

The Women's Human Rights Institute and the "Comfort Women" Movement

The Women's Human Rights Institute is an international organization that engages in education, advocacy and research to support transnational women's movements and to promote the use of women's human rights mechanisms to support feminist activism.

The WHRI team has a long association with the movements seeking justice for the survivors of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during the Asia Pacific War. Angela Lytle and Heather Evans both lived in South Korea, where they were involved with survivors and their support organizations. In Canada, they have worked with local educational organizations to raise awareness about sexualized violence in war. They have acted as associate campaigners with the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, and have participated in many advocacy and activist campaigns. They served as researchers and consultants for Tiffany Hsiung's 2016 film on this issue, "The Apology." This is a crucial time for renewed activism on this issue, both due to recent regressive steps by the Japanese government and due to the fact that the survivors, now in their 80s and 90s, are rapidly passing away. The following information gives background about the issue and discusses urgent activism required in the face of renewed efforts to thwart survivors' access to justice. Justice for "the grandmothers," as they have come to be known, is an important step towards recognition of colonial and military sexualized violence as an endemic human rights violation that must be addressed.

Historical Background: Who are the "comfort women?"

Between the years of 1932 and 1945, during what historians now term the Asia-Pacific War, an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 women and girls were mobilized through forced recruitment, kidnapping, false offers of employment and sale to service Japanese soldiers in brothels euphemistically called "comfort stations." The women and girls taken into this system of military sexual slavery ranged in age from 11 to 33 years old, and came from established Japanese colonies such as Korea and Taiwan, as well as from newly invaded or occupied territories such as China, Singapore, Saipan, Guam, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Borneo, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, and the Netherlands (Dutch East Indies). Some of the victims were enslaved locally, while others were taken to "comfort stations" in foreign lands for a time period ranging from a few weeks to four years. During their period as "comfort women," the victims were raped by as many as 30 soldiers per day, and subjected to psychological abuse, beatings, torture, involuntary surgeries, forced abortions, and more. Only an estimated one-third of those who entered the "comfort stations" survived.

The Movement and Its Demand for Apology and Reparations in Accordance with International Human Rights Law

When the war ended, their ordeal was far from over. Many of those who survived found themselves abandoned far from home, with profound physical and psychological trauma. Some made their way home, only to be rejected by family or community, or forced to hide what had

happened. A combination of factors, including survivors' marginality from power as racialized, colonized women; prevailing gender notions; the complex geopolitical context, and the fact that rape and sexual slavery were not treated as war crimes in the post-war tribunals left the issue outside of public discourse for decades, with no support in place to help survivors rebuild their lives.

This shifted in the early 1990s, when political changes and the strength of international women's human rights organizing created new openings to bring the issue forward domestically, regionally, and internationally. In 1991, Korean survivor Kim Hak Soon became the first person to testify on television about her experience as a "comfort woman." Other survivors from both within Korea and without began to come forward, and movements for justice developed that continue to this day. Beginning in January of 1992, survivors in South Korea began to protest in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, a weekly protest that still continues to this day and has become a hallmark of the movements. Since then, decades of domestic, regional and international activism has ensued, including a series of landmark reports and statements from independent human rights experts within the United Nations calling for Japan to adhere to international human rights norms on the right to a remedy and reparation in relation to the "comfort women" survivors.

The core demands of the survivors to the Japanese government have been articulated using this human rights framework. The 'seven demands' of the weekly Wednesday demonstrations, which echo the core principles of the right to a remedy and reparation according to human rights standards, include:

1. Acknowledge the war crimes
2. Reveal the truth in its entirety about systemic military sexual slavery
3. Make an official apology
4. Make legal reparations
5. Punish those responsible
6. Accurately record the history in textbooks
7. Erect memorials for the victims and establish a history museum

Japanese Government Responses

The Japanese government has never taken full, official responsibility for the "comfort women" system, nor has it provided due redress to the survivors in accordance with international human rights law. Responses by government officials have ranged from outright denials of the existence of the "comfort women" system to expressions of regret for the suffering of the victims that evade acknowledgement of Imperial Japan's coordinating role in the military sexual slavery system. Many of the survivors and their supporters have rejected the statements or supposed "apologies" because they fail to adhere to the demands listed in the previous section and to abide by internal law. In addition, the whitewashing of the issue in educational textbooks has been an official policy since the 1950s, and there is significant social and political pressure on those within Japan who acknowledge and support the survivors' claims. This has resulted in most of the Japanese public having little to no knowledge of this aspect of the country's wartime past.

International Government and UN Responses

As a result of transnational civil society activism, many national governments and regional governance bodies have issued official resolutions and statements in support of the survivors, including Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, the European Union, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and some municipalities in Japan. In addition, there have been reports published within the United Nations based on research conducted by Special Rapporteurs as well as binding recommendations made by human rights treaty bodies to which Japan is a State Party. The extensive and ongoing activism of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, in particular, has kept this issue on the human rights agenda at the UN despite the Japanese government's ongoing efforts to diminish or silence the issue. The following human rights treaty bodies and/or special procedures have commented on this issue, urging Japan to make an official apology:

CEDAW: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

CERD: Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

CESCR: Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

CCPR: Human Rights Committee on the Intl Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

UPR: Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council

CAT: Committee Against Torture

Special Rapporteur on violence against women

Special Rapporteur on systematic rape, sexual slavery and slavery-like practices

Special Rapporteur on racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia

UN Working Group on discrimination against women in law and practice

You can download here: [Recommendations by UN Human Rights Bodies on CW Issue Korean Council](#)

ROK-Japan Bilateral Agreement

The Recent "Agreement" and the Survivors' Responses

Most recently, on December 28, 2015, the South Korean and Japanese governments entered into a bilateral agreement claimed to "finally and irreversibly" solve the "comfort women" issue. The agreement includes the establishment of a foundation in South Korea to support survivors with funds from the Japanese government, but these funds are not official reparations. Other provisions of the agreement include South Korea's promise to negotiate for the removal of a memorial statue erected on the site of the weekly protests in Seoul, outside the Japanese embassy, and both nations agree to refrain from further criticism of each other at the UN or in other international spheres. The agreement only applies to South Korea, and does not include

any of the other affected countries.

Survivor-activists and their support organizations found the agreement a grave affront. The survivors were not consulted during the process of developing the agreement, and the many recommendations given to the Japanese government on how to provide remedy and reparation for these war crimes from UN human rights bodies were flagrantly ignored.

International Responses to the “Agreement”

While the President of the United States and the United Nations Secretary-General, as well as other world leaders, were quick to praise Japan and South Korea for reaching an “historic agreement,” human rights experts and international women’s human rights defenders have pointed out the many flaws in the agreement. Praise for the agreement reflects the geopolitical interests of world powers to fortify the Japan-US-ROK relationship rather than seeking to build true reconciliation with survivors, who were not consulted. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, as well as many “comfort women” survivors in South Korea, have spoken out against the agreement and both governments.

In the words of one survivor, ““Do you think we’ve been struggling like this for such a long time out of greed for that 1 Billion Won?” asks Kim Bokdong, a former “comfort woman” who was forced into sexual slavery at the age of 15. “What we are demanding is legal reparation. It means that Japan must admit that it committed crimes as a state.”

WHRI-Korean Council Advocacy

Accordingly, the WHRI joined the Korean Council in advocacy efforts to bring attention to the flaws of this agreement by submitting a joint communication to the UN Working Group on discrimination against women (WGDRAW), requesting a public statement calling for the Japanese and South Korean governments to revisit the agreement from a human rights framework. The communication highlighted our grave concern that both governments completely ignored survivors, and sidestepped their obligations under international human rights treaties to take into account the many recommendations issued by human rights bodies. The agreement to seek removal of the memorial statue is gravely disrespectful to survivors, and the agreement can also be read as allowing for a “gag order” on further activism on the issue. (Download the full text of the agreement [here](#)).

In March 2016, the WGDRAW, together with the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence and the Special Rapporteur on Torture, issued a statement calling the contents of the agreement into question:

“We believe the agreement between Japan and South Korea falls short of meeting the demands of survivors,” said the independent experts on discrimination against women, transitional justice and torture. “An unequivocal official apology recognizing the full responsibility of the then Japanese Government and military, as well as adequate reparations, would protect and uphold the victims’ right to truth, justice and reparation.”

On the same day this statement was released, “comfort woman” survivor Gil Won Ok and Korean Council Director Meehyang Yoon travelled to New York to meet UN Secretary General

Ban Ki Moon to express their views on the agreement. After the meeting, the Secretary-General expressed sympathy for the position of survivors and supporters, and then clarified his praise of the agreement, emphasizing that the ROK-Japan agreement must be implemented from a rights-based perspective.

Why We Need This Apology

An official apology remains elusive for survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery. The fact that this issue remains so contentious more than 70 years since these crimes were committed is testament to the fact that there remains widespread impunity for sexualized violence, both in and out of conflict zones, all around the world. Until governments fully recognize their responsibility for the prevention, punishment and redress for crimes of sexual violence and set up mechanisms to put an end to impunity, including making reparations for current and past crimes related to military engagement and colonialism, it will not be possible to move forward. The long-sought apology for the survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery is an important step for all of us towards the recognition of endemic sexualized violence and a beginning to change the culture of violence and impunity. WE need this apology.

What We Can Do to Support Survivors in Attaining Official Apology

There are many ways that we can support the survivors and their redress movement. These are just a few of the actions that you can take to ensure that the survivor-activists receive the official apology they deserve.

Sign the 100 Million Signature Campaign Petition

The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

Write a Letter to Government Officials

Sample Letter coming soon

Refer to resolutions made by your government, ask them to reiterate to Japan. Block Japan's request for a permanent seat on UN Security Council. Write to the governments of Japan and South Korea about the flaws in the agreement.

Resources (English Language)

Web Resources

Website for the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

<https://www.womenandwar.net>

Website for the House of Sharing, South Korea

<https://www.houseofsharing.org>

Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, Japan

<http://wam-peace.org/en/>

South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's E-Museum for Japanese Military Sexual Slavery

<http://actionforpeace.net>

Amnesty International Australia's Justice for "Comfort Women" Campaign

<http://www.amnesty.org.au/comfort>

The Politics of Trauma Educational Resource on "Comfort Women" Issue

<https://politicsoftrauma.com/>

ALPHA Education

www.alphaeducation.org

Books

Henson, M.R. (1999). *Comfort Women: A Filipina's story of prostitution and slavery under the Japanese military*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Kim-Gibson, D.S. (1999). *Silence broken. Korean comfort women*. Parkersburg, Iowa: Mid-Prairie Books.

Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (1995). *True stories of the Korean comfort women: testimonies*. London: Cassell.