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JAPN 311

December 17, 2019

## The Pursuit of Justice for Comfort Women

### **Introduction**

This paper will address the issue of the survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery known as ‘comfort women’ during the Asia Pacific War (1931-1945), also referred to as World War II, who are demanding justice and a restoration of their dignity to the Japanese government. The purpose behind comfort stations was to prevent sexual crimes against local women during the war and were established in the Japanese military camps. Women were ‘recruited’ violently, with deception and even coercion. The number of victims is unknown, but according to data from the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF), it is estimated to be between 20,000 to 410,000. Most of them were from Korea, Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Netherlands, and Indonesia. The survivors of this high-profile human rights issue are demanding a sincere apology from the government of Japan. It is evident that all countries involved in armed conflicts hide all their atrocities committed in a treaty that only serve as symbolism. For over two decades, their voices have been ignored and even blamed by several sectors of society, especially from the right-wing Japanese politicians. I believe that the government of Japan perceives it as a threat to their prestige to the rest of the world. An apology symbolizes the acceptance of a mistake and a humiliation for the country as a whole.

### **Literary Review**

The topic of comfort women has been well-researched by academics since it is directly related to the role of women during times of war, as well as the definition of

rape crime on international law. Historically, during times of war, women have had a passive role, taking care of their families while their husbands are at the forefront of the battles. Others take part by serving as nurses to take care of the wounded soldiers. Although, there have been cases of women being part of the armed conflict such as the *Adelitas* or *Soldaderas*, indigenous or mongrel Mexican women who joined the fight during the Mexican Revolution in 1910. According to the article “*Soldaderas* and the Staging of the Mexican Revolution” by Alicia Arrizon, these women went into combat carrying their children on their backs. *Adelitas* “fought, foraged for food, cooked, nursed the wounded, and performed many other essential services” (96). Despite their efforts and cruciality during the war, *soldaderas* were still perceived as an object of male desire. In fact, there is a famous song called “La Adelita,” a popular ballad song that portrays them as an object to love and have sex. It is well known that some women were sexually exploited by the *revolucionarios* (revolutionists) when they assaulted houses for food and luxury objects. It is evident that the soldiers’ sexual needs have been historically normalized over women’s rights since no legal action has taken place. In the article, “War Rape: New Conceptualizations and Responses” by Nancy Farewell states that rape has always been perceived as a weapon and strategy of war which is rarely denounced due to external pressures or fear from being rejected from society. Farewell affirms that the context of war rape is related to gender relations, patriarchy, and militarization, “the military, largely a masculine [...] determines and reinforces hierarchies of power within and among states, thereby reinforcing and re-creating gender relations and patriarchy” (394). During the early 1990s, the Asian feminist activists and jurists denounced the issue of ‘comfort women’ to the international community, which modified rape as a war crime to a human crime (391). This is considered a significant achievement because rape is now penalized despite any reason

by international law. However, until today, there has not been justice for ‘comfort women’ even though it has been proven that the Japanese Imperial Army, as well as some members of the Japanese government during World War II (WWII), were part of this system of sexual exploitation. Throughout this time, victims have been demanding an apology from those responsible, but the Japanese government continues to reject their responsibility upon this crime. Based on the information presented, it is evident that ‘comfort women’ is a topic related to other social issues that have occurred far beyond war.

### **Methodology**

In order to investigate the issue of ‘comfort women,’ I will be exploring scholarly articles, newspaper reportage, and a book that revolves around women's human rights and the pursuit of justice for the victims of sexual exploitation during WWII. In addition to articles that inform about the victims’ suffering and data to show the magnitude of this issue, I decided to focus my research on the aftermath of ‘comfort women’ and how it continues to be a relevant issue in today’s society. First of all, the data and statistics are based on information from the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF), an organization established by the Japanese government in 1994 whose primary purpose is to fight for justice for ‘comfort women.’ The scholarly articles presented analyze the efforts for justice, the lack of action from the Japanese government, the culture of sexual violence in Japan, solutions beyond state apologies, a testimony from one of the victims, the significance of a state apology, the new conceptualization of rape crime during war, the current and future relation between Asia and Japan, the U.S. involvement in ‘comfort stations,’ the judicial recognition of military sexual slavery, and the next step in action with the ‘comfort women’ issue. The purpose of this research

paper is to inform with objectivity by providing the arguments of those who support justice and those who oppose it. The articles were carefully selected in order to form a cohesive and accurate opinion since the focus of this assignment states my perspective about the sexual exploitation of women during WWII.

### **Research Findings**

After immersing in the topic of ‘comfort women,’ and analyzing the general perceptions of the Japanese society and the international sector, there is no doubt about those who planned and executed the ‘comfort station’ system. Since the 1990s until today, the focus has been on the compensation to victims of this atrocity that cost uncountable suffering and thousands of deaths under the excuse of protecting civilians from the sexual needs of the soldiers. In an article from the *Wall Street Journal* called “Lost in the Wrangle: Justice for Comfort Women” by Andrew Browne, it is stated that members of the Japanese government sponsored this system through a network of brothels known as the Recreation and Amusement Association (R.A.A.) who called for women who would sacrifice themselves for the Japanese cause by sexually serving the Japanese Imperial Army during WWII (1). It is clear that some of those women served at their own will; in fact, some of them were already prostitutes. However, in most of the cases, women were kidnapped or deceived about goods jobs in several Asian countries. Despite this, the conservative Japanese politicians affirm that all ‘comfort women’ were volunteers, and the government should not give any form of compensation for this reason (3). In the same article, the authors present the testimony from Yuan Zhulin, a Chinese ‘comfort women’ who describes being raped by 10 Japanese soldiers on her first day, “the lower part of my body felt as if it had been sliced with knives.” Furthermore, the aftermath was worst for Zhulin, in 1958, a Chinese court

sentenced her to hard labor and was sent to exile to the northeast of the country for prostituting herself to the Japanese (4). Testimonies such as this one are uncountable. Although most of them were never revealed. In a special report from the *Tokyo Weekender* magazine called “No comfort in the truth” by Annemarie Luck addresses the story of Kim Hak-Sun, a Korean victim who gave the first testimony of this issue in 1991 and inspired many more women from different Asian countries. She stated, “each woman had to serve an average of three to four soldiers on regular days, and seven to eight soldiers after battles” (19). The victims had to endure painful sexually transmitted diseases, forced abortion, most of them died, and those who survived were abandoned and had to tolerate shame and stigmatization. An article from the *History Channel* called “The Brutal History of Japan’s ‘Comfort Women’ by Erin Blakemore addresses an investigation that affirms that ‘comfort stations’ did not end after the war. In 2007, the Associated Press (AP) revealed that the United States authorities allowed these stations to continue operating in order to serve American men until 1946 by general McArthur (2). Tens of thousands of women had sex with them. Despite the involvement of many sectors, full justice has not been achieved. In the article, “Commentary on a Victory for “Comfort Women”: Japan’s Judicial Recognition of Military Sexual Slavery” by Etsuro Totsuka, addresses a landmark decision in favor of the victims. In 1998, the Japanese court ruled in favor of three Korean ‘comfort women’ being the first time of compensation to foreign plaintiffs. The members of the Japanese Diet were held negligent under the State Liability Act for not compensating the victims. The arguments presented in this case served as a guide for the following cases, which most of them were unsuccessful (47). In the article “Asian-Japanese: State Apology National Ethos, and the “Comfort Women” Reparations Debate in Japan” by Mariko Izumi, the Kampo Trial rearticulated apology as new rhetoric of responsibility in Japan

under the scrutiny of legal discourse. The victims demanded different resolutions. In the Kampo Trial, they wanted monetary compensation and an official apology from the Japanese government in the Japanese Diet as well as in the General Assembly of the United Nations. Song Sin-do, a Korean victim, demanded only an official state apology, “Apology is enough. I want them to understand that it is not about money.” (481). Although, the judges stated that it was not possible to demand an apology in the court without financial compensation. Whereas, Taiwanese “comfort women” survivors asked for an apology in the form of a letter. In China, they demanded a published apology in Japanese national newspapers, and others also wanted an apology at the Japanese Diet and the U.N. General Assembly. As an outsider, there is no doubt that the Japanese government should accept their responsibility and compensate for their shameful and unforgettable mistake of all times. In the article “The ‘Comfort Women’ Issue and the Embedded Culture of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Japan” by Muta Kazue states that misogyny, powerful rape myths and the porn culture in Japan prevents a profound reflection of the effects caused to the victims which in turn makes a formal apology from the Japanese government an impossible task (621). This is not a political issue; it is a moral issue. In the article, “Disputes in Japan Over “Comfort Women” and Historical Perception” by Hirofumi Hayashi addresses the current efforts in obtaining an apology from the Japanese political institutions. The continuous rejection of responsibility from the conservative Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, motivated the U.S. House of Representatives in 2007 to pass a resolution forcing them to accept their involvement in the ‘comfort stations’ system, “[they] should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner” (129). Furthermore, surprising, the Japanese government refused to accept this resolution in any way. Their excuse is that they already apologized on various occasions

meaning that this issue should be left in history as part of the war crime. In times where globalization is a key factor in the countries' economic and political success, a good relation among nations is necessary. Although this is not the case with Japan and Korea, the two main protagonists of this issue. In the article, "The Burden of History: The Issue of 'comfort women' and what Japan Must Do to Move Forward" by Sonya Kuki, a list of recommendations to agree on a resolution is addressed. The governments of Japan and South Korea should establish a channel of interaction to address the points of contention and place accountability on both sides. A commission from both nations should, "[...] foster discussions of the terms of an official government apology and state compensation; and define the duties of legal responsibility...open up discussion on gender policy [...] should be responsible for deliverables, such as a final commission report and a bilateral treaty...that would be legally binding for both countries" (254). The best form to "compensate" the victims is by not only rectifying the past but to institute measures to create a friendly exchange between all parts involved.

## **Conclusion**

As a human rights issue, it is undoubtful that 'comfort women' are still at the 'comfort stations' suffering the sexual and psychological exploitation from individuals whose primary purpose was to protect their nation, their values, their cultures, and their people. They did the opposite; they changed the lives of thousands of women whose only guiltiness was being women at times of horror, at moments in which humanity disappears at the first shot with the only purpose of fighting for something they never receive. The war is fought by the poor with an idea implemented by those in power; patriotism. The efforts to pursue justice for 'comfort women' should not cease. People, this is not a political issue; this is an obscene violation of human rights and should be

taken as such. The international community should advocate for justice. However, everything starts with us. Seventy-four years have gone in vain, let us 'comfort' these courageous women.



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