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"Comfort Women" Justice Coalition

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Listen to the Voices of the Women

By Judith Mirkinson¹

Abstract

Using survivor testimonies, military records and statements from human rights organizations, this paper lays out the undeniable truth of the “comfort women” system. This truth is recognized by the international community and maintains that the Japanese government and Japanese Imperial Army instituted and maintained the largest system of sexual slavery in the 20th century. These testimonies provide the factual counterpoint to the historical denialism of Harvard Professor J. Mark Ramseyer as well as the Japanese government. The “comfort women” survivors’ experiences, since breaking a 40-year silence in the 1990s, manifest a resilience and sense of purpose in demanding an accounting and apology from Japan. In addition, it shows these women to be activists in the fight to end gender violence worldwide. These women and their supporters forged a transnational movement and helped declare rape during wartime a crime against humanity. Their efforts are part of a worldwide struggle to establish the right to truth as a fundamental human right.

Keywords: “Comfort Women,” Human and gender rights; Accountability; International right to truth; Sexual Slavery

Introduction

Thank you. I came here as a “living evidence of history.” I came here as a witness to history, but now I am more than that. I came here as an activist who is trying to resolve the history for the sake of all women’s rights in the world. And for the sake of these women, I am determined to solve this problem. Thank you.” (Yong Soo Lee, known as Grandma Lee, speaking before the San Francisco Board of Supervisors on the building of the “comfort women” memorial in San Francisco) (Mirkinson, 2020).

I was kidnapped by a group of Japanese soldiers. They put me in a military vehicle, drove to Tengqiao and locked me in a house. There were always soldiers guarding the gate and they didn’t let me go anywhere. We labored during the day. At night the Japanese soldiers came to our rooms, usually three to five of them arrived together, but some days there were more than others. If I didn’t do what they said, they beat me. I was very frightened and

¹ Judith Mirkinson is a long-term women’s and human rights activist. In 1993, working with GABRIELA, the women’s coalition of the Philippines, she organized the first US and Canada tour of a “comfort women” survivor and has worked on the issue ever since that time. Mirkinson is the author of *Red Light, Green Light*, one of the first articles to be written about sex trafficking and its relationship to the “comfort women” system. She is more recently the author of [Building the San Francisco Memorial: Why is the Issue of the “Comfort Women” Still Relevant Today?](#) She has spent decades doing international solidarity work and is a co-author of the 2019 National Lawyers Guild investigative report: [The Lasalin Massacre and the Human Rights Crisis in Haiti](#). Judith is a member of the Board of the SF/bay chapter of the National lawyers Guild. She is President of the “Comfort Women” Justice Coalition.

was forced to do whatever they asked. (Huang Youliang, Hainan Province, China) (Qui, 2013).

The soldiers locked me upstairs with the rest of the girls and women. They squatted on the floors. There was no room so they lay down on top of each other. You were not allowed to speak to one another. But in the room the moaning was constant. They don't take you anywhere. You lie there and next to you a girl is being raped. I tell you; they treated us like dogs. I was only twelve, I didn't have my period yet. I was imprisoned for two years. (Narcisa Adriatico Claveria) (Galang, 2017).

I want redress. I welcome all who come to interview me because I want to let people know my experiences. I demand an apology and compensation from the Japanese. I want to have a peaceful and good life in my late years. (Chen Yabian) (Qui, 2013).

Listen to the voices of these women. They are survivors and they are resolute. Their voices are important and they have played an essential role in exposing the function of gender violence during war.

These are the voices that the government of Japan wishes to silence and erase. These are the voices that J. Mark Ramseyer chooses to ignore and dismiss in his paper, *Contracting For Sex in the Pacific War*, published online in the *International Review of Law and Economics* in December 2020. These are the voices that continue to hold Japan accountable for its wartime crimes.

What is truth and who gets to tell it?² Who is treated as an expert and whose voices are discarded? Whose memories are valued? How are the voices and, therefore, the lives of women represented in history, and particularly the history of warfare? And finally, how is historical denialism silencing their voices and warping the historical record?

These are age-old questions, but they are at the heart of the demand for justice for the hundreds of thousands of women sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. And these are the core issues surrounding the papers and statements of Ramseyer, other historical denialists, and the current Japanese government.

These women, euphemistically known as the "comfort women", were lured and/or kidnapped from all the countries and territories occupied by Japan during the Pacific War, expressly at the behest of/or by members of the Japanese Imperial Army. It's estimated that 180,000 came from Korea and more than 200,000 from China. Several thousand more were taken from the Philippines, Taiwan, and every other territory under Japanese control. Most of these women and girls (for they were as young as 10 with the average age being 15) didn't survive. They died at the hands of the Japanese.

Their existence was an open secret, but not fully public until 1991, when Hak Sun Kim came forward in Korea and told of her experience as a victim and survivor of the Japanese "comfort women" system. Her testimony opened up a floodgate of remembrances from women all over Asia:

² There are many interesting movies that deal with the question of memory and gender violence. Two examples are *Calling All Ghosts*, <https://www.kanopy.com/en/sfpl/video/143525>, and *Shusenjo*, <https://www.shusenjo.com>, which can be accessed through Kanopy. Another current video which shows the importance of truth and memory is *Descendant*. There are also countless numbers of videos and movies which focus on the "comfort women" on YouTube as well as many which detail gender violence in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Congo, among other locations.

On days when the soldiers returned from expeditions, we each had to take as many as 10 hat I to 15 men. They took us as if we were some kind of object and used us however they wanted. When we broke down with problems like diseases, they abandoned us like objects or killed us. [Hak Sun Kim](#) (Sang-Hun, 2021).

Despite the fact that they came from different countries, sometimes thousands of miles apart, the stories of the "comfort women" are strikingly similar. Their testimonies describe fraudulent offers of employment, kidnappings, beatings, torture, trafficking, and ultimately, sexual slavery.

Although the Japanese military burned thousands of documents in preparation for the American occupation at the end of the war, documents and artifacts do exist that clearly show the military operations needed to create this system. In addition to the hundreds of actual testimonies, there are military procurement records, cables, photos, lists of prices as well as money "chits" needed for purchasing the women's time. In 2007, scholars discovered seven documents that had been submitted to the Tokyo tribunal in 1948 in which the tribunal officially acknowledged that women were forcibly coerced. Most recently, as China has opened up its WWII archives, more and more evidence is [emerging](#) (Kyodo News, 2019):

When the soldiers came back from the battlefields, as many as 20 men would come to my room from early morning. That's why I had to have a hysterectomy (in my twenties). They rounded up little girls still in school. Their genitals were still underdeveloped, so they became torn and infected. There was no medicine, except something to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, and Mercurochrome. They got sick, their sores became septic, but there was no treatment. The soldiers made Chinese laborers lay straw in the trenches and the girls were put in there. There was no bedding... underneath was earth. There was no electricity at that time, only oil lamps, but they weren't even given a lamp. They cried in the dark "Mummy, it hurts! Mummy, I'm hungry." When someone died, the girls got scared and began to cry. Then everyone in the trenches was poisoned and they closed up the trench. They dug another trench next to it. Kimiko Kaneda (Asian Women's Fund, 2007).

These women's words have been accepted for decades by scholars, human rights defenders, international human rights bodies, the United Nations, and even by the [US Congress](#).³ All have asked the Japanese government to officially apologize and accept responsibility for the institutionalizing and administration of this vicious system.⁴

Yet the Japanese government refuses: disputing numbers, disputing accounts and ultimately insisting that although there may have been so-called "comfort women," they were "volunteers," or that if the women were pressured, the pressure came from private "entrepreneurs." The women are called exaggerators at best and liars at worst. According to the deniers' narratives,

³ The 110th Congress passed HR121 in 2007. Introduced by Representative Mike Honda, it was 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. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-resolution/121>

⁴ Google "comfort women," and hundreds of articles, books, videos and radio interviews will come up, including reports from the UN and other international bodies. See references for more specifics.

these women were just covering up the fact that they were prostitutes and the military merely took advantage of the situation.

Mr. Ramseyer is part of this effort, stating in an [op-ed](#) in *Japan Forward*: “We are not used to finding that the story is pure fiction. But that is the nature of the comfort-women-sex-slave story.” In reality, it is Mr. Ramseyer’s words that are pure fiction – and the words and actions of the survivors and their supporters, both within academia and the broader movement, prove it.

The outraged response to Ramseyer’s article, thankfully, was swift and clear. As a result, his article now has an addendum: “[under review](#).”

In fact, the uproar over the article has resulted in some scholars examining all of Ramseyer’s research, including [Privatizing Police: Japanese Police, the Korean Massacre, and Private Security Firms](#) about the anti-Korean riots and massacres that took place after the devastating 1923 earthquake in Japan. Here too, he made up facts about Koreans, slandering them as gang members and murderers. Again, this is pure fiction, clearly based on his racism, which is endemic in his work. As a result of the scrutiny, he now acknowledges that the piece has to be rewritten.

The Japanese government, led by the ruling right wing nationalist Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), is determined to smash the “comfort women” and their allies. To this end, it has spent millions of yen in order to back up its position and fund deniers who have taken their so-called “history wars” to the world. Japan has pressured the authorities in every country to take down any statue dedicated to the “comfort women.” It has prevented UNESCO from entering thousands of “comfort women” documents into the [Memory of the World](#),⁵ an international program dedicated to the preservation of historical and cultural documents and artifacts. It has even pressured textbook companies in the US to delete any reference to the “comfort women” (McCurry, 2015).

With the full support of the Japanese government, articles disputing the women’s existence continue to be written, and their histories continue to be denied – all with the goal that these women will be forgotten entirely.

This was not a foregone conclusion in Japanese politics. There could have been another path. Forced by the outpouring of public opinion in Asia, in the 1990's there actually was more of a debate as well as more sympathy for the “comfort women” within Japanese society. The Japanese cabinet at the time took note and initiated an investigation which, in turn, began the process of acknowledging and taking responsibility for the pain and suffering the women had endured. In 1993, then Chief Cabinet Minister Yohei Kono released what came to be known as the [Kono Statement](#) (Japan Foreign Ministry, 1993): “The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as ‘comfort women.’” By 1997, Japanese textbooks reflected the change, as the issue of the “comfort women” was now to be taught in middle schools.

But this was not to last. Ironically, if Japan had followed the Kono statement with an official apology and reparations, the issue would certainly not have gained the level of international support it now has. If Japan had in fact been forced to take this action, it would have shown the power of the women and the movement, and it would have stood as an example to others demanding justice. However, by 2012, textbook references to the vast war crimes committed against women by Japan had disappeared, as the public questioning of the past was seen as both anti-nationalist and unpatriotic.

⁵ After much struggle, the Japanese government allowed documents detailing the Nanjing massacre to be entered into the Memory of the World but remain determined to keep any reference to the “comfort women” out.

The late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was integral to this process. Although he formally began his political career in 1993, he, along with a group of right-wing intellectuals, had already begun to decry the narrative of Japan as a perpetrator, a nation which had to apologize. Instead, they reworked the myth that Japan was waging an anti-colonial struggle during World War II in order to free Asia from Western imperialism. One instrumental group in this campaign was the Japanese Society for Textbook Reform, whose goal was to create ultranationalist textbooks (Kano, 2015).

As he rose in the ranks and then became Prime Minister, Abe pursued a policy of reclaiming the heroic history of Japan. He was one of the group responsible for the formation of the Japan Conference, which was the largest coalition of conservative forces in Japan, and which was explicitly anti-feminist (Kano, 2015). Abe had no shame in touting the “Co-Prosperty Sphere”, used during WWII to justify Japanese imperial expansion to “save Asia from the White Race.” Tied to all this was a rejection of culpability for the massacre at Nanjing and the fate of the “comfort women.” On the eve of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, Abe said, “We must not let our children, grandchildren, and even future generations to come, who have nothing to do with the war, be predestined to apologize” (Wolpe, 2015).

In 2021, the following appeared on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [website](#): “Despite such sincere efforts by the Government of Japan, there are claims that can hardly be said to be based on historical facts, such as the allegations of ‘forceful taking away’ of ‘comfort women’ and ‘sex slaves’ as well as the figures ‘200,000 persons’ or ‘several hundred thousand’ for the total number of ‘comfort women’” (Japan Foreign Ministry, 2021).

Historical Denialism

We are living in a time of great historical and political contention. There has been a resurgence of those formerly colonized and/or enslaved demanding an accounting for the crimes of enslavement, repression, and colonialism of the past and the present. This is clearly shown in the uprisings that shook the United States in the wake of the police murders of Michael Brown, George Floyd, and so many other Black people. The protests of the Black Lives Matter movement have engendered a deep rethinking of the history of the US and the role of white supremacy.

There has been an outpouring of books and media about the systemic racism at the foundation of American life. So too in Britain, historians are dissecting the mythologies surrounding the British Empire and particularly the colonization of India, Africa, and the [Caribbean](#).

This period has also seen a massive change in the relationship of women to civil society. Women, now fully in the workplace in much of the world, have been challenging the ages-old status quo. Along the way, there have also been enormous cultural shifts in terms of gender. Same-sex marriage, once thought anathema, is now legal in many parts of the world. Issues of gender identity have exploded.

All this change has contributed to a right-wing backlash. This can be seen in many parts of Asia. In Japan, the LDP has now claimed a supermajority. In Korea, the moderate Moon Jae-In has been replaced by the right-wing misogynist [Yoon Suk Yeol](#) whose election was propelled in part by an explicitly anti-feminist campaign (Suzuki, 2022). In the Philippines, 36 years after his father was overthrown in a popular rebellion, Ferdinand (Bong-Bong) Marcos, Jr. is now following in the footsteps of the notorious Rodrigo Duterte.

In each case, these leaders have based a large part of their popularity on “restoring the past.” Mr. Ramseyer’s writings fit neatly into this paradigm, interpreting and/or making up facts to fit with his own deeply racist and misogynist version of history.

The 2015 Agreement

On December 28, 2015, then-Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byong-sei released parallel statements in a press release stating that they had resolved the issue of the “comfort women” “finally and *irreversibly*.” Kishida offered an apology from Prime Minister Abe to the survivors and Japan agreed to set up a fund of 1 billion Yen (\$8.3 million) for survivors. The Japanese further demanded that the statue to the “comfort women” in Seoul be removed and that the term “sex slaves” never be used again (Japan Foreign Ministry, 2015).

Although U.S. and Japanese officials lauded this development, the survivors and their supporters were furious. None of the survivors had been consulted in South Korea. Furthermore, the so-called agreement was only between South Korea and Japan. The women and governments of all of the other affected countries were ignored.

The “comfort women’s” outrage created a crisis and was one of the reasons the government of President Park Geun-hye was toppled. In 2017, then-Korean President Moon Jae-in denounced the agreement as seriously flawed: “The agreement cannot solve the “comfort women” issue,” It’s a “political agreement that excludes victims and the public” and violates general principles in international society” (Lee, Shin 2017).

Yet by 2022 the situation had changed. In tandem with other countries in the region, South Korea elected right-winger, Yoon Suk-Yeol, in March. Mr. Yoon campaigned on an anti-woman platform, promising to do away with the country's gender ministry. In June, Foreign Minister Park Jin was reported to have conveyed to Kishida, now the Prime Minister of Japan, in their meeting that Seoul will respect the 2015 Japan-Korea “Comfort Women” [Agreement](#) (Mirkinson, 2020). He said, “The military relationship between Korea and Japan is the central axis of world peace.” (Lee, 2022).

On learning that the 2015 Agreement was going to be honored. [Yong-soo Lee](#) spoke up:

Dear President Yoon,

This is Yong-soo Lee. How are you?

I am losing sleep over the news reports that the Korean government will respect the 2015 deal.

The 2015 deal is invalid! I cannot accept any conditions on which it is premised. The 1 billion Yen from Japan must be returned as well. Why?

For decades, we have been demanding proper resolution of the “comfort women” issue based on the seven principles set up by the UN. They are: 1.

Acknowledgement of the crime, 2. Official apology, 3. State reparations, 4.

Punishment of perpetrators, 5. Fact-finding, 6. Ongoing education, 7.

Establishment of memorials and museums.

The 2015 deal resolved none of these demands.

On the contrary, the Japanese government is saying to the U.S. and Germany that the issue is over and to tear down all memorials to the “comfort women” based on this 2015 deal that allegedly has “resolved the issue finally and irreversibly.” How can this deal be a resolution while Japan is abusing it to erase our history? Why do you force this deceptive deal on us?

The “comfort women” issue is a universal human rights issue.

This issue will never be resolved with the 2015 agreement. Please don't kill us twice (Lee 2022).

Yong Soo Lee has called for the governments of Japan and Korea to adjudicate this matter before the International Court of Justice. Yet in order to do this, both governments have to agree. Given the stance of both the Japanese and Korean governments at the moment, this seems extremely unlikely.

Women, Militarism, and War

It makes sense that ultra-nationalists refuse to budge on this issue.

Military-sponsored "comfort women" stations did not just spring up. They were the result of the history of militarization in Japan.

The tradition of Japanese men combining military service with sexual release was long considered a necessity to reclaim a glorious Japanese empire.

Japan, like most other nations, has a history steeped in patriarchy. Women were to be subservient to men. Traditional Japanese warriors began to see prostitutes as essential to their calling and therefore their lives as early as the 12th century, and this continued to the modern day. The government itself began to develop brothels for samurai to frequent any time they were away from home. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became a practice for businessmen, government officials, and the military to conduct business in these establishments. This tradition continues to the present day. The practice of trafficking women for sex work was also not new, as this was encouraged when wars and earthquakes decimated Japan's economy during the 19th century (Huang 2012).

From 1918-1922, the Japanese military sent 70,000 troops to Siberia in order to support the so-called White Army and stop the spread of communism to the Pacific. They did so at the behest of then-US President Wilson. Although few soldiers were killed outright, more than 10,000 were felled by venereal disease, contracted through rape and sponsored prostitution.

This situation only escalated with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and China, beginning in 1931. The number of rapes and cases of sexually transmitted diseases grew exponentially. Then in 1937, in the space of a little over six weeks, the Japanese raped and killed hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children in Nanjing. The rampage was so gruesome that it gained international notoriety and came to be known as the Rape of Nanjing.

The rapes had to be contained. Aside from everything else, military authorities knew that they only added to the hatred and resistance of those being conquered. Yet organized sex was deemed essential to keep soldiers fighting, and "comfort" was needed to be offered to the soldiers by providing an avenue to release their pent-up emotions, tensions, and frustrations resulting from the bleak conditions and harsh discipline they had to endure. It was also thought that keeping sex "in-house" within military-run "comfort stations" would diminish spying and the leaking of military information (Women's Tribunal Judgement, 2001). Here is [Okabe Naosaburō](#), a senior staff officer in the Shanghai Expeditionary Force, writing in his diary, on the establishment of a comfort station in Shanghai in 1932:

Recently, soldiers have been prowling around everywhere looking for women, and I often heard obscene stories [about their behavior]. As long as conditions are peaceful and the army is not engaged in fighting, these incidents are difficult to prevent. Rather, we should recognize that we can actively provide facilities. I have considered many policy options for resolving the troops' sexual problems and have set to work on

realizing that goal. Lieutenant Colonel Nagami [Toshinori] will bear primary responsibility in this matter. (Bisland, Kim, Shin 2019)

After much deliberation and research, the "comfort women" system was organized, first by the Japanese Navy and then by the overall Japanese military authorities. The first station was set up in 1932 in Shanghai, China. Thousands would follow. The stations ranged from actual brothels to caves and even to spaces set aside on the front lines.

Although at first aided by Japanese and Korean entrepreneurs, the *ianfu* or "comfort women" system had distinct advantages. It could be systemically regulated, the women could be transported via military vehicles, and they could be easily procured and replaced as they were used up (Huang 2012).

The use of the comfort stations was strictly regulated. This is a copy of the regulations formulated in March 1938 by the 2nd Independent Heavy Siege Artillery Battalion stationed at Changzhou, China.

Regulations for the Use of Comfort Stations

- **Clause 59 Basic Principle**
- To help to enforce military discipline by providing ways for relaxation and comfort
- **Clause 60 Facilities**
- Comfort stations are set up inside the south walls of Nikka Hall...
- Visiting days are appointed to each unit.
- Hoshi unit—Sunday
- Kuriwa unit—Monday and Tuesday
- Matsumura unit—Wednesday and Thursday
- Narita unit—Saturday
- Achiwa unit—Friday
- Murata unit—Sunday
- **Clause 61 Price and Time**
- 1 For non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, comfort stations are open from 9:00 to 18:00.
- 2 Price Time limit is one hour for one man.
- Chinese—1 yen
- Korean—1 yen 50 sen
- Japanese—2 yen
- **Clause 62 Examination**
- Every Monday and Friday are examination days. On Friday women are examined for sexually transmitted disease (Shiryoshusei, 1938 in Asian Women's Fund, 2007)

In addition to rampant sexism, the "comfort women" system was steeped in racism and colonialism. This is clearly shown in the well-documented complete disregard and inhumanity Japanese soldiers had for the people they were conquering throughout Asia. It is also clear from a look at the "cost schedule" that the Japanese military used at the comfort stations: Japanese and European (white) women were the most expensive, followed by Koreans and Chinese, and on down the line of nationalities.

The inter-relationship among racism, colonialism, and misogyny is key to understanding the "comfort women" system. If examined properly, it allows us to further study the relationship between gender violence and these forces historically. For those living in the United States, it

means seeing the use of gender violence in the conquering of the Americas and in the rape and enslavement of both Indigenous and African people. This is an important aspect of "comfort women" scholarship that needs to be developed further. For it is within this nexus that the strength of the movement and therefore the memories of the women can find its power and therefore its longevity.

The issue of the comfort women was for the most part silenced in Malaysia kept in the memories of the women who had been violated. But in 1992, an international conference investigating Japanese WWII war crimes was held in Kathmandu, Nepal. Representatives from Malaysia attended and subsequently put out a call for survivors to come forward with their testimonies. Unfortunately, most of those writings just languished and nothing was done with them until scholar Nakahara Michiko found them and followed up with some of the women (Nakahara, 2001):

I was living in Serdang when Japan invaded Malaysia. I was a rubber tapper, I was sixteen years old. On March 22, 1942, two truck-loads of Japanese soldiers came to the village. I was cooking in the kitchen. I failed to escape. They caught me and raped me. I struggled against them but one of them kicked my head with his boot-wearing foot. My head was injured. They took me with several girls from the village.

They confined us in a house in Ampang and raped us one after another every day for one month. Then they took us to the comfort station opposite Pudu jail. It was called the Chinese Tai Sun Hotel. Then we were transferred to Ngan Ngan. There were four big buildings where women serving Japanese soldiers were living. I had to serve ten to twenty soldiers every day. As a result, I was punched all the time. It continued until 1945 when Japan surrendered." (*Mrs. P* writing to Nakahara Michiko) (Nakahara, 2001).

Women's voices have rarely played a large part in the recitation of history, including in most histories documenting WWII. Only in the last fifty years, with the growth of a transnational women's movement, has the impact of war on women been vigorously examined and questioned.

Both the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals had access to information about sexual violence. In particular, the International Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE), held in Tokyo, found that "torture, murder, rape and other cruelties of the most inhumane and barbarous character were freely practiced by the Japanese army and navy." Yet neither tribunal explicitly prosecuted the crime of sexual violence (Women's Tribunal, 2002).

Although Article Two of the General Charter of the United Nations does explicitly say that men and women must be regarded as equal, the CEDAW – Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women - was not enacted until 1979. Subsequent articles and protocols condemning gender violence and linking it to warfare did not appear until the 21st century.

Yet, the precedents in International Law are clear. In the twentieth century they begin with the Hague Convention of 1907 and the Geneva Convention of 1929 and progressed through the Geneva Convention of 1949 (Henry, 2013).

There was one telling exception clearly based on racism -- after the war, Japanese military officials who sent Dutch internees to comfort stations were prosecuted. Army Major Okada was sentenced to death and eleven others were sentenced to terms ranging from two to twenty years.

When Jan Ruff O'Herne, a Dutch colonial who had been interned following the occupation of Indonesia and who was forced to be a "comfort woman," was asked why she thought it took so

long for the world to recognize the horrors she had endured, [she responded](#): Perhaps the answer is that these violations were carried out against women,” she wrote. “We have all heard it said: This is what happens to women during war. Rape is part of war, as if war makes it right” (Seelye, 2020).

The struggle of the "comfort women" for recognition and justice is intrinsic to this effort to hold governments and militaries accountable. It is one of the reasons they are so powerful and why the Japanese government has gone to such lengths to refute them.

The "comfort women," who have often been painted simply as victims, have in reality been courageous and persistent human rights and feminist activists. These women had much to overcome in order to speak out. They had to overcome their own patriarchal and paternalistic upbringing, which insisted that women be “pure” virgins until marriage. They had to deal with the historic issue of shame – which puts the blame of rape on women, stigmatizing them with the label of “prostitutes.”

This is the great paradox about rape, both in war and peacetime. It has been condemned under international law for centuries, but it is also completely tolerated, expected, and treated as a “normal” occurrence. It’s the irony of the Japanese position. The comfort women system is based on the fact that sex is deemed an essential need for soldiers' mental and physical health. There was even a belief that sex with a virgin (which no enlisted man could ever have) would protect you from death. Women were requisitioned objects, on the same level as food or toilet paper. This is the testimony of a Japanese officer:

During the battle, which lasted about fifty days, I did not see any women at all. I knew that as a result of (being without access to women), men’s mental condition ends up declining, and that’s when I realized once again the necessity of the special comfort stations. This desire is the same as hunger or the need to urinate, and soldiers merely thought of comfort stations practically the same as latrines. (Women’s Tribunal Judgement, 2001).

The view of women as “merely prostitutes” can only be described as detestable. The assumed contempt in the word is universal. What’s really unconscionable is the assumption that if you’re a prostitute you’ve actually *volunteered* to be raped as many times as the military deems necessary. In the case of those who were prostitutes at the beginning of the war, the reality is that they became sex slaves as the war progressed and they suffered the same fates as those who were coerced and/or forced.

Both the government and its henchmen understand that rape is anathema, so even though the military didn’t mind doing it, it can’t be part of a heroic restorative narrative. This is why it’s so important for them to deny that these women were coerced and why they have fought back against the term "sex slaves."

Any rape is traumatizing, sometimes affecting victims for their entire lives. But mass rape does more than that. It impacts the entire community or in many cases an entire nation. There are many historic examples of this from the use of rape to destroy Indigenous populations in the Americas to the mass rape of Rohingya women, to the use of rape in the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, just to name a few. Perhaps the “comfort women” system is different, but the impact must have been the same: collective trauma for entire villages.

Especially under patriarchal systems, the rape of women signifies the breakdown of civil society’s social structures affecting not only the present, but future generations. As many feminists have noted, women carry the collective memory and culture of a society. When you destroy their well-being, you destroy those aspects of life as well. Gender violence, truly is, as one author has described it: *A weapon of mass destruction* (emphasis added) (Zawat, 2010).

Survivor after survivor testified about the stigma, ostracism and abuse they received upon returning home. This was exacerbated by the insistence of the Japanese that they had volunteered and not victims of military force and coercion.

Jan Ruff O'Herne was a young Dutch colonial living in Indonesia when she was interned and then forced into a "comfort station." She said: "When we were returned to the internment camps we were called 'whores.'" "How can you tell your daughters, you know?" "I mean, the shame, the shame was still so great. I knew I had to tell them, but I couldn't tell them face to face" (Women's Tribunal Judgement, 2001).

In a recent video, [Estelita Dey](#) of the Philippines says her children didn't learn of her experiences until they saw her at a demonstration on television. (Asian Boss. 2019)

Rosalina Bucu, also of the Philippines, testified before the "Comfort Women" Tribunal in Tokyo in 2000: "I could not stand the humiliation and loss of respect for myself." Teng Pao-Chu said, "I lost my life. I was regarded as a dirty woman" (Women's Tribunal Judgement, 2001).

Added to this is the fact that each time they testified, each woman had to relive her experiences and trauma over and over again. Despite it all, hundreds of women came forward:

Since everyone in the village knew that I had been ravaged by the Japanese troops, no man in good health or of good family wanted to marry me. I had no choice but to marry a man who had leprosy. My husband knew about my past and used it as an excuse to beat and curse me.

I am willing to go abroad to testify to the atrocities the Japanese military committed. I demand an apology from the Japanese government. I am not afraid. Huang Youlaing (Qui, 2013).

I could have had many children, but because of the torture by the Japanese I was unable... I want redress. I welcome all who come to interview me because I want to let people know my experiences. I demand an apology and compensation from the Japanese. I want to have a peaceful and good life in my late years. Chen Yabian (Qui, 2013).

One could say that the courageous testimony of the grandmas helped lead feminist activists and then scholars to examine the relationship of the "comfort women's" experiences to those of other women in WWII. The gendered experiences of women Holocaust survivors had been studiously avoided until the 1990s, most probably due to the stigma of being either labeled as a prostitute or a collaborator or both (Hedgepath & Seidel 2010). But the struggle of the "comfort women" opened up possibilities and was part of the challenging of hitherto taboo subjects such as rape. In 1995, 1000 women stood silently at the Beijing Women's Conference protesting gendered violence during war. The "comfort women" survivors were there in force.

The women have not only fought for themselves but for all who suffer from and fight against sexual and gender violence. In 2012, Kim Bok Dong and Gil Won Ok initiated the Butterfly Fund with the express purpose of raising money for women in other countries such as Congo. They said any money they received from the Japanese government should go to other women victims of war (Hwan-bong, 2012).

There's a direct relationship between Hak Sun Kim and the other women speaking out, and the #MeToo movement.

The study of the relationship of the use of "comfort women" to militarism coincided with the increased study of the Rest and Recreation (R & R) centers during the Korean and Vietnam Wars and their subsequent iterations in the remaining bases in Korea and the Philippines. This, in

turn, has led to an examination of the intersection of sex tourism and Asian economies. In places like the Philippines, whole economies were also dependent on the export of women for both sex work and domestic work (which were often combined). The “comfort women’s” experiences of being trafficked helped illuminate these facts:

I remember it was one day in the spring of 1941 when I was fifteen. A Japanese man in yellow clothes visited my house with a village-head and told my mother to send me to “daishin tai for the empire, since she had no son. Otherwise, he added, my family would be traitors and unable to live here. He also said that “daishin tai meant to go to work at a workshop producing army uniforms. He forced my mother to sign on the document., I ended up being drafted in this way. I arrived in Guangdong via Taiwan. Until then I still believed I was going to a workshop. However, an army surgeon gave all of the girls an examination for venereal diseases and assigned me to the comfort station where I began my nightmarish day. During weekdays I received about 15 soldiers a day, but it seemed more than 50 during weekends. We moved from Guangdong to Hong Kong, and then to Singapore after about three months. In Singapore sometimes we went on official trips to army bases located in deep valleys. There were so many soldiers rushing in that I could not even stretch my legs at night. After staying in Singapore for several months, we were on the move constantly to Sumatra, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Java to receive soldiers there. (Kim Bok Dong) (Korean Council, 2012).

In fact, these women “coming out” and their determination to be heard helped lead the international human rights community to challenge the age-old acceptance of rape and sexual violence during wartime as “normal.” This began to be codified at the Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993, where “comfort women” survivors and their supporters joined with survivors of rape and violence in the former Yugoslavia and insisted that the body had to deal with the reality of sexual violence during war. As Jan Ruff O’Herne noted:

In 1992, the war in Bosnia had broken out, and I could see that women were again being raped in an organized way, and then after that, that same year, I saw the Korean “comfort women” on television. They broke their silence, and Ms. Kim Hak Sun was the first “comfort women” to speak out. I watched them on television as they pleaded for justice, for an apology and compensation from the Japanese Government.

I decided to back them up especially as I realized that in Bosnia women again were being raped on an organized scale. I decided to break my silence, at the international public hearing on Japanese war crimes in Tokyo in December, 1992, and I revealed one of the worst human rights abuses of World War II, the forgotten Holocaust. For 15 years I have worked tirelessly for the plight of “comfort women” in Australia and overseas and for the protection of women in wars so that these wartime atrocities will never happen again. (Jan Ruff O’Herne) (Speech Bank, 2007).

As Gay McDougall, the special rapporteur of UNHCR, put it: “As I note in my report, the issue of the former “comfort women” was a major impetus for the United Nations deciding to commission the study of systematic rape and sexual slavery during armed conflict” (Mirkinson, 2020).

In 2002, following the ICC tribunals concerning the former [Yugoslavia](#) (ICTY 1993, 2017) and [Rwanda](#), (ICTR, 2015) the [Rome Statute of the International Court](#) (ICC) became the first

international criminal law instrument that recognized forms of sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and enforced sterilization, as distinct war crimes and crimes against humanity. These crimes also did not have to only occur during actual armed conflict.

A Transnational Solidarity Movement: Demanding the Truth

Since the 1980's and the so-called "Dirty Wars" in Latin America, the international community has tried to reckon with human rights abuses of the past and the right of survivors and their descendants to the truth. This has been codified in certain international protocols.

The right to truth originated in Latin America as one method of transformative justice regarding the victims of those disappeared in the so-called "dirty wars" (Van Noorloos, 2021). As such, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACCommHR) has explicitly stated: "Societies affected by violence have the unwaivable right to know the truth of what happened as well as the reasons why and circumstances in which the aberrant crimes were committed, in order to prevent such acts from recurring."

[The Synoptical Table of the Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights](#) lays out basic principles. Principle 2 discusses *the Inalienable Right to Truth* and Principle 3 lays out the *The Duty to Preserve Memory*:

A people's knowledge of the history of its oppression is part of its heritage and, as such, must be ensured by appropriate measures in fulfilment of the State's duty to preserve archives and other evidence concerning violations of human rights and humanitarian law and to facilitate knowledge of those violations. Such measures shall be aimed at preserving the collective memory from extinction and, in particular, at guarding against the development of revisionist and negationist arguments.

The value in all this for the "comfort women" is clear. The desirability of a society knowing and acknowledging the truth is of utmost importance. It cuts through the lies, disbelief, and silence, and actually allows healing to begin. Impunity--not holding perpetrators accountable--is what leads to atrocities to be repeated again and again. Opening up the history of the "comfort women" actually might help in avoiding these kinds of crimes in the future.

In the case of the "comfort women" there are no perpetrators who could be punished. No revenge is being sought. Thus, the remedy is one that could easily be accomplished. It would be a first essential step in opening up the true history of what happened. It could also then lead to the other remedies outlined in international law: reparations, correcting textbooks, museums and so on. This apology could then also lead to quantitative, if not qualitative social change.

Gender violence is an intrinsic, systematic occurrence throughout millennia. It's built into the fabric of world society. For a country like Japan--the third largest economy in the world--to acknowledge its own responsibility would be a great example to other countries to do the same.

When we look at the growth of the "comfort women" movement, we need to acknowledge the power and clarity of women's organizations throughout Asia. Of particular note is The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan. These women were instrumental in organizing the first survivors to testify. More recently they have been joined by "Comfort Women" Action for Redress and Education (CARE.) In the Philippines, Lila Pilipina has supported the Lolás and continues to advocate for them within the context of the broader Philippine women's movement. Here in San Francisco, the "Comfort Women Justice Coalition," is responsible for the

building of the San Francisco "Comfort Women Memorial."⁶ There are many others throughout the world.

One of the greatest shows of support and determination can be found in the 2000 Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery. This "unofficial" tribunal finished the work that the original Tokyo trials should have done. It put the Japanese Military, the Japanese government and Emperor Hirohito himself on trial and found them guilty (Women's Tribunal, 2001).

The "comfort women" movement is truly transnational. This is one reason it has been such a thorn in Japan's side. Thousands of people have been moved by their courage and their experiences. It is a prime example of a sustained campaign. And the movement has gone far beyond what happened during WWII to demand an end to gender violence overall.

But the heart of the work remains the continued insistence for an official apology and reparations from Japan. One way this demand is being magnified is through the erecting of statues in memoriam to the women. The Japanese government detests these statues and has made their removal a core demand of its foreign policy. It knows that the statues represent historical truth. They have also become a focal point of organizing, which is exactly what Japan abhors.

A good example of Japan's strategy is its campaign against the "comfort women" memorial statue in San Francisco. The original idea of the statue came from a multinational organization called the Rape of Nanjing Coalition. In 2015, a resolution calling for the building of such a [memorial](#) was introduced into the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Immediately, the Japanese Consulate began a campaign against its construction (Mirkinson, 2020). The more Japan protested, the more support was garnered for the "comfort women."⁷

Despite the Consulate's best efforts, the statue was unveiled in 2017 and now stands on public land. When faced with the threat from Osaka Mayor Yoshimura that he would cut the 60-year sister city relationship with San Francisco, if the statue didn't come down, the answer from the city was clear: The statue remains (Fortin, 2017)!

The San Francisco "Comfort Women" Memorial (Figures 1-3) is unique in that it shows three young women/girls: one from the Philippines, one from China and one from Korea standing atop a pedestal. Thus, they not only represent the countries from which the majority came from, standing atop a pedestal, but also represent the multi-Asian population of the San Francisco Bay Area. It is truly a transnational and international effort.

Below the women stands a life-size replica of Hak Sun Kim gazing up at them. The young women, also life sized, stand together, hands clasped, feet bare. They are victims and survivors both. On a wall next to them is a plaque in five languages, telling their story and calling on the world to eliminate sexual violence once and for all.

⁶ www.womenandwar.net, www.comfortwomenaction.org, www.remembercomfortwomen.org, <https://movementforhelolas.wordpress.com/about-lila-pilipina/>

⁷ See Mirkinson for a full description.

Figures 1-3: The San Francisco "Comfort Women" Memorial



Mirkinson: Listen to the Voices of the Women



With the knowledge that the grandmas are getting older, their numbers diminishing, there are plans to make their words and images “eternal.” Grandma Lee and Peng Nai Nai from China have already sat in front of cameras, answering over a thousand questions: anything anyone would think to ask about their life experiences. Their images and voices will live on in a computer-generated hologram that can take questions from interviewers and answer as if they are in the room. So, even if Japan never apologizes, its government’s actions, lack of remorse, and impunity will be there for all to see. The “comfort women” have been an example and have inspired countless others to resist the Ramseys of this world. Their voices must remain in our ears.

“I wish time would wait for me, but I know it won't,” “I am determined not to die before I resolve this... I need to be alive as much as 200 years to resolve this” (Yong Soo Lee, 2022).

Listen to the voices of the women.

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