

The Japanese post-WWII debate about the Military Comfort Women System

**Research question; *To what extent has Japan acknowledged and apologized to the
Korean Military Comfort Women?***

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Introduction

Alongside the Japanese occupation of Asian countries, starting in 1931 until the end of WWII in 1945, the Japanese government established several Comfort Women stations. Forcing women all over Asia to work as sexual slaves, the majority being from Korea, affected thousands of women's lives. This essay will discuss *to what extent has Japan acknowledged and apologized to the Korean Military Comfort Women?*, mainly focusing on the moral, economic and legal aspects. Firstly this essay will provide background information and an explanation of the issue. The later part will be a discussion and analysis of the ongoing debate, starting with the first statements and accusations in 1991.

Explanation of the term “Comfort women”

In this work the term “Comfort women” will be used. The term comes from the Japanese words “jūgun ianfu” which means comfort women, however, some suggest the word “comfort” implies that the women consensually went through with these actions which could therefore misrepresent the events taking place. Comfort women however, is the most known and acceptable term, thus it will be used throughout the essay.

Background

The longstanding tension between Korea and Japan became prevalent through the annexation by the Japanese in 1910-45, a period of oppression as the Japanese tried to dismantle Korean culture. The first military comfort women system was established in 1931 in Shanghai and

until the end of WWII in 1945 these establishments would continue to be installed throughout Japan and other nations.¹ The official reasons according to for creating these stations are:

1. To prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)²
2. Prevent outbreak of rape in foreign areas³
3. To satisfy the soldiers.⁴

Many soldiers were visiting brothels from different areas, which often led to a spread of STDs, thus the military and Foreign Ministry desired a more controlled area where the soldiers could have regular medical attention. It was also to prevent the outbreak of rape and looting.⁵

From 1931 to 1945, there was an estimate of 200 000 comfort women, the majority from Korea.⁶ The women were taken using various methods depending on the circumstances, mainly abducted or deceived. Comfort women were taken into stations and would live there for a couple of weeks, months or years. After WWII Japan's military surrendered and returned to Japan. Some of the comfort women also went to Japan while others stayed in the country they were abducted to, and a few were sent back to their country with the help of the U.S and Japanese Military. Many of the women suffered from PTSD, diseases, injuries, as well as social discrimination from family members or other social groups.⁷ This has since been a sensitive issue and a long ongoing debate about whether Japan has sincerely and sufficiently apologized or not.

¹ Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. p.43

² STD - Sexual Transmitted Diseases

³ Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. p.47-49

⁴ [Ibid] p.72-73

⁵ [Ibid] p.72

⁶ Lynch, A.. "Comfort women." *Encyclopedia Britannica*

⁷ Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* p.192-197

Early accusations

In the 1980s a few former comfort women gathered and began sharing their stories. In 1987 women began discussing the events publicly, as South Korea became a newly liberated country.⁸ In 1990 Yun Chung-OK published an article about comfort women which gained a lot of attention, so much so that a government representative in Japan published a response. The statement declared that comfort women were controlled by civilians not the military directly and it's inherently impossible to create an inquiry.⁹ Women's organizations in Korea issued another statement in which Kim Hak-Sun came out, being the first victim who spoke out publicly about her experience. Both Japan and South Korea were shocked by the statement and made the Korean public furious and more private organizations spoke up. As this was receiving national attention, the Japanese government decided to do an inquiry, which led to more evidence and documents being disclosed to the public. The issue of comfort women gained more international attention during the 1990s and the South Korean government became more involved with the issue as well. The Japanese along with South and North Korea's government decided to invite a special rapporteur from the UN who would investigate and settle an agreement between the two nations.

Comfort women's demands

In 1991 Kim Hak-Sun, together with Korean women's organizations and other former comfort women, put forward six demands to the Japanese government as a way to show remorse. These were;

⁸ Blakemore, Erin. "The Brutal History of Japan's 'Comfort Women'"

⁹ Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. p.34

1. “Acknowledge that the comfort women were forcibly taken away
2. issue a public apology
3. conduct an investigation to discover what really happened and disclose the finding
4. construct a monument to commemorate the victims
5. pay compensation to the victims or their surviving heirs; and
6. establish educational programs to raise awareness of the history behind the issue.”¹⁰

After these demands certain parties of the Japanese government acknowledged the Japanese military’s participation in the organization of the comfort women system, and eventually, in 1993 released a new statement, referred to as the Kono statement¹¹. The Japanese government now stated that the Japanese military was indeed directly or indirectly involved.¹²

The Japanese and Korean organizations

Several organizations that focused on the issue of comfort women were established during the 1990s. The Asian Peace and Friendship Foundation for Women (AWF) was established in 1994 in an attempt to show redemption and help the former comfort women, the main aims being, donations from the Japanese society, welfare projects, collecting historical documents and to support contemporary issues of violence against women.¹³ Closely after in 1996 the fund had received over 400 million yen in donations which would be distributed to the survivors if they were to accept the apology. The South Korean government was more than accepting and welcoming of this as a sincere effort of apology, however, former comfort women and public were divided, when only some of them accept the money.¹⁴ Other organizations such as The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual

¹⁰ Asian Women's fund. "How Did the Comfort Women Issue Come to Light?"

¹¹The Kono statement which for the first time acknowledged the involvement of the Japanese military regarding comfort women. This statement would be continually referred to years after with other Japanese prime ministers as a way to acknowledge responsibility.

¹² Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. p.36-37

¹³ Asian Women's Fund. "Establishment of the AW Fund, and the Basic Nature of Its Projects.

¹⁴ [Ibid]

Slavery by Japan was established in 1990 and has been helping comfort women both on a national and international level. The main goal of this has been to argue against Japan, making them recognize both legal and moral responsibilities and bringing these issues to human rights organizations such as the UN. They created several projects such as demonstrations, welfare activities, education centres and more.¹⁵

UN Report

As previously mentioned, the UN became involved with the issue as well, in 1995 when South Korea's and the Japanese government invited them to investigate the matter in hopes for solving this issue. The special rapporteur gathered information and discussed with the Korean and Japanese government but also with certain women's organizations and former comfort women. With the collected information, they published a report in 1996, with certain demands for the Japanese government. The UN report can be divided into three main parts; moral responsibility, economic compensation and legal responsibility.

Moral responsibility

The special rapporteur announced that there has been an attempt at taking moral responsibility before with the publishing of several letters from former prime ministers. There was also an appreciation for the Asian Peace and Friendship Fund (APFF) which was established as a way to take moral responsibility. Along with this the South Korean government did not demand much from Japan because in 1965 Japan and South Korea had already agreed on settlements with the bilateral agreement in regards to war reparations,

¹⁵ Wikipedia. "The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

including compensation for the comfort women.¹⁶ The special rapporteur however questioned the agreement and considering that comfort women's demands were yet to be met, further moral responsibility needs to be taken.

Economic Compensation

The Japanese government argues that they have paid out a total of 500 million US\$ to the South Korean government under the bilateral agreement with South Korea. Thus they are not legally entitled to any more compensation, and not to any individual victims as well.¹⁷ As mentioned previously, the government also established the AWF in which all the donations goes to former comfort women as another economic compensation. The South Korean government agrees with this and does not necessarily ask for further compensation, however, the comfort women disagree. Many instead saw this as a ploy or an attempt by the government to avoid taking legal responsibility because the money was from the people, not the government. Therefore wanting nothing to do with AWF.¹⁸ The special rapporteur demands that the Japanese government give further economic compensation to the victims and act according to their wishes because the 500 million US\$ was paid to the government for war reparations, not for the victims.¹⁹

Legal responsibility

While the government of Japan does take moral responsibility, they do not take any legal liability. The main argument is that there were no international or humanitarian laws at the time concerning this case, and therefore they did not break any laws, and if there were any, it

¹⁶ United Nations. "UN Commission on Human Rights - Report on Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

¹⁷ [Ibid]

¹⁸ [Ibid]

¹⁹ [Ibid]

had already been settled by the San Francisco Peace Treaty²⁰, and other bilateral peace treaties and international agreements.²¹ The Special Rapporteur states that the San Francisco Peace Treaty and other treaties alike are not valid as they do not concern the events of sexual slavery in particular.²² Thus the legal responsibility regarding comfort women still lingers. There are several international laws and humanitarian laws that were broken, most prominently the forceful recruitment of women, sexually assaulting women and murdering them. The military comfort women system were also indeed systemically planned and could arguably be considered a form of genocide, according to Dr. Jong Nam Yong²³. In retrospect, it is clear that Japan did indeed break several laws, and if they can take moral responsibility for the events, then taking legal responsibility should be evident as well.

The Japanese response to the demands

The government

The Japanese government and their approach to this issue has drastically varied during the years. At first in 1990 as previously mentioned they denied the military involvement and published a statement. Soon after an inquiry was made in 1993 the government released the Kono statement which acknowledged the involvement. In 1994 the government also established AWF as a way to further compensate and take on moral responsibility for the issue.²⁴ In 1995 it was argued that the issue was “settled completely” as they had been given financial compensation and taken moral responsibility. In 2007 the former prime minister Shinzo Abe brought up the issue again and denied any form of military involvement with

²⁰ The San Francisco treaty was created after WWII in an attempt to restore the relations between Japan and the Allied Powers.

²¹ United Nations. "UN Commission on Human Rights - Report on Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

²² [Ibid]

²³ [Ibid]

²⁴ Asian Women's fund. "How Did the Comfort Women Issue Come to Light?"

comfort women, arguing that there is no clear evidence that the women were coerced. Thus going against the previous statement from the Japanese government and denying both legal and moral responsibility.²⁵ In the 1990s Japan had agreed and often mentioned in their apologies that they will be teaching about comfort women in their history courses. Until 2005 that was the case, however, as nationalistic ideas grew, people thought it would inherently ruin their national pride teaching it in school.²⁶ From 2005 forward, the word “comfort women” nor the description of comfort women would no longer be used in any history textbook taught in schools. While many Japanese no longer cared much for the issue or grew tired of it, this decision infuriated both comfort women and women’s organizations.²⁷

The public

In 1997 a Japanese television network created a survey about the public’s reaction to the comfort women issue whereas around half of them thought the government has yet to make a sufficient apology, while the other half thinks the government has apologized too much or responded properly.²⁸ Many conservative Japanese saw the comfort women system as a “necessary evil” and as a form of “legal prostitution” in the war times, and when documents were first released about comfort women in 1993 there was a strong wave of opposition for giving compensations to former comfort women.²⁹ They also pointed out that everyone had suffered during the war, and the comfort women are in it for economic gain. Even when AWF was first established many, particularly from the business sector was hesitant to donate because it wasn’t only Japan that had incidents like these as forms of slavery was common among colonial powers.³⁰ There was also another survey conducted in 1998-1999 amongst

²⁵ Hayashi, Hirofumi. "Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military "Comfort Women" System and Its Perception in History." p.124

²⁶ [Ibid] p.128

²⁷ [Ibid] p.128

²⁸ Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. p.27

²⁹ Soh, C. Sarah. "Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women". p.215

³⁰ [Ibid] p.221-222 .

Japanese military war veterans where two thirds thought comfort women were paid for their services and thus Japan does not need to apologize or compensate.

South Korea's and international reactions and response

Government

In 1993 the former president Kim Young-Sam stated that the Japanese government has already compensated enough and Korea will not ask for further compensation.³¹ During and after the UN report South Korea continued to show support for the Japanese government to a certain extent when they supported the AWF as they saw it as a “sincere effort by the Government of Japan to accommodate the wishes of the Republic of Korea and the victims”³². The government of South Korea also acknowledged the hardship of determining whether or not Japan had any legal obligations to crimes committed over 50 years ago.³³ Although the South Korean government acknowledged Japan's efforts they continued to support the victims and the various organizations when they argued for their rights and demands. They also wish for a more sincere apology to all the victims and disclosure of all the documents and other findings related to this issue.³⁴ The government has continued to accept the apologies and statements from Japan, accepting the compensation money and taking down the comfort women statues³⁵ as they were a concern to Japan.³⁶

³¹ United Nations. "UN Commission on Human Rights - Report on Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

³² [Ibid]

³³ [Ibid]

³⁴ [Ibid]

³⁵ The Statue of Peace was in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul in 2011 as a memorial for comfort women.

³⁶ "Statue of Peace." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

Organizational groups & comfort women

Since the issue was first brought to attention in 1990 by Yun Chung-OK former comfort women have been fighting to disclose their truth and be met with their demands. Along with these comfort women the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan organization has been a huge part of this process, organizing weekly demonstrations on wednesday³⁷ since 1992.³⁸ These organizations do not think Japan has sincerely apologized nor met their demands since the topic first came about, and thus keeps on striving to get these demands acknowledged. The AWF was seen as a way to dismiss their compensation, as the money gathered for the organizations are from civilians, not the government.³⁹ This is later on also expressed by other comfort women, such as Kim Hak-Sun in 1997 who thinks the meaning of the economic compensation is not the want for money but rather as a way for the government to apologize, not the people.⁴⁰ Which as previously stated, led to a division amongst the comfort women because some accepted the money. Other former comfort women such as Kim Bok-Dong heavily disagree with how the government of South Korea has handled the issue as well. The government and former president Park Geun-Hye settled for an agreement with Japan without considering the victims, for example with removing the comfort women statue, and as she mentioned “What kind of bastards would reach such a one-sided deal? . . . I want a formal apology. They should say, ‘What we did was completely wrong, and we’ll correct our history textbooks’ And say to us, ‘We sincerely apologize. . . ’”⁴¹. In retrospect many comfort women and the public do not approve

³⁷ Officially referred as “ Wednesday Demonstration demanding Japan to redress the Comfort Women problems”

³⁸ The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. website

³⁹ United Nations. "UN Commission on Human Rights - Report on Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

⁴⁰ Newstapa. "[ENG SUB] MY wish is...(Newstapa)." *YouTube* 11:01-11:20

⁴¹ Asian Boss. "Life As A “Comfort Woman”: Story of Kim Bok-Dong | STAY CURIOUS #9." *YouTube*. 13:35-14:56

nor appreciate the efforts of Japan and demand for more as the demonstrations and statements keep on coming.

International reaction

The first UN report in 1996, it was agreed that on an international level Japan should take more responsibility and nongovernmental organizations should keep pushing the issue. The South Korean government could also bring the issue to the international court of Justice to settle further legal agreements with Japan.⁴² In 2016 another UN meeting was held, whereas they acknowledged how the Japanese response had changed during time. At first denying the history and issue of comfort women but then acknowledging the agreement between Japan and South Korea. An agreement which showed the compensation and responsibility taken regarding the events of comfort women, as well as releasing several statements since 1993 acknowledging the issue.⁴³

Discussion & Conclusion

In order to discuss to what extent Japan has apologized it's important to look at the various perspectives of Japan and the former comfort women but also to consider the moral, economic and legal demands that were put on Japan since 1990 as previously mentioned.

Regarding moral responsibility, Japan did indeed acknowledge and apologize to former comfort women both in the 1990s and during the early 2000s, however, after 2007 the political view has shifted and in many cases Japan now disregards the issue. The Kono

⁴² United Nations. "UN Commission on Human Rights - Report on Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Jan 96)."

⁴³ CCTV Video News Agency. "The Japanese gov't denies issue of comfort women at the UN session. 2:07-3:05

statement that was first released in 1993 from the Japanese government was and always has been a controversial statement within Japan. Yohei Kono, the former president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)⁴⁴ who released the statement was heavily criticized by others in the Japanese government because although there was no clear evidence of coercion regarding comfort women other than testimonies, the Kono statement acknowledged there was. Therefore many in LDP wanted the statement to be withdrawn⁴⁵, or changed, as according to the historian Ikuhiko Hata, “Even if this statement was a political compromise, I believed inserting expressions that seemed to acknowledge forced abduction-which had not been proven-would create breeding ground for future trouble. I tried to persuade Kono and Tanino to reconsider, but I was told there was no time to make those changes.”⁴⁶ With this in mind, strong Japanese conservatives and the continued critique of the Kono Statement became more and more evident within the Japanese politicians and public as people were growing tired of the debate. The former prime minister and president of LDP Shinzo Abe in 2007, who was strongly conservative and a Japanese nationalist, therefore publicly disagreed with the statement.⁴⁷ Despite this, the Japanese government did fund and establish AWF as an attempt to help former comfort women and in one way accept moral liability, and from the 1990s until 2005 it was also a part of the education system. Which needs to be taken into consideration when considering to what extent they have apologized. Although in the perspective of former comfort women and considering the lack of support from the rest of the Japanese government when it comes to the Kono Statement, these actions could be seen as dishonest. The view and actions of Abe and other conservative politicians, according to the historian Sonya Kuki, would also agree that these actions only helped “undermine the value

⁴⁴ Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) - The leading conservative party in Japan since 1955

⁴⁵ Ikuhiko, H. *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*. p.206

⁴⁶ [Ibid] p.200

⁴⁷ Kuki, Sonya. “THE BURDEN OF HISTORY: THE ISSUE OF ‘COMFORT WOMEN’ AND WHAT JAPAN MUST DO TO MOVE FORWARD.” p.6

of previous apologies and gestures of repentance.⁴⁸, stating that the government needs to recognize the issue sincerely if they wish to move forward.⁴⁹ In that sense, yes, Japan has acknowledged moral responsibility to a great extent in 1993 with the Kono statement, along with the AWF and history books, which was also appreciated by the UN, however due to the change in political attitude in Japan, these efforts of apologies and resentment can and is seen as insincere from a comfort women's perspective. Therefore further action needs to be taken.

In addition to moral responsibility, there has been some attempt at an economic compensation several times as well both from the Japanese public and government. However, these economic compensations have either been directly to the South Korean government or rejected by other comfort women. According to the UN, Japan did indeed give money to the South Korean government in war reparations, however, they are for war reparations and not compensation for comfort women directly.⁵⁰ Additionally, Ikuhiko Hata states that Japan has paid over 2 million yen (around 17 000\$) to each former comfort women, and the government funded welfare programs worth of around 3 million yen (around 26 000\$), and while there was donations from the public, the government mainly funded the organization and the compensation money.⁵¹ This compensation money was also received and accepted by some South Korean comfort women. Thus in one sense the government has given economic compensation to former comfort women. However, despite this, a majority of comfort women did not accept it, as mentioned previously, it was seen as a way to avoid legal responsibilities. The Korean organization raised a complaint and asked the AWF to discontinue the donations, and that alternate and more sincere compensation should be made.⁵² Based on the testimonies

⁴⁸ [Ibid] p.6

⁴⁹ [Ibid] p.6

⁵⁰ United Nations. "UN Commission on Human Rights - Report on Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Jan 96).

⁵¹ Ikuhiko, H. *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*. p.249

⁵² Soh, C. Sarah. "Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund for "Comfort Women"p.21

of former comfort women and the UN report, it seems that the issue of economic compensation is not the main priority of comfort women and therefore will not accept the donations from AWF as it would contradict their other personal demands, and they would rather want personal compensation through the government directly.⁵³ Therefore to some extent the Japanese government has given economic compensation to the South Korean government and to the comfort women who accept the donations, however, not to the majority of the women.

When it comes to legal liability there has been no acknowledgement. A large majority of the Japanese government do not think they bear any legal liability, as there's a lack of evidence. Most of the sources regarding comfort women are either from testimonies or military documents from Japan, both of which have been a huge debate about which one is more reliable. Neoliberalist and historian such as Ueno Chizuko argue that written documents are the most reliable evidence for studying history and can therefore dismiss the comfort women's testimonies, and because there is a lack of documentation which state that comfort women were coerced, Japan cannot be held responsible.⁵⁴ However, according to other historians such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki, testimonies can and should be regarded as reliable sources, or to a similar extent as written documents because war documents can easily be fabricated or falsely written as well. Therefore one cannot claim that Japan holds no responsibility because of the lack of written documents. Others, such as Ikuhiko Hata also claim that the majority of women were not coerced but were legal prostitutes earning more money than the Japanese soldiers.⁵⁵ To these arguments however, Yoshimi once again argues that despite if women were coerced or not, “ the fact that the woman consented to be sent to

⁵³ United Nations. "UN Commission on Human Rights - Report on Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Jan 96)."

⁵⁴ Nozaki, Y. *The "Comfort women" Controversy*

⁵⁵ Ikuhiko, H. . *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*. p.316

the front (in this case Burma) does not absolve the military from responsibility for its brutal treatment of her within the comfort women system, leading her to attempt to commit suicide by drowning.”⁵⁶ Therefore the two main arguments of the comfort women debate stems from firstly which source is more reliable and secondly, if there was legal prostitution should Japan still be held legally accountable? This is of great importance, because whether or not Japan has, or should acknowledge and apologize to comfort women on a legal ground. While as mentioned, Japan disagrees, the UN and historians such as Bellows J. Thomas continues to argue that the Japanese government is indeed responsible for not preventing harm on comfort women considering customary laws⁵⁷, but also that individual military soldiers and officers should be held accountable as well.⁵⁸ Considering the Japanese government has not accepted any legal liability throughout the debate, they have to no extent sufficiently apologized to former comfort women regarding violations of humanitarian or international laws.

In conclusion, to answer the question *to what extent has Japan acknowledged and apologized to the Korean Military Comfort Women?* The Japanese government has apologized to some extent regarding economic compensation, and at first moral responsibility as well. However, as the political view shifted in Japan, former apologies or attempts at a sincere apology can be seen disingenuous. The fact that they have taken no legal liability as well shows that Japan has little to no extent sincerely and sufficiently apologized to the Korean military comfort women. Especially considering the personal demands of comfort women have not been met, as the Wednesday demonstrations continue to this day, fighting for their demands to be met.

⁵⁶ Nozaki, Y. *The "Comfort women" Controversy*

⁵⁷ Bellows, Thomas J., and The United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights p.92

⁵⁸ [Ibid] p.87

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