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The Issue of Comfort Women as an Example of Gender Inequality in Japan

It has been more than 70 years since World War II, yet some issues have not been resolved between Japan and countries they colonized. Relations between Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and other Asian states are heavily influenced by past wars, conquests and colonialism. A large part of the discussion concerns territorial disputes, but there is one issue which is linked to gender equality – the wartime sex slaves called comfort women who, for a long time, were described as just wartime prostitutes.

Who are comfort women? Some of them are still alive. Comfort women were women and girls who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army in military “comfort stations” throughout the Pacific region in territories occupied before and during World War II. “Comfort women” is the euphemistic term used to describe tens of thousands of girls and women from Korea, China and other Asian countries who were forced into farm labour and sexual servitude for Japanese combat or occupation troops before and during World War II.

The comfort women system was the largest sex trafficking system of the twentieth century. Estimates of the number of comfort women ranges from 50,000 to 300,000. In Chinese reports the number of exploited women exceeds 400,000 – most have already died. Today we also know that gay people were also forced to serve in comfort stations.

It is said that 25–30% of them survived, most of them with post-traumatic stress like survivors of the Holocaust and those who have been physically abused. Most of the survivors had their reproductive system destroyed through unsafe abortions, rapes and torture. Many of them committed suicide before or after returning home, where they found no consolation. Instead they were discriminated against as people who had brought shame on their family. Licensed prostitution was so common in Japan, that nobody believed they had been forced to “comfort” soldiers. Some of them told no one knew what had happened to them. They said later that they felt ashamed, afraid and isolated. But in the

1990s, when a former comfort woman broke a half-century of silence, many of them realized that they had not been alone. They could register with the government and visit the base where they had been held.

The issue was not known to the general public, as after the war the Imperial Army destroyed all the evidence of the comfort women system by burning down the stations and killing the women who didn't manage to escape.

Why were comfort stations organized? During the Asian war of 1932–1945 women were forced to “comfort” Imperial Army soldiers at comfort stations. Soldiers were divided into ranks – each soldier had 20 minutes of sex. Comfort women were called a gift from the Emperor to the army. Paradoxically they were supposed to prevent soldiers from raping civilians, to prevent a venereal epidemic among the soldiers, as well as to boost the morale of the army. C. Sarah Soh, a professor at the University of San Francisco, says that they were a continuation of a Japanese tradition and a lesson taken after the Nanking massacre, where the Imperial Army brutally raped and killed civilians, including women and children¹.

The first comfort station that can be confirmed by various documents was built in Shanghai in 1932. The system spread with Japanese wartime operations, and many women from Japanese colonies and occupied territories suffered brutal treatment by the Japanese Imperial Military.

Soldiers went to comfort stations straight from the front line, dirty. Acts were brutal and the refusal of sex was punished. Women had to ‘treat’ 25–100 soldiers per day, depending on the need. They were stationed in small barracks and endured poor conditions and were often starving. Very often women were transported to another military point. All women were registered, checked by a medical doctor, but this didn't prevent them from getting sexually transmitted diseases. They had to serve the infected. They were often raped by the doctors who were supposed to take care of them. They were often crying and begging to be rescued.

Today these women would be described as victims of sex trafficking. Human trafficking is a serious crime under international treaties and national legislation, including that of Japan. The stories of how particular women were forced into prostitution vary depending on the class, race and status of the woman. Korean, Filipino, Chinese were considered a worse class, so they were cheaper. Some Western women, such as Dutch or Australian, were also kidnapped and forced into comfort stations to serve the generals. The typical procedure was to kidnap young women from the market or recruit them to work in silk factories or as nurses in hospitals. The Imperial Army also used similar techniques to recruit kamikaze pilots – they targeted poor and uneducated families, promising that they would provide the child with food and a place to stay so that they could serve the Emperor and his army.

But the individual stories of survivors show another side of recruitment – for example, a great deal of Korean women were sold by their parents to Korean businessmen who owned

¹ C.S. Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 17–23.

and operated comfort stations. A lot of women escaped home in order to save money for their education, because before the war it was not common that girls were sent to school. This phenomenon continued after the Second World War. In Japan and Korea there were brothels catering to American soldiers, until the Americans made prostitution illegal².

In December 2015 South Korea and Japan signed a deal which was supposed to end the problem. However, some conservative historians and politicians, including members of the governing LDP party, still question the involvement of the Japanese authorities in the system. The deal reached between Seoul and Tokyo in 2015 to resolve the wartime sex slavery issue was declared “invalid” by the head of the Korean National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs Committee in October 2016. The surviving former comfort women, along with their supporters, protested against the agreement as it failed to mention Japan’s legal responsibility for running military brothels.

So, as long as the deal between the Japanese and Korean governments is not peacefully resolved, the comfort women issue still remains. The critical dialogue takes place between Japan and South Korea because the majority of comfort women were Koreans, but there were also Taiwanese, Filipino, Indonesian, Chinese, even Dutch, Australian and Japanese comfort women. In Indonesia, for example, the survivors are not even recognized by their own government.

Why has it taken so long for Japan to finally acknowledge the human rights and dignity of the comfort women and admit that they forced them into prostitution during the war? There are various political explanations, but it is more interesting to approach this issue from the gender studies perspective. The question is why did it take more than a half century for Japan to attempt to resolve the issue of comfort women?

The answer is connected with Japanese history and the low status of Japanese women. The same is true for Korea, despite the fact that the former president of South Korea was a woman, which is very rare for Asia as continent.

In the Global Gender Gap Report 2016, a yearly update of gender statistics published by the World Economic Forum, Japan is shown to be one of the countries with the lowest level of gender equality in the developed world and below that of developing countries such Tajikistan and Indonesia, coming in 111 out of 144 assessed countries in 2016. South Korea is not any better, as it is in 116th position. The report analyzes women’s economic participation, education, political participation, and health³.

The Global Gender Gap Report notes that the percentage of female lawmakers in Japan remains one of the lowest in any country – and this has been proven to be a factor in the low political participation of women in Japan⁴. Data available from the Inter-Parliamentary Union which ranks women’s participation in parliaments from all over the world shows that Korea is more advanced than Japan with a proportion of 17% of women in parliament, while Japan has only 15% of women in the Diet (both chambers). None of these

² M. Kimura, *Unfolding the “Comfort Women” Debates. Modernity, violence, women’s voices*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 4–5.

³ <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/results-and-analysis/>.

⁴ Y. Mikangai, *Woman and Political Institution in Japan*, „Political Science and Politics 6”, No. 2(2001), p. 211–212.

countries has ever exceeded the world average of 23%⁵. It could be one of the reasons why the comfort woman issue is taking so long to resolve – if the average politician in both countries is a man over 60 years old, why would they bother to care about some wartime ‘comfort women’?

It is an interesting question why the South Korean president did not show any interest in the issue – as a woman, she was approached more than once by former comfort women who organized themselves into various groups, demanding recognition of the war crime they were subjected to, and filed lawsuits against the Japanese government.

Japan tried to invade Asia before the world wars. The Japanese colonial empire constituted the overseas colonies established by Imperial Japan in the Western Pacific and East Asia region from 1895. Victories over China and Russia expanded the Japanese sphere of influence, notably in Taiwan and Korea. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed, Japan was occupied by the Americans.

The comfort women system began to be recognized as a serious human right violation and the subject of political debate, particularly in Japan in the 1990s⁶. Kim Hak-sun gave testimony about her experience as a comfort woman and she became the first publicly known Korean comfort woman. Together with two other women, she filed a lawsuit in the Tokyo District Court on December 1991. Shortly after that, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a Japanese historian, reported that he had uncovered Japanese government documents that showed the involvement of the Japanese military in recruiting women and organizing comfort stations.⁷ Before that “discovery” the Japanese government claimed that comfort stations were organized and managed by private business. In 1992 the Japanese government finally admitted that it had had “minor” involvement in the managing and supervising of comfort stations. Scholars and feminist activists established non-governmental organizations aimed at supporting the still living comfort women survivors (many of them were Japanese). Thanks to their work, testimonies were collected and research was done, which has been made available to the public⁸.

It is an interesting fact that when the issue went public, a lot of men who served as soldiers in the Imperial Army said they had no idea that the comfort women were sex trafficked. They thought they were voluntarily paid prostitutes – because all soldiers had to pay for the “comforting”, but most of the women never got any money, or if they did, it was only a small percentage. Some men released their private memoirs from the war times, additionally proving that the system was organized by the military.

The issue was widely discussed at various international fora, including in various United Nations committees. The first discussion took place in 1992 and a special rapporteur was designated to investigate the issue in 1995 in the context of violence against women in armed conflicts. Eventually, the Japanese government presented a plan on war reparations in 1994. A small amount of money was given to a private charity foundation, which was

⁵ <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

⁶ C.S. Soh, *The Comfort Women...*, p. 43–46.

⁷ M. Kimura, *Unfolding the “Comfort Women” Debates...*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4–5.

to be set up as part of this arrangement. This proposal was criticized as insufficient and not a proper way to recognize the state's legal responsibility. The Japanese government decided to subsidize the operational costs and to provide welfare and medical care for the comfort women survivors, but not to finance provisional compensation (atonement money). This caused a lot of conflicts among the former comfort women, some of them accepted the agreement, some of them rejected it. In 1996 the UN special rapporteur submitted a full report on violence against women with an addendum on the comfort women issue – the report confirmed the legal responsibility of the Japanese government and called for compensation for individual comfort women⁹.

Now it is 2017 and the issue is not 100% solved. Only a few surviving comfort women are still alive. Soon they too will be gone and it will be very sad if they do not get any official apology from the Japanese government and a clear signal that the issue has been finally resolved. Why is it taking so long and why is this important? A lot of documents have been found to prove that the Japanese were responsible for the organized crime of sex trafficking, yet some conservative politicians deny this practice.

Looking at the history of Japan, the low status of women was a main cause of the exploitation of women in various spheres of life. For example, a married woman had to take full responsibility for household chores, children, parents, parents-in-law, and be aware of the fact that her husband had concubines called “second wives”. A married woman was devoted to the private sphere of family tasks, while men were having sex outside marriage and it was normal to adopt the concubines' children without the legal wife's consent. Both Korea and Japan are patriarchal, Confucian states with three rules of obedience for women: a woman has to obey her father, after getting married – her husband, and if she is single and her father is gone – her brother.

Licensed prostitution was introduced in Korea by the Japanese in 1876, but some scholars argue that prostitution was present in Japan from the XII century¹⁰. Most of the prostitutes were recruited from second class geisha. Tokugawa Shogunate ordered brothels to be placed in special districts of pleasure called *yukaku*. The first comfort station was established after the Imperial Army entered Shanghai in 1932. The spread of comfort stations in all of Asia was rapid, as the Japanese expanded. The sex industry started to have problems with recruiting Japanese women, so a massive hunt for Koreans or Chinese women started. Also, the Tokyo government decided that the export of Japanese women was bad for the image of the Emperor. The hunt for women started in Japanese colonies – in Taiwan, Korea, China, etc.

During WWII the Japanese used Koreans as a labour force – many women were summoned to labour camps, which were in fact brothels. The issue of the oppression of women in Japan is well entrenched in society where Confucianism is present¹¹. There is no unified category of the oppression of women in Japan, since various social differences such as class and race intersect with gender – for that matter, Japanese comfort women were

⁹ Ibidem, p. 20–21.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 42.

¹¹ N. Takemaru, *Women in the language and society of Japan*, McFarland and Company, 2010, p. 2–26.

treated slightly better than Koreans or Chinese. Sexism and racism are often exploited as military strategy, and the comfort women system can be considered an example of this¹².

Another reason is that in a patriarchal society, men in power re-write history: the history of WWII for the Japanese is a shameful story of defeat and men simply refuse to remember what their part in the defeat was. As M. Foucault said, power constructs history. Men basically refused to hear women's oral stories – the comfort women's story was known to the public – but because there were no available documents proving the involvement of the Japanese military, they chose to ignore the voices of women.

C. Sarah Soh wrote a book entitled *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Post-colonial Memory in Korea and Japan* in which she provocatively disputes the simplistic view that comfort women were victims of a war crime that was solely the fault of Imperial Japan. Instead, she argues that both the Japanese military and Korean patriarchy were at fault. She asserts that because of the patriarchy that dominated Korea at the time, homes were unstable – many girls were not allowed to go to school, they were basically servants to their families, and thus young girls were more likely to leave, a situation which allowed comfort station owners to recruit them into brothels. Additionally, she argues South Korean nationalist politics and the international women's human rights movement have contributed to the incomplete view of the tragedy that still dominates today.

Some comfort women/girls testified they were “hired” or “adopted” or “entrusted” or “sold” to food business operators or land owners, then, while working, they were abducted by the Japanese military or Korean collaborators. The Imperial army used Korean collaborators¹³.

Two facts are unquestionable. Prostitution was aimed at civilians and it was run commercially and privately. The comfort women system was developed for the Imperial Army on the orders of high ranking Japanese officials. The commonalities between prostitution and the comfort women system are obvious. These include compulsory VD examination of women, and the use of women's bodies and sexuality to enhance masculinity and national strength. Specialists such as Kimura or Soh underline that, as the comfort women system was introduced mainly in colonies and occupied territories, the exploitation that women experienced was not only sexual but also racial or was based on ethnicity. As comfort women had to serve military personnel during armed conflicts, they were more likely to suffer various forms of violence than licensed prostitutes.¹⁴ Yuki Tanaka stresses that,

the ‘comfort women’ system can be distinguished from other examples [of sexual violence during wartime] due to its extensiveness, forcefulness and severity in five areas. First, its geographical spread, covering the entire Asia-Pacific region, including the distance that women were forced to travel; second, the scale of the victimization of women; third, the ethnic diversity of the women who became the victims; fourth, the intensity

¹² K.L. Barry, *Prostitution of Sexuality*, NYU, 1995, p. 130–131.

¹³ C.S. Soh, *The Comfort Women...*, p. 207–230.

¹⁴ Y. Yeong-ae Yamashita, *Nationalism and Gender in the Comfort Women Issue*, “Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies”, No. 3(2009), p. 208–219.

of sexual violence and the length of the victimization; and last, the direct involvement of the military and the government.¹⁵

The Japanese military used women from different countries and ethnic groups in the colonies and occupied territories. Specific political, cultural circumstances or organizational forms also played a crucial role in the whole business. This includes, for example, the organization of leisure time during war. The Japanese work ethic did not allow much free time for soldiers. They could not take holidays like the rest of the occupying forces. By the end of the war over 40% of adult men between 17 and 45 years old with Japanese citizenship had been mobilized. The only way to sustain the spirit of an aggressive soldier and a submissive imperial servant, it was thought, was to permit soldiers to use comfort stations.¹⁶ The comfort women system is a particular example of intersectional exploitation and oppression based on gender, class, race, colonialism, militarism, Japanese imperialism and capitalism.¹⁷ As Kimura has noted, “Imperial masculinity was developed by rape and sexual activities in comfort stations, while soldiers bonded with each other as imperial subjects – military hierarchy was maintained and sustained by sexual access”.¹⁸

Today survivors just want a clear apology from the highest possible ranked Japanese official, the inclusion of historical facts in textbooks, and reparations. Something has already been done, but it is, so far, insufficient.

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¹⁵ M. Kimura, *Unfolding the “Comfort Women” Debates...*, p. 101, compare with Y. Tanaka, *Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during WWII and US Occupation*, Routledge, 2008, p. 95–96.

¹⁶ Y. Yeong-ae Yamashita, *Nationalism...*, p. 113.

¹⁷ C.S. Soh, *The Comfort Women...*, p. 235.

¹⁸ M. Kimura, *Unfolding the “Comfort Women” Debates...*, p. 102.

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