

# Fact Sheet on Japanese Military “Comfort Women”

## Asia-Pacific Journal Feature

Please see the [Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan](#) signed by 187 Japan studies scholars who call on Prime Minister Abe to "act boldly" and support a more honest account of 20th century history.

### Who were the "comfort women"?

"Comfort women" is a historical term referring to women who were forced to provide sexual service to Japanese soldiers at military brothels called "comfort stations" established by the Japanese military in its occupied territories between 1932 and 1945. "Comfort women" were women and girls taken from all over Asia and the Pacific, with Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese, Filipina, and Indonesian women comprising the vast majority. Experts using the best documentation estimate the number of "comfort women" at tens or hundreds of thousands.

### How were "comfort women" recruited?

At the beginning, women were recruited primarily from existing brothels in Japan by offering them a way to repay their debts more quickly. But the concern in the Japanese military over venereal diseases, and the demand for a greater number of women as the Asia-Pacific War expanded, led to the

recruitment of women outside of existing private brothels. In Japan's colonies (Korea and Taiwan), the Japanese government licensed contractors to recruit or procure women under collaboration with local governments and police departments. Women were frequently deceived with a promise of lucrative jobs and were held in debt bondage, unable to leave after realizing the nature of the "work" expected of them. In other areas under Japanese military occupation such as China, the Philippines and Indonesia, the military kidnapped local women or ordered local leaders to provide women for them.

### What were the conditions in which "comfort women" worked?

Women who were held in debt bondage earned a percentage of the fees paid by Japanese soldiers, but their earnings were confiscated for debt repayment and living expenses. They were forced to have sex with many men each day, and very few were allowed to return to their home after their debt was retired. Other women who were forcibly taken to the "comfort stations" were forced into sexual servitude, often without pay.

### How was the Japanese government, including the military, involved?

Some Japanese nationalists claim that "comfort stations" were no different from any other

brothels, which were legal at the time, but there are clear differences. The "comfort stations" were established by the Japanese government, and the women were recruited primarily by contractors licensed by the government. The Japanese government issued a special permit for the women to travel, and transported them on military vehicles and ships. The military built buildings for the "comfort stations" in colonies and occupied areas and arranged for soldiers to visit, even at the war front. The military set many policies, fee structures, and schedules, and provided military doctors to check the women for venereal diseases and treat them periodically.

### **How did the issue surface in the 1990s?**

Following the democratization of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), a Korean former "comfort woman" came forward publicly for the first time in 1991, seeking a formal apology and reparation from the Japanese government. Her action led hundreds of other women in Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere to come forward. The Japanese and international press covered the story. Links to some of the testimonies of the women can be found at the end of this document.

### **What has the Japanese government done since the 1990s?**

At first, the Japanese government evaded responsibility for the human rights violations in the "comfort women" system, blaming private contractors and individual traffickers. But in 1992, historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi discovered documents in the archives of Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies that proved the

direct involvement of the government and the military in the establishment and operation of "comfort stations". In 1993 the government was forced to issue the so-called Kono statement, which acknowledged the imperial Japanese government's role as well as the use of force and deception in the recruitment of "comfort women." Hundreds of similar documents have been discovered since. In 1995, Japan established the Asian Women's Fund, which distributed the Prime Minister's signed letter of apology along with "atonement" money funded through donations from Japanese people. Some victims accepted the atonement money, while others refused it, criticizing it as an attempt to avoid providing formal reparations.

### **What are former "comfort women" seeking?**

There are four main demands made by various groups working on behalf of the former "comfort women": First, an official apology accompanying a Cabinet or Diet (parliament) resolution (rather than something that can be construed as one leader's personal view, such as the Prime Minister's letter); second, formal compensation to the victims of the "comfort women" system; third, lessons on the "comfort women" issue in Japanese classes and textbooks; and finally, investigation of official policies that established and maintained the "comfort women" system.

### **What is the dispute about?**

There are factual as well as legal and political disagreements over the issue of "comfort women." The factual disputes involve the actual number of "comfort women" and their ethnic

backgrounds, and the extent to which the Japanese military was directly involved in the deceptive or forceful recruitment of the women, their transportation overseas, and their fate in the comfort stations. In the absence of any official government figures, estimates of the total number of "comfort women" are based on the aggregation of other estimates (e.g. reports by individual women and soldiers, the total number of Japanese soldiers, the ratio of "comfort women" to soldiers, how long each "comfort woman" was held). This makes it difficult to come to a consensus. Since private individuals often procured women, and there is no official documentation of direct orders to kidnap them, some claim that the Japanese government and military are not responsible for the coercion. Legal and political questions include whether Japan has sufficiently accepted responsibility for the atrocity with the establishment of Asian Women's Fund, and whether Japan's legal obligations to compensate the victims have been dissolved by the 1951 Treaty of Peace between Japan and the Allied Powers or by bilateral treaties between Japan and its neighbors (Republic of China in 1952, Republic of Korea in 1965, and People's Republic of China in 1972 and 1978). Some Japanese nationalists, including members of the Parliament, reject any wrongdoing or culpability on the part of their government or military.

### **What has the international community said about the issue?**

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Economic and Social Council, Commission on the Status of Women, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and Committee Against Torture have issued reports and advisories urging Japan to accept some or all of the victims' demands. Legislatures in the United States

(House of Representatives), the Netherlands, Canada, European Union, South Korea, and Taiwan have passed similar resolutions, as did the State of California, the New York Senate, and other legislative bodies around the world.

### **Online Resources**

[Fight For Justice](#)

[Women's Active Museum on War and Peace](#)

[e-Museum for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery](#)

[Can you hear us? The Untold Narratives of Comfort Women](#)

[Testimonies of the Victims \(Asian Women's Fund\)](#)

[Debunking the Japanese "Comfort Women" Denier Talking Points](#)

### **Books**

Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women* (2002).

Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women* (2001).

Maria Rosa Henson, *Comfort Women: A Filipina's Story of Prostitution and Slavery under the Japanese Military* (1999).

Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (1999)

Jan Ruff-O'Herne, *Fifty Years of Silence: The Extraordinary Memoir of a War Rape Survivor* (2008).

C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (2009).

### Statements, Reports and Resolutions

Japan: Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the result of the study on the issue of "comfort women" (1993)

Japan: Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi

Murayama "On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end" (1995)

United Nations: Report of the Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy on violence against women, its causes and consequences

United Nations: Report of the Special Rapporteur Gay J. McDougall on systematic rape, sexual slavery and slavery-like practices during armed conflict

Resolutions adopted by legislatures of the United States, the Netherlands, Canada, European Union, Republic of Korea, and Taiwan, as well as various reports by United Nations committees are compiled [here](#):

Statement of the Historical Science Society of Japan protesting "comfort women" revisionism (Japanese)

Standing with Historians of Japan: A statement of American Historians