

Comfort Women: The Forgotten Victims of World War II



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Introduction

During World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army began practicing large-scale organized prostitution. The women recruited to become prostitutes for the Army were named "comfort women." It is estimated that 80,000 to 200,000 Korean women were used as sex slaves during World War II. This estimated number does not include the Chinese or Filipino women that were forced to become sex slaves. The practice of recruiting women had far-reaching cultural effects on the countries involved. The Japanese military enslaved thousands of women, but Japan never formally apologized for its actions. Japan, unlike Germany, has refused to even consider giving compensations for the wartime atrocities their soldiers committed. This issue was largely ignored immediately after the end of World War II, however, as time passed survivors and their families came forth seeking retribution for the crimes Japan committed. It is almost as if this topic was erased and ignored internationally. But now women are fighting for justice and retribution in hopes that Japan will finally acknowledge the enslavement of women during World War II.



Image 1:
Former 'comfort woman' poses by one of the few images of comfort women taken during WWII.

Thesis

The practice of comfort women has had detrimental and lasting effects on the women who were forced to become sex slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II.

Methods

The proposed research strategy will utilize film and other primary sources from comfort women of various nationalities in combination with secondary sources to answer the following questions:

- How were women from China, Korea, and the Philippines recruited?
- When did the practice of comfort women become official under the Japanese Imperial Army?
- How has the practice of comfort women effect the women who were subjected to it?
- Why was the comfort women issue not recognized internationally under the early 1990's?
- How has the Japanese government made efforts at reparations to former comfort women?



Image 2:
Believed to be a 'freed' comfort women, who appears to be a young girl, found in a comfort station at the end of WWII.

Results

Women from the Philippines, Korea, and China were coerced, kidnapped, and forced to become sex slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army. The military would promise families the welfare of the young women by telling them the women would work in factories, hospitals, and other service jobs. The delicate process of recruiting women by asking the family's permission disappeared as the Japanese Imperial Army began to kidnap women whenever it was convenient.

The Army did not officially begin the practice of comfort women until after the Rape and Massacre in Nanjing in December of 1937. The Army argued that if the soldiers had prostitutes around, they would not feel the need to gang rape women. The gang rape of local women had continuously occurred during the occupation of Nanjing. The army officials wanted to control the spread of sexual transmitted infections among the soldiers as well.

A similarity among the women taken were their Confucian ideals that focused on a women's virginity and feminine chastity as her most sacred attributes before marriage. Additionally, for the majority of comfort women were unmarried. Unmarried young women between the ages of 16 to 20 were favored by the Japanese Imperial Army. The few women who survived were unable to be married and create a family after WWII.



Image 3:
Former comfort women, at eighty years old, still recalls being raped daily at age sixteen.

It is estimated that only around 1,000 of the 200,000 women were able to return home. Those that returned home were viewed as sinners, unclean, and a disgrace to their families. The women even blamed themselves for the sins they were forced to commit. The topic of comfort women was suppressed throughout Asia until the early 1990s when women started fighting for retribution from the Japanese government. The issue was further embraced by the third-wave of feminism.



Image 4:
Former comfort women from South Korea, protest outside of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, Korea in 2000.

By the mid-1990s the Japanese government had admitted its official involvement in the recruitment and use of comfort women. Still, the government did not take moral responsibility for the actions of the Army. Japan's apologies were very backhanded to the surviving comfort women who still have not been able to heal emotionally.

Conclusions

The issue of the comfort women may not have become such a popular topic today if it has not been for Ms. Hak-Sun Kim from South Korea that came forward in 1991 about her time as a comfort woman. She was spurred to come forward when the Japanese government denied their involvement in the sex slavery system. This brave woman encouraged other comfort women to speak on what actually happened during World War II.

Today, there are not many living comfort women but their legacy will no longer be ignored from history. There have been movements internationally to further promote the acknowledge of this wartime atrocity. Women especially have supported the further investigation in hopes of preventing future sexual enslavement of women. There have been museums, statues, books, and more that have been dedicated to the recognition of comfort women and what they were forced to endure.



Image 5:
Ms. Hak-Sun Kim, a Korean women, speaking on her experience as a comfort women during WWII. She was the first of many comfort woman to publicly speak about her horrific experience.

The Japanese government has been under the international eye as the issue of comfort women has continued to evolve. By 1993, the Japanese government officially stated that the military did maintain brothels during times of war. But Japan has continued to refuse to expand on the inhumane treatment of the women. The exact number of enslaved women and the number of deaths due to the enslavement has never been released.

Japan formally gave compensation to South Korean comfort women in 2015. The Japanese government officially stated that it was responsible and sincerely sorry. Japan has continued to appear remorseful to the women who were forced to be sex slaves. Japan further promised the medical aid to remaining comfort women at a sum of \$8.3 million. Even with a formal apology and compensation, many activists are still fighting for further recognition for all comfort women.



Image 6:
A protestor in South Korea, crushes photos of Shinzo Abe from Japan after Abe offered the South Korean President Moon Jaw-in \$8.3 million for the remaining comfort women. The Japanese treatment of comfort women has infuriated protesters for decades. Every Wednesday there are protesters outside of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to fight for comfort women.

Comfort Women Activism

In 2017, San Francisco unveiled a comfort women statue that sparked further discussions. This statue caused an uproar from the Japanese sister-city of San Francisco. The mayor of the sister-city, Osaka, has cut ties with San Francisco since the unveiling. The two cities had a relationship from 1957 to 2017. The three young girls holding hands are meant to represent the Chinese, Filipino, and Korean women who were forced to become comfort women. The older figure standing at a distance is meant to symbolize the few surviving comfort women now, as they continue to fight for recognition.



Image 7:
This comfort women statue was officially displayed on November 1, 2017. It is titled "Column of Strength" by Steven Whyte.

The comfort women statue that stands outside of the Japanese Embassy in South Korea is there to further seek an apology from Japan. The statue is a constant reminder of the young women who suffered tremendously under the occupation of the Japanese Imperial Army. Throughout the seasons people will bring the statue of the young girl different items of clothing. As well as flowers to further remember all those that are lost. Sitting on the right side of the statue is an empty chair for anyone to sit in and try to imagine the horrid life of comfort women.

The display of comfort women statues is furthering awareness for the rape and enslavement of women throughout the world. The statues aim to represent the history of comfort women that has been suppressed for far too long.



Image 8:
This is the comfort woman "Statue of Peace" that has been standing outside of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, South Korea since December of 2015.

Resources

1. Chai, Alice Yun. "Asian-Pacific Feminist Coalition Politics: The Chōngshindae/Jūgunianfu ("Comfort Women") Movement." *Korean Studies* 17, (1993): 67-91.
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3. Park, You-me. "Compensation to Fit the Crime: Conceptualizing a Just Paradigm of Reparation for Korean "Comfort Women"." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 2 (2010): 204-213.