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The Uncomfortable Facts About Korean Comfort Women

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The Uncomfortable Facts about Korean Comfort Women

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Thesis: Japan's denial of the horrors experienced by comfort women during World War Two weakens the efforts made for human and women rights made over the past century and validates current modern day war crimes involving sexual violence.



Why were their Comfort Women?

During Imperial Japan's invasion of China in the winter of 1937, Japanese military took the then-capital city of Nanjing. From the day that Nanjing was taken, on December 13th until leaders of Japan commanded it to cease in February of the following year, the Japanese military men commence in "systematic killing of citizens, surrendered soldiers and widespread rape of women." This incident known as the Rape of Nanjing brought an unforeseen issue to the leaders of Japan attention, if their men were to be allowed to commit such acts then the occupied areas would become hostile towards the Japanese. Therefore the Japanese leaders began the institution of Comfort Stations run by captive women who were forced to become sexual slaves for the Japanese military. These "Comfort Women" were intended to provide the Japanese military as a sexual outlet created to prevent them from committing more war crimes such as the Rape of Nanjing from happening. Though in the beginning the Japanese military were provided with Japanese volunteer prostitutes, there was a rapid call for more women. This led to the Japanese expanding their recruitment to the women from their colonies.

Lied to and Forced into Slavery:

Of the women that were taken from Korea and forced into becoming a Comfort Women, the majority were unaware of the task they were expected to fulfill. Many of them were coerced by men who told them of job opportunities available to them in Japan, such as becoming a nurse or to work in factories. However, when they arrived at their destination, they were taken to comfort stations instead. These Korean "women" were taken from ages young as 14. They were given Japanese uniforms and Japanese names.

The Life of a Comfort Women:

In the account of Oh Omok, who was a Korean comfort woman, she explains that she was taken at the age of 16, she and her fellow Korean captives had their hair cut, and during the day they would cook and do laundry. But at night they would be instructed to "service" the soldiers, which could be up to six men a day. She recalled that if she displeased the men in the slightest they would beat her. The Korean comfort women of Oh's station lived in atrocious conditions, some fell pregnant, became infertile from the sexual trauma/sexually transmitted diseases contracted in the Comfort Station, and many even died while in captivity.



The trials of the comfort women did not end after the surrender of Japan. Many women died from the effects of their abuse or from a variety of diseases by the end of the war, and even more were either executed at the hands of the Japanese or committed suicide instead of facing a lifetime of shame at home. The few women who did survive and choose to return to their homes were rejected and abused because they embodied the Korean perception of failure to accomplish the foundational responsibility of protecting womankind. This Confucian principle of unconditional chastity for women was originally designed to sustain and engender safety in society, but even after World War II and the horrors that the comfort women suffered at the hands of the Japanese military, they still had much to endure.

Shortly after the Korean peninsula plunged headfirst into the Korean War, the South Korean military developed their own secret system of sexual slavery, using native Korean women as their slaves. When seen side-by-side with the Japanese utilization of comfort women, the Korean "special comfort unit" receives very little attention, but was atrocious nonetheless. The intentional abuse of their own people is a sad development in the history of human rights for the people of Korea, when the end of the war should have also meant the end of systematic sexual abuse of Korean women.

In the 1990s, after decades of silence, survivors of the Japanese military sexual slavery began to share their stories. The surviving victims united and began to find healing through seeking justice for their horrific past. On January 8, 1992 survivors joined together outside of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, which was the beginning of the 'Wednesday Demonstrations.' This event is sponsored by the 'Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.' The trauma experienced by these women is not something that can be undone or forgotten. As the testimonies of the surviving Comfort Women have illustrated, the trauma is multifaceted and individual, but it is evident that many of these wounds have never healed. On August 4, 1993 the Japanese Government released the Kono Statement, which was a landmark statement from Japan that confirmed their involvement and that "The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations." This was the first time that the Japanese government had acknowledged their participation in the war crimes of the Comfort Women. In 1994 the Japanese government established the Asian Women's Fund, which distributed compensation to Comfort Women with a signed apology from the prime minister of the time. However, this was not sufficient for the victims as they felt a state redress was necessary. Yoon Mee-hyang, a representative from the NGO behind the Wednesday Demonstrations stated "This is a crime that was institutionalized by a country, they forced women into sexual slavery over a long period of time. They need to adopt a resolution at the official level and we need to see legal reparations."

For over twenty years the Wednesday Demonstrations have consistently been held outside of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul and in December of 2011 the NGO sponsoring the demonstration reached their 1000th rally for an official Japanese apology. Despite their efforts, Japan has yet to apologize. The movements have gained international attention and the UN Human Rights Committee has also urged Japan to take concrete measures to address the issue. In 2014 the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay expressed her regret that Japan has not provided effective redress for the war crimes and sexual slavery. She also emphasized that the issue of comfort women in "not relegated to history, but continues to impede violations of victims' human rights. As long as Japan continues to deny their forced sexual slavery of Korean women, they are detracting from the efforts made in human/women rights. Many of the comfort women have passed away, and it is imperative that Japan officially apologizes and offers a state redress before it is too late.

