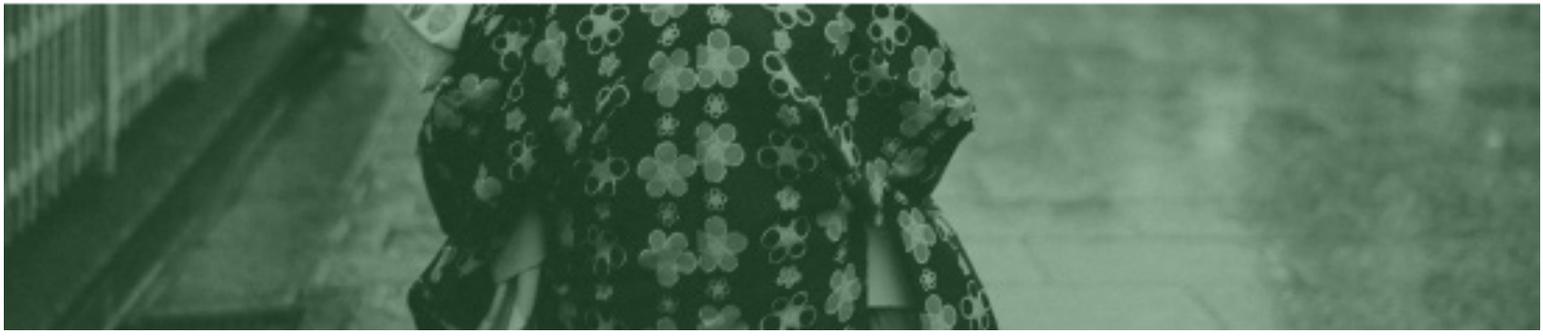




# an Inquiry into the Controversy of KOREAN COMFORT WOMEN



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## ABSTRACT

During World War II the Japanese Imperial Army utilized government sanctioned prostitution to increase troop morale and diminish contention with the local population. These “comfort women” (as they came to be known) recount tales of kidnapping, rape, and poor conditions that have prompted decades of international debate over the legitimacy of their claims and the resulting reparations they may incur. Due to a variety of cultural, economic, and political factors, the voices of these women were not heard until the 1990s. This essay will explore the intersectional factors that affected the comfort women’s silence as well as address the lingering tension between Japan and Korea on an international political scale.



## INTRODUCTION

Following the atrocities of World War II, the public eye centered its gaze on Eastern Europe. The horrors of the Holocaust warrant the attention that has been given, but while the world remained focused on the Jewish plight, the Pacific front remained relatively ignored. It was here, in Japan and Korea, that thousands of women were pressed into prostitution for the Japanese Imperial Army. For 46 years the testimonies of these “comfort women” were suppressed through socio-economic, cultural, and political factors within Korea, until finally, the first ex comfort woman, Kim Hak-Sun, came forward in 1991. Her testimony marked the start of public discourse on the intimate, highly controversial issue of systematic rape by the Japanese Army. However, it also called into question the previous failures of the South Korean regime to recognize, support, and advocate for the thousands of women that were now coming forward. The victims have focused their attention on reparations from the Japanese but this paper will expand further to analyze the successes and shortcomings of the South Korean state in supporting and advocating for ex-comfort women both before and after 1991.

### CHAPTER 1: WHO ARE COMFORT WOMEN

The origins of the comfort woman oper-

ation rested on the complete inability of Korean society to protect their women from an occupying power. Korea was colonized by Japan in August 1910. The ensuing Japanese imperial rule was characterized by exploitation of Korea’s economic markets and the complete denial of civil rights to the subjected Korean population. Japan utilized their success in Korea to build up a strong national identity that was founded upon the superiority of Japan over its colonized neighbors. The result was a large pool of poor, uneducated Koreans at the mercy of apathetic rulers.

The subservient position of Korea under colonialism came to a head at the outbreak of World War II. In the beginning Japanese military leaders had engaged in hiring local prostitutes to serve soldiers. Sex was used as a way to mentally and physically decompress soldiers from the tensions of front-line battle. It provided moral support to the troops and also gave the government some control over the spread of venereal diseases since prostitutes were routinely examined. An added benefit of supplying prostitutes was reduced rape in occupied communities which helped to limit animosity from civilians. In order to efficiently manage this business, the Japanese army created its own “comfort division” of state-controlled prostitution. However, as the war continued to escalate, the demand for sex far outweighed the supply voluntary pros-

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titutes could offer. Fearing that “soldiers would explode into a riot and revolt,” military leaders realized they would have to source in women from occupied territories to provide the necessary supply of women.<sup>1</sup>

The means used to obtain the estimated 20,000-200,000 women are universally unsavory.<sup>2</sup> The Japanese government licensed contractors, “to recruit or procure women under collaboration with local governments and police departments,” throughout their new empire.<sup>3</sup> Many were promised lucrative work in industries like textiles as false pretense for leaving their villages but quickly ended up trapped in comfort stations until the war ended. Other forms of recruitment, especially in the rural, colonial area, included coercion and brute force. In some cases, the Japanese specifically targeted the daughters of Korean resistance leaders who had attacked police to emasculate local leaders and demonstrate Japanese control.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 70-80% of comfort women during the war period were Korean, but they also came from China, Taiwan, the Netherlands, and Indonesia.<sup>5</sup>

Once the women arrived at the comfort stations they were divided into hierarchies that determined the price soldiers would pay for her services. How women were categorized was determined by her class and nationality and they were subsequently paired with a corresponding military group. Japanese and European women

were the most desirable and were reserved for high level officers. Korean and other colonial women, who were often illiterate and poor, were left for the common soldiers.<sup>6</sup> Soldiers paid money for the women’s services and about half of the sum went to the women and the other half to the comfort stations proprietor. However, the women could not leave, had to follow military schedules, and if they refused customers they were shot.

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the Pacific War ended. Following Japanese defeat, the disassembly of the fronts caused massive chaos and confusion for all involved. Thousands of women had contracted diseases, physical injuries that impacted fertility, and extreme PTSD from their time at the stations. Due to the close proximity comfort stations had to the front lines, many women found themselves in China and other foreign territories. Eye witness accounts recall comfort women being abandoned, tortured, and shot as incriminating papers were burned in the chaos.<sup>7</sup> While officers and common soldiers rushed to get home, the comfort women were often completely forgotten. Their stories would not surface again for another 46 years.

## CHAPTER 2: EXPLORING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL VALUES OF KORAN SOCIETY

Following the end of WWII, the socio-economic and cultural values of Korean society contributed to the silence of comfort women. The comfort women arrived back in Korea to a newly liberated state that was in no condition to provide support or assistance for them. The North and South were divided under two separate spheres of influence, the Soviet Union and the United States, teetering on the brink of the Korean War. As Japanese industry had mainly been centered in the northern parts of Korea, the South emerged from WWII completely reliant on the United States to economically bolster its fledgling country and provide military defense against future threats. The North on the other hand, had strong legitimacy in their anti-Japanese foundations and were economically more stable than the South. The new Southern regime under Syngman Rhee, was faced with a very real threat of completely collapsing and being absorbed by the North. The plight of a few thousand, very poor, usually illiterate women was not a pressing issue for the regime; survival was.

The Southern regime had little to gain directly from supporting and advocating for politically insignificant women. Still, it is intriguing

that they did not utilize survivors to bolster their own anti-Japanese credentials. Following the split after WWII, the South was plagued by accusations of complicity with Japanese supporters. Rhee continued using the same police force and high level bureaucrats that operated under Japanese rule to maintain order. However, the much more anti-Japanese North used its more hostile position to bolster legitimacy within its regime. In order to help bolster the South's anti-Japanese platform, one might expect Rhee to have provided greater support for ex comfort women. These women made up some of the most heart-wrenching casualties in the wake of Japanese imperialism and this would have helped Rhee prove his Pro-Korean, Anti-Japanese sentiments. Regardless, Rhee's decision to ultimately ignore the situation was a valid reaction given his need to keep pro-Japanese bureaucrats and police officers in his regime in the face of extreme social instability. It also would have been considered extremely shocking for the patriarchal government to address sexual assault survivors at all, much less for political gain. Still, Rhee's decision to not address comfort women marked the initial and continued neglect by the Korean government to help advocate for a marginalized section of its population.

The new South Korean regime neglected to provide any attention to the returning comfort women. However, Korean society, as

a whole, did notice and proceeded to shame, disgrace, and ostracize those who dared to talk about their experience. South Korea remained extremely conservative after the end of Japanese occupation and the Korean War. While women were officially given suffrage in 1948, under Article 11 of the new constitution, their role in society continued to remain as mothers and homemakers.<sup>8</sup> It was not until Park's economic reform in the 60's and 70's that women began to venture into entry level positions in the workforce. This meant that regardless of social class, women everywhere were left with very limited economic status and influence on political discourse. This marginalization was exacerbated even further for survivors. As previously mentioned, most Korean comfort women were among the rural and poor demographics before being pressed into service by the Japanese. Illiteracy and poverty was compounded with the ingrained sexism of Korean culture and essentially diminished the importance of the comfort women's plight in the eyes of the political elite. The women were unable to advocate for themselves, and even if they had been educated and fiscally secure, their inability to speak about their traumas prevented it from coming onto the political scene until the 1990's.

It is tempting to view the silence of the comfort women as a result of mainly cultural and economic suppression. However, regardless of

either of those factors, many survivors of sexual assault do not talk about their experience. The highly intimate and extremely traumatic experience of rape is in its very nature a way of silencing women. That being said, Korean culture did play a role in perpetuating the feelings of guilt and shame that silenced women. While economic reform raced forward, society progressed beyond its traditional values at a much slower pace. Koreans embraced the Confucian tradition which placed substantial importance on a woman's chastity to maintain her value. As one saying reads, "To starve to death is a small matter, but to lose one's chastity is a great matter," exemplifying the supreme importance of a woman's virginity, even over that of food or her life.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately for the comfort women, this tradition views rape in the same way as consensual, premarital sex. Thus, victims who had been raped to the point of barrenness were now viewed as 'tainted goods', ineligible for marriage, unable to have children, and a stain on their families. In a society where that is the totality of a woman's purpose, the comfort women were disgraced. As a result, Korean society failed in its moral duty to support mentally and physically injured women in its communities and instead victimized them further through ostracism and shame. This outcome was common among comfort women, and, upon liberation, many realized that they could never go home to



their families and villages. Suicide gave women the option to end the humiliation and shame to themselves and their families. While many chose this route, for the survivors, South Korea's push towards modernization proved to be an opportunity to blend back into normal life.

The road to political and economic empowerment was not a straightforward path. Following a series of coups, Park Chung-hee took control of South Korea in 1963.<sup>10</sup> He pursued a ruthless regime that transformed Korea from a struggling dependent nation to an international



power. In 1972 Park declared martial law and, simultaneously adopted a policy of intensively promoting tourism as a source of foreign ex-

change that was previously acquired through participation of Korean troops in the Vietnam War. Sex tourism made up a substantial part of this and brought in the finances that Park needed to project South Korea into a developed country. Discussions on women's human rights in sex tourism were, "considered so radical as to challenge the stability of the nation by hampering economic growth...and was thus subject to sanction."<sup>11</sup> The Korean government was cautious about contentious issues like comfort women with Japan during this critical time of economic development and thus there was political pressure from the top of the Korean government for others to not bring up a controversial issue like sexual slavery to the detriment of national growth.

However, Park's reforms would indirectly lead to the rise of women in the workforce and their resulting political activism. Tourism made up a small component of economic growth, but Park's leading focus was on building export-led industrialism.<sup>12</sup> To provide the necessary manpower but also keep costs low, women across the country were employed in factories. They were favorable because they were willing to work long hours for minimum pay. During this time frame, "South Korea gained notoriety for having the world's longest work week and the highest accident rate."<sup>13</sup> Factory women were subjected to sexual harass-

ment, poor working conditions, and stunted educational opportunities as many sent wages home to pay for their brothers' education. However, the "economic miracle" under Park would not have been possible without the exploited labor of female factory workers.

As a result of Park's reforms, the economic and living conditions of South Koreans slowly began to improve. Again, the factory women proved to be instrumental, this time with the rise of the feminist movement. Tired of poor working conditions and low wages, factory women became involved in the minjung undong labor movement, and later would use their experience in political advocacy for workers' rights to also advocate for women's equality in the workforce.<sup>14</sup> These internal movements were echoed in 1976 when the United Nations began a program dubbed the 'United Nations Decade for Women' with the goal of, "promot[ing] equal rights and opportunities for women around the world."<sup>15</sup> The UN's declaration powerfully exemplified a worldwide movement towards engaging and empowering all women.

The growing agency of Korean women resulted in a historic case in 1986 when a labor organizer name Kwon Il Suk rocked Korean society by coming forward with accusations of sexual assault against Korean police.<sup>16</sup> She was the first woman ever to file suit against the Korean government. Kwon claimed that she had been

sexually assaulted at a police station while under interrogation for her participation in a labor protest. Her frank admission of being abused, as comfort women well knew, was previously considered an unspeakable experience in Korean society. However, Kwon refused to allow officials to diminish her trauma as exaggerated, "tactics used by student radicals," against the government.<sup>17</sup> Her defiance against submitting to the patriarchy prompted thousands of women to protest her treatment. This resulted in the formation of Korean Women's Association United (KWAU) in February, 1987, and while the protest was shut down by government officials using tear gas, the advocacy of women's rights, including sexual rights, had finally gained precedent in South Korea.<sup>18</sup> Kwon's bravery was monumental, and despite the government's attempts at diminishing the issue, the wave of public protests ensured that women across Korea were witnessing the success of a woman speaking out about sexual assault despite the own risks to her reputation. One such woman, was Kim Hak-Sun, an ex-comfort woman who, like many others, had lived in silence about her experience until that moment.

### CHAPTER 3: KIM HAK-SUN COMES FORWARD

Inspired by the growing feminist rights movement, in August, 1991 Kim Hak-sun gave



a public testimony that continues to color Japanese-Korean politics to this day. Kim recounted, as the very first woman to come forward, her first hand experiences as a comfort woman during the war 46 years prior. In December, 1991 she filed a class action lawsuit against the Japanese government, formally seeking an apology and compensation for the physical and emotional trauma she endured during her time at comfort stations. The case, formally named the Asia-Pacific War Korean Victims Compensation Claim Case opened on December 6, 1991 demanded compensation for the Pacific War victims, including two other unnamed women who filed with Kim Hak-sun.<sup>19</sup> The Japanese government refused to apologize, provide reparations, or open an investigation. However, similar to the #MeToo movement today, once one woman came forward, thousands of others began speaking about their experiences. Hak-sun went on an international tour speaking about her experiences and brought world attention to Japan's refusal to sincerely apologize. This combined with discovery of documents confirming Japanese military involvement with intimate details of the comfort woman operation prompted Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa to publicly apologize for the harm inflicted. An official apology, called the Kono Agreement, was made in 1993. The Kono Agreement admitted that the "Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establish-

ment and management of the comfort stations, the recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military, in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments and that they lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere."<sup>20</sup> For decades the Japanese government had flatly denied its involvement in the comfort women issue, making the Kono Agreement a huge victory for advocates of these women. However, critics have been swift to point out that the apologies never assume legal responsibility for Japan's actions.

Once Kim Hak-sun came forward, another ex-comfort woman, this time a Dutch woman named Jan Ruff-O'Herne, felt empowered enough to share her story. O'Herne advocated very publicly for the issue of comfort women to be treated as a human's rights violation rather than a shameful topic, and in 2007 she testified at the US House of Representatives as part of a congressional hearing on "Protecting the Human Rights of Comfort Women."<sup>21</sup> O'Herne's advocacy helped to garner international support for the survivor's complaints against the continued apathy displayed by the Japanese government.

## CHAPTER 4: LEGAL ISSUES AND COMPENSATION

It is noteworthy that Kim's complaints were aimed exclusively towards the Japanese government. Naturally, the government was directly responsible for her suffering and thus should provide adequate compensation. However, as Japan has consistently pointed out since 1991, compensation has already been made through the Treaty of Basic Relations in 1965, which established diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea. In it, Japan provided Korea with approximately \$800 million in economic reparations after the war with the condition that it also released Japan from further claims. Conservatives in the Japanese right wing have argued that this means Korean comfort women have no legal claim for reparation regardless of not being mentioned directly in the treaty.<sup>22</sup> As previously addressed, the Korean government was undergoing massive economic reform under Park Chung-hee. Because of this, the majority of reparation money was used by the Korean government for industrial economic development, including the Sonyang Dam. Compensation for individuals was limited to only 300,000 won (\$277.00) per death in victims of forced labor.<sup>23</sup> As a result, comfort women were given no direct compensation by their government, despite money being allotted for war

victim reparation. In this, the Japanese provide a reasonable argument for their refusal to continue to provide money to individual claims, as heart wrenching as they may be.

Despite not being legally responsible for more compensation for ex comfort women, the Japanese government set up the Asian Women's Fund in 1994 to distribute money donated by Japanese citizens to ex comfort women.<sup>24</sup> The fund was financed in part by private donation of about \$5 million but mostly through a \$40 million donation by the Japanese government.<sup>25</sup> Victims also received a signed apology from the prime minister, stating "As Prime Minister of Japan, I thus extend anew my most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women."<sup>26</sup> While most of the survivors eventually accepted the monetary compensation, many complained that by using private donations, the government was essentially 'buying them off' instead of actually officially apologizing and giving compensation. This detail seems small yet remains an ideological sticking point to protests that continue to this day. In 2015, the Japanese government officially apologized and gave another \$6 million in compensation to the remaining survivors.



## CHAPTER 5: THE KOREAN GOVERNMENT

The progressive support of ex comfort women through cultural change and advocacy groups led to a substantial shift by the Korean government from its historical apathy. As discussed, immediately following World War II, the government was too weak and disorganized to address the issues of women who, at the time, were few in number, poor, and politically insignificant. However, in the 1960's, the Park regime actively suppressed the issue and even went as far as promoting sex tourism within Korea to increase foreign currency flow into the country.<sup>27</sup> In 1991 reform began taking place on an institutional level as a result of three decades of lobbying from women's rights advocates. Previously, the laws complied with the Confucian patriarchy and systematically limited women's legal rights in Korean family and property law. In 1991 legislation was passed that, "gave daughters equal rights to inherit family property, and gave divorced and separated women the right to child custody."<sup>28</sup> Legal empowerment within familial dynamics was a hard won battle against conservatives that had long dominated the government and marked a significant step forward in the Korean government recognizing women's rights.

The rise of the feminist movement, the increasingly public support towards survivors,

and the continued denial of involvement by the Japanese government prompted the Korean government to establish the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan in November 1990. The Council seeks to, "restore the victims rights and dignity by solving the "comfort women" issue and is trying to form solidarity with women who are experiencing similar pain from current wars and armed conflicts."<sup>29</sup> Through this organization, ex-comfort women began organizing weekly protests every Wednesday since January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1992 in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul.<sup>30</sup> Known as 'The Wednesday Protest', supporters and ex-comfort women reached their 1000<sup>th</sup> protest in 2011, and marked the milestone with a statue of a comfort woman placed directly outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Known as the 'Statue of Peace', the bronze statue was revealed only days before the arrival of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.<sup>31</sup> The Japanese government ferociously called for the statue's removal but its requests were ignored until 2015 when Japan agreed to pay 1 billion yen to survivors in exchange for the removal of the statue.<sup>32</sup> Both sides claimed this would be, "a final and irreversible resolution" towards the divisive issue.<sup>33</sup> However, it proved to be an unpopular decision as Japanese "conservatives condemned the agreement as unnecessary given previous Japanese expressions of remorse and,

more significantly in South Korea, critics in the media described the deal as Park effectively selling out the dignity of survivors of wartime sexual slavery for short-term diplomatic and geopolitical gain.<sup>34</sup> Korean protestors refused to recognize the deal and continued to put up statues throughout South Korea. Tensions peaked when one was placed in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan resulting in Japan recalling two of its ambassadors and stating, “it would suspend negotiations over a currency swap meant to help South Korea stabilize its currency, the won, in times of financial crisis.”<sup>34</sup> Frosty relations have continued into 2017 with South Korean President Moon Jae-in telling Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last June that, “The reality is the majority of our people cannot emotionally accept the comfort women agreement.”<sup>35</sup>

In addition to disputes about public statues, South Korea has also sparred with Japan about how history is being told. In 2006, the Japanese government employed an edited version of middle school textbooks that noticeably downplayed the involvement of the Japanese government in the comfort women issue as well as controversies regarding Japanese imperialism and the Nanking Massacre.<sup>36</sup> Wary of the Japanese rewriting of history, the Korean embassy in Japan released a statement directly objecting to the changes stating, “The Republic of Korea expresses regret over the fact that some of the 2006

Japanese middle school textbooks ... still contain content that justifies and glorifies wrongs committed in the past.”<sup>37</sup> Despite clear objections by the Korean government, the Japanese textbooks were not amended and continue to be viewed as self-favoring historical revisionism. The Japanese counter with the argument that Korean history books are equally self-favoring and politically censored and therefore South Korea has no legitimacy in its complaints.

This series of issues has severely eroded diplomatic ties between South Korea and Japan. Many Japanese feel that Japan has issued enough apologies and paid enough in compensation. The continued protests by South Koreans are viewed as a detriment to potential economic and political ties and are forcing an issue that has long been addressed in the public limelight much to Japan’s continued embarrassment. Conversely, Koreans believe Japan is trying to sweep its horrific human rights violations under the rug using vague language and second hand payouts to victims. They remain unsatisfied by Japan’s half-hearted attempts at reconciliation and continue to press the issue on a domestic and international scale. Regardless, neither side has received closure and tensions continue to escalate despite 72 years passing since the end of World War II.

## CONCLUSION

While political issues remain unresolved,



time is running out for comfort women. Kim Hak-sun passed away in 1997 with her case still unresolved.<sup>38</sup> That was nearly twenty years ago, and today only a handful of women remain. Many women lived their entire lives feeling as though Japan had never officially and sincerely apologized for its actions, and continued to protest until their deaths. Despite the unresolved friction between Japan and Korea, Korean society itself has made massive improvements in its treatment and advocacy for survivors. Initially, the women's plight was deemed too inappropriate for public discussion and had little importance in the eyes of political leaders. Apathy was enhanced by Korean culture's emphasis on female chastity and those who did acknowledge their experiences in the years immediately following the war were shame and ostracized. Under Park, the initial oppression of women's rights and democratic reform gradually gave way to increased political activism as the economy began to improve and women became more independent throughout society. This culminated in extreme social change throughout the 1980's, ultimately leading to improvements in the legal rights of women and Kwan's suit directly against the Korean government. Her actions were paramount in opening dialogue about sexual assault and the failures of the Korean government to adequately address women's rights abuses, setting the ground for Kim Hak-sun to come forward.

In 1991, Kim provided the first eye-witness account of her experience as a comfort woman, providing direct evidence that Japan had systematically coerced and raped thousands of women. Kim's testimony marked the beginning of the Korean government's evolution of support towards comfort women. Throughout the turn of the century the Korean government has become increasingly more vocal against Japanese repression of the issue and has remained resilient in its protests despite it causing diminishing political and economic ties between the two countries. In 2015 the issue was said to be finally resolved, however, that decision was later reversed in 2017 following Korean sentiment that Japan's apologies were insincere and grounded in a desire suppress the issue instead of legitimate remorse.

Despite the unresolved nature of the conflict, the lives of comfort women helped catalyze immense change within Korean politics and society. They have represented women's rights issues, served as witnesses against Japanese attempts to diminish the severity of its actions, and continue to fight against sexism and apathy in Korea. While the stories of comfort women are complicated and full of issues on all sides, their advocacy has had a profound impact not only on the lives of other victims, but also attitudes regarding women's rights around the world.

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