

A Fact Sheet on Japanese Military “Comfort Women”

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 or “comfort stations” established by the Japanese military in its occupied territories between 1932 and 1945. “Comfort women” were taken from all over Asia and the Pacific, with Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese, Filipina, and Indonesian women comprising the vast majority. Many women were considered underage. Experts estimate the number of “comfort women” at tens or hundreds of thousands.

How were “comfort women” recruited?

At the very beginning, women were recruited primarily from existing brothels in Japan by offering them a way to repay their debt more quickly while serving the nation. But the concern over venereal diseases and the demand for a greater number of women 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 typically 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 such as the Philippines and Indonesia, the military often 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 held for a period of time, and forced into sexual servitude, often without pay.

How was the Japanese government/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 or by the military itself. The Japanese government issued a special permit for the women to travel, and transported them on military vehicles and ships. The government built buildings for the “comfort stations,” set policies, fee structures, and schedules, and provided military doctors to check the women for venereal diseases 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. Links to some of their testimonies can be found on our website.

What has Japanese government done since the 90s?

At first, Japanese government evaded responsibility for the human rights violations in “comfort women” system, placing the blame on private contractors and individual traffickers. But as more historical evidences were discovered by Japanese and other historians, the government was forced in 1993 to issue the so-called Kono statement, which acknowledged Japanese government’s direct involvement in the establishment and operation of “comfort stations” and the use of force and deception in the recruitment of “comfort women.” In 1995, Japan established 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 received the

atonement money, while others refused it, criticizing it as an attempt to avoid providing formal reparations.

In December 2015, foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea jointly announced an “agreement” to resolve the diplomatic dispute between two nations over the “comfort women” issue, which included a payment of 1 billion Japanese yens (about 8.3 million U.S. dollars) by the Japanese government to a fund to be set up by the South Korean government. The agreement was widely denounced by former “comfort women” and groups supporting them because it failed to involve voices of the victims themselves and fell short of survivors’ demands as well as recommendations made by various United Nations bodies. It also left out victims in other countries completely.

What are former “comfort women” seeking?

There are four main demands made by various groups working for the former “comfort women”: First, an official apology accompanied by the Cabinet or Diet (parliament) resolution (rather than something that can be and have been 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, the teaching of “comfort women” issue in the country’s history classes and textbooks, and finally, the investigation and persecution of responsible parties.

What is the international 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 breakdown, and the extent to which Japanese military was directly involved in the deceptive or forceful recruitment of the women. Legal and political questions include whether Japan has sufficiently accepted responsibility for the atrocity, 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?

United Nations Human Rights Committee, Economic and Social Council, Human Rights Commission, Commission on the Status of Women, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and Committee Against Torture have issued reports and advisories demanding Japan to agree to some or all of the victims’ demands. Congresses of the United States (House), the Netherlands, Canada, European Union, South Korea, and Taiwan have passed similar resolutions, as did the State of California, New York Senate, and other legislative bodies around the world.

Online Resources:

Fight For Justice
<http://fightforjustice.info/>

Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace
<http://wam-peace.org/en/>

e-Museum for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery
<http://www.hermuseum.go.kr/english/>

Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace
<http://wam-peace.org/en/>

Links to more resources and the list of books and films are found on our website at www.fendnow.org

FeND
Japan-U.S. Feminist Network for Decolonization
脱植民地化を目指す日米フェミニストネットワーク

Japan-U.S. Feminist Network for Decolonization (FeND) is a network of activists and scholars resisting both Japanese and U.S. colonialisms. For more information, or for comments or questions, please visit our website or contact us.

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