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Abstract

The Pacific War in Asia is infamous for the sickening atrocities committed by the military forces of both the Allies and Japan. Proof of the carnage is undeniable and is often discussed in textbooks, history classes, and documentaries around the world. The forced recruitment of women to serve as sex slaves to the Japanese military is included on the long list of wartime tragedies, however it often remains on the periphery of discussions on wartime violence. The negligence is due in part to the half century of silence that followed the victimization of the women most often known as "ianfu," "wianbu," "Military sexual slaves," "Japanese war rape victims," or the less provocative "comfort women."¹ Yet the inattention can also be attributed to the Japanese government's repeated denial of culpability, be it from shame or simple economic greed. Despite Japan's desire to hush up the stories of the military sexual slavery, recent women's movements in Korea and the international community have spurred the outspokenness of the survivors. This paper will discuss the rationales used by the Japanese government for the establishment of the comfort system, its effects on women's lives, and their reasons for decades long silence. Also examined are the women's recent demands for justice and various governmental reactions in an effort to reveal the actions that necessitate emotional and mental healing, as well as prevention of future abuses against women.

Keywords

Japan, comfort women, World War II, Korea

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The Pacific War in Asia is infamous for the sickening atrocities committed by the military forces of both the Allies and Japan. Proof of the carnage is undeniable and is often discussed in textbooks, history classes, and documentaries around the world. The forced recruitment of women to serve as sex slaves to the Japanese military is included on the long list of wartime tragedies, however it often remains on the periphery of discussions on wartime violence. The negligence is due in part to the half century of silence that followed the victimization of the women most often known as “ianfu,” “wianbu,” “Military sexual slaves,” “Japanese war rape victims,” or the less provocative “comfort women.”¹ Yet the inattention can also be attributed to the Japanese government’s repeated denial of culpability, be it from shame or simple economic greed. Despite Japan’s desire to hush up the stories of the military sexual slavery, recent women’s movements in Korea and the international community have spurred the outspokenness of the survivors. This paper will discuss the rationales used by the Japanese government for the establishment of the comfort system, its effects on women’s lives, and their reasons for decades long silence. Also examined are the women’s recent demands for justice and various governmental reactions in an effort to reveal the actions that necessitate emotional and mental healing, as well as prevention of future abuses against women.

The use of women for sex during wartime is not a novel concept. However, what made the phenomenon of the comfort women so appallingly unique was the level of

systemization by the Japanese government. The Japanese military set up comfort stations for the troops beginning around the time of the Manchurian invasion in the early 1930s and the stations remained a permanent fixture until the end of the Second World War.² The military established strict regulations for the comfort stations. The only patrons allowed were soldiers and civilian employees. Both the women and their patrons were obligated to observe rules regarding personal sanitation and other behavioral regulations, such as forbidding violence towards the women. The military also provided condoms (ironically called Assault No.1) for the men and regular pelvic exams for the women. Additionally, the military documents claimed troops paid the women a fee for their services.³ However, oral accounts from surviving comfort women explained that rarely did the stations abide by these rules, further allowing for occurrences of gross neglect, abuse and exploitation towards the women by the Japanese military.

Most often, the military was responsible for the operation of such stations but occasionally a civilian was hired instead. Regardless of who administered the station the local military was solely responsible for the protection, transfer and provision of the female population.⁴ Ustinia Dolgopol, in her opening statements as Co-Chief Prosecutor for the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery held in Tokyo in 2000, explained the accountability of the Japanese government and the military for the establishment of the comfort system by stating;

establishment of facilities for sexual slavery were considered to be part of the war effort and that the Japanese government and military officials at the highest levels were involved either directly or indirectly in sanctioning, condoning or tolerating the system. Further, officials of the state of Japan were responsible for

¹ Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), v.

² Howard, 13.

³ George Hicks, "The 'Comfort Women,'" in *The Japanese Wartime Empire 1931-1945*, ed. Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 317.

⁴Howard, 13.

requests for recruitment of women, the authorization of travel for women to be taken to facilities of sexual slavery, and the organization of transport, including naval vessels.⁵

Dolgopol based her statement on evidence provided from an inquiry made by the International Court of Justice that recovered documents from field officers in both the Japanese army and the navy requesting shipments of comfort women to their areas.⁶

The Japanese military felt a need to establish the comfort system for a variety of reasons. The initial reason given by the government for the comfort system was to sustain the troops essential fighting spirit.⁷ The Japanese troops held very superstitious beliefs regarding sex and war, claiming amongst other things that copulation before battle would protect them from injury. This belief led many troops to ritually visit comfort women before entering combat.⁸ Secondly, it was deemed necessary in order to protect the troops against contracting venereal diseases from the local brothels. Instead, they were only allowed to frequent facilities established exclusively for their own use, which through the regular medical exams, and supply of chaste women from Korea, supposedly ensured the men's virility and sexual health.⁹ Thirdly, the comfort stations were created in hopes of preventing the rape of local women by the troops that often resulted in anti-Japanese sentiment. Note the concern was not for the local population but rather for their ability to succeed in governing the conquered peoples.

Yet, all the reasons stated by the Japanese government for the establishment of the comfort system can be contested. While psychologically sexual activity can be construed

⁵ "Breaking the History of Silence: The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery," prod. and dir. Video Juku, 68 min., Violence Against Women in the War-Network Japan, 2001, videocassette.

⁶ Sangmie Choi Schellstede, ed., *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (New York: Holms & Meier, 2000), 108.

⁷ Howard, 14.

⁸ George L. Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

as an outlet for the tension created during war, it is not a necessity for the survival and success of humans in warfare. Additionally, the comfort system did not stem the tide of venereal diseases. In fact, it remained one of the major complications suffered by the surviving comfort women, as later accounts will prove. Lastly, strong evidence exists that directly conflicts with the credibility of the claim that comfort stations prevented the rape of local women by the military. For example, during the aforementioned Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, two Japanese veterans were sworn in and questioned by prosecutors if they believed that the establishment of comfort stations prevented rape. Kaneko Yasuki was one of the two veterans questioned. He responded by saying, "No. Because we got charged there. But rape was free." The prosecutor countered, "If you thought that way then did you ever rape anyone in the field?" Kaneko replied, "Yes. In 1943, when we attacked a village, one of us found a woman around 21 or 22. Six of us drew lots to decide who'd go first, and one by one we raped her. 'Kill the women. They give birth. Babies grow up to resist us.' The orders were completely different from what they said at home. We could die anytime. We were to kill them, so we might as well rape them first. And we did..." The prosecutor then turned to Suzuki Yoshio, the other remaining veteran and asked, "Did you see others rape in the field?" Suzuki responded,

In the army, rape went along with fighting. It was almost an everyday affair. I once went on my own to find a woman. I found one about age 30, guarded by several old women. I chased the old women away but she hid herself. I finally found her hiding in a pigsty. In China, pigsties were used as toilets. She had covered herself in manure to keep me off. That somehow stirred up my lust. I dragged her out to a barn and raped her there.

Kaneko later added to his testimony, "The Army's Criminal Code gave at least seven years in prison for rape. But we raped anyway because we despised the Chinese. We used to call them "Chinks" and other dirty names. 'What's wrong with raping Chinese? We

are killing them anyway' ... we raped thinking like this."¹⁰

Historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki found the logic behind the theory that establishment of comfort stations would end rape questionable, for "the comfort system was a system of officially recognized sexual violence that victimized particular women and trampled upon their human rights. It is impossible to prevent rape on the one hand while officially sanctioning sexual violence on the other. There is no reason to imagine that there would be any relation between the comfort station system and a substantive solution to the problem of preventing rape."¹¹ Clearly, the reasons stated for establishment of the comfort stations were not legitimate for the stations did not ensure the troops would remain exclusive patrons, nor did it prevent the spread of diseases or widespread rape.¹²

There remains little documented evidence as to the precise methods of recruitment used by the military since much of the evidence was destroyed at the end of the war. What knowledge there is of such techniques comes from oral accounts of surviving comfort women and the rare military man.¹³ The various processes of recruitment ranged from "recruitment by violence, including threats of violence and the misuse of power; false promises of employment; abduction; [and] human traffic."¹⁴ From accounts of surviving former Korean comfort women, it seems that deceit was the most frequent method used in their area. Often the young girls from poor farming families were approached by local agents hired by the Japanese military, who enticed them with tales of good paying jobs in Japan. The girls would then go with the agent and were

¹⁰ "Breaking the History of Silence"

¹¹ Yoshimo Yoshiaki, *Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) ,66.

¹² Tanaka Yuki, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 32.

¹³ Howard, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

relatively well treated while in transit to their comfort station. They remained ignorant of the true nature of their work until arrival whence they were “broken in” by rape at the hands of the Japanese troops.¹⁵

While the rationalization for the establishment of comfort stations and the recruitment of comfort women is clearly stated, the reason for the predominance of Korean women as military sexual slaves is not as precise. Many historians claim racial prejudice and hatred as the determining factor in such a large recruiting drive on the Korean mainland. While racial hatred for Koreans and many other Asian peoples, by the Japanese is undeniable, other factors exist. Namely, the annexation of Korea in the 1910 created an atmosphere in which the Japanese felt they could harvest the resources of Korea at their leisure, whether it was iron ore and other raw materials or the nation’s larger resource of its peoples.¹⁶

Another possible reason for the enthusiastic recruitment of Korean women for Japan’s military sex slaves involves an academic discussion of their inherent sexual nature. The first wave of women sent to the Chinese front in 1932 were experienced prostitutes from Japan often already afflicted with venereal diseases. Fearing incapacitation of the troops and an epidemic at home once the war was over, a different approach was quickly taken and the Japanese military turned to their colonies Korea and Taiwan. Korean women were thought of as more chaste than average resulting from their Confucian heritage that emphasized purity and frowned upon premarital sex. Therefore, Korean women were considered free of damaging sexually transmitted diseases. In 1939, a gynecologist name Dr. Aso Tetsuo serving at the Shanghai base hospital submitted a

¹⁵ Tanaka, 38.

report that is believed to be the impetus behind recruiting such a large force of Korean women for use in the comfort stations. In his report he included,

Among those from the [Korean] Peninsula, there was very little indication indeed of venereal disease, but those from the Homeland, although free of acute symptoms at present were all extremely dubious. In age, these were all past 20, some approaching 40, and had already spent a number of years in prostitution. Those from the Peninsula presented a pleasing contrast, being in the main younger and unsophisticated...care needs to be taken with the more jaded type of woman, whom I have repeatedly examined for syphilis and found clearly branded with a past history of venereal disease by the scars of bubo excisions on the groins. These are really dubious as gifts to the Imperial Forces.¹⁷

Aso's report is not only a rationalization for the recruitment of Korean women over Japanese, but also of young virgins over older women.

While little documentation remains regarding the official recruitment methods, the military was precise in its documentation on the administration of the comfort stations.¹⁸ The description of conditions in which the surviving comfort women lived during the war differ slightly for each case, yet every account is strikingly unlike the official standard which ensured adequate clothing, food, health services, protection from infection and abuse. George Hicks described the official regulations of the comfort system as, “ set[ting] out hours of opening, fee, and time allowed—two yen for thirty minutes—and procedural details such as the banning of intercourse without a condom which was issued at the time of payment...Army rations were supplied to the comfort women.”¹⁹ In spite of the official decrees, the women's living conditions varied from constraint of personal freedoms to utter disregard for the basic human needs of food, water, and shelter depending on their location in the empire and at what stage in the war

¹⁶ David Andrew Schmidt, *Ianfu—The Comfort Women of the Japanese Imperial Army of the Pacific War: Broken Silence* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 91.

¹⁷ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 83.

¹⁹ Hicks, “The ‘Comfort Women,’” 317.

they served.

Most women recall the provision of a small room along a corridor filled with other similar rooms. Each individual cubicle was approximately large enough for a few tatami mats. Their diet usually consisted of rice and few vegetables, but as the supply lines stretched food and other necessities became scarcer for the scorned comfort women. Medical examinations occurred anywhere from once a week to once every few months. If found to be infected with a sexually transmitted disease, the women were injected with a harsh chemical called “No. 606,” now believed by many survivors to be one of the causes for their sterility. Hwang Kumju recalled her experience at the comfort station,

The station was a makeshift building, and each main room was divided into five or six small cubicles by wooden planks. The entrance to each cubicle was draped with a blanket as a substitute for a door... The cubicle had a wooden floor covered with a blanket and was just big enough for one person to lie down, leaving sufficient room for another person to stand at the side... It was bitterly cold there with just a single blanket to cover us... The meals were mainly rice, soya bean soup and pickled radish. When we first arrived, we were given baggy trousers, a short jacket, military socks, a cap, black canvas shoes, a padded coat and padded trousers. Later we were given some kind of military training suit. Later still, the supply completely stopped, and we had to wear the clothes that had been discarded by soldiers. When we entered 1945, the supply shortage became so serious that we were not given any clothes anymore. The supply of vegetables also stopped, as did that of soy sauce and soya bean paste. We had to eat balls of rice cooked in salt water. That was it.²⁰

Short supplies of food and other necessities were not the only difficulties endured by the comfort women during their stay at the stations. Despite military injunctions against beating the women, many soldiers inflicted great physical harm when rebuffed. Additionally, the number of men the women serviced in a day far exceeded what a body could withstand. Historian Tanaka Yuki wrote, “ Each comfort woman served several men—up to 10—on a normal day, but the number would sharply increase shortly before

²⁰ Howard, 74.

and after each combat operation. On such days, each woman was forced to serve 30 to 40 men a day. The available time for each man was regulated to 30 minutes. However, in the busy periods each soldier was allowed only a few minutes.”²¹ Many survivors recall lines of men forming at their door, causing them to remain on their back throughout the day and night. With these facts in mind, it is understandable why so many survivors claim they suffer severe physical pain and injury resulting from the repeated sexual violations which lasted from as little as three weeks to as long as eight grueling years.²²

The nature of Japan’s system of military sexual slavery was such that at the war’s end the women who survived could not easily reassemble their lives. They suffered from significant emotional distress, physical ailments, and general incapacitation. They lived in a society in which “the shame of a woman was the shame of her whole family” and despite whatever atrocity caused the defilement, Korean women remained depraved, crippled by a past over which there was no control.²³ However, the initial problem for comfort women after the defeat was their inability to return home. In many cases Japanese troops simply left their posts and abandoned the comfort women hundreds of miles away from Korea, often without money or any other means of transportation. One example is Pak Ok-Nyon who served as a comfort woman in Rabaul, New Guinea for nearly three years.

After a week of sailing, our ship was torpedoed in the morning. It was hit in the midsection and broke apart into two parts after the explosion. We were all thrown into the water. After the ship sank, I was left with another girl. We tried to go to the men calling us but just could not move. Fortunately we found a piece of wood drifting nearby and hung onto it throughout the night. That piece of wood saved our lives. The next morning a boat rescued us... We saw many wounded people. I was injured too, but somehow the wounded open area did not bleed. The boat

²¹Tanaka, 52.

²² Ustinia Dolgopol and Snehal Paranjape, *Comfort Women: An Unfinished Ordeal: Report of a Mission*, (Geneva, Switzerland: International Commission of Jurists, 1994), 29.

²³*Ibid.*, vi.

sailed back to Rabaul.... After landing I found out our group of 50 girls was reduced to 15. In spite of the dangers of the air raids and torpedoes, I still wanted to return to Korea. Air raids got worse in Rabaul... I was able to board another ship, but this time the ship sailed only one day before it was bombed and sank... Our group of 15 girls was further reduced to only four. After a while, we sailed again. This time we made it to Shimonoseki, Japan.²⁴

Amazingly, Pak Ok-Nyon eventually made it to her home in Muju, Korea. While her story of homecoming is one of the most sensational, it is still an excellent example of the dangers these women had to endure, and the lengths they would go to put their lives back together.

Many of those who did manage to return home faced the stark reality that the vestiges of their old life no longer existed. Their families had either perished or moved on during their absence. Women who did find relatives confronted the equally arduous task of fielding questions regarding their activities. Kim Bun-sun recalls her life at the end of the war, “When I got home, my father was deceased, and my mother was having a hard time alone with small children. For four years she had no idea of my whereabouts; she assumed I was dead. She was very surprised and happy to have me back home. Occasionally, she asked me about those four years I was away. I vaguely told her that the Japanese authorities sent me to Japan where I worked for four years. I could not tell her the truth and details.”²⁵ Other survivors were so ashamed of their past they completely avoided placing themselves in a position to answer their relatives’ painful questions by simply not returning home. One such woman was Mrs. K * who explained, “I was glad to have survived, but very ashamed and angry about my past life. I decided not to go back to

²⁴ Schellstede, 84-85.

²⁵ Ibid., 23.

* Pseudonym

my home because of the shame and potential harm to my family.”²⁶

Also upon return to their native land, the families of the survivors frequently urged them to marry. Many former comfort women found the prospect of marriage and the implicit sexual acts of such a relationship fantastically daunting after the sexual trauma they experienced on a routine basis during the war. Kang Duk-kyung expressed the sentiments of many survivors when she said, “ Over the years, I had several marriage proposals. But I did not have enough strength to overcome my low self-esteem, guilt and past nightmares to get married and raise a family.”²⁷ Kim Sang-hi was a comfort woman stationed in Singapore from 1943 until the end of the war. She too was confronted by her family with the frightening prospect of marriage upon her return from the front. She recalled the experiences, “My family didn’t ask me about my past; they must have just guessed. I was 24 years old, still a marriageable age. So my parents tried to arrange my marriage, and this was the most painful thing. How could I get married? I had been raped and raped, and my body had been used over and over. My heart was ripped and torn so many times.”²⁸

The residue of their experiences as military sexual slaves remained long after the immediate years following the war. The comfort women who survived the atrocities of war retained permanent scars on their psyches and physical bodies. One of the long-term effects of the wartime sexual abuse is the women’s considerable health problems. These problems range from low self-esteem and self-worth, as noted in previous accounts, to disabilities incurred as a result of systematic physical abuse, as well as the debilitating effects of syphilis and other venereal diseases contracted through serial copulation.

²⁶ Ibid., 104.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ Ibid., 35.

The hatred the Japanese troops exhibited for Chinese and Korean peoples is undeniable. Korean comfort women were not spared the wrath of racial hatred while in the comfort stations. Moon Pil-gri was one of the many Korean comfort women to experience the physical ramifications of Japanese racial hatred. She recalled,

...The day, after receiving so many soldiers, my vagina was swollen and painful. So I tried not to receive any more soldiers that day. A soldier who was turned away became so angry he ran to a 'pechika,' a Russian coal burning stove, scooped up burning coal and threw it at me. It hit me and burned my back. It took three months to heal. You could still see the scar there. I learned later that he was not properly punished for the offense, which was not a surprise because they did not regard us as equal human beings. One soldier told me he was surprised by my resilience. He didn't think I would recover from my burns. He also said that our Korean race should be eradicated from the earth.²⁹

Many received beatings before, during, or after sex, while others were beaten for their attempts to flee the nightmare of their situation. Many were left permanently disfigured or disabled. Mrs. K recollected her attempts at escape, "Whenever we were moved, we were guarded by military policemen and kept under constant watch. I tried to escape several times, but I was caught each time by the soldiers and severely beaten by the supervisors. On one occasion, I jumped off a truck and tried to run away in the dark. But they caught me and my supervisor beat me savagely all over my body and then cut off my three left fingers with a knife."³⁰ Survivors Yi Bok-nyo and Kim Dae-il have suffered all their lives from injuries sustained from Japanese troops while at the "comfort station." Yi Bok-nyo described how her injury was inflicted, "I could not bear this sight [of soldiers stabbing the women with their swords] and started to flee the scene. They caught me and seared my buttocks with a heated gong-shaped metal piece. This crippled me for life, and the burned flesh still remains very unsightly. To this day, I cannot walk

²⁹Ibid., 66.

³⁰Ibid., 104.

alone without leaning on someone.”³¹ Kim Dae-il was also crippled resulting from physical abuse at the hands of the Japanese she was forced to service as a “comfort woman.” She recalled the experience, “One time another drunken soldier came in and continued drinking in my cubicle. He then stabbed the lower part of my body and shouted, ‘Hey, this *senjing* (a dirty Korean) is dying.’ He then screamed, ‘*Kono yaro!*’ (Damn you!) and stabbed a few more times on my lower abdomen. I became crippled for life from these wounds.”³²

Permanent injuries were not the only debilitating and embarrassing scars the survivors of the “comfort station” system incurred. Many contracted sexually transmitted diseases resulting from their frequent and forced copulation. Pak Kyung-soon* was a “comfort woman” who contracted syphilis soon after arriving in Hiroshima, Japan. Since her condition went untreated for a long period, she will carry the disease for the rest of her life. Upon her return home,

My parents figured out the best thing for me to do was to get married...so they quickly searched and found an eligible man for me. He was twelve years older than I was. We were married without delay and started our new life in a rented room... A few days later he found out he was infected with syphilis from me. After five months’ treatment at Dr. Huh’s Clinic we made some improvement. Those days I could smell the odor of my weekly injection of ‘# 606,’ arsenic treatment for syphilis...After a year of marriage my husband literally kicked me out, and I moved back into my parents’ house...For the last thirty years, I have been treated at a psychiatric hospital for mental disorder caused by this syphilis... All these years I was too ashamed of my past, and I could not reveal it even to my doctors.³³

Venereal disease spread like wildfire in the comfort stations. If women did not contract syphilis, it was gonorrhea or some other sexually transmitted disease. Clearly, based on

³¹ Ibid., 92.

³² Ibid., 26-27.

* Pseudonym

³³ Schellstede, 77-79.

these accounts, the argument made by the Japanese government and even contemporary historians that the establishment of comfort stations controlled the problem of venereal diseases, and protected the health of troops in wartime is incontestably false.³⁴

The mental and physical effects of the sexual victimization they met as comfort women prevented great numbers of these women from forming lasting relationships with men, bearing children, or even the ability to secure for themselves comfortable living circumstances in their waning years. For many survivors, like Yi Yong-nyo and Kang Duk-kyung, entertaining the idea of marriage was impossible due to systematic and repeated sexual violence inflicted upon their persons during the war. Yi Yong-nyo was a comfort woman for three years in Rangoon, Burma. Regarding her marital status she said, “ I never married. I have no children. All these years I have earned my living, working as a maid in others’ homes or in restaurants. I sorely miss the ordinary life that most women enjoy: getting married and having a family. The Japanese took that away from me.”³⁵ Kang Duk-kyung paralleled her sentiment when she stated, “ I am now 65 years old. As I think back on my past nightmares working as a ‘comfort woman,’ I want to believe that it was just a terrible dream. And if it were not a dream, I would like to think of it as my fate, over which I had no control. But then, I often say to myself, ‘but I had every right to have gotten married and lived a happy life!’”³⁶

Unlike Kang Duk-kyung and Yi Yong-nyo, some former comfort women attempted to establish relations with men despite their unforgettable past. Often, these women suffered from such low self-esteem that they entered into unequal relationships with men as their concubines or mistresses. Kim Soon-duk met a man, had an illegitimate

³⁴ George Hicks, “The ‘Comfort Women,’” 310.

³⁵ Schellstede, 97

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

child by him but never married. She commented on the frequency of former comfort women entering into similar relationships, “I know of no women with the same background as mine who ever legally married.”³⁷ Yet, some survivors did attempt to normalize their lives by marrying. However, they soon found they could not easily wipe away their memories of the comfort station. Kim Yoon-shim was one of the few survivors who attempted to legitimately marry. Still, her past continued to haunt her and her marriage was very unhappy.³⁸ While Jan Ruff O’Herne, a former comfort woman from the former Dutch Colony of Indonesia, married, she could not forget the sexual abuse inflicted upon her body during the war. She vividly described the difficulty many comfort women encountered with marriage during the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal in Tokyo, in 2000. “One thing that we could never enjoy as a woman, was the pleasure of sexual intercourse with our husbands because you are reminded all the time of all the hundreds of times you were forcibly raped by Japanese. That always comes into your mind.”³⁹

While unfathomably great, these emotional, physical, and mental distresses caused by the forced sexual acts were not the only severe ramifications of the comfort system for the surviving women. Most survivors were barren because of the constant sexual abuse inflicted upon them during their time as a comfort woman. Hwang Keum-ju, who spent four years as a comfort woman stated, “I cannot begin to describe the pain and hardship I went through afterwards. The Japanese gave me diseases, and I bled so much that I lost my uterus. It’s been over 35 years now, and I am alive only because of

³⁷ Ibid., 41.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ “Breaking the History of Silence”

penicillin.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Mrs. K had to undergo a hysterectomy resulting from the ravages Japanese troops wreaked upon her body.⁴¹

In a society in which tradition mitigated that children became the primary care givers for their parents in their waning years, the inability to bear children was enormously debilitating for the surviving comfort women. Jin Kyung-paeng was a comfort woman for five years during the war. Of her life afterwards she said, “Today I have constant pain all over my body and frequent dizziness, but I cannot even afford over-the-counter drugs. My monthly income is 45,000 won or about \$55, from the Korean Government. I have no possessions, relatives, or offspring. I am alone.”⁴² Many former comfort women found themselves in similar circumstances. Kim Sang-hi shared her related story;

I was born into a good family and was raised properly. I never went outside the house much until I was so suddenly abducted that evening. Now, no family, no children, I am only growing old. Whenever I see an old lady of about my age walking hand in hand with her grandchild, my heart wrenches. I became a Catholic, but I still cannot find solace in religion. I should forget and forgive but I cannot. I try and try, but I cannot let go of it. When I wake up every morning, my head subconsciously turns east toward Japan, and I curse her. I cannot help it.⁴³

Kuhma Lim tells another sad tale of a life stunted by her exposure to the Japanese system of sexual slavery during the Pacific War, “...I live [d] by myself in a small squalid room with space only for one person to lie down in. You could call the room a cave for an animal rather than a shelter for a human being. I wish I could have a cozy house so that I could sleep comfortably.”⁴⁴ Kuhma Lim died alone from cardiac failure in her home on

⁴⁰ Schellstede, 8.

⁴¹ Ibid., 104.

⁴² Ibid., 13.

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ Ahn, 230.

March 12, 1994, one year after she told her story.⁴⁵

The survivors of Japan's system of military sexual slavery are increasingly dying out. Unlike Kuhma Lim and the other women quoted above, many have not dared to speak the truth of their past. Even more are ending their lives lonely, sick, and unfulfilled with words of apology and regret from the Japanese government. Try as they may, these women could not piece together their lives at the conclusion of the Pacific War for a myriad of reasons. Kuhma Lim expressed this trend best when she said, "My life can never return to the time before I was taken by the Japanese to the comfort station, at the age of 17, and my wounds cannot be healed."⁴⁶ The systematized sexual slavery numerous Korean women were subjected to during the Pacific War left them incapable of carrying on their lives on numerous levels, physically, emotionally, mentally and economically. There is no way to make up for these cavernous losses, but the Japanese government can attempt to assuage these wounds and prevent further occurrences through acceptance of legal and moral responsibility, admission of wrongdoing, and education of future generations.

One of the reasons the issue of comfort women barely figures on the political radar of Japan and many other nations is due to the fifty years of silence that immediately followed the victimization. It is important to understand what perpetuated the silence, and then, what prompted these women to speak out about their past. The prolonged silence can mostly be attributed to the structure of Korean society. Confucianism was the basis for much of Korean societal beliefs, one of the most important being the emphasis on

⁴⁵ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 230.

female chastity.⁴⁷ A woman's sexuality was strictly controlled in Korea; a young woman had to remain chaste until marriage, and if her husband should perish, she then was required to remain faithful to his memory for the rest of her existence.⁴⁸ The emphasis on preservation of female chastity was also one of the reasons why so many young Korean girls were drafted into forced sexual service for the Japanese army who feared contraction of venereal diseases from more mature sexual women. However, the most significant result of the constricted view of women's sexuality in Korea was that regardless of how the loss of innocence occurred, a woman who lost her virginity before marriage was forever considered damaged goods, to be shunned and disrespected by their loved ones as well as general society.⁴⁹ The victims who returned to their homes and revealed their stories were ostracized for their degradation. Therefore, many women chose instead to swallow their pain, and live a lie in an attempt to remain a member of average society. Madam X* was one such woman. She tells what it was like living in silence,

When I was sleeping with my husband, I often had nightmares and he would ask, 'what's wrong? What's wrong?' I could never tell him the cause of my nightmares...for nearly fifty years I have lived with my terrible secret. Even though what happened to me was no fault of my own, I dread to think what people would say. It's awful not to be able to talk to anyone. Not even my own husband or children. Sometimes I am deeply depressed and have a long face. No one knows why.⁵⁰

The same patriarchal society placed an equal emphasis on the birthing of heirs, an act many survivors could not perform for various reasons, either because of internal

⁴⁷ Kazuko Watanabe, "Trafficking in Women's Bodies, Then and Now: The Issue of Military 'Comfort Women,'" *Women Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 1/2 (1999): 23.

⁴⁸ Sarah C. Soh, "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress," *Asian Survey* 36, No. 12 (1996): 1229.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1229.

* Pseudonym

⁵⁰ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 166.

scarring or because of the mental anguish of sexual interaction. These women could not reveal the source of their infertility, and therefore suffered the doubled scorn of their relatives. Li Tianying, a Korean comfort woman from 1939-1944, experienced a similar situation. In 1944, Li escaped from the brothel to work as a communist nurse in China. There she met her first husband, a soldier in the communist army. They soon returned to his family's home. "Though no one in the village knew about Li's past, or that she was even Korean, her inability to bear children because of her scars brought on her the disdain of her husband's family.... Li was divorced in 1955." Li was later thrown into a rehabilitation center because of her despoiled past and there she met and married another inmate. He too eventually shunned her for her sterility and later left Li. Consequently, she lived the rest of her life alone, without close family or friends.⁵¹

Only recently with the shifting of societal beliefs in Korea have the comfort women come to be viewed as victims of abhorrent violence. Much of this changing atmosphere can be attributed to a rise of feminist women's movements within South Korea. Historian David Andrew Schmidt attested that "in 1988, a coterie of South Korean women's organization's first demanded a formal investigation into the *ianfu* station with a collection of more than two hundred signatures."⁵² The atmosphere of female empowerment enabled a group of three former comfort women along with thirty-five other Koreans in 1991 to formally file a class-action suit against the Japanese government for their sufferings as comfort women serving the Japanese military.⁵³ One of these women testified under her own name, Kim Hak-sun. She declared her reasoning, "I

⁵¹ Arif Dirlik, "Trapped in History: War Oppression and Human Unity: Memories of a 'Comfort Woman,'" *In Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, eds. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White and Lisa Yoneyama, 313-315, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 314.

⁵² Schmidt, 21.

wanted to sue for the fact that I was trampled upon by the Japanese Military and have spent my life in misery. I want the young people of South Korea and Japan to know what Japan did in the past.”⁵⁴ Her brave action encouraged many other comfort women to come forward with their stories and seek redress from the Japanese government.

One of the largest groups behind the efforts to satisfy the comfort women needs for apology and acceptance of responsibility by the Japanese government within Korea is the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery (also known as Han’guk Chongsindaemunje Taech’aek Hyopuihoe, or “Korean Council”).⁵⁵ The Korean Council has formulated a clear outline for the goals of the comfort women’s efforts for redress. They are as follows,

To reveal the full details of the war crime of military sexual slavery,
To acknowledge the war crime of military sexual slavery by Japan,
To apologize formally for the crime,
To pay reparations to the victims and their bereaved families,
To erect a memorial tablet,
To record the crime in school textbooks and teach Japanese students about it,
To punish the perpetrators.⁵⁶

Many Japanese citizens feel these women are acting out of greed in seeking to rectify their past. However most survivors and activists state their search is for emotional rather than fiscal gain. They believe that only after the perpetrators are punished, and Japan accepts its responsibility in perpetrating such atrocities and apologizes for their actions will their wounds ever truly heal. A Serbian psychologist at the December 2000 Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, in Tokyo, Japan testified that prosecution of one’s aggressor helps the victim progress in the healing process. Since

⁵³ Sarah C. Soh, “Japan’s Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors,” Japan Policy Research Institute, May 2001, 2.

⁵⁴ Yoshiaki, 33.

⁵⁵ Soh, “Japan’s Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors,” 2.

⁵⁶ Ahn, 232.

these women have not spoken out about their past for fifty years likewise, the perpetrator of their crime has not been brought to justice, therefore little therapeutic progress has been made. Wretchedly, many continue to live with the same level of grief they had after the initial violation, five decades later. Yet, revealing their past was one step to assuaging their pain, for as Choi Chungmoo writes, “Silence impregnates violence. It prevents war survivors from healing, and instead leaves their individual wounds and the collective nation wound open and bleeding.”⁵⁷

Former comfort woman Kuhma Lim also felt great relief after speaking about her past, saying to Yohson Ahn, “If I were to write my painful story it would become several books. This is the first time I have said something about my past to others. Now it feels therapeutic. To say something about my past is one thing but not to say anything at all, to keep it secret, is even more painful.”⁵⁸ The activists feel the redress of the comfort women by the Japanese government would fulfill many roles, not only helping the women be at peace with their past, but also educating Japan and the world that while sexual victimization often goes hand in hand with war, it is not acceptable and they must do all they can to prevent similar atrocities from ever happening again.

Yet, impending legal suits and external pressure from interest groups advocating on behalf of the surviving comfort women, was not enough to force Japan to address the issue. The event that necessitated a response from the Japanese government was the publication of materials in the Asahi Simbun, one of the country’s top newspapers, in 1992 by historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi, which proved beyond a doubt that “the imperial

⁵⁷ Choi Chungmoo. “The Politics of War Memories Toward Healing.” In *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*. eds. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White and Lisa Yoneyama, 349-409 (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 407.

⁵⁸ Ahn 230-231.

army was involved in both establishing and operating the comfort stations.”⁵⁹In the face of such blatant documentation, the government had no other recourse but to acknowledge involvement in the establishment of the wartime comfort women system.⁶⁰ However, for the Japanese government, acknowledgement was not as simple as saying “Yes, we did it, and we’re sorry.”

The government draws a distinct difference between accepting moral responsibility and legal responsibility for the actions towards comfort women. Morally it understood that what happened to the women at the behest of the Japanese government was wrong and should never again recur. The government did issue an official apology stating it, “ sincerely apologizes and [expresses its] remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physiological wounds,” and expressed a “firm determination never to repeat the same mistake and that they would engrave such issues through the study and teaching of history.”⁶¹

To help assuage the wounds of the victims, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kozo Igarashi and Prime Minister Murayama developed a private fund, known as the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF) to provide monetary compensation for the survivors. Sarah C. Soh writes that the government created the AWF fund, “to express ‘a sense of national atonement from the Japanese people to the former ‘comfort women,’ and to work to address contemporary issues regarding the honor and dignity of women.”⁶² However, the Korean Council and others from within Japan feel the establishment of AWF was a diversionary tactic on the part of the Japanese government to avoid accepting legal responsibility. Many Korean victims refuse to accept the provisions of the fund based on

⁵⁹ Soh, “Japan’s Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors,” 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁶¹ Schellstede, 127.

this belief.

The AWF has four areas of concern. They are:

- 1) To deliver two million yen (around \$18,000 US depending on the exchange rate used) to each survivor-applicant as “atonement money” raised from the Japanese people, accompanied by letters of apology from the Prime Minister and the AWF President;
- 2) To implement government programs for the survivors’ welfare;
- 3) to compile materials on the comfort women for the historical record;
- 4) to initiate and support activities that address contemporary issues of violence against women.⁶³

It has been argued that the AWF is not wholly private, for the Japanese government oversees the administration of the fund. However, the government continually reiterates that the fund was created out of moral obligation and receives its funds from thoughtful citizens.⁶⁴ The special rapporteur on violence against women for the United Nations, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, commended the nation of Japan for the establishment of the fund but chided the government for its continued negligence of legal responsibility for the “‘comfort women’ under public international law.”⁶⁵

While the state of Japan could no longer deny it had a hand in the administration of the comfort system after Yoshiaki Yoshimi’s expose in 1992, it remained adamant that it bears no legal responsibility for those actions.⁶⁶ The government has several different tactics to avoid legal liability. Firstly, they deny that any of the latest updates to international law are retroactive and therefore do not apply to their involvement with comfort women during the Pacific War. Secondly, Japan denies the women were “slaves” and therefore this cannot be prosecuted under international law prohibiting the trading of slaves. Thirdly, they contend that acts of rape during war were not found illegal by either

⁶² Soh, “Japan’s Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors,” 1.

⁶³ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁵ Schellstede, 129.

the Hague Convention No. 1V from 1907 or any of the international laws Japan was under during the time of the Pacific War. Lastly, since Korea was an occupied state of Japan during the War, the Japanese government cannot be sued for crimes against the indigenous peoples of a belligerent state for technically Koreans were Japanese citizens.⁶⁷ The government of Japan also refuses to consider the individual reparation of comfort women, stating, “That any individual claims that these women may have had for compensation were fully satisfied by peace treaties and international agreements between Japan and other Asian States following the end of the Second World War.”⁶⁸

The reaction against the Japanese for their refusal to accept legal responsibility is great. The United Nations is particularly heated in their castigation of the state of Japan, because they find little credence in the arguments the Japanese use for defense. One of the numerous arguments the Japanese government makes in its denial of legal responsibility for the suffering of comfort women is the women were “volunteers” and in no way coerced, enslaved, or drafted into service. Therefore, the government claims the comfort system was not an illegal process through international law. However, Keith Howard, editor of True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women, states, “as defined by an international regulation contemporary to the time, taking anybody through deceit, violence, threat, misuse of power or any other coercive means constituted an act of forced drafting. The methods used against the women...consequently constitute coercive recruitment.”⁶⁹

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, held at the conclusion of World War II, also shared a similar view of the Japan’s forced labor corps, this included wartime factory

⁶⁶ Soh, “The Korean ‘Comfort Women’: Movement for Redress,” 1235.

⁶⁷ Schellstede, 137.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 137.

laborers as well as comfort women. Despite the common perception of the Tribunal as a kangaroo court held by the victors of war, the point of the decision remains valid. The Tribunal affirmed;

This recruitment of labourers was accomplished by false promises, and by force. After being recruited, the labourers were transported to and confined in camps. Little or no distinction appears to have been made between these conscripted labourers on the one hand, and the prisoners of war and civilian internees on the other hand. They were all regarded as slave labourers to be used to the limit of their endurance.⁷⁰

In light of Howard's declaration and the Tribunal's verdict, it seems virtually impossible for the Japanese government to continue to proclaim its innocence and deny responsibility for the atrocities of the comfort system which the government condoned and encouraged. And yet the Japanese government still does.

For every aspect of the Japanese government's defense, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights can find intricate legal inaccuracies and subsequently finds the Japanese government to be legally responsible for the egregious crimes committed against the comfort women during the Pacific War. Nevertheless, because the acceptance of legal responsibility seems to be linked with individual fiscal compensation, the government is unwavering in its refusal to pay. The reparation of comfort women would set a troublesome precedent for Japan, who is quite rightly afraid that such action will cause a domino effect of other war crime victims suing the government for economic redress, plunging Japan's economy even further into the grips of its current recession.⁷¹

Additionally, the reluctance of much of the Japanese citizenry to believe in, let alone empathize with, the surviving comfort women remains a large roadblock to any attempts to remedy their grievances. Kazuko Watanabe reported, "According to research,

⁶⁹ Howard 18.

more than half of Japanese women do not believe the stories of the comfort women.”⁷²

As previously stated many Japanese feel the comfort women are only suing out of greed rather than any psychological need, while others feel that no one should obtain prizes for the pain they suffered during the war for everyone, they feel, suffered equally.⁷³

In contrast to the brave acts of the comfort women, who despite social mores and years of silence have spoken out against their aggressors and revealed their history of pain, the government of Japan is acting with grand weakness. Ustinia Dogopol, acting as Co-Chief Prosecutor for the Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery declared in her closing statement on December 12, 2000, “[we] must feel humbled by the demonstration of bravery and commitment that the survivors of military sexual slavery have displayed. The cowardice of the Japanese government stands in stark contrast to the courage of the women. The government of Japan has not had the strength of will to admit honestly and openly the extent of the atrocities committed by the previous government.”⁷⁴ Clearly, the government of Japan has no legitimacy to continue its avoidance of accepting legal responsibility for the crimes committed against the comfort women and must move to amend the situation for the surviving women.

No justifications exist for the systematic enslavement of women for sexual gratification during the Pacific War by the Japanese government. No matter how the situation is spun, the moral depravity that allowed such behavior is inexcusable. The atrocities of the “comfort stations” affected not only the survivors’ ability to marry and have children, but also their capacity to secure for themselves comfortable living

⁷⁰ Dolgopol, 27.

⁷¹ Soh, “Japan’s Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors,” 4.

⁷² Watanabe, 24

⁷³ Soh, “Japan’s Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors,” 2-3.

⁷⁴ “Breaking the History of Silence.”

circumstances in their waning years. Military sexual slavery tore apart these women's lives in addition to their bodies, minds, and souls. They were practically rendered helpless. Something must be done to assuage the open and festering wounds of the victimization of thousands of innocent women at the hands of the Japanese military. It appears doubtful the Government Japan will ever fully compensate the victims and their families, for it believes it has too much to lose in light of the possibility of other war crime victims coming forward to press their case in the same vein.

Regardless of financial obligation, the government of Japan owes an apology not only to the survivors and to the memory of the departed comfort women, but to all women in the world who have been violated as an act of war. For the government of Japan to continue to deny their responsibility for the damaged lives of these women sends a subtle message to other governments that such behavior is allowable (for over fifty years later no perpetrator has formally been brought to justice in either Korea or Japan), if not tacitly condonable. The international community must continue to put pressure on the Japanese government to fully admit its responsibility in the creation and administration of the comfort system, to memorialize the departed and surviving comfort women, and most importantly to educate any and all that such revolting behavior is intolerable.