

The Comfort Women System as Strategic Imperial Violence

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Throughout the history of empire, hierarchal power structures have systematically subjugated women in the pursuit of political, economic, and territorial ambitions. Whether through interpersonal violence (e.g., domestic abuse), the restriction of rights, or state-sanctioned oppression, women and girls have long been targeted by their governments, families, and communities simply because of their gender. State-sanctioned sexual violence serves as a tool of domination, control, and warfare, with implications that extend into contemporary international human rights discourses. The issue of ‘comfort women’ represents historical injustices and the persistent denial of accountability, which continue to shape global geopolitics and gender relations.

War remains one of the most devastating threats to women, who have long been systematically targeted during conflicts despite only recently being permitted to serve in armed combat. According to U.N. Resolution 1325, “Civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons, and increasingly are targeted by combatants and armed elements.”¹ This resolution may be recent, but the harsh reality it highlights is far from new. From the destruction of Carthage to the ongoing war in Ukraine, soldiers have repeatedly wielded violence—especially sexual violence—against women as a means to break the spirit of entire populations. While the scope of such atrocities can vary, sexual violence is a constant companion of war, used against both foreign enemies and fellow citizens during civil strife.

Gayatri Spivak’s concept of the subaltern is essential in understanding the marginalization of the voices of women victimized by Japanese militarized sexual slavery. Spivak argues that the systematic silencing of colonized women’s voices by colonial patriarchal

¹ Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls. *Pacific Regional Perspectives on Women and the Media: Making the Connection with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Women, Peace, and Security) and Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action*. no. 3 (2011): 570–77.

structures renders their testimonies illegible within dominant narratives.² Stripped of their agency and denied a voice in the historical record, victims of Japanese militarized sexual slavery embody this subaltern position. Spivak's analysis reveals how these women were caught at the intersection of colonial and gendered oppression, explaining why, even decades later, survivors struggle to have their voices heard amid historical revisionism and denial. Spivak states that amplifying the voices of these marginalized women requires a critical re-examination of the structures that have silenced them, which we still see frequently dominate the historical narrative today.

Spivak's framework not only illuminates the silencing of these women but underscores the systemic roots of their victimization, which lie in the adoption of colonial ideologies by imperial powers like Japan. The Japanese empire was heavily influenced by Western imperialism and racial hierarchies encountered during the Iwakura Mission and adapted these structures of oppression into its nation. By incorporating these frameworks, Japan created an imperial system where gendered and sexual violence became tools of control and erasure, embedding the very mechanisms Spivak critiques into its colonial practices.

In the late 19th century, the Japanese government was faced with the necessity to evolve. It understood that in order to compete with other nations, it needed to transform from a secluded society to a modern nation-state. The 1871 Iwakura Mission sent a Japanese delegation, led by Iwakura Tomomi, to the United States and multiple European countries. This mission was meant to further Japanese understanding of Western political, social, and economic systems. In their study of Western systems, Japan encountered racial hierarchy significantly for the first time. A near-completely homogenous nation, Japan began to internalize ideologies of racial superiority.

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988).

Japan quickly adopted this racial framework, as evident in their treatment of neighboring Asian populations after the mission's return.³

Japan's adoption of Western ideas of racial hierarchy was both strategic and reflective of Japan's geopolitical context following the Iwakura Mission. The Iwakura Mission proved to Japanese leaders how central racial hierarchy was in the colonial domination and power structures of the Western nations they mission had visited. Japan was concerned about maintaining sovereignty within a period of significant Western imperial tendencies, and replicating Western frameworks seemed necessary to secure its position in an ever-changing national order.

Japan's adoption of Western ideologies of racial hierarchy not only justified its imperial domination of neighboring Asian populations but also reinforced deeply entrenched systems of sexism that became central to its imperial and militaristic agenda. These ideologies worked in tandem, as the frameworks of modernity Japan sought to emulate from the West were inseparable from the gendered systems that upheld them. Western imperialism relied on patriarchal structures that subordinated women both in domestic and colonial contexts, and Japan, eager to align itself with these models, integrated these systems into its modernization efforts.

Japan's alignment with Western imperial models extended beyond racial ideologies into the domain of gendered violence, where patriarchal structures and militaristic systems intersected to enable systemic oppression. This dual framework of domination found its most horrifying expression in the militarized sexual violence perpetrated during Japan's imperial conquests. Nowhere is this more evident than in the atrocities committed during the Second Sino-Japanese

³ Carmina Yu Untalan. "Perforating Colour Lines: Japan and the Problem of Race in the 'Non-West.'" *Review of International Studies* (2023): 1–19.

War, where the intersection of race, gender, and imperial ambition culminated in one of the darkest chapters of modern history: the Nanjing Massacre.

A significant example of militarized sexual violence is the crimes committed by the Japanese military during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The Nanjing Massacre, which began on December 13, 1937,⁴ stands as one of the most horrific wartime atrocities of the modern era. Over the course of six weeks, hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and soldiers were killed, and up to 80,000 women were raped or otherwise sexually tortured. This massacre was part of Japan's brutal campaign to gain control over mainland China—a conquest that would eventually expand into complete colonial rule until the end of World War II.

While the atrocities at Nanjing were not officially sanctioned by the Japanese government, they were in line with its military practice known as the 'Three Alls' strategy: kill all, burn all, loot all.⁵ This policy was designed to terrorize and subjugate conquered cities, effectively crushing resistance. At the time, Japan's military and government leadership were tightly intertwined, with figures like Prince Asaka directly overseeing military operations. Despite the scale of the horror in Nanjing, the Western world largely turned a blind eye to these and other war crimes during Japan's reign of terror across East Asia.

The Japan's military policy of institutionalized sexual slavery known as the 'comfort women' system was an escalation of the tactics seen in Nanjing allegedly introduced to curb mass rape and boost the morale of Japanese soldiers stationed in occupied territories. However, it ultimately functioned as a barely concealed mechanism for widespread rape and sexual exploitation, subjecting tens of thousands of women to lives of profound suffering and abuse.

⁴ Suping Lu. "The Nanjing Massacre: Primary Source Records and Secondary Interpretations—A Textual Critique of Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi's Review." *China Review International* 20, no. 3/4 (2013): 259–82.

⁵ Lyman P. van Slyke, "The Battle of the Hundred Regiments: Problems of Coordination and Control during the Sino-Japanese War." *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 4 (1996): 979–1005.

As a euphemistic title, the term ‘comfort women’ diminishes the severity of what was done to these women and girls, some of whom had never left their homes. Though they were aware of Japanese colonial presence, no amount of awareness could have possibly prepared them to be systemically raped and tortured. Kidnapped, lied to, and falsely promised work during a time of mass famine and desperation, they were sex slaves held captive and tortured by the Japanese military under the direction of the Japanese government. Denialists call these women and girls ‘money hungry,’ ‘thieves,’ ‘liars,’ and ‘prostitutes.’⁶ The majority of victims of Japanese militarized sexual slavery were Korean women; victims also included women from China, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, East Timor, and the Dutch East Indies.⁷ While estimates range between 20,000 and 500,000 victims, researchers assert that 200,000 women were forced into sexual slavery during Japan’s colonial rule.⁸

Despite the Japanese government’s refusal to publicize official documentation regarding their ‘comfort women’ protocol, evidence does exist: a document known as JS-2 issued by the Consular Police of the Japanese Consulate General in Shanghai, China on December 21, 1937 gives explicit instruction on the installation of comfort stations, staffing of the stations, and the initial plan for the abduction of 3,000 women for a single station.⁹ Another document titled JS-22 published by the Vijaya Branch of the Iloilo Office of the Military Administration Bureau on November 22, 1942 openly stated that the Military Administration Bureau would be in charge of supervision and guidance of comfort stations.¹⁰

⁶J. Mark Ramseyer. “Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War.” *International Review of Law & Economics* (2021).

⁷ Yuri Tanaka. *Japan’s Comfort Women* (Routledge, 2001)

⁸ Linny Kit Tong Ng. “A Legal Herstory of WWII ‘Comfort Women’ — Chapters: Past, Present, and Beyond” (2024). *LL.M. Essays & Theses*. 14. https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/lm_essays_theses/14

⁹ Shanghai, China, and Consular Police of the Japanese Consulate General in Shanghai, China (1937).

¹⁰ Iloilo Office, Vijaya Branch, Military Administration Bureau. *Sending of the Comfort Station Regulations* Panay, Iloilo (November 22, 1942)

Two editions of an allied report published in February and November during 1945, “Amenities in the Japanese Armed Forces,” includes some documented proof of the practice. In this report, prices for the ‘use’ of each woman are listed based on military rank, with prices differing based on the woman’s race.¹¹ The two reports are among the few remaining pieces of concrete physical evidence of Japan’s ownership of the ‘comfort stations’ published by entities outside of Japan. Notably, this information was published under Report 120, which discussed amenities to the Japanese military, and not Report 72, which discussed war crimes committed by the Japanese military,¹² indicating a lack of understanding of the breadth of the situation by the allied forces upon initial investigation. While relying on allied reports for information is less than ideal, the Japanese Government destroyed approximately 70% of its records after the end of World War II.¹³

During the period of this atrocity, enslaved women were raped by up to 60 soldiers a day. Up to 500,000 women across Asia were enslaved and abused by an occupying military that treated them as sub-human and did not care if they lived or died. Although allied powers quickly prosecuted crimes committed against Westerners following World War II, they largely ignored the ‘comfort women.’ The first trial related to the punishment of Japan’s crimes in the context of militarized sexual slavery occurred in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) in 1948.

Under Japanese imperialism, citizens of the Dutch East Indies were forced into internment camps. In what’s known as the Semarang incident, women from four of these camps

¹¹ The Allied Forces Translation and Interpretation Department under the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, Southwest Pacific Area. *Investigation Report No. 120* (February 16, 1945) Investigation Report No. 120 (November 15, 1945): Prepared by the Allied Forces Translation and Interpretation Department under the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers

¹² “US-2 ATIS Research Report No. 120.” (Allied Translator and Interpreter Section, November 15, 1945).

¹³ Edward Drea. “Researching Japanese War Crimes.” *National Archives and Records Administration for the Nazi War crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency Working Group*. p. 9.(2006)

were forcibly removed and taken to comfort stations,¹⁴ where women ages 17 to 28 were told to line up and enter the camp office one by one for evaluation. On February 26, just two days later, approximately thirty-five of these women from camps around the country were sent to four different comfort stations in Semarang. Notably, most of these women were Dutch or mixed race. On February 14, 1948, the Batavia temporary court-martial convicted 12 military actors for their involvement in the Semarang Incident, sentencing one man to death and 11 others to prison sentences ranging from two to 20 years¹⁵. It is no coincidence that the first women to see some semblance of justice were white or mixed race. The Western world largely focused its attention on the white victims in the trials immediately following the war, even in the predominantly non-white East.

Victims of Japanese militarized sexual slavery are often invalidated or ignored, with revisionist historians citing variances in the testimonies of women brave enough to share their stories. These variances are largely due to discrepancies between comfort stations, as station decisions about their logistic functions were left to the local military commanders. Testimonies from victims vary drastically based on age, nationality, where they were taken, and to which station they were transported.

One survivor, Kimiko Kaneda, whose mother was of Japanese descent and her father Korean, was forced to be a comfort woman in Zaoqiang and Shijiazhuang. During her time in captivity, she was stabbed, had her bones broken, and raped by “as many as 20 men” each day.¹⁶ She was subjected to rape at all hours of the day and only allowed rest if soldiers deemed it

¹⁴ “Women Made to Become Comfort Women - the Dutch East Indies.” The Indo Project, April 14, 2024. <https://theindoproject.org/women-made-to-become-comfort-women-netherlands/>.

¹⁵ Rinzema Admiraal, *Het geschonden beeld. Aspecten van Gedwongen Legerprostitutie in door Japan Gekoloniseerd en Bezet Azie* (The desecrated image. Aspects of forced prostitution in Asia during the Japanese colonization and occupation).

¹⁶ Kimiko Kaneda. *The Testimony of Kimiko Kaneda in Relation to Japanese Militarized Sexual Slavery*. The Comfort Women Issue and Asian Women’s Fund, 1998. <https://www.awf.or.jp/e3/oralhistory-00.html>

necessary, which was not common. Kaneda became addicted to morphine and was allowed to return to Korea in 1945 for medical rehabilitation, which ultimately saved her life.

Another survivor, born in Miaoli, Taiwan, in 1930, remained anonymous even after her death, as she was too ashamed to tell her community what had happened to her during the war. This victim was told she had to leave her home to work as a cook for the Japanese military under the General National Mobilization Law.¹⁷ She cooked, cleaned, and mended during the day and at night she was raped.¹⁸ Kim Hak-Soon, one of the most influential survivors of the comfort women system, was kidnapped by a Japanese soldier and forced to work as a comfort woman in China. At the comfort station where Kim Hak-Soon was held, she was raped by seven or eight soldiers each day. Kim Hak-Soon would give the first official 'comfort women' testimony in 1991, catalyzing the ongoing movement for justice.

While the Japanese government is undoubtedly at fault for its military's crimes, many scholars and researchers blame the overarching patriarchal environment in East Asia for the continued suffering of victims after their return home. Their countries, their communities, and even their own families shamed women for the abuse they endured, forcing thousands of survivors into silence. Thousands of women died without speaking out, terrified of telling their stories and exposing themselves as victims of heinous war crimes.

Based on a clear hierarchy between the sexes, with women representing the internal sphere and men the external, Confucianism preserves patriarchal dominance across Korea and many other East Asian nations to this day. Notably, Confucianism stresses chastity as a value for women and not for men; if a woman of dignity was approached by a male assailant, she was

¹⁷ National Diet of Japan, and Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe, *General National Mobilization Law* § (1938).

¹⁸ Anonymous. "The Testimony of an Anonymous Taiwanese Victim in Relation to Japanese Militarized Sexual Slavery." *The Comfort Women Issue and Asian Women's Fund*, 1998. <https://www.awf.or.jp/e3/oralhistory-00.html>

meant to commit suicide with a “silver decorated knife.”¹⁹ Confucianism permitted a husband’s use of physical violence to reprimand his wife, creating a culture of abuse and fear within the home. While some of these ancient customs were no longer practiced in East Asia in the twentieth century, Confucian undertones continued to subtly permeate society. Along with broader sociopolitical behavior, Confucianism created an environment where men controlled the lives of women within their households. This element of fear and obedience within the family led to victims’ shame and unwillingness to speak on the abuse they’d faced until Kim Hak-Soon’s testimony in 1991 led to an increase in work on the issue.

Prompted by a declaration from Professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi from Chuo University, a 1992 investigation revealed the existence of documents that prove the involvement of the Japanese military in the creation and operation of comfort women stations.²⁰ The results of this investigation were published along with a statement from then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato, which stated:

The inquiry has revealed that the Government had been involved in the establishment of comfort stations, the control of those who recruited comfort women, the construction and reinforcement of comfort facilities, the management and surveillance of comfort stations, the hygiene maintenance in comfort stations and among comfort women, and the issuance of identification as well as other documents to those who were related to comfort stations.

The Government again would like to express its sincere apology and remorse to all those who have suffered indescribable hardship as so-called “wartime comfort women”, irrespective of their nationality or place of birth. With profound remorse and

¹⁹ Y.O. Park. *The History of Women in the Chosun Dynasty* (Chunchu Mungo, 1976).

²⁰ Yoshiaki Yoshimi. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

determination that such a mistake must never be repeated, Japan will maintain its stance as a pacifist nation and will endeavor to build up new future-oriented relations with the Republic of Korea and with other countries and regions in Asia.²¹

After further investigation the following year, another statement was issued by the new Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yohei Kono, stating:

Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day. The then-Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments.

They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere.

Undeniably, this was an act, with the involvement of the military authorities of the day, that severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. 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.

It is incumbent upon us, the Government of Japan, to continue to consider seriously, while listening to the views of learned circles, how best we can express this sentiment.²²

²¹ Koichi Kato, "Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato on the Issue of the so-called 'Wartime Comfort Women' from the Korean Peninsula," https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000346.html.

²² Yohei Kono, "Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary," https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html.

These statements are direct admissions of guilt, yet still no official changes were made to Japan's school curriculum or government policy.

The Kono statement was effectively rendered irrelevant with the election of Shinzo Abe as Prime Minister in 2002. Abe encouraged publishers to remove any mention of the 'comfort women' protocol and the military's involvement in their recruitment and abuse from textbooks and pull books about the issue from shelves.²³ This included going as far as to encourage a change in Ministry of Education guidelines in 2015 that required textbooks to present Japan in a positive way, including omitting references to comfort women.²⁴ In 2007, in an attempt to stop U.S. House Resolution 121 seeking an unconditional apology for the victims of militarized sexual slavery by the Japanese government, Abe's allies published an article titled "The Facts" in *The Washington Post*, denying the government's involvement in the 'comfort women' issue and urging House Representatives to deny the resolution.²⁵ Abe's revisionism was unsurprising, considering he was the grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, who served as Hideki Tōjō's minister of commerce throughout World War II and was tried as a Class A war criminal following the war.²⁶ Kishi was elected Prime Minister of Japan in 1957, with his younger brother following in his footsteps just a few years later and ultimately paving the way for Abe's political career.

Activists had already begun to work on the issue prior to Abe's election and fiercely continued despite the government's refusal to acknowledge its part in these crimes. Following an open letter from South Korean women's groups to Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki demanding an apology and investigation into militarized sexual slavery, the Korean Council for

²³ Xiaochen Cai. "Shinzo Abe's Reconciliation and Revisionism." *The United States and Japan in Global Context: 2017* (2017): 31.

²⁴ Sam Bamkin. 2018. "Reforms to Strengthen Moral Education in Japan: A Preliminary Analysis of Implementation in Schools." *Contemporary Japan* 30 (1): 78–96.

²⁵ The Committee for Historical Facts, "The Facts," *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2007, Washington D.C. edition.

²⁶ John Delury. "The Kishi Effect: A Political Genealogy of Japan-ROK Relations." *Asian Perspective* 39, no. 3 (2015): 441–60.

the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery (informally called The Korean Council) was founded in 1990 to aid in the development of the Asian Women's Fund and to demand apology and redress for survivors. The lack of response from Toshiki led to the unification of thirty-seven women's groups across Korea to become The Korean Council.²⁷

Kim Hak-Soon gave the first testimony from a survivor after 50 years of silence. Survivors feared a multitude of reactions to their testimonies, especially retaliation from the Japanese government, their own governments and communities, or from individuals. Regardless of individual thought processes, these women had reason to stay quiet—but many felt they had even more reason to speak out. Kim gave her initial testimony on August 14, 1991, following Japan's formal denial of their involvement in comfort stations and militarized sexual slavery. Kim was 67 years old when she recounted the torture she endured when she was 17. On December 6, 1991, Kim and two other survivors filed a lawsuit at a Tokyo District Court demanding an apology from the Japanese government; their demands have yet to be fulfilled.

Founded in 1995 for the purpose of privately compensating victims, the Asian Women's Fund received ¥600 million and ¥4.8 billion from the people and Government of Japan, respectively.²⁸ In addition to their share of the money, each survivor was meant to be given a formal apology signed by the Japanese Prime Minister; Kim, other survivors, and activists argued that a private fund would not substitute for the state redress they had demanded. Kim stated in 1997 "I did not come out with my shameful past because of money. What I strongly demand is restitution, not some money for consolation."²⁹ The private fund was not meant as an

²⁷ Chin Sung Chung. "The Origin and Development of the Military Sexual Slavery Problem in Imperial Japan." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5(1): 219–53. 1997

²⁸ Asian Women's Fund. "The Establishment of the Asian Women's Fund." *Establishment of the Asian Women's Fund*. Accessed November 15, 2024. <https://awf.or.jp/e2/index.html>.

²⁹ Hankyoreh. "Grandmother Kim Hak-Soon, Who Refuses Private Funds, Says, 'All I Want Is an Official Apology from Japan.'" August 15, 1996.

apology to survivors but as a means for the Government of Japan to avoid legal liability for these war crimes. Kim wanted an apology in the form of the correction of history books and education, as the other survivors did.

Work on the ‘comfort women’ issue did not end with Kim Hak-Soon’s death in 1997. The Japanese Government has waffled on their official stance since, but the Korean Council and countless other activist groups have not backed down. Today, only eight confessed survivors remain to share their stories. Dozens of survivors came before them, creating art, telling stories, giving interviews, and cementing their testimonies in history. They speak for the thousands of women who were made to feel unable to speak because of atrocities committed against them. Thousands of women were made to feel as though if they spoke out, they would be cast away from society and those who loved them. These eight Halmeonis (grandmothers) dedicate their lives to living truthfully for their sisters, who were forced to feel that they could not.

Revisionists and denialists continue to create literature for the sole purpose of denouncing these women—a disgusting if unsurprising fact in light of the many historical examples of women, particularly victims of sexual and other types of violence, being silenced through tactics similar to those still being used by the Japanese Government and other denialists. In addition to revisionist literature, these denialists are often physically present at comfort women memorial events, particularly the Wednesday Protests. The first Wednesday Protest took place on January 8, 1992, in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, South Korea, organized by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.³⁰ This initial protest was relatively small, involving a small group of women and activists who gathered to demand an official apology and reparations from the Japanese Government for its wartime atrocities. Little

³⁰ Vera Mackie. “One Thousand Wednesdays: Transnational Activism from Seoul to Glendale.” In *Women’s Activism and “Second Wave” Feminism: Transnational Histories*, ed. Barbara Molony and Jennifer Nelson (2017), 249–71.

did they know, this protest would spark a movement that would grow exponentially, becoming a global symbol of resilience, justice, and the power of collective memory.

The Wednesday Demonstrations have continued every week without fail, even in the face of severe weather, political tensions, and global crises, with only one cancellation in over three decades. This makes it the longest-running peace protest in the world, standing as a testament to the enduring fight for recognition and justice for the survivors of Japan's wartime sexual slavery system. The unwavering commitment of the activists, many of whom are themselves survivors of violence, underscores the importance of keeping the issue alive in the public consciousness.

More than an activist gathering, these protests are a platform for survivors to share their stories, demand accountability, and educate future generations. The Wednesday Demonstrations have become a space for young activists, students, and international allies to show solidarity, ensuring that the legacy of the 'comfort women' will not be forgotten. These non-violent protests create an inclusive space full of laughter, tears, and music. Participants engage in spoken word poetry, musical acts, and children's dance groups to bring attention to the issue and feel heard. In response to this sustained activism, the Korean Government took significant steps in 2018 by establishing the Research Institute on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery (R.I.M.S.S.) under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. The institute's mission is to document survivor testimonies, conduct research, and spread awareness through the development of educational materials. This effort reflects a growing recognition of the need to preserve the historical truth and promote awareness, especially among younger generations.

Additionally, Comfort Women Action Redress and Education (C.A.R.E.), a non-governmental organization, conducts advocacy work both in South Korea and internationally. C.A.R.E. focuses on educating the public, advocating for survivors' rights, and

fighting for justice. Through public lectures, educational materials, and international campaigns, they fight to ensure that the voices of the survivors are heard and that the issue remains on the international agenda. Beyond weekly protests and advocacy groups, efforts to honor the survivors include museums, exhibitions, books, and articles dedicated to preserving the history of the comfort women and exposing the truth of their suffering. Survivors like Halmeoni Yong Soo-Lee continue to play an active role in the movement for redress; now 96, she continues attending protests, speaking at events, and sharing her story with young people to ensure that the history of the survivors of Japanese militarized sexual slavery is never forgotten. Her efforts are a reminder of the strength and resilience of survivors, who refuse to let their stories fade into obscurity. These acts of remembrance are crucial in the face of ongoing denial and revisionism by those who seek to erase the wartime atrocities committed by the Japanese Government. While Halmeoni Yong Soo-Lee has taken a step back from her incredibly active participation in the movement, she is still gracious enough to meet with researchers and journalists from across the globe. The continuation of these Wednesday protests, along with the work of organizations like R.I.M.S.S. and C.A.R.E., highlights the collective determination to keep this issue present in the collective historical conscience in Korea and around the world. As long as the protests continue, the legacy of the survivors and work of their supporters will continue serving as a powerful reminder of the need for justice and historical accountability.

In Japan, the overwhelming majority of people interviewed had very different views than their government. One almost 90-year-old woman discussed knowledge she had of a comfort station near her childhood home. Her older sister had noticed groups of Korean and Chinese women in the market but refused to answer her questions about them until well after the war. While neither woman had concrete proof, they both had their suspicions. In 1991 when Kim

Hak-Soon gave her testimony, this woman's belief in her suspicions solidified.³¹ The same woman's granddaughter now attends a Japanese university where she studies Women and Gender. She recently completed a report on the government's refusal to take blame despite the clear evidence. Her younger brother has argued with his classmates at school about the issue. While the government does not understand the necessity of accountability, it's clear that its people do.

The history of Japanese militarized sexual slavery and broader wartime atrocities committed by imperial powers underscores the far-reaching consequences of a failure to hold imperial regimes accountable for their actions. Survivors like Halmeoni Yong Soo-Lee, who have dedicated their lives to spreading awareness about crimes committed against them, demonstrate that they will continue to fight regardless of attempts to suppress their voices. The persistent denial and evasion of responsibility by imperial powers have left wounds that continue to affect both the victims and the global community at large.

The exploitation of women during wartime exemplifies the systematic use of sexual violence as a tool of imperialism. Sexual violence has historically been a tool used in empire-building to dispossess and control populations deemed expendable. The use of rape as a weapon in imperial contexts destabilizes communities while asserting dominance over marginalized groups.

Colonialism operates through systems that require the subjugation of land, resources, and bodies, among other things. In the context of colonialism, sexual violence reinforces racial and gender hierarchies. Sexual violence isn't always an act of physical violence, but a symbolic assertion of dominance by colonial powers. The connection between sexual violence and colonialism is evident across almost all empires, where sexual violence is used to strip

³¹ Anonymous interview with Alyssa Brown, August 2024.

indigenous people of their agency. The trauma inflicted by sexual violence affects not only individuals, but also their families and communities, asserting colonial authority and destroying hope of a colonized people.

The refusal of the Japanese state to fully acknowledge and take responsibility for these crimes intensifies the suffering of the survivors who have been forced into silence for decades, as well as prevented a necessary confrontation of the past. This failure to confront historical injustice deprives future generations of the opportunity to learn, hindering historical growth and the global pursuit of justice. The implications of this lack of accountability extend beyond the survivors. At the international level, the continued denial of war crimes by imperial powers perpetuates a culture of impunity in which states can commit human rights violations without facing significant legal consequences. This lack of accountability perpetuates patterns of violence, undermining international enforcement of human rights frameworks and signaling to other states that similar acts of violence will go unpunished. The Japanese state's refusal to fully confront the past hinders broader processes of international reconciliation and justice for victims of state-sanctioned violence everywhere.

The road to justice is long and challenging, yet survivors, advocates, and global citizens' collective determination offers hope. As history shows, refusing to remain silent in the face of oppression and demanding justice can lead to change. With continued efforts to confront historical wrongs, educate future generations, and hold perpetrators accountable, it is possible to confront the wounds of the past and create a world where the dignity and rights of all individuals are fully respected and protected. The legacy of the survivors of Japanese militarized sexual slavery will not be defined by the atrocities they endured but by the strength of those who have

turned their pain into a call for justice, paving the way for a future of accountability, empathy, and healing.

The history of Japanese militarized sexual slavery not only represents a significant human rights violation, but a deliberate strategy of imperial control and erasure. While scholarship continues to be developed about the system itself, the attempt to obscure these crimes and the silencing of victims is a secondary crime. The ‘comfort women’ system can be situated within broader imperial patterns of violence and denial through primary evidence and survivor testimony, which continue to challenge the Japanese government’s denial of accountability.

The Japanese military’s rigorous record-keeping provides evidence of the institutional control of Japanese militarized sexual slavery. Dozens of Japanese military documents with explicit instruction for the procurement and transportation of ‘comfort women’ known as JS-1 through JS-29 still exist, carefully preserved and publicized by UCLA.³² These documents prove that the ‘comfort women’ system was not an incidental policy, but a standardized framework designed to hold woman hostage for sexual abuse by soldiers. These documents refute denialist claims that these women were voluntary sex workers, illustrating how the Japanese government institutionalized sexual violence for the purpose of its imperial ambitions.

While documentation provides structural insight, survivor testimonies and continued advocacy illuminate the human cost of the ‘comfort women’ system. Survivors like Kim Hak-Soon, Kang Duk-kyung, and Yong Soo-Lee dedicated their lives after their testimonies to continued advocacy work, with Kang Duk-kyung even living at the House of Sharing, a home for victims of Japanese militarized sexual slavery privately funded by donors that includes a

³² UCLA CKS Comfort Women Resource Center. “Japanese Military Documents.” UCLA Center for Korean Studies, University of California Los Angeles. Los Angeles, California.
<https://www.international.ucla.edu/cks/care/japanesedocs>

museum dedicated to education.³³ Their testimonies highlight the intersection of race, gender, and colonialism in the experiences of survivors, in addition to revealing the long-term psychological and physical impacts of Japanese military violence against victims. Survivors of the ‘comfort women’ system have always been an impactful part of the movement for reparations and recognition. From their attendance at Wednesday Protests to the art they created as a form of self-expression to their constant willingness to relive their trauma to educate others, these women have not stopped fighting for the acknowledgment of the crimes committed against them. As of 2024, only eight survivors who’ve spoken out remain alive. One survivor, 96-year-old Yong-Soo Lee spoke of a dream where Kim Hak-Soon, the first survivor to testify in 1991, told her to rest and allow future generations to continue their work. The following day, she saw a yellow butterfly, the symbol of the movement, which she believed to be a sign from Kim Hak-Soon; she’s since taken the advice of her ‘sister’ and taken a more passive role in the movement.³⁴ In their work, survivors like Yong Soo-Lee have become custodians of historical memory. While the Japanese government may continue to deny their actions, survivors will forever be remembered and advocated for thanks to the work of their sisters. Their actions highlight the importance of lived experience as a historical source while emphasizing the importance of grassroots movements in shaping public memory.

The history of Japanese militarized sexual slavery is a testament to the enduring struggle for truth in the face of imperial violence and denialism. The systemic nature of imperial violence and deliberate strategies of erasure that followed it are easy to reveal, but they’re also easy to erase. The intentional concealment of Japanese military documents and the culture of shame that forced many survivors into silence were powerful tools, but not more powerful than the survivors

³³ “Nanum,” accessed November 24, 2024, <http://www.nanum.org/>.

³⁴ Yong Soo-Lee, interview by Alyssa Brown, August 2024.

and activists who continue to fight for recognition. The history of the ‘comfort women’ movement is an important reminder that history—particularly imperial history—is not just a record of the past, but an ongoing battle over whose voices are heard and stories are acknowledged.

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