that the women were part of a larger, paternalistic wartime exchange. The establishment of comfort stations was also rooted in the desire to boost soldier morale by offering temporary respite from the brutalities of war, which was rationalized as providing “recreational sex” to enhance military performance.[196]

The comfort women, as “gifts” to soldiers, were expected to fulfill their gendered roles as imperial subjects, helping soldiers regain energy and re-commit to the ultimate goal of victory in the so-called “Sacred War”. Over time, comfort women became so entrenched in the military logistics that they were treated as part of the army's essential supplies, along with provisions like food and ammunition.[197] In military records, these women were categorized as ‘supplies’ during transport, devoid of any personal identification, further exemplifying the dehumanization embedded in the system, especially if we consider that military transport regulations included animals.[198] This reduction of women to mere objects, valued only for their sexual utility, exemplifies the extent to which their humanity was erased within the wartime imperial regime.

Another indication of their dehumanization lies in the practice that, upon arrival at the comfort stations, non-Japanese comfort women were either assigned a Japanese first name by the administrators or ordered to choose one. This imposition of a new name served as yet another manifestation of patriarchal fascism, prioritizing the

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[195] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 61
[196] *Ivi*, p. 70
[197] *Ibidem*.
[198] Tetsuo Aso, *Shanghai yori Shanghai e* (From Shanghai to Shanghai), Fukuoka, Sekifusha; 1993, Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 70

psychological comfort of Japanese soldiers over the personal identity and dignity of the non-Japanese women. Soh interprets this forced renaming as a symbolic act, effectively "repackaging" non-Japanese comfort women with culturally appropriate labels, rendering them more fitting as imperial gifts for the military.[199]

3.1.1 – COMFORT WOMEN AND THE REPRODUCTION OF PATRIARCHAL NATIONAL MYTHS IN SOUTH KOREA

Before the outbreak of the global conflict, the position of women in Korea was deeply influenced by Confucian traditions, which strictly delineated the roles assigned to men and women. In practice, this translated into an intensely patriarchal social structure, where marriage was viewed primarily as a transaction that secured a woman's domestic labor and reproductive capacity for her husband. Polygamy was both common and legally authorized, especially in cases where a man's first wife failed to produce a male heir.[200] Among the most esteemed attributes in a young woman were *sujŏl* and *chŏngbu* (faithfulness and chastity), virtues deemed essential for attaining the status of *yŏllyŏ* (virtuous woman).[201] The idea of a widow remarrying was met with strong societal disapproval and divorce carried even greater stigma: women who separated from their husbands were labeled *kich'ŏ* (abandoned women), a designation similar to that of *hwanghyang nyŏ* (women who return), referring to women who had to return back into their parental homes.[202]

While the scarcity of documentary evidence and the reluctance of surviving comfort women to share their past experiences are often cited to explain the prolonged silence surrounding the issue of sexual slavery in Korean society, a deeper cause lies in the enduring cultural legacy of patriarchy, which enforced a double standard

[199] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 70
[200] Maria Amelia Odetti, *Jūgun ianfu (Comfort women) La schiavitù sessuale nel sud-est asiatico durante la Seconda guerra mondiale e la memoria femminile*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 4 (2006), p. 35
[201] Howard Keith, *A Korean Tragedy*, in *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, Howard K.(ed.), Cassel, London1995, p. 3. Cit. in Maria Amelia Odetti, *Jūgun ianfu (Comfort women) La schiavitù sessuale nel sud-est asiatico durante la Seconda guerra mondiale e la memoria femminile*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 4 (2006), p. 35
[202] Maria Amelia Odetti, *Jūgun ianfu (Comfort women) La schiavitù sessuale nel sud-est asiatico durante la Seconda guerra mondiale e la memoria femminile*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 4 (2006), p. 35

in sexual morality between men and women. Under traditional Korean patriarchy, male sexual autonomy – including extramarital affairs – was tolerated and even encouraged, whereas women's sexuality was subjected to rigid control, anchored in expectations of virginity before marriage and chastity thereafter. Women who lost their chastity, regardless of the circumstances, were stigmatized, shamed and frequently ostracized by their own families.[203]

Against this cultural backdrop, it becomes understandable why many survivors of sexual slavery sought to bury and forget their traumatic histories, hoping to shield themselves and their families from further disgrace. Some women even resorted to suicide, a tragic response rooted in long-standing cultural patterns: during the Japanese invasions of Korea in the late 16th century, numerous women chose death either to escape the threat of rape or after having been raped. Their suicides were commemorated as acts of virtuous womanhood (*yŏllyŏ*).[204] Notably, following the withdrawal of Japanese forces, King Sŏnjo honored loyal subjects (*ch'ungsin*), filial sons (*hyoja*) and virtuous women (*yŏllyŏ*), with women receiving royal commendations at nearly five times the rate of the two male categories combined.[205]

The persistence of these traditional attitudes can still be observed in more recent times. Some young male criminals in South Korea exploited rooted notions of sexual honor by raping women in front of their families, knowing that victims would be unlikely to report the crime due to the stigma attached. The media coined the term *kajong p'agoebom* (family-destroying criminals) to describe these offenders, recognizing the profound psychological devastation their actions inflicted on the family structure. The assaulted woman, perceived as dishonored by herself, her husband and her relatives, often became the catalyst for the collapse of the family unit.[206] Victims often refrain from reporting these crimes due to fears of social ostracization, victim-blaming and a lack of institutional support. Surveys

[203] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1229
[204] *Ibidem.*
[205] Interview with Chung Sei-hwa, president of the Korea Women's Development Institute, August 29, 1995; Kim Ok-gil et al., *Han'guk yŏsŏngsa* [History of Korean women] (Seoul: Ewha Womans University, 1972), p. 401. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1229-1230
[206] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1230

indicate that a significant portion of men holds the victim partially responsible for sexual assaults, further discouraging reporting.[207]

Following the end of Japanese occupation in 1945, those comfort women who survived – escaping mass executions intended to eliminate witnesses during the Japanese retreat – and who managed to return home, faced further suffering. They were received not with empathy but as *hwanghyang nyŏ*, or "disgraced women", no longer seen as virtuous or pure.[208]

The majority of Korean military comfort women had originated from impoverished farming communities and had received minimal formal education. Even if they had sought justice, they lacked the resources or social standing to challenge the abuses they had suffered. Historically, it has often been women from the poorest backgrounds who were most vulnerable to exploitation, serving to gratify the unchecked sexual appetites of men wielding wealth, weapons or power.[209] Thus, it is unsurprising that Japanese imperial forces deliberately targeted women from rural, disadvantaged backgrounds in their organized "slave hunts".[210]

For decades, the surviving women bore their *han*[211] in silence, until, in 1991, Kim Hak-sun bravely broke the collective silence by publicly recounting her experiences as a comfort woman. When women's rights activists brought the issue of the *Chŏngsindae* to public attention, the initial response of the South Korean

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[207] 55% of Korean men link sexual assault with women's behavior, *Korea Times*, February 27, 2017 (https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/amp/southkorea/law-crime/20170227/55-of-korean-men-link-sexual-assault-with-womens-behavior, April 28, 2025)

[208] Maria Amelia Odetti, *Jūgun ianfu (Comfort women) La schiavitù sessuale nel sud-est asiatico durante la Seconda guerra mondiale e la memoria femminile*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 4 (2006), p. 35

[209] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1230

[210] See, for example, Yoshida Seiji, *Watashi no Senso Hanzai: Chosenjin Kyosei Renko* [My war crimes: The forced draft of Koreans] (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobo, 1983). Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), p. 1230

[211] "Han" (*한*) is a complex Korean concept that refers to a deep, often unexpressed feeling of sorrow, resentment or regret, arising from experiences of injustice or suffering. It is associated with a collective, historical trauma that is passed down through generations, reflecting a sense of emotional burden and unfulfilled desire for resolution. See Iljoon Park, Korean Social Emotions: Han (한 恨), Heung (흥 興), and Jeong (정 情), in *Emotions in Korean Philosophy and Religion*, edited by Edward Y. J. Chung and Jea Sophia Oh, *Palgrave Studies in Comparative East-West Philosophy*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 235–256. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94747-7_8

government was one of indifference. This dismissive attitude can be attributed not only to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and androcentric biases but also to longstanding elitist tendencies that marginalized the grievances of the poor and powerless.[212]

In a society deeply shaped by paternalistic dynamics like that of South Korea, it is unsurprising that the issue of comfort women took so long to gain public attention. Patriarchy, which reinforced male authority and subordinated women, created an environment in which the voices of female victims, especially those suffering from profound trauma, were systematically suppressed. In this context, the hierarchical structure of South Korean society, with its strict gender roles, made it difficult for the issue of comfort women to emerge as a significant concern. Moreover, the fact that many of the victims came from poor, rural families aggravated the problem. These women, already marginalized by their socio-economic status, faced even greater invisibility and silence. The fear of social ostracism was particularly intense for these women, as coming forward would likely expose them to further marginalization. This stigma, rooted in both their past suffering and their lower social standing, created a barrier to speaking out and seeking justice.

3.1.2 – Sexual and Emotional Caregivers During War, Stigmatized Survivors After

The roles of comfort women during World War II were marked by a stark duality, deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies that both sexualized women and placed them in caregiving roles. These women were not only subjected to sexual exploitation but were also expected to fulfill emotional roles, offering solace to soldiers facing the brutalities of war. This dual burden was a manifestation of a broader patriarchal framework that shaped their existence not only in wartime Japan but also in colonial Korea. In both societies, women were historically viewed through a reductive lens: either as sexual commodities or as ‘mothers’ tasked with emotional labor, roles that denied them autonomy and reduced their worth to service for men. Such rigid expectations enforced women’s submission and reinforced their subordinate

[212] Chunghee Sarah Soh, The Korean "Comfort Women": Movement for Redress, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1230-1231

position, with men benefiting from both sexual satisfaction and emotional solace, maintaining their dominant societal status.

Embedded within these patriarchal structures, the roles of comfort women took on further dimensions. As part of a wider wartime culture of emotional and sexual exploitation, the concept of 'shadow families' began to emerge. These makeshift families were created to provide a semblance of normalcy for soldiers in the chaos of war. In these imagined homes, women were relegated to the role of 'shadow wives', acting as caregivers who created a nurturing and familial atmosphere. However, despite assuming these roles, comfort women were still bound by the need to provide sexual services, often out of fear of losing the protection that these temporary familial bonds offered. [213]

The dynamic between soldiers and comfort women was deeply complex. On one hand, soldiers saw them both as emotional caregivers and as objects of sexual service. On the other hand, comfort women viewed soldiers as potential sources of protection, yet simultaneously as individuals from whom they needed to protect themselves. An exemplary aspect of the condition these women occupied is reflected in the fact that they were often required to provide emotional support to new recruits, often frightened and anxious about the war. Ironically, these recruits, being at the bottom of the military hierarchy, often redirected their anger towards the comfort women. Subjugated in other ways, the recruits used the women as a means to regain a sense of power and control.[214]

Yet, the suffering of these women did not end with their years as comfort women. After the war, their ability to reintegrate into society was severely hampered by the trauma they carried. Many of them struggled with feelings of shame and the inability to lead a conventional family life. For example, Kim Hak-sun was abused by her husband, who humiliated her by calling her a "prostitute" despite the immense trauma she had endured. The stigma surrounding their past meant that

[213] Yonson Ahn, Yearning for affection: Traumatic bonding between Korean 'comfort women' and Japanese soldiers during World War II, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 26(4), 2019, pp. 360-369
[214] *Ivi*. pp. 369-371

many comfort women would never marry, carrying the weight of their experiences with them for the rest of their lives.[215]

This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of their male counterparts, who, after the war, had no difficulty returning to their pre-war families or starting new ones, with no shame or consequences for their actions during the conflict. In fact, some soldiers openly recounted their sexual encounters with women of different ethnic backgrounds in post-war memoirs.[216] This reflects the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that governed sexual morality, where men, celebrated for their sexual experiences, faced no stigma, while the women were forced to carry the burden of exploitation for the rest of their lives. The societal double standard that defined gendered sexuality in both Korea and Japan is evident: men were encouraged to demonstrate their masculinity through sexual autonomy, while women were expected to maintain chastity, their worth tied to moral purity.

This duality – where male sexual autonomy was glorified and female sexuality stigmatized – reinforced the patriarchal hierarchy and it is within this context that the language surrounding comfort women and their exploitation becomes essential. The next chapter will explore how patriarchal structures were not only perpetuated through actions but also through the language used to shape perceptions of these women, further entrenching their subjugation and reinforcing the gendered dichotomies that defined their wartime roles and beyond.

3.2 – LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR PERPETUATING PATRIARCHY

Language is a powerful mechanism through which societies construct and enforce power dynamics, particularly those rooted in gender. The words and labels we use to define individuals are never neutral; they reflect, uphold and, sometimes, even exacerbate societal hierarchies. In patriarchal systems, the language surrounding

[215] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 72
[216] Il Myon Kim, *Tenno no Guntai to Chosenjin Ianfu* (The Emperor's Forces and Korean Comfort Women), Tokyo: San'ichi Shobo, 1976. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 72

women often serves to reinforce their subordinate position, casting them in roles that limit their autonomy and personhood. By shaping how women are perceived and how their actions are understood, language plays a key role in sustaining gender inequality.[217]

When examining the experiences of women in contexts of exploitation or violence, the terminology used to describe them can often serve to minimize or obscure their suffering, while simultaneously justifying the treatment they receive. In many patriarchal cultures, the language surrounding women's sexuality has historically been used to commodify their bodies,[218] reduce them to objects of male desire and reinforce the notion that their value is contingent upon their ability to fulfill certain societal expectations. This linguistic framework not only dehumanizes women, but also contributes to the broader social acceptance of their mistreatment.

The use of certain terms to define women in such situations can create a sense of distance between their experiences and the larger society, making it easier for their suffering to be ignored or rationalized. By casting women in specific roles defined by their sexuality, such as those of 'wife' or 'whore', patriarchal systems construct a binary of value and worth based solely on their sexual utility. In this way, language becomes a tool for regulating women's behavior and defining their roles within a rigid, patriarchal framework.

Moreover, the language of subjugation often carries within it a sense of ownership and control. Words that reduce women to sexual objects or commodities do more than simply describe their roles – they also imply that they are to be used, owned and discarded according to the whims of those in power. This perpetuates a sense of entitlement over women's bodies, allowing those in positions of authority to justify their actions by framing them as part of a larger, normalized system. In a society where such terminology prevails, the line between consent and coercion

[217] Sahar Zahoor *et al.*, How Languages Constructs Gender Roles and Reflects Power Dynamics in Literature, Exploring Speech Acts, Conversational Dominance, and Stereotypes, in *Review of Applied Management and Social Sciences (RAMSS)*, Vol 7, no. 4 (2024), pp. 759-776

[218] Easy Sociology, Commodification of Women, in *Sociology of Gender*, September 29, 2024 (https://easysociology.com/sociology-of-gender/commodification-of-women/#h-historical-roots-of-commodification, May 22, 2025)

becomes blurred and the boundaries of exploitation become easier to overlook or dismiss.

Therefore, the very act of naming carries with it a form of power – power to define, to categorize and to control. The terms used to describe women, particularly in contexts of violence, can shape how their experiences are understood and whether their suffering is recognized. When those terms are designed to reinforce gender inequity, they not only reflect the existing power structures but actively sustain them, ensuring that the inequalities of the past continue to shape the experiences of women in the present.

3.2.1 – IANFU AND OTHER OFFICIAL TERMS IN JAPANESE

As analyzed by Chunghee Sarah Soh, the term *ianfu* – commonly translated as "comfort woman" – offers deep insight into the ideological framework of imperial Japan. Written with three Chinese characters[219] – *i* (to comfort), *an* (peaceful or secure), and *fu* (wife or married woman) – the term encapsulates the patriarchal and militaristic logic of the wartime regime. Through this linguistic construction, *ianfu* evokes the image of a woman whose purpose was to console soldiers as a wife might, thus reinforcing their emotional resilience and encouraging them to fight with renewed determination.[220]

Alongside the term *ianfu*, Japan's wartime state and military also used additional terms such as *shakufu* (meaning "waitress") and *tokushu* (meaning "special") *ianfu* to refer to comfort women.[221] By contrast, in the post-war period, Japanese government officials commonly employed the term *jūgun* ("military") *ianfu*. Some

[219] The term *ianfu* (*慰安婦*) is composed of three kanji characters which are Chinese characters adopted into the Japanese writing system. These characters, originally from Chinese, have been integrated and adapted as kanji in Japanese. Kanji differs from native Japanese scripts (hiragana and katakana) in that they are logographic characters borrowed from Chinese but used with Japanese readings and meanings. For discussion of kanji as Chinese characters acquired and adapted by Japanese, see Che Kan Leong and Katsuo Kamaoka, Cognitive processing of Chinese characters, words, sentences, and Japanese kanji and kana: An introduction, in *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journey*, Vol. 10 (1998), pp. 155-164

[220] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 67

[221] Yoshiaki Yoshimi and Hirofumi Hayashi, "Hajime ni (Preface)," in *Nihon-gun Ianfu (Japanese Military Comfort Women)*, ed. Yoshiaki Yoshimi and Hirofumi Hayashi (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten, 1997). Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 67

scholars[222] suggest that *jūgun ianfu* gained widespread use after journalist Senda Kako's 1973 book *Jūgun ianfu*. However, a 1971 reference in a work by Kim Il Myon[223] shows that the term was in use before the publication of Senda's book.

As Soh further note, advocates of the comfort women redress movement in Japan and Korea have become increasingly aware of the implications of the term *jūgun* and have sought alternative phrases, such as *Nihon-gun* or *Ilbon'gun* ("Japanese military" in Japanese and Korean, respectively), to avoid perpetuating the misconception that the comfort women were voluntary participants. Ironically, Japanese ultranationalists also oppose the term *jūgun* because of its association with formal military affiliation.[224]

In the English translation of *jūgun ianfu* as "military comfort women", the term *jūgun* (or *chonggun* in Korean) loses its original connotation of "following" (with *jū* in Japanese and *chong* in Korean indicating this connection) the military, as the role of a nurse, journalist or photographer might be mistakenly assumed. In reality, some comfort women, such as Kim Hak-sun, who served soldiers on the front lines in remote battlefields, were indeed coerced to follow military units, while others who worked in urban areas like Shanghai had no need to accompany the troops.[225]

It is worth noting that the Chinese character for *jū* in *jūgun* also connotes obedience. Therefore, linguistically, the term *jūgun ianfu*, when considered alongside the 1944 law concerning the *Joshi Teishintai* / *Yŏja Chŏngsindae*, evokes a powerful new demand for female obedience, specifically from the modern nation-state. This reflects a shift from the traditional Confucian concept of the "Three Rules of Obedience" for women in dynastic societies – obedience to the father as a daughter, to the husband as a wife and to the son as an elderly widow – to a new, extra-

[222] *Ibidem.*
[223] II Myon Kim, *Tenno no Guntai to Chosenjin Ianfu* (The Emperor's Forces and Korean Comfort Women) (Tokyo: San'ichi Sho, 1976). Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 67
[224] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 67
[225] *Ibidem.*

domestic form of obedience in the roles women were expected to adopt as citizens of the modern nation-state.[226]

3.2.2 – CHŎNGSINDAE AND OTHER OFFICIAL TERMS IN KOREAN

In contrast, it is noteworthy that Korean women's leaders chose the term *Chŏngsindae* instead of *wianbu*. *Chŏngsindae* was used to describe various *ad hoc* groups composed of students, farmers, housewives and other citizens, all of whom were mobilized to support Japan's war efforts.[227] Kang Man-kil asserts that the term *Chŏngsindae* began circulating in colonial Korea around 1941 and, after the introduction of the *Yŏja Chŏngsindae Law* in 1944, it became specifically associated with women.[228]

Despite the broader meaning of the term *Chŏngsindae*, which initially encompassed individuals whose roles were limited to manual labor, with some former members coming forward to clarify that they were not involved in sexual services, the classification of *Chŏngsindae* as comfort women, or forced prostitutes, continues to prevail in Korean society. This ongoing association reflects a deeply ingrained perception that comfort women were misled into joining *Chŏngsindae*.[229]

The use of *Chŏngsindae* by activists appears to serve as a political tool, emphasizing the deceptive and coercive recruitment practices employed during colonial Korea. Additionally, the term helps distinguish wartime comfort women from contemporary *wianbu* serving U.S. forces in Korea. In this sense, *Chŏngsindae* can be seen as a sensitive euphemism, developed to protect the dignity of survivors and to avoid the negative connotations of the term *wianbu* (prostitute).[230]

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[226] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 71
[227] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), pp. 67-68
[228] Man-kil Kang, "Ilbon'gun 'Wianbu' ŭi kaenyŏm kwa hoch'ing munje" (The Concept and the Problem of Appellation of the Japanese Military 'Comfort Women'), in *Ilbon'gun 'Wianbu' munje ŭi chinsang* (The Truth of the Japanese Military 'Comfort Women' Problem), ed. Han'guk Chŏngsindae Taech'aek Hyŏpŭihoe Chinsangchosa Yŏn'guhoe (Seoul: Yŏksabip'yŏng, 1997). Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 68
[229] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 68
[230] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 62

3.2.3 – CRUDE WORDS, CRUEL ACTS: SOLDIERS' TERMS REFLECTING THEIR BEHAVIOR

While wartime officials adopted the euphemistic term *ianfu* to obscure the brutal conditions of military prostitution and enforced sexual labor, soldiers often employed more vulgar language that revealed deeply ingrained patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes toward the women they exploited.[231] The vulgar Chinese term *pi*, referring to the female genitalia, was reportedly first adopted by Japanese troops deployed in China. Over time, its usage appears to have spread more broadly across the ranks of the imperial military. The English term "cunt" may best capture the connotations associated with *pi* as it was used by soldiers to refer to comfort women[232] – crude, derogatory and dehumanizing.

Japanese soldiers stationed in China used Chinese slang terms like *pi-kankan* (literally, pi-viewing) and *pi-mai* (pi-purchase),[233] which reflect how they viewed comfort women not only as prostitutes but as objects reduced to their sexual function. These expressions point to a dehumanizing attitude, treating the women's bodies – specifically their vaginas – as commodities.[234] Ethnic distinctions were also emphasized, with soldiers labeling the women based on nationality, such as "Korean pi" or "Chinese pi".[235] For Korean women, they used the term "Chosen pi," derived from Korea's name under Japanese rule, and an even more insulting abbreviation, "Sen pi".[236]

Among the degrading terms used by Japanese soldiers to describe comfort women was "public toilet" (*kyōdō benjo*), a label that vividly illustrates how these women

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[231] *Ivi*, pp. 70-71
[232] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 39
[233] Rumiko Nishino, *Jia gun Ianfu: Moto Heishitachi no Shogen* (Military Comfort Women: Testimony of Former Soldiers), Tokyo, Akashi Shoten; 1992, p. 46. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 71
[234] Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 71
[235] Rumiko Nishino, *Jia gun Ianfu: Moto Heishitachi no Shogen* (Military Comfort Women: Testimony of Former Soldiers), Tokyo, Akashi Shoten; 1992. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 71
[236] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 39

were stripped of their humanity and viewed solely as tools for sexual use. This expression appears to have been first used by Asō Tetsuo, who was in charge of both the medical screening of comfort women and the drafting of the official regulations governing military brothels.[237] In his documentation, Aso emphasized that "the special military comfort station must not become a place of hedonistic pleasure; rather, it ought to be a hygienic public toilet".[238]

Asō's description of military comfort stations as "sanitary public toilets" was not an original interpretation; the use of the toilet as a metaphor in Japanese discussions of sexuality has deep cultural roots. It reveals a broad contempt for prostitutes, grounded in traditional beliefs about male superiority and a supposed right to public sexual access.[239] This perspective extended beyond government and military circles. Terms such as *shomben geisha* (literally "toilet geisha") were used to label lower-class geisha involved in sex work. Even male university students in postwar Japan, up through the 1970s, used the word *toire* (toilet) to describe women they engaged with for casual sex.[240]

In this context, it is important to note that "Liberation from the Toilet" was the title of a 1970 manifesto by the Japanese feminist group *Tatakau Onna* (Fighting Women).[241] Tanaka Mitsu, the manifesto's author, criticized the prevailing masculinist sexual culture that reduces women to two binary roles: «As far as men are concerned, a woman is split into two images – either the expression of maternal love: a 'mother', or a vessel for the management of lust: a 'toilet'.»[242]

The view of women as mere vessels for male semen is not exclusive to Japanese sexual culture. In agrarian societies like Korea, women have historically been

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[237] *Ivi*, pp. 39-40
[238] Tetsuo Aso, *Shanghai yori Shanghai e* (From Shanghai to Shanghai), Fukuoka, Sekifusha; 1993, trans. by Chunghee Sarah Soh, Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 71
[239] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 71
[240] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 40
[241] *Ibidem*.
[242] Mitsu Tanaka, *Benjo kara no Kaihō*, statement prepared for Tatakau Onna (Fighting Women), September 1970, in Inoue Teruko et al. (eds), *Nihon no Feminizumu 1: Ribu to Feminizumu*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1994, pp. 39–57

likened to the "field" (*pat* in Korean), where men deposit their "seeds" (*ssi* in Korean).[243] This metaphor, rooted in agrarian imagery,[244] portrays the sexual act as a one-sided event, in which men's ejaculation into passive, silent fields symbolizes the receptiveness of women to male desire. Such imagery aligns with the masculinist understanding of male sexuality as driven primarily by biological needs, viewing sexual acts as bodily functions aimed at physical release.[245]

It is understandable, therefore, that Dr. Asō and other male soldiers viewed comfort women as mere vessels for male sexual energy.[246] The doctor's perception of the comfort station as a sanitary public toilet reflects a phallocentric, essentialist view of male sexuality, which was widespread in masculinist sexual cultures. Dr. Yuasa Ken, another medical professional who served in the Japanese Imperial Army, shared during an interview in Tokyo in 1997 that most soldiers felt no hesitation in seeing non-Japanese comfort women as mere objects of sexual desire and felt justified in using violence to relieve their stress. He added that only a small number of soldiers, who developed close, friendly relationships with the non-Japanese comfort women, treated them with respect and empathy as fellow human beings.[247]

It becomes evident, upon analyzing the examples presented within this text, that the subordination, dehumanization and humiliation imposed on the comfort women during World War II, in addition to being actively manifested through the actions of Japanese soldiers, is also reflected in the terminology they employed. Whether referring to the slang used by soldiers or the official terms, including those still in use today, the status of the comfort women has consistently been one of subjugation and exploitation.

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[243] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 71

[244] Carol Lowery Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 71

[245] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 71

[246] Rumiko Nishino, *Jia gun Ianfu: Moto Heishitachi no Shogen* (Military Comfort Women: Testimony of Former Soldiers), Tokyo, Akashi Shoten; 1992, pp. 48, 52. Cit. in Chunghee Sarah Soh, From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 2000), p. 71

[247] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'*, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (April 2000), p. 71

3.3 – PATRIARCHY ROLE IN DELAYING THE EMERGENCE OF THE PROBLEM

3.3.1 – THE SILENCING AND MARGINALIZATION OF JAPANESE COMFORT WOMEN

The issue of comfort women is vast and complex, encompassing victims and experiences of diverse backgrounds. It cannot be reduced merely to the narrative of "innocent virgins forcibly recruited", a portrayal that early Korean feminist movements initially emphasized. Such a categorization, in fact, merely reiterated the same discrimination that had been perpetrated fifty years earlier, notably during the Batavia Trial of 1948, where the Dutch military tribunal recognized justice only for women who were able to prove they had been coerced into prostitution by the Japanese military.[248]

Following this logic, those who were drawn into prostitution for reasons not involving use of force – which was the case of many Japanese comfort women – were excluded from recognition as victims of wartime sexual crimes. In this context, the Asian Women's Fund, established in 1995, offered a response that mirrored this initial discriminatory framework. Compensation from the Fund, including financial reparation, governmental support for socio-medical expenses and the Prime Minister's letter of apology, was reserved solely for those who could demonstrate they had not engaged in prostitution prior to the war.[249]

Such an approach ultimately reinforced a significant division between the experiences of Korean and Japanese comfort women. The categorization imposed by feminist support movements thus led to the marginalization of Japanese comfort women, predicated on the notion that their recruitment was "voluntary" due to their prior engagement in prostitution.[250]

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[248] Jihie Moon, "Antinomy of the Dutch Approach to Japanese 'Comfort Women': Focusing on the Batavia Military Tribunal", *Southeast Asia Journal*, Vol. 32, no. 2, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, 2022)

[249] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.102

[250] *Ivi*, p. 103

However, this supposed "voluntariness" is revealed as illusory when one examines the actual circumstances that compelled these women into prostitution. Available testimonies indicate that Japanese comfort women were selected from among prostitutes already working in brothels or tea houses within Japan.[251] Predominantly originating from the southern island of Kyūshū, these women had often been sold, as a result of extreme poverty, by their families to traffickers, who then resold them to brothel owners, to whom they remained indebted until the repayment of their purchase price.[252]

Thus, Japanese comfort women were victims of human trafficking, which fundamentally undermined any meaningful exercise of free will that the term "voluntariness" might suggest. This trafficking rendered them mere objects of commercial exchange, a condition comparable to that experienced by women forcibly recruited or deceived in other parts of Asia.[253]

A shared characteristic among the majority of comfort women was their socio-economic background: both Japanese and other Asian victims largely came from impoverished classes. Prewar Japanese society codified norms that sharply differentiated the roles of women according to class. Whereas upper-class women were subjected to stringent expectations of chastity, the prostitution of lower-class women was tacitly tolerated as a means of preserving the honor of the elite.[254] Consequently, in order to shield the army from public dishonor, only Japanese women already engaged in prostitution were recruited into military brothels, thus excluding "virgins" from enlistment.[255]

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[251] Yeong-ae Yamashita, Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue, in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, July 2009, p. 213
[252] *Ivi*, p. 214
[253] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.103
[254] Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne 2004, pp.43-48. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.103
[255] Pyong Gap Min, Korean "Comfort Women" The intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class, in *Gender & Society*, XVII, VI, December 2003, pp. 944-952; and Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women. Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 154-155. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.103

Within the Imperial Japanese Army, Japanese comfort women enjoyed a relatively privileged status, being valued for their nationality and their experience in the entertainment industry; accordingly, their "price" was significantly higher than that of Korean or Chinese women.[256] Despite the relative privileges granted to some Japanese comfort women – such as placement in facilities reserved for high-ranking officers – they remained unequivocal victims of sexual slavery.[257] The nature of their labor, the conditions of constant sexual violence, confinement, physical abuse and the subsequent social discrimination they endured after the war, were no different from the sufferings experienced by other Asian comfort women.[258] Nonetheless, their victimization was frequently overlooked, largely because they were Japanese nationals and deemed to have "voluntarily" participated.[259]

An emblematic case in this regard is that of Mihara Yoshie,[260] also known by her pen name Shirota Suzuko.[261] She was the first Japanese survivor to publicly testify about her experiences – five years prior to the testimony of the first Korean comfort woman, Kim Hak-sun, in 1991.[262] Having lived since the early 1980s at the Kanita

[256] Yeong-ae Yamashita, Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue, in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, July 2009, p. 213
[257] *Ivi*, p. 214
[258] Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women. Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 10-11. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.104
[259] Yeong-ae Yamashita, Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue, in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, July 2009, p. 217
[260] Mihara Yoshie, originally from Fukagawa, Tokyo, faced immense hardship from a young age. After her mother's death and the seizure of her home, she dropped out of Kyoritsu Women's Vocational College. At seventeen, her father sold her to a geisha house in Kagurazaka to settle debts. There, she contracted gonorrhea and, under a three-year contract, accumulated a debt of 500 yen. She was later sent to a naval comfort station in Magong, Taiwan, where her debt grew to 2,500 yen. After returning to Japan, she struggled financially, moving to Saipan and the Truk Islands, and later Palau, accumulating further debts. Repatriated by U.S. forces in 1946, she continued working in brothels, servicing both Japanese and American military clients. Despite the atrocities she endured as a comfort woman, her financial situation forced her to remain in this line of work. See Yeong-ae Yamashita, Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue, in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, July 2009, p. 208
[261] In 1970, under the pen name Shirota Suzuko, she published her memoirs *Ode to Mary*. However, the memoirs quickly went out of print due to the limited sales, which highlights the significant resistance to the public disclosure of a comfort woman's personal experiences. See Yeong-ae Yamashita, Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue, in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, July 2009, p. 215
[262] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.104

Women's Village in Tateyama, a rehabilitation center for sex workers in Chiba Prefecture,[263] Mihara expressed in 1985 her wish to the Christian pastor and founder Fukazu Fumio to erect a monument commemorating the souls of military comfort women. Despite initial hesitation, Fukazu honored her request by erecting a small monument – a simple wooden plaque inscribed with "Monument for the Deceased" (*chinkon no hi*).[264]

Although a discreet ceremony inaugurated the monument to avoid public attention, news of its existence was reported by the *Asahi Shimbun* on August 19, 1985. The monument and Mihara's subsequent interview with the TBS radio station on February 19, 1986, garnered public interest, leading approximately 166 individuals – former soldiers and comfort women among them – to send donations aimed at replacing the wooden plaque with a more permanent stone monument. Thanks to these contributions, a larger stone monument was erected, bearing the inscription "Ah! Military Comfort Woman" (*Ā! Jūgun ianfu*), evoking the cries confided by soldiers to the women during the war.[265]

However, Mihara Yoshie's testimony was not followed by others, and her efforts failed to generate broader societal awareness. Although she received numerous letters from individuals who had shared similar experiences, none chose to join her public appeal.[266]

Yeong-ae Yamashita reported in an article that during her 1991 visit to the Kanita Women's Village, she learned that Mihara had written several letters addressed to the Japanese Prime Minister. Due to her deteriorating health – she had been left paralyzed in her lower limbs after contracting syphilis during the war – Mihara had entrusted Fukazu to send the letters on her behalf; yet they were never dispatched.[267]

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[263] Yeong-ae Yamashita, Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue, in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, July 2009, p. 215
[264] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.104
[265] *Ibidem.*
[266] *Ivi.* pp. 104-105
[267] Yeong-ae Yamashita, Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue, in *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, July 2009, pp. 215-216

Mihara, despite her willingness to share her wartime experiences publicly, was ultimately hindered in her efforts by those around her. Notably, the very individual who should have provided support – Pastor Fukazu Fumio – chose instead to obstruct her attempts at gaining recognition. Although Fukazu initially demonstrated sympathy by erecting a commemorative monument, his subsequent refusal to send Mihara's letters to the Prime Minister reveals a deeper inability to fully comprehend and advocate for the cause of the comfort women. This response can plausibly be attributed to the social and cultural context in which he was raised – an environment that discouraged open confrontation with Japan's wartime history and tended to suppress women's voices. Consequently, rather than facilitating Mihara's pursuit of acknowledgment, he inadvertently perpetuated the mechanisms of silence and marginalization.

This episode thus underscores the crucial role played by women's support movements in ultimately breaking the fifty-year silence surrounding the comfort women issue and in drawing sustained national and international attention to their plight.

3.3.2 – NATIONALISM, FEMINISM AND THE FRAMING OF THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE IN KOREA

In contrast, in the Republic of Korea, women's movements succeeded in creating the necessary support for survivors to publicly testify about the crimes they had endured. This support was crucial in protecting survivors from the pervasive social stigma that categorized them as "dirty" prostitutes, by promoting a new nationalist reinterpretation of the issue. According to this perspective, the comfort women system was not to be regarded as a national disgrace, but rather as evidence of gender-based violence and discrimination against the Korean nation as a whole.[268]

However, embedding the issue within nationalist discourse also meant perpetuating certain patriarchal structures. By framing the comfort women narrative within the rhetoric of national violation, the suffering of the victims was equated with the

[268] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.105

suffering of the nation itself, thereby reinforcing traditional patriarchal notions that linked women's bodies to national honor. In this view, the violation of women was not primarily seen as an assault on their individual autonomy and dignity, but as an attack on the collective honor of Korea. This conceptualization rested on deeply entrenched patriarchal expectations that demanded women's chastity and purity as a symbol of national integrity.[269] As a result, the complexity and diversity of the comfort women system – where women of different backgrounds, experiences and social positions were subjected to violence – was flattened and simplified into a homogenized narrative of victimhood that emphasized purity and chastity above all else.[270]

Korean women's movements, while crucial in bringing the survivors' suffering to light, often unintentionally reinforced this patriarchal framework by portraying the survivors as "pure" women whose honor had been sullied by foreign aggressors. By doing so, the movements reduced the issue to a nationalist grievance against the former colonial power, rather than framing it primarily as a case of systemic, gender-based violence. This approach, while politically effective in rallying national sentiment, ultimately risked marginalizing survivors who did not fit the idealized image of the "chaste" victim. Furthermore, it echoed similar strategies adopted by other countries that had been colonized and occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army, such as Taiwan, China, and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines.[271]

It becomes evident, then, that in the early 1990s, identifying the comfort women system mainly as a national crime, rather than as a profound manifestation of gendered oppression, significantly hindered the emergence of testimonies from Japanese victims and complicated a truly intersectional understanding of the issue. Patriarchy, both as a societal structure and as a conceptual framework, continued to

[269] *Ibidem*.
[270] Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne 2004, pp. 92-94. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.105
[271] *Ivi*, pp. XIII; 92-94. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.106

shape the terms of debate, even within movements that sought to challenge oppression.[272]

An illustrative moment highlighting these tensions was the intense debate that took place during the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing between Korean and Japanese feminists. The controversy began at a workshop on the comfort women issue, which was held at the NGO Forum of the conference.[273] On that occasion, Korean activists were vigorously challenged by Ueno Chizuko, a prominent Japanese feminist, who emphasized the urgent need for feminist movements in both Japan and Korea to transcend nationalist frameworks in order to achieve a fuller and more legitimate recognition of the survivors' suffering. Ueno pointed out that by adhering to nationalistic narratives, the Korean movement inadvertently reinforced patriarchal binaries that rigidly distinguished between "chaste women" (virgins and wives/mothers) and "impure women" (prostitutes).[274] The insistence that all victims had been "pure" before their conscription into military brothels, while aiming to shield survivors from societal shame, paradoxically entrenched the idea that women's value and legitimacy as victims depended on their sexual purity – thus aligning with, rather than dismantling, patriarchal standards.[275]

Ueno's intervention was met with strong opposition, notably from a Korean-American woman in the audience, who interpreted her comments as a demand for Korean women to forget their country's history of colonization by Japan.[276] This exchange revealed the deep tensions between feminist goals and nationalist loyalties, especially given that the binary of "colonizer–colonized" often implied a

[272] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.106
[273] Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, p. 72
[274] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.106
[275] Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne 2004, p. XIII. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.106
[276] Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, p. 72

homogeneity within each category that erased internal differences. Japanese feminists pointed out that even ethnic Japanese women, forced into prostitution during the war, had themselves been victimized, despite belonging nominally to the "colonizer" group; as women and members of lower social classes, their experiences of abuse were often not fundamentally different from those suffered by comfort women from Korea or other parts of Asia.[277]

Ueno further criticized the tendency among Korean activists to depict Korean survivors as entirely coerced victims in contrast to Japanese women allegedly acting of their own volition, arguing that such divisions perpetuated prejudices against prostitutes and created artificial national distinctions among similarly victimized women.[278]

In contrast, scholars like Kim Puja[279] viewed the comfort women issue as a crucial opportunity to overcome nationalism – not only between the "perpetrating nation" (*kagaikoku*) and the "victimized nation" (*higaikoku*), but also among women from different victimized countries, such as China and Taiwan.[280] However, Kim also insisted that the distinctions between aggressors and victims, colonizers and colonized, could not be simply erased.[281] She called upon majority Japanese feminists and historians to recognize that colonialism, more than patriarchy alone, had been the decisive force shaping the victimization of Korean women: their

[277] *Ivi*, p. 63
[278] Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne 2004, p. 129. Cit. in Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, p. 72
[279] Puja Kim is a professor specializing in gender studies and gender history at the Institute for Global Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in Japan. Her scholarly work includes in-depth analyses of gender and education in colonial Korea as well as extensive contributions to the study of the 'comfort women' issue. See Rumiko Nishino, Puja Kim, and Akane Onozawa, eds. *Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State's Assault on Historical Truth*. Translated by Robert Ricketts. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2018, pp. xi-xii
[280] Puja Kim, *Rekishigaku to katarite no ichi: Minzoku, kaikyû, jendâ shokankei kara kangaeru [Who Tells the Story? Race, Class and Gender in History and Historiography]*, paper presented at the symposium on "Contested Historiography: Feminist Perspectives on World War II," organized by the Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien (DIJ), Tokyo, April 13–14, 2000. Cit. in Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, p. 73
[281] Rumiko Nishino, Puja Kim, and Akane Onozawa, eds. *Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State's Assault on Historical Truth*. Translated by Robert Ricketts. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2018, pp. 105-108

suffering had been exacerbated not only by gendered oppression but also by their status as colonial subjects exploited for a war effort waged by a foreign nation.[282]

Ueno, in contrast, maintained that feminism's primary goal should be to overcome national borders and ethnic identities altogether. She argued that patriarchy itself underpinned constructs like ethnicity and nation, and thus, feminism needed to reveal these underlying structures rather than reinforce them. Consequently, Ueno refused to accept colonialism as the main analytic framework for understanding the comfort women issue, nor did she advocate taking on Japan's national guilt.[283] While she did criticize the Japanese government for its failure to take responsibility through official redress, she cautioned that assuming collective national responsibility risked reviving the same notions of national identity that had historically fueled racism and colonialism.[284]

Instead, Ueno highlighted a crucial paradigm shift in the comfort women movement: the idea of direct, personal redress, implying that the state or nation could not claim to represent the individual. In this view, feminism emerged as the decisive force capable of deconstructing the nation's claims to representational authority.[285]

This critical confrontation spurred a moment of reflection within the Korean women's movement. It became increasingly clear that confining the issue within nationalist parameters and traditional notions of female honor had yielded limited tangible results in terms of achieving justice and recognition for survivors. It also became apparent that a broader, more inclusive approach was necessary – one that

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[282] Puja Kim, *Chôsenjin "ianfu" mondai e no shiza: Feminizumu to nashonarizumu [The Issue of Korean "Comfort Women" from the Perspectives of Feminism and Nationalism]*, in *Shinpojiumu. Nashonarizumu to "ianfu" mondai*, edited by Nihon no Sensô Sekinin Shiryô Sentâ, Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1998, p. 195. Cit. in Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, p. 73

[283] Nihon no Sensô Sekinin Shiryô Sentâ (ed.), *Shinpojiumu: Nashonarizumu to "ianfu" mondai [Proceedings of the Symposium on Nationalism and the "Comfort Women" Issue]*, Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1998, p. 62. Cit. in Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, p. 73

[284] *Ivi*, pp. 77-78. Cit. in Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, pp. 73-74

[285] *Ivi*, p. 26; and Chizuko Ueno, *Posuto reisen to "Nihonban rekishi shûsei shugi" [The Post–Cold War Era and the "Japanese Version of Historical Revisionism"]*, in *Shinpojiumu: Nashonarizumu to "ianfu" mondai*, edited by Nihon no Sensô Sekinin Shiryô Sentâ, Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1998, p. 122. Cit. in Ulrike Wöhr, A Touchstone for Transnational Feminism: Discourses on the Comfort Women in 1990s Japan. *Japanstudien*, Vol. *16*(1), 2005, p. 74

recognized the systemic gendered violence at the heart of the comfort women system, rather than reducing the issue to a nationalistic grievance alone.

Thus began a new phase of collaboration among Asian women's movements, one that sought to "gender-ize" and internationalize the comfort women issue. This shift aimed to challenge both the legacy of colonial violence and the enduring influence of patriarchy, emphasizing survivors' voices and experiences not based on their conformity to ideals of purity or nationalism, but on the fundamental violation of their rights and dignity as women.[286]

3.3.3 – The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal: A Transnational Feminist Approach to Justice

The 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing marked a pivotal moment for transnational feminist activism. It brought international attention to the issue of sexual violence in armed conflict, highlighting the experiences of survivors and challenging the longstanding marginalization of these voices within both international law and human rights discourse. For many Asian feminists, the Beijing Platform for Action not only validated their concerns but also provided a common framework for addressing gender-based violence as a matter of international justice.

Building on this momentum, regional efforts intensified and helped set the stage for the 1997 International Conference on Violence Against Women in War and Armed Conflict Situations in Tokyo. This conference inspired the formation of the Violence Against Women in War Network, Japan (VAWW-NET Japan) in 1998.[287] Led by VAWW-NET Japan and supported by a network of women's NGOs across Asia, the concept of organizing a people's tribunal began to take form. [288]

Faced with continued inaction from official institutions and aware of the urgency brought on by the aging of survivors, activists sought alternative paths to justice.

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[286] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p.106

[287] Violence Against Women in War Network, Japan (VAWW-NET Japan) is a feminist NGO founded to support survivors of wartime sexual violence and to promote historical accountability, particularly in relation to Japan's military sexual slavery system. The official website, currently inactive, is http://www.jca.apc.org/vaww-net-japan

[288] Christine M. Chinkin, Women's International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, in *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), p. 336

VAWW-NET Japan formally proposed the idea of a tribunal at the 1998 Asian Women's Solidarity Conference in Seoul, where it received broad support from participating groups. What began as a regional initiative soon expanded into a transnational movement, though it remained firmly anchored in the Asian feminist community. Planning sessions were held in Tokyo in December 1998 and in Seoul in February 1999, culminating in the creation of an International Organizing Committee. [289]

This committee was composed of three key groups: survivors and activists from countries impacted by the crimes (including China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and both South and North Korea), represented by Yun Chung-Ok; members from Japan, the perpetrator country, with VAWW-NET Japan and spokesperson Yayori Matsui; and an International Advisory Committee chaired by Indai Lourdes Sajor of the Asian Center for Women's Human Rights (ASCENT) in the Philippines.[290] The Advisory Committee also included participants from all over the world – North and South America, Africa, Europe, Australia, and Asia.[291]

The committee was tasked with carrying out investigations, drafting the tribunal's charter and organizing the event, which would ultimately be held in Tokyo. At its core, the initiative reflected a collective resolve to seek justice through community-led efforts when institutional mechanisms had consistently failed to deliver.[292]

> these failures must not be allowed to silence the voices of survivors, nor obscure accountability for such crimes against humanity. [The tribunal] was established to redress the historic tendency to trivialize, excuse, marginalize and obfuscate crimes against women, particularly sexual crimes, and even more so when they are committed against non-white women.[293]

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[289] *Ibidem.*
[290] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 132
[291] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), pp.106-107
[292] Christine M. Chinkin, Women's International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, in *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), p. 336
[293] Prosecutor and People of Asia Pacific Region v. Hirohito; Prosecutor and People of Asia Pacific Region v. Japan, Summary of Findings and Preliminary Judgment, paragraph 5, in *Women's Int'l War Crimes Trib. 2000*, Dec.12, 2000. Cit. in Christine M. Chinkin, Women's International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, in *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), p. 336

On December 8, 2000, more than 1,300 people assembled at the Kudan Kaikan Hall in Tokyo to attend the opening session of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal. Unlike state-authorized courts or institutions backed by international legal bodies, this people's tribunal operated independently of formal legal systems. It emerged from a transnational feminist movement determined to bring to light suppressed historical realities and to apply international legal standards to injustices that had long gone unacknowledged.[294]

The tribunal's judges were deliberately selected for their established dedication to justice and gender equality. The panel included Gabrielle Kirk McDonald, former President of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia; Carmen Argibay, Justice of the Argentine Supreme Court and President of the International Association of Women Judges; Christine Chinkin, an international law professor in London and contributor to multiple UN missions; and Willy Mutunga, at the time President of the Kenyan Bar Association and later Chief Justice of Kenya.[295] The panel reflected a diversity of backgrounds – professional, geographical and ideological – that is often absent in official international tribunals.[296] This inclusive composition echoed the tribunal's broader aim: to create a feminist legal process that was both global and representative.

In addition to these figures, the tribunal's membership featured a broad array of legal scholars, human rights practitioners and advocates. Notable among them were Vitit Muntarbhorn (former UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking and related abuses), Gay McDougall (UN expert on minority issues) and Patricia Viseur-Sellers (gender justice adviser for the international tribunals for Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda).[297] Leadership roles were primarily held by women – an unprecedented development that highlighted the feminist orientation of the proceedings and marked a significant moment in efforts to challenge male-dominated legal

[294] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 132
[295] *Ibidem.*
[296] Christine M. Chinkin, Women's International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), p. 338
[297] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 132

traditions. The tribunal thus redefined who could serve as a legitimate voice in international legal interpretation and historical reckoning.

One of the tribunal's defining features was its prioritization of survivor testimony. Elderly women who had endured Japan's military sexual slavery system came forward to share their experiences publicly, despite the emotional and physical toll. Though time had inevitably shaped memory, their testimonies represented a breakthrough in feminist historiography, asserting the value of personal narrative as a form of evidence and resistance.[298] Their accounts were supported by experts – historians, psychologists and legal advocates – who had been involved in prior international trials during the 1990s. Furthermore, two former Japanese soldiers, Kaneko Yasuji and Suzuki Yoshio, also provided testimony, rejecting official narratives that framed the military's prostitution system as a mechanism to prevent mass rape. Instead, they confirmed that sexual violence was systemic and often encouraged as a method of warfare.[299] [300]

To emphasize the international dimension of the tribunal, the Organizing Committee brought together legal experts and feminist leaders from five continents. This global participation reinforced the event's broader ambition – not just to condemn past atrocities, but to contribute to the evolution of international legal norms concerning sexual violence in conflict. The tribunal unfolded in parallel with significant developments in international criminal law, such as the 2001 *Foca* verdict by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia,[301] which formally recognized rape as a crime against humanity.[302]

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[298] *Ivi*, pp. 134-135
[299] *Ivi*, pp. 135-136
[300] Paragraph 559 of the 2001 Charter, which includes testimonies from several soldiers, records the following account: "One company commander unofficially gave instructions for raping as follows: 'In order that we will not have problems, either pay them money or kill them in some obscure place after you have finished.'" See Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery, *Judgment*, The Hague (Netherlands: December 4, 2001)
[301] The ICTY convicted three Serbian military leaders for employing rape as a method of terror and an instrument of ethnic cleansing. See International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, *Judgement to Be Handed Down by Trial Chamber II in the Kunarac, Kovac & Vukovic Case ("Foca")*, The Hague: ICTY, February 20, 2001 (https://www.icty.org/en/press/judgement-be-handed-down-trial-chamber-ii-kunarac-kovac-vukovic-case-foca, April 29, 2025)
[302] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), pp. 133-134

The central mission of the tribunal was to elevate the voices of the former comfort women, especially in light of continued denial and revisionist narratives. Positioned as a political and symbolic form of justice, the tribunal directly challenged the legacy of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials of 1946–1948, which had largely overlooked sexual violence and exempted key figures from accountability.[303] By placing survivors' memories and dignity at the heart of the proceedings, the tribunal asserted a new epistemological approach – one that refused to erase or marginalize women's experiences.

A particularly significant aspect of the tribunal was its decision to revisit the question of imperial accountability. Unlike the postwar Tokyo Trials, which shielded Emperor Hirohito from prosecution due to geopolitical interests and the influence of General MacArthur,[304] this tribunal explicitly named him as a defendant. The earlier exemption had been justified by casting the Emperor as a symbolic figure without real authority. Such a portrayal depended on both the cooperation of the accused and the deliberate suppression of incriminating evidence.[305] In postwar Japan, this issue became a cultural taboo, reinforced by the intimidation tactics of nationalist groups. The Women's Tribunal sought to break this silence.[306]

After several days of testimony and argument, the judges, supported by a team of legal advisers, deliberated and prepared a preliminary judgment. Although their authority was symbolic rather than binding, their process was characterized by transparency and rigor. On the fourth day, the tribunal issued its verdict. The final judgment, published in The Hague on December 4, 2001, found Emperor Hirohito

[303] *Ivi*, p. 134
[304] General Douglas MacArthur was a prominent U.S. Army general who commanded Allied forces in the Southwest Pacific during World War II and later oversaw the Allied occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1951. See Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Douglas MacArthur" (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Douglas-MacArthur, April 29, 2025)
[305] Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000); and John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. / The New Press, 1999). Cit. in Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 137
[306] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), pp. 137-138

guilty of criminal negligence under Article 3, Section 2 of the Tribunal's Charter.[307] The announcement was met with strong emotional reactions – relief, validation, and affirmation – for both the survivors and their advocates. The decision offered formal recognition of Japan's institutionalized system of wartime sexual slavery.[308]

With the exception of the Emperor, the individuals named in the proceedings had already been tried in 1948 and were deceased.[309] Nonetheless, the tribunal's findings served to reaffirm the political and moral responsibility of those previously convicted and renewed public attention to the systematic nature of sexual violence during Japan's wartime expansion.[310] The absence of any Japanese government representative – despite an invitation[311] – also pointed to the enduring unease surrounding the issue within Japan's political establishment.

The tribunal's impact extended far beyond its proceedings. It raised global awareness of gender-based violence and contributed to deeper reflections on the intersections of prostitution, militarism and patriarchy. The reactions it provoked – ranging from solidarity to backlash – demonstrated the continuing opposition faced by survivors, especially in the form of antifeminist narratives that aimed to delegitimize their experiences.[312]

One of the most concrete outcomes of the tribunal was the establishment, in 2005, of the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo.[313] Nevertheless, the

[307] According to Article 3, Section 2, a superior may still be held responsible for the offenses outlined in Article 2 if committed by a subordinate, to the extent that the superior knew or should have known about the conduct in question. In this context, Emperor Hirohito, having held the highest military authority and thereby bearing ultimate responsibility for command, was found guilty. See "Annexe 2 - Charter of The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal On Japan's Military Sexual Slavery", *Droit et cultures* [Online], no. 58 (2009-2), published July 6, 2010 (https://journals.openedition.org/droitcultures/2189, April 29, 2025)
[308] *Ivi*, p. 139
[309] The accused included: Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989); Andô Rikichi (1884–1946), Governor of Taiwan, committed suicide post-arrest; Hata Shunroku (1879–1962), sentenced to life, released in 1955; Itagaki Seishirô (1885–1948), executed; Kobayashi Seizô (1877–1962), released before trial; Matsui Iwane (1878–1948), executed for the Nanking Massacre; Terauchi Hisauchi (1879–1946), died in prison; Tôjô Hideki (1884–1948), Prime Minister, executed; Umezu Yoshijirô (1882–1949), died serving life sentence; and Yamashita Tomoyuki (1885–1946), executed for responsibility in the Mapanique mass rapes. See Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 137
[310] *Ivi*, p. 138
[311] *Ivi*, p. 134
[312] *Ivi*, p. 141
[313] *Ivi*, p. 143

tribunal did not bring closure to the ongoing "memory wars" in East Asia. Its critique of Japanese nationalism was a significant development, but as sociologist Ueno Chizuko emphasized in her 1998 work,[314] feminist movements in the region still grapple with distancing themselves from nationalist frameworks. This remains essential – not only for addressing historical grievances but also for confronting the patriarchal systems that continue to shape contemporary societies.[315]

In the end, the Women's International Tribunal stands as a landmark in the global feminist pursuit of justice for survivors of wartime sexual violence. It challenged silence with testimony, impunity with symbolic accountability and nationalist narratives with a vision of transnational solidarity. Its most enduring legacy lies in its contribution to the gendered reinterpretation of historical memory and its insistence that even symbolic justice can serve as a powerful vehicle for truth and transformation.

3.3.4 – Resisting Justice: The Japanese Response to the Women's Tribunal

Despite the substantial symbolic and legal significance of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, it faced substantial opposition within Japan. The Tribunal's verdict undermined the Japanese government's longstanding position on the comfort women issue internationally, leading Tokyo to attempt to suppress awareness of the event.[316] One of the most significant examples of this was a collaboration between the national broadcaster NHK and the feminist group VAWW-Net Japan to air a documentary on the Tribunal. This documentary was

[314] Chizuko Ueno, *Nashonarizumu to jendâ* [*Nationalism and gender*]. Tokyo: Seidosha, 1998. Cit. in Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 141

[315] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), pp. 141-142

[316] The national newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* was the sole publication to announce the tribunal's judgment. See Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Japan's 'Comfort Women': It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word), *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, March 1, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/tessa-morris-suzuki/2373/article, April 29, 2025)

intended to be the second episode in a series addressing wartime responsibility, including topics like the Algerian War of Independence and the Yugoslav Wars.[317]

Originally scheduled to air on NHK's educational channel on January 30, 2001, under the title *Towareru senji seibōryoku* (Questions about Wartime Sexual Violence),[318] the documentary underwent drastic changes just a day before its broadcast after a meeting between NHK executives and Shinzō Abe, the then Chief Cabinet Secretary.[319] The final version of the documentary differed significantly from the agreed-upon script. It featured an interview with the conservative historian Hata Ikuhiko, a known revisionist who questioned the credibility of survivor accounts and harshly criticized the Tribunal. The testimonies of Chinese survivors and former Japanese soldiers, who had provided key evidence regarding military involvement in the forced prostitution system, were cut. Additionally, references to the Emperor's conviction were removed entirely.[320]

This edited version of the documentary omitted footage from the Tribunal's proceedings and made no mention of its findings. In response, VAWW-Net filed a lawsuit against NHK and the two production companies involved.[321] This case also ignited wider public discussions about political interference in media, particularly involving NHK and the national newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, which called for safeguarding journalistic independence from political pressure.[322]

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[317] Yayori Matsui, The Historical Significance of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal 2000, in *Overcoming the Culture of Impunity for Wartime Sexual Violence*, 2000, p. 7. Cit. in Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 110

[318] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 110

[319] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Japan's 'Comfort Women': It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word), *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, March 1, 2007 (https://apjjf.org/tessa-morris-suzuki/2373/article, April 29, 2025)

[320] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), pp. 110-111

[321] The lawsuit was unsuccessful. See Akemi Nakamura, NHK censorship ruling reversed, *Japan Times*, June 13, 2008 (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/06/13/national/nhk-censorship-ruling-reversed/, April 29, 2025)

[322] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Free Speech – Silenced Voices: The Japanese Media, the Comfort Women Tribunal, and the NHK Affair, *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, December 2, 2006 (https://apjjf.org/tessa-morris-suzuki/2305/article, April 29, 2025)

The insufficient media coverage and the lack of widespread dissemination of the Tribunal's findings in Japan meant that it failed to spark significant changes in political or social discussions surrounding the comfort women issue.[323]

Several factors contributed to the censorship surrounding the Tribunal's verdict. For one, the conviction of Emperor Hirohito directly challenged one of Japan's most deeply ingrained postwar taboos.[324] Additionally, the consolidation of sixty-four survivor testimonies over the three-day proceedings made it nearly impossible to deny the existence of the military sexual slavery system. The Tribunal also uncovered numerous historical documents from various countries that contradicted revisionist narratives and governmental denials.[325]

The Tribunal's verdict also exposed the inadequacy of Japan's policies regarding the comfort women issue, including the Asian Women's Fund. The judgment made clear that the Fund, being a private project, could not substitute for direct state responsibility. Moreover, it no longer aligned with the demands of the survivors, who increasingly sought not only financial compensation or symbolic apologies, but also the prosecution of those responsible – something the Fund was fundamentally incapable of delivering.[326]

The Fund was also criticized for discriminatory practices, including its refusal to compensate or apologize to victims who could not prove they hadn't been prostitutes before being recruited. This policy remained in effect even after the Tribunal officially recognized the comfort women system as a gender-based crime and a violation of women's human rights, regardless of the conditions under which the women had been recruited. In this way, the Fund's criteria perpetuated damaging narratives about the "voluntariness" of the women's participation, which

[323] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 111

[324] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), pp. 137-138

[325] Silvia Gini, *Il Fondo nazionale per le donne asiatiche in Giappone: una lettura di genere*, DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile, no. 15 (2011), p. 111

[326] *Ivi*, pp. 111-112

continue to be invoked in Japanese political discourse to minimize the severity of the crime.[327]

Ultimately, the Women's Tribunal and the comfort women issue continue to challenge Japan's patriarchal society. This challenge was made possible by the evolution of feminist movements in Asia, which, through international solidarity, provided substantial support to the survivors and strongly opposed both conservative government policies and neo-nationalist revisionism.

However, the comfort women issue remains highly controversial and polarizing. Survivors continue to face public skepticism and denial, often enduring attacks on their dignity and the veracity of their testimonies. More than twenty years after the Tribunal, Japan has yet to issue an unequivocal apology that accepts legal responsibility for the coerced military prostitution system. While some administrations have expressed regret, their statements remain diplomatically vague, carefully avoiding a direct admission of state responsibility – a position that continues to strain relations with South Korea and China.

Despite the absence of official redress, the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal remains a landmark event in the global quest for justice for survivors of sexual violence. It offered a public forum where the voices of women, long silenced or discredited, were finally heard and validated. The Tribunal mobilized civil society actors across Asia and beyond, contributing to a feminist reimagining of transitional justice that prioritizes the experiences of survivors and examines the structural conditions that allow such crimes to occur.

Significantly, the Tribunal challenged long-standing patriarchal narratives that treated sexual violence in wartime as a mere byproduct of conflict or individual misconduct, rather than as a systematic weapon of domination. In doing so, it laid the groundwork for broader critiques of gender-based violence, both in wartime and peacetime, across Asia. The feminist coalitions supporting the Tribunal have continued their activism, striving to dismantle the cultural and institutional norms that perpetuate the subordination of women.

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[327] *Ivi*, p. 112

Although formal legal justice has not yet been achieved, the Tribunal's legacy endures. It reshaped the historical narrative of the comfort women issue, stimulated significant academic and legal debates, and contributed to the gradual development of gender-sensitive approaches to human rights violations in East Asia. The struggle for recognition and redress continues, but the Women's Tribunal stands as a testament to the power of survivor-centered justice and the growing capacity of feminist movements to confront the legacies of wartime sexual violence and challenge the patriarchal foundations of modern societies.

CONCLUSION

Nearly ninety years have passed since the institutionalization of the comfort women system during Japan's imperial expansion, yet a definitive and just resolution remains frustratingly elusive. Despite the passage of time, the political, moral and historical complexities surrounding this issue have not diminished; rather, they have intensified and become more deeply entrenched. What has emerged through this research is a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how intertwined factors – namely national interests, historical revisionism and deeply rooted patriarchal norms – have continuously shaped collective memory, obstructed accountability and marginalized the voices of survivors. These forces have created persistent barriers to achieving recognition and justice for the women who suffered under this system.

The failure to acknowledge and adequately redress the comfort women system cannot be attributed solely to unresolved diplomatic tensions between Japan and South Korea. Rather, it reflects a deeper and more pervasive structural issue: the persistent influence of patriarchy in both societies, which has systematically prioritized national honor and political expediency over gender justice. This dynamic is particularly evident in the recurring pattern of cyclical diplomacy, whereby symbolic gestures of recognition are frequently followed by denial or retraction. State-sponsored initiatives such as the Asian Women's Fund and the 2015 Agreement were presented as steps toward reconciliation. However, they remain insufficient and unsatisfactory efforts, widely criticized for their top-down nature and for the absence of meaningful survivor participation. Most significantly, these measures have failed to provide a clear and unequivocal acknowledgment of legal responsibility on the part of the Japanese state, leaving a profound moral and legal void at the heart of the issue.

These patriarchal dynamics have been further exacerbated by racialized hierarchies. The marginalization of comfort women has followed racialized lines, revealing how both gender and geopolitical status have influenced whose suffering was deemed worthy of recognition. While the violence endured by comfort women was documented by prosecutors from the Netherlands, China and France – covering

crimes committed in Indonesia, East Timor, China and Indochina – only the abuses suffered by women from Allied nations received formal attention during the postwar trials of Class B and C war criminals. By contrast, Asian women were excluded from these early mechanisms of justice and were compelled to remain silent within their home countries, where cultural taboos, patriarchal norms and political pressures further reinforced their invisibility. This silence persists to this day in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia,[328] where only a single survivor has publicly come forward. Even bilateral treaties, such as the 1965 agreement between South Korea and Japan, failed to acknowledge the existence of these women, reflecting a broader national and international reluctance to confront the full scope of gender-based war crimes when the victims were not white. [329]

A further aggravating factor has been the nationalist framing imposed on the comfort women issue. In the postwar period, patriarchal ideologies fostered a culture of silence and shame that discouraged survivors from coming forward, while simultaneously allowing political institutions to instrumentalize the issue for nationalistic purposes. Consequently, the suffering of comfort women was often co-opted into broader state narratives, stripped of its gendered dimensions and reduced to a bargaining chip in bilateral negotiations. These dynamics demonstrate that patriarchy not only delayed recognition but also undermined the terms and conditions under which justice was pursued.

Having outlined and synthesized the key findings, it is important to return to the central research question that guided this thesis: to what extent have patriarchal structures delayed the exposure and recognition of the comfort women issue? The evidence presented confirms that patriarchy has played a central role in this historical injustice. Its influence can be traced across every dimension of the issue, from early patriarchal conceptions of male dominance and female subordination to

[328] A confidential directive dated 30 July 1993, revealed by an *Asahi Shimbun*'s article on October 13, 2013, shows that the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed its embassies in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia not to investigate the comfort women issue among local populations. See Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 127

[329] Christine Lévy and Anne Epstein, The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?, *Clio (English Edition)*, No. 39, Gendered laws of war (2014), p. 127

the androcentric notion of men's "natural needs", for which women were made responsible. Patriarchy did not cease with the dismantling of the comfort women system; it continued to shape postwar dynamics, including the denial of recognition, victim-blaming and the refusal to issue sincere apologies – often under the pretext that the issue was not sufficiently important. In this sense, the thesis concludes that patriarchal structures have profoundly shaped the way this injustice has been addressed, not only delaying public recognition but also distorting the terms of redress and historical responsibility.

Yet amid this legacy of silence and denial, feminist movements have emerged as vital forces of resistance. A new generation of activists in South Korea and Japan – informed by global currents such as #MeToo[330] and shaped by local struggles – are reframing the comfort women issue as an ongoing demand for gender justice. Through protest, art, education and transnational advocacy, they are creating new spaces for memory, solidarity and critical engagement. These feminist interventions mark a significant shift, not only in how the past is remembered but in how justice is conceptualized and pursued.

By centering its analysis on patriarchy, this thesis contributes to a growing body of literature that reinterprets historical injustices through a gendered lens. While this body of scholarship is indeed substantial, it is also marked by considerable variation in perspectives. Some scholars offer conflicting interpretations of the comfort women issue – ranging from those who emphasize systemic gender-based violence to others who seek to minimize or even deny the structural nature of the abuses.

[330] The #MeToo movement unfolded differently in South Korea and Japan, shaped by distinct social and cultural contexts. In South Korea, the movement gained rapid momentum beginning in 2018, with numerous women publicly accusing prominent figures of sexual harassment and assault. This led to widespread protests, legal reforms, and increased public awareness of gender-based violence. The movement was characterized by strong survivor participation and a vibrant civil society response, which challenged entrenched patriarchal norms and state silence. Conversely, in Japan, the #MeToo movement progressed more cautiously. Many survivors remained anonymous due to fears of social stigma, professional repercussions, and victim-blaming. Public discourse in Japan has been slower to embrace the movement, and legal or institutional changes have been limited. Despite these differences, both countries continue to wrestle with deeply rooted patriarchal structures that hinder full acknowledgment and justice for survivors. The movements in both contexts have also fostered new forms of solidarity and activism, including the use of hashtags like #WithYou to support survivors while mitigating personal risk. See Linda Hasunuma and Ki-young Shin, #MeToo in Japan and South Korea: #WeToo, #WithYou, in *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, vol. 40, no. 1, New York, 2019, pp. 97–111

This heterogeneity should be acknowledged as both a strength and a limitation of the present work. On one hand, it allows for a pluralistic approach that presents readers with a range of viewpoints, encouraging critical engagement and a deeper understanding of the complexities at play. On the other hand, it also poses a challenge, as some of these positions serve less to foster scholarly debate and more to delegitimize the issue altogether or to obscure its underlying patriarchal and colonial dimensions. This tension highlights the ongoing contestation surrounding the comfort women issue and reinforces the importance of approaching it with both analytical rigor and ethical sensitivity.

Ultimately, the comfort women issue is far from a closed chapter. It remains a contested and living site of struggle where the entangled forces of denial, nationalism and patriarchy continue to be challenged by survivors, activists and scholars alike. In this context, justice must be understood not as a one-time resolution but as a transformative and ongoing process-grounded in acknowledgment, reparation and the redefinition of collective responsibility. It is through sustained engagement, critical reflection and inclusive dialogue that meaningful progress toward justice and healing can be achieved.

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