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The “Comfort Women” Redress Movement in Japan: Reflections on the Past 28 years¹

Introduction

Korean “comfort women” (ianfu), forced to provide sex to Imperial Army troops at military “comfort stations” (ianjo) during the Asia-Pacific War (1931–1945), were abandoned after Japan’s defeat in August 1945. Those fortunate enough to return home spent more than half a century in poverty, hiding their experiences of systemic sexual abuse from their own communities. In the late 1980s, as South Korea’s democratization movement flourished, Korean women’s groups drew attention to the plight of these victim-survivors and began a campaign to help them obtain justice and rejoin society. To coordinate and expand that work, in November 1990, these groups formed the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter, the Korean Council). In December, concerned women in Japan exchanged views with their South Korean counterparts and laid the groundwork for a Japanese redress movement.

Less than a year later, an unexpected development galvanized the new advocacy groups. In August 1991, Kim Hak-sun appeared at a press conference in Seoul and spoke openly about her past as a “comfort woman,” becoming the first South Korean to “come out” using her real name. In December 1991, during a visit to Japan, Kim brought suit against the Japanese state for her wartime suffering. Tokyo denied responsibility, but in January 1992, historian Yoshiaki Yoshiiaki uncovered Imperial Army documents that proved direct military involvement in the “comfort women” system, forcing the government to acknowledge the complicity of the Imperial state and its armed forces.²

¹ This chapter is a substantially rewritten and updated version of an article that originally appeared in Japanese in the September 2013 issue of The History Journal. Puja Kim, “Nihon no shimin shakai to ‘ianfu’ mondai kaiketsu undō” [Japanese Civil Society and the Struggle to Resolve the Issue of Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery], Rekishi Hyōron [The History Journal] no. 761 (September 2013): 24–40. I wish to thank Tomomi Emoto for her English translation. I am also grateful to Robert Ricketts for revising and adapting the manuscript.

Following Kim Hak-sun’s example, survivors in South Korea and other countries also stepped forward and announced themselves. Redress groups quickly formed around these women, many of whom later filed lawsuits in Japanese courts demanding a formal apology from the government, state-mandated compensation, and a full accounting of the truth about military sexual abuse. As the advocacy movement gathered steam and public interest in the “comfort women” issue grew, both in Japan and abroad, the Japanese government conducted two internal surveys of its own.³ On 4 August 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei announced the conclusions of these studies in a formal policy pronouncement.

Speaking on behalf of the government, Kōno expressed Japan’s “apologies and remorse” for the “comfort women” system and recognized the Imperial military’s role in establishing, maintaining, and managing the sex venues.⁴ The so-called Kōno Statement was ambiguous about the ultimate responsibility for the “comfort women” system, but it acknowledged the coercive recruitment (kyōsei renkō) of women, their transportation to foreign battlefields, and the lives of misery they led at “comfort stations” under “a coercive atmosphere.” Kōno also stated Japan’s “firm determination never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history.” This pledge was an official commitment to the international community to remedy this historical injustice and work to prevent recurrences.

In August 1995, Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi addressed the issue of war responsibility in general, conveying his “deep remorse” and “heartfelt apology” for Japan’s pre-1945 “colonial rule and aggression.”⁵ Responding to the Kōno and Murayama statements, junior high textbook editors began includ-

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ing brief accounts of the “comfort women” in school history books. This change seemed to presage a turning point in post-war education: the “comfort women” issue would now become part of the nation’s historical memory.

The Japanese government’s efforts to deal with this issue through the quasi-private Asian Women’s Fund (1995–2007) faltered and ended in confusion, however. In the late 1990s, there was a strong reaction from historical revisionists, who disputed the facts of military sexual servitude. Far-right politicians, academics, social commentators, and business leaders challenged the Kōno and Murayama pronouncements and called for the elimination of textbook references to “comfort women,” the Nanjing Massacre, and other unresolved war issues. Abe Shinzō, Japan’s current prime minister, and other influential young lawmakers of the day, participated actively in this movement. Abe channeled this “revisionist turn” and ascended rapidly inside the ruling Liberal Democratic Party,6 serving as a magnet for ultranationalists of various persuasions. These forces quickly aligned with his revisionist agenda, insisting that public education and the media reflect their right-wing views of history.

When Abe became prime minister in 2006 and formed his first government (2006–2007), his position on the “comfort women” was soon formalized as government policy. On 5 March 2007, Abe told the National Diet that “testimony to the effect that there had been a hunt for ‘comfort women’ is a complete fabrication.”7 This assertion was ratified as a Cabinet decision on 16 March 2007,nullifying one of Kōno’s fundamental admissions: that “comfort women” had been “recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitment.”

In June of that year, a group of 60 prominent revisionists close to Abe placed a full-page advertisement in The Washington Post, making the following additional claim to a world audience: “The ianfu [comfort women] were not, as is commonly reported, ‘sex slaves.’ They were working under a system of licensed prostitution that was commonplace around the world at the time.”8 When Abe

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6 The Liberal Democratic Party is a conservative party that has ruled almost continuously since its founding in 1955. The LDP’s post-war hold on power has been broken momentarily only twice: by a coalition government from 1993 to 1994 under Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi and by the centrist Democratic Party of Japan from 2009 to 2012.


became Prime Minister again in December 2012, an explicit priority was to revise the Kōno Statement. By then, the official denial and disparagement of “comfort women” had metastasized into a full-blown hate movement.

With that background in mind, this chapter discusses Japan’s redress movement, focusing on three themes. The first is the cooperative ties forged in the early 1990s between former “comfort women,” and an extensive network of researchers, legal specialists, educators, women’s groups, human rights activists, and local residents in Japan. The period from the early 1990s through the end of Abe’s first term begins with the personal revelations of former “comfort women” in 1991 and ends with the failure of the Asian Women’s Fund in 2007.

The high point of this early period was the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, held in Tokyo in 2000. The Tribunal was a pivotal event that pursued the criminal responsibility of those who created and ran the “comfort women” system, opening a new front in the redress campaign.

A second theme is the revisionist rejection of the historical realities of the “comfort women” saga and the attempts of the redress movement to counter this reaction by strengthening the appeal of a fact-based discourse. “Comfort women” revisionism became a highly politicized feature of the first Abe government. I analyze changing public perceptions of the sexual slavery issue in the early 2000s, as both the government and some segments of society engaged in what became known as “comfort women bashing.” Since Abe’s second term as prime minister (late 2012-present), this current has broadened into a hate-speech movement that now attracts younger Japanese, including women.

The final theme is the search for an enduring settlement of the controversy. It includes the continuing response of the redress movement to the state’s assault on historical truth, the problems facing survivors and support groups, and the deceptive Japan-South Korea Agreement of December 2015, which professes to have settled the issue definitively.

On a personal note, I write from my perspective as an ethnic Korean born and raised in Japan who has been deeply involved in efforts to find a solution to the “comfort women” dilemma consonant with the needs and wishes of living victims. This essay is also informed by my personal experiences as an organizer of the 2000 Women’s International Tribunal.
The Redress Movement

The Early Years

The existence of “comfort women” was known in Japan long before the 1990s. Senda Kakô’s 1973 reportage, The Military “Comfort Women,” sold 700,000 copies, becoming a long-running best-seller. His book remained the representative work on the “military “comfort women”—a term he popularized—until the 1990s. The issue, however, did not arouse widespread public interest. Nor did it stimulate historical research on the subject or inspire a broad-based advocacy movement committed to finding a solution.

Two factors in the early 1990s led to a progressive shift in popular perceptions of the “comfort women” in both Japan and South Korea. The first was the emergence in 1990 of a unified Korean women’s movement inspired in part by the pioneering “comfort women” research of Yun Chong-ok, a professor at Ewha Woman’s University in Seoul. In June 1990, when asked in the Japanese National Diet if his ministry planned to investigate that question, a Labor Ministry bureaucrat replied that there were no records because private brokers, not the military, had mobilized the women. In October, a coalition of South Korean women’s groups issued an open letter to the Diet protesting that statement and drawing renewed attention to the problem. Yun Chong-ok visited Japan and delivered a series of lectures that December based on her extensive studies. Invigorated by Yun’s talks, women’s groups in Japan launched their own campaign to advocate for the rights of victim-survivors.

A second factor impelling the redress movement was Kim Hak-sun’s dramatic public testimony in 1991. Her surprise revelations in August and subsequent lawsuit against the Japanese government spurred Japanese and ethnic Koreans in Japan to act on her demands for official restitution. Large numbers of women gathered to hear Kim talk in Tokyo and Osaka during her December visit, and many lent her their support.

Deeply moved by Kim’s earlier televised interviews in Seoul, Yoshimi Yoshiaki scoured Japan’s Self-Defense Agency archives for information on military “comfort stations.” In January 1992, he publicized military documents proving

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10 The Hankyoreh newspaper (Seoul) serialized Yun Chong-ok’s Japan lectures, which ethnic Koreans in Japan had translated into Korean. The talks were also published later in Japanese.
beyond a doubt that Imperial Armed Forces had been intimately involved in planning, establishing, and operating those venues in China as early as 1932.¹¹

In South Korea, China, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the Netherlands, victimized women came forward, spoke publicly, and in some cases, took the Japanese government to court. In each country, support groups coalesced around the survivors, and as lawsuits multiplied, researchers and legal experts in Japan offered their assistance. Following the example of South Korean and Japanese women’s organizations, advocacy networks sprung up and were soon cooperating across borders. The result was the emergence of a transnational movement that won the backing of the United Nations and other world human rights bodies.

In August 1992, one year after Kim Hak-sun’s press conference, the first Asian Solidarity Conference for the Issue of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan convened in Seoul. Support groups from South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan participated. In 2014, the Conference drafted a proposal for a solution that survivors could accept, providing the outlines of a viable settlement. By 2016, the coalition had met fourteen times in South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and other countries.

From “Comfort Women” to Sex Slaves

Scholars in Japan engaged in intensive and sustained fact-finding to uncover the realities behind the “comfort women” system. Yoshimi Yoshiaki worked closely with Hayashi Hirofumi and other pioneering researchers, including feminist historians and writers such as Suzuki Yūko, Nishino Rumiko, and Kawata Fumiko. Together they produced a substantial body of new information on the background and inner workings of this system.¹² In 1993, historian Arai Shin’ichi joined Yoshimi, Hayashi, Nishino, and Kawata to inaugurate the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan’s War Responsibility (abbreviated as


Japanese civic groups and supporters also played a crucial part in fact-finding and discovery. In January 1992, for example, several local organizations established a hotline, “Dial Emergency for ‘Comfort Women,’” which collected the personal war memories of 235 Imperial veterans and former military nurses across Japan. Support groups in Saitama, Kyoto, and Kumamoto also conducted telephone surveys, publishing their findings in self-funded books and pamphlets. Korean women living in Japan helped bridge the Japanese and South Korean movements by organizing public conferences (shōgen shūkai) for Kim Hak-sun during her Japan tour. They interpreted, translated Kim’s talks into Japanese, and helped publish the proceedings.

Groundbreaking research and citizen data-gathering raised public awareness of the problem, but the single most important factor was extraordinary progress in recording and publishing the oral histories of survivors. The tight cooperation that developed between Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipino, and Dutch survivors, on the one hand, and a wide variety of redress groups in Japan, on the other, gave the Japanese advocacy movement a distinctive dynamism. This collaboration was particularly evident in the civil law cases that survivors brought against the Japanese government.

In the decade between 1991 and 2001, survivors began ten civil actions against the state. Kim Hak-sun and two others filed the first suit in December 1991. They were followed in short order by plaintiffs from South Korea (1991 and 1992), the Philippines, and a Zainichi Korean in Japan (1993), a Dutch survivor (1994), Taiwanese victims (1999), and four groups of Chinese women from Shanxi Province and Hainan Island (1995–2001). In March 2010, the Supreme Court dismissed a final appeal by the Hainan group, ending litigation.

The plaintiffs lost all of their cases but one, that of the Yamaguchi District Court’s Shimonoseki Branch, where they won a partial victory and limited damages—only to have the decision overturned later by a higher court. But Japanese judges unanimously recognized as fact that “comfort stations” had been established and managed by the military. Many judgments also cited or quoted direct-

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ly from plaintiff depositions, attesting to their veracity. During adjudication, lawyers, researchers, and women’s groups in Japan examined and compiled the plaintiffs’ oral statements, many of which were later published by support groups. The evidentiary trial record became an indispensable part of the struggle to uncover historical truth, and for that reason, courtroom testimonies remain a rich oral archive of historical importance.¹⁵

It is clear from this voluminous written and oral documentation that the “comfort women” system was not a case of wartime prostitution. It was a regime of systematic rape instituted as state policy by Japanese military and civil authorities between 1932 and 1945. The world human rights community concurred. After careful examination, UN human rights mechanisms concluded in 1992 that the “comfort women” system was a system of “sexual slavery.” That determination quickly gained traction in Japan and Asia. Redress advocates began employing the terms “Japanese military comfort women” and “Japanese military sexual slaves” interchangeably, a shift in emphasis that brought this terminology closer to the lived experiences of victims.

The key issue is not forcible recruitment, per se, but the fact that many tens of thousands of girls and women across Asia and the Pacific were subjected to an elaborately organized regime of military control, confined in “comfort stations,” and obliged to perform sex acts on demand. Deprived of freedom of movement, captive women lived under threat of extreme sanction and could neither refuse work nor walk away.¹⁶


Survivors and redress groups demanded redress for all victims regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or place of residence, and Kōno incorporated that phrase into his final report. Faced with a transnational advocacy movement, escalating law-

¹⁶ The great majority of “comfort” girls and women were Asians and Pacific Islanders, but the Japanese military also recruited considerable numbers of ethnic Japanese. Most were licensed prostitutes, indentured to their owners, often under slave-like conditions. Although the military enticed many to sign contracts, once they reached the “comfort stations,” the women were subject to the same harsh military regulations and violence as non-Japanese inmates, until their contracts expired. See VAWW RAC, Nihonjin “ianfu”: Aikokusin to jinshin baibai to [Japanese “Comfort Women”: Patriotism and Human Trafficking], eds. Nishino Rumiko and Onozawa Akane (Tokyo: Gendai Shokan, 2015).
suits, and growing domestic and world concern, the government attempted to find a solution. On 19 July 1995 the National Asian Peace Fund for Women (commonly referred to as the Asian Women’s Fund) was inaugurated under Foreign Ministry auspices as a semi-public, semi-private foundation. This policy initiative ultimately betrayed the hopes of survivors and advocacy groups alike.

The Asian Women’s Fund (AWF) purported to settle the Japanese state’s moral, but not legal, responsibility for the “comfort women” system by financing individual “atonement” payments, not with national funds, but with privately raised money, thus avoiding any suggestion of state compensation.¹ The semi-private Fund operated from 1995 to 2007. Although “comfort women” came from a dozen countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific, only victims from South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines were eligible for “sympathy” money and a written apology from the prime minister. The many victims who refused to accept the AWF solatia, or who were considered ineligible, never received an apology. Moreover, the fund did nothing to correct the impression that the “comfort women” system was a form of prostitution tolerated and often encouraged by modern warring armies. Thus, survivors continued to be evoked in the public eye not as victims of sexual violence but as “paid professionals” or camp followers—who were now asking for a handout.

New Directions: Prosecuting the Guilty

From the late 1990s, two obstacles stood in the path of the redress movement. One was a demand by South Korean groups that civil and military officials responsible for the “comfort women” system be prosecuted and punished. The second was an ultra-nationalist backlash in Japan that rejected the very notion of redress, a topic that is addressed below.

Punitive action against the wartime architects of the “comfort women” system proved controversial in Japan. Women’s groups and world human rights bodies, on the other hand, viewed such action as essential in the worldwide struggle against male impunity. Eliminating violence against women by pursuing the worst offenders had the broad support of the global women’s movement. A crucial advance in this area was the UN General Assembly’s adoption in 1993 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Based on the Convention, crimes such as mass rape and impregnation used as weapons of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and gang rapes and forced marriages in Rwanda were tried by the UN criminal tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda as crimes against humanity in 1993 and 1994, respectively. The need for punitive measures was also written into the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the World Conference on Women in 1995. A 1996 report on the Japanese military “comfort women” by Radhika Coomaraswamy, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, also endorsed that conclusion.

In the fall of 1997, leaders of the women’s movement in Japan invited 40 redress activists from 20 countries to an international conference in Tokyo on violence against women in wartime, leading to the establishment of VAWW-NET Japan (Violence against Women in War Network-Japan). In 1998, the new organization’s chair, well-known feminist and journalist Matsui Yayori, conferred with Yun Chong-ok of the Korean Council and Indai Sajov, leader of a major Filipina women’s coalition. They agreed to create a women’s international war crimes trial. Staffed by internationally known jurists, this court would hear testimonies from victim-survivors and prosecute Japanese military and civil leaders responsible for the “comfort women” system. The idea of a people’s tribunal enlarged the scope of advocacy. In addition to demanding legal relief for victims, the movement would indict and try in absentia those who had engineered the system for crimes against humanity in accordance with international humanitarian law.

The International Women’s Tribunal (2000)

In late 2000, as Japan prepared to enter the 21st Century, the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter, the Women’s Tribunal or the Tribunal) convened in Tokyo’s Kudan Kaikan Hall, with 64 survivors from eight countries in attendance. Held from 8–12 December 2000, the trial included a common indictment by the chief prosecutor, survivor testimonies given in person or via video, extensive evidence displays, cross-examination by judges, and a verdict. The Women’s Tribunal also took testimony from expert witnesses—many of them Japanese historians and legal scholars—and former Imperial soldiers. The Japanese government declined to send representatives or ob-

servers despite a formal invitation from the court. Its viewpoint was represented by a friend of the court brief (*amicus curiae*).

On 12 December 2000, the judges—leading authorities in international law—summarized their conclusions. The Women’s Tribunal ruled that international laws in effect at the time the “comfort women” system was established required the present government of Japan to accept “state responsibility” for wartime sexual enslavement and its unresolved problems. One year later, on 4 December 2001, the complete 200-page-long judgment was released publicly in the International Court of Justice at The Hague, Netherlands. The decision did not find all of the accused guilty but convicted Emperor Shōwa¹⁹ and nine high-ranking civil and military officials guilty of either condoning or executing a policy of “rape and sexual slavery,” adjudged a crime against humanity.

The Women’s International Tribunal was significant for many reasons.²⁰ First, it was a people’s initiative held in Tokyo, the capital of the aggressor nation, to pass judgment on war crimes committed by the Imperial state and its armed forces. The Tribunal was modeled on the 1967 Russell Tribunal in Stockholm, which scrutinized American atrocities in the early years of the Vietnam War (1964–1975). A key difference was the Russell Tribunal’s lack of a gender perspective: it did not try crimes of violence against women. VAWW-NET Japan

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¹⁹ Emperor Shōwa’s name was Hirohito, and until his death in 1989, he was known as Emperor Hirohito. His name was changed posthumously to Shōwa, the historical era defined by his 63-year reign (1926–1989).

reached out to the survivors of military sexual violence in Asia to help them prosecute some of the former high authorities responsible for that system in Japanese courts.

The Tribunal brought together Japanese women and Asian victims. However, it also attracted jurists, historians, women’s rights specialists, citizens’ groups, and a host of NGOs/NPOs from around the world. Global civil society assembled in Tokyo to pass judgment on Japan’s wartime system of sexual enslavement, which the government of the host country refused to address. Although its verdict was unenforceable, the civil proceeding had great symbolic value, granting international legitimacy to surviving victims and affording many a degree of personal closure. It also refocused the world’s attention on their ten-year struggle for justice.

The Tribunal was important for a second reason: the collaboration between survivors and supporters in Japan who drew up individual bills of indictment for the victims in each country. The indictments documented specific acts of violence against the plaintiffs by those responsible based on survivor testimonies and historical records. Indictment teams, organized for each country, worked with victims and their supporters in the months leading up to the Tribunal, with some visiting former Asian battlegrounds to interview survivors. Through this process, it was discovered that an iconic photograph of a pregnant “comfort woman” taken by U.S. soldiers in China in 1944 was Pak Yong-sim, a North Korean survivor. Pak was invited to Tokyo to testify at the Tribunal.

Researchers learned in this way that the “comfort women” system had also been implemented in Portuguese Timor (East Timor) and many parts of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia).

The Tribunal was unusual in a third sense: it relied on the copious empirical research that Japanese scholars and researchers had produced in the 1990s. Their findings adduced evidence of the Emperor’s war responsibility, the deep involvement of the military, the Emperor’s awareness of sexual slavery, and his criminal negligence in condoning it.

The Women’s International Tribunal was neither a public hearing nor a mock trial. It was an innovative people’s action grounded in international law that held up for world scrutiny three important questions that the Allied Powers had ignored in the early post-war Tokyo War Crimes Trials (1946–1948): the exemption of the Emperor from war responsibility, Western and Japanese colonial

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rule, and organized sexual violence against women.²² Jurists, researchers, and women’s groups representing many ethnicities and nationalities carefully summarized an enormous quantity of oral and written evidence to help the judges produce a final judgment on these issues as they related to wartime sexual violence. The proceedings were published in six volumes by VAWW-NET Japan in 2002.²³ The Tribunal represents the high-water mark of the 1990s redress movement. Its achievements, however, would soon come under attack as the far-right mobilized to discredit them.

The Revisionist Turn


Meanwhile, after the late 1990s, a reaction against the advocacy movement set in as ultra-rightist politicians and educators pushed back against public calls for reparations and textbook revision. In January 1997, revisionist educators established the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai), and began agitating for the removal of “comfort women” and other “masochistic” themes from the nation’s schoolbooks. In February, ultra-rightists in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) established the Young Diet Members’ Group for Considering Japan’s Future and History Textbooks. Led by Abe Shinzō, the group’s secretary-general and a rising star in the LDP, this conclave characterized “comfort women” as prostitutes and demanded that such references be banned from public school texts. Finally, in May, far-right businessmen, academics, writers, cultural figures, and religious leaders inaugurated the Japan Conference (Nippon Kaigi), bringing powerful private-sector interests into the revisionist fold.

In their 1997 editions, all seven publishers of junior high school history and civics books had included some mention of the “comfort women.” Alarmed at this development, in the early 2000s, LDP leaders, the Young Diet Members’

Group, the Ministry of Education, and the *Tsukurukai* prevailed on textbook publishers to remove the offending passages.²⁴ As a result, such citations gradually disappeared, and by 2006, only two out of eight history books used the term in their main text. By 2012, the last references had been effaced. Since the mid-2000s, Japan’s history of military sexual abuse has faded from public memory.

**The Politics of Denial (2007)**

As the 21st century dawned, an incident occurred heralding the advent of “comfort women” bashing. In January 2001, a Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) television production for its educational channel, “Wartime Sexual Violence in Question,” featured the Women’s International Tribunal, but at the last minute revised the content. The publicly-financed NHK is Japan’s national broadcast network, and its charter obliges it to maintain strict political neutrality in news coverage and programming.

When the segment aired on 30 January 2001, it was apparent that NHK had altered the original version by deleting the testimonies of key witnesses, including two former Imperial soldiers. Furthermore, the network censored the remarks of commentator Lisa Yoneyama, portraying the U.S.-based scholar as being critical of the Tribunal when in fact her evaluation had been positive. The Tribunal’s guilty verdict against the Emperor was also cut. Suspicions of outside political interference deepened when the program took the unusual step of inserting an interview with historian Hata Ikuhiko, a hostile critic of the “comfort women” problem. Just before the segment was televised, Sakagami Kaori, one of the directors of the original version, warned that something was amiss.

In July of that year, Tribunal organizer VAWW-NET Japan and Matsui Yayori lodged a civil complaint against NHK, fearing that “[i]f we remain silent now, we will be guilty of self-censorship later, in effect having condoned [this abuse of] state power.” In March 2004, the Tokyo District Court handed the plaintiffs a partial victory. In 2005, as the lawsuit proceeded on appeal to the Tokyo High Court, a program director, Nagai Satoru, blew the whistle, revealing that a high-ranking NHK executive had been persuaded to modify the script after pressure from senior government officials. According to Nagai, the officials had “intimated that changes would be advisable” (*ito no sontaku*), a phrase that the court cited in

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its final judgment. Fearful that the government would cut its budget, the broadcaster had complied. As many surmised, political intervention had indeed caused NHK to violate its charter and realign with the revisionist agenda. In 2007, the High Court sided with the plaintiffs, criticizing NHK for political bias, and assigned damages. NHK appealed, however, and in 2008, the Supreme Court nullified the High Court decision.

The senior government figures involved were said to include Abe Shinzō, a Cabinet member, and other officials in his sway. Efforts to prove their involvement were inconclusive, however, and media sources and many researchers took this as a signal to steer wide of the “comfort women” problem, which politically had become too hot to handle. The NHK incident was a turning point in the public perception of the issue, a change that paved the way for an official policy of “comfort women” denial.²⁵

As we saw earlier, Abe announced this policy in March 2007, when he told the Diet there was no evidence that “comfort women” had been forcibly recruited and then had that statement adopted as a Cabinet decision. A full-page public comment that leading revisionists placed in The Washington Post in June completed the narrative by adding that “comfort women” were not “sexual slaves” at all but licensed prostitutes. Abe’s attempt to undermine the 1993 Kōno Statement was condemned by governments in North America, Europe, and Asia. The U.S. House of Representatives, for example, responded to these provocations in July by adopting House Resolution 121, which admonished the Japanese government to acknowledge, apologize for, and accept its historical responsibility for the “comfort women” system.

**Preserving Historical Memory: The Women’s Active Museum (2005)**

In the first decade of the 2000s, as the NHK incident unfolded, the advocacy movement intensified its public education campaign while searching for a viable solution acceptable to the victim-survivors of sexual slavery. Women’s groups and other civic organizations set up mobile exhibitions across Japan, where experts explained the issues using teaching materials based on current research.

This movement was one of the precursors to the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM), which was established in Tokyo in August 2005.

WAM, Japan’s only “comfort women” museum, regularly holds symposia, lectures, and seminars on military sexual slavery, organizes both permanent and temporary exhibits open to the public, maintains an extensive working archive, and produces a steady stream of educational materials, reports, and other publications. Established by colleagues of Matsui Yayori (1934–2002), WAM’s multifaceted research and outreach activities provide a strong counter-narrative that is anchored in historical fact to the revisionist distortions. The Museum has also sponsored initiatives by younger Japanese. An early undertaking was the “Indelible Memory” National Rallies, a series of public talks by former “comfort women” held simultaneously in several large cities across Japan. WAM continues to work closely with a loose coalition of women’s and human rights groups in Japan and abroad.

The “Comfort Women” Become a Diplomatic Issue (2009 – 2011)

Pressed by civil society groups, between 2000 and 2006, lawmakers of three opposition parties, the Social Democrats, the Communists, and the Democratic Party, sponsored eight “wartime sexual coercion” bills. LDP Diet members blocked all but one of these from reaching the legislative docket. As public dissatisfaction with the LDP mounted on a host of issues, in 2009, the centrist Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) ousted the LDP in a general election. It was the first transfer of political power to a single opposition party since 1955.

Encouraged by this development, in February 2010, redress groups in Japan joined forces to form the 2010 Japan National Action to Resolve the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Issue and pressure the DPJ to legislate a solution. In November, together with the Korean Council, National Action handed the new government some 610,000 signatures from around the world demanding action on the issue. Despite its liberal credentials, the DPJ failed to respond, leaving the questions in limbo.

On 30 August 2011, the Constitutional Court of Korea ruled that the South Korean government’s failure to solve the problem of individual war claims against Japan violated the constitutional rights of living war victims. At a Japan-South Korea summit that December, President Lee Myung-bak pressed Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko to take immediate action to settle the “comfort women” dispute, but Noda demurred. A year later, in December 2012,
the DPJ was roundly defeated in a general election, returning the Liberal Democratic Party to power and Abe Shinzō to the premiership.

The Hate Movement (2007–2018)

Beginnings

Following the NHK incident, public support for war reparations to the victims of military sexual slavery began to waver. In the mid-to-late 2000s, escalating revisionist counterclaims attempted to delegitimize redress demands by denigrating victim-survivors. The cascade of pejorative comments by ultra-nationalist political and public figures became known as “comfort women bashing.” At a popular level, Internet-savvy ultra-rightists—the so-called right-wing netizens (netto uyo)—picked up this rhetoric, turning social media into a vehicle for attacking not only the “comfort women,” but Koreans and Chinese, in general. The upsurge of historical revisionism spawned an incipient hate-speech movement “from below” that took its cue from the policies and public remarks of central authorities.

In January 2007, young ultra-rightists at the grassroots level created the Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of Zainichi Koreans (Zainichi Tokken o yurusanai Shimin no Kai, hereafter Zaitokukai). It comes as no surprise that the rise of xenophobia began with Abe Shinzō’s first administration (2006–2007). Utilizing social media, the Zaitokukai organized a hate campaign targeting ethnic Korean residents in Japan (Zainichi Chōsenjin) and other minorities, among them, former “comfort women.”

Ironically, an influx of South Korean popular culture swept Japan at about the same time, somewhat dampening the chorus of ethnic vilification. Known in Korean as hallyu (Japanese, kanryū), the “Korean Wave” produced a boom in imported South Korean TV dramas, which were largely consumed at first by older Japanese women. Hallyu began to trend in 2004, and by 2010, had reached younger generations through the musical artistry of K-pop. With the flare-up of a territorial dispute over Takeshima (Dokdo) Island in August 2012 and an new Abe Cabinet in December, enthusiasm for Korean pop culture waned.

In 2013, driven in part by the Japan-South Korea “comfort women” dispute, hate speech became a national buzzword. In this paper, I limit my discussion of this phenomenon to what I call “comfort women” hate speech. Although the targets have expanded beyond the victims of military sexual violence, “comfort women” bashing was an important early influence on this movement, which continues to rage against survivors. This variant of hate speech is characterized
by 1) the fomenting of racial animosity toward South Korea, China, and Koreans living in Japan, 2) the narrowing of the term “comfort women” to include only Koreans, and 3) the defamation of survivors.

**The Normalization of Hate Speech (2013-present)**

From 2013 to 2014, the primary objectives of the hate campaign dovetailed with the Abe government’s policy of disavowing the 1993 Kōno Statement. Four political and social developments explain the proliferation of verbal intimidation directed at minority groups during Abe’s second administration.²⁶

First, in September 2012, two months before his elevation to Prime Minister, Abe repeated that, “[w]e must affirm the fact that the Cabinet decision [of 16 March 2007] has revised the Kōno Statement.”²⁷ On 7 February 2013, following his resumption of power, Abe again told the Diet that the government had no evidence of women being forcibly carried off by the military. Leaders of the revisionist camp applauded these pronouncements and kept the pot boiling with a steady barrage of derogatory comments about victim-survivors. Right-wing netizens amplified the Abe government’s contentions, asserting that because “comfort women” were prostitutes, no coercion was involved, and thus neither the Japanese state nor the Imperial military could be held responsible for that system.

Secondly, social media activists were not the only source of “comfort women” disparagement to impact mass culture. Many conservative weeklies, books, TV talk and variety shows, and even comic books (manga) now echoed anti-Korean sentiment. As advertising revenues, book sales, and audience ratings soared, hate speech became a thriving cottage industry. Even mainstream media sources revised their position on this issue. In January 2014, Momii Katsuto, the new NHK director-general, affirmed that “[‘comfort women’] existed in the war zones of every country.” This exculpatory comment was not innocent. Momii was an Abe protégé appointed to bring Japan’s state broadcasting corporation into sync with the government’s political views. Some private broadcasters also began to suggest that coercion was not a factor in “comfort women” mobilization.

In August 2014, the Asahi Shimbun, Japan’s leading liberal daily newspaper, published a self-critical review of its past coverage of the “comfort women” and retracted some of its earlier reporting. A feeding-frenzy ensued as far-right politicians, social commentators, and conservative newspapers denounced the Asahi for selling the country out and siding with Japan’s enemies. Prime Minister Abe joined the fray, lamenting to a Diet committee in October that, “The unfounded slander that Japan as a whole ‘enslaved women’ is being spread throughout the world.” Revisionists and far-right social media took up that mantra, alleging that false allegations of “sexual slavery” were tarring all Japanese.

A third development was psychological, verbal, and physical harassment by xenophobic groups. Today, the Zaitokukai, for instance, continues to organize hate demonstrations in the Korea Towns of Tokyo, Kawasaki, Kyoto, Osaka, and other large cities. The Zaitokukai employs a combination of racist invective, intimidation, and occasional violence and has advocated the expulsion and even massacre of Japan’s Korean minority. “Comfort women” advocacy itself has been targeted, with Zaitokukai bullies disrupting exhibitions, rallies, and other redress activities.²⁸

The inroads made by hate speech among the general public is especially worrisome. Since 2007, this trend has led many people to see no harm in publicly maligning North and South Korea, China, Japan’s ethnic minorities, atomic bomb victims, and survivors of wartime sexual abuse. To be sure, Zaitokukai activists are a small minority, and powerful civil society movements have formed to confront and deter them. Nevertheless, vilification campaigns have stirred up dormant feelings of historical and racial resentment that society and the education system have failed to address properly. Thus, hate rallies are sometimes convened spontaneously without Zaitokukai support. Social media platforms are now potent tools for inducing “ordinary” Japanese to engage in hate messaging and other xenophobic behavior.

A fourth vector is the spread of “comfort women” revisionism to women, and even to Japanese living abroad, particularly in the United States. In 2011, the former Zaitokukai vice-president established Nadeshiko Action (Japanese Women for Justice and Peace). This all-women group has actively boosted Abe’s ideas, not only in Japan, but also overseas, to wit its briefs to the UN Human Rights Council depicting sexual slaves as camp followers. In the United States, a small group of expatriate Japanese, the Global Alliance for Historical Truth

GAHT, has attempted to transplant the “history wars” being waged in Japan. It brought suit against the city government of Glendale, California to halt construction of a “comfort women” memorial (see below). The U.S. Supreme Court dismissed the lawsuit in March 2017.²⁹

The acrimony unleashed against scholars, researchers, and journalists who have exposed the unsavory facts of the “comfort women” system is particularly alarming.³⁰ On 5 May 2015, 187 historians and Japan specialists working in the United States issued an “Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan.” Researchers from European and other countries also added their names, focusing world attention on the suppression of historical truth in Japan.³¹ On 25 May, 464 Japanese historians and educators representing 16 professional associations followed up with their own statement criticizing the disinformation campaign waged by the Abe regime and “comfort women” detractors.

A Solution the Victims Can Accept

The Asian Solidarity Conference (2014)

With the start of the second Abe government in 2012, redress groups reassessed their struggle and sought to reunify the movement around the basic demands for justice articulated by survivors. In August 2013, a new organization, Fight for Justice, created a website to provide the public with accurate and up-to-date information on the “comfort women” system and the progress of the advocacy movement.³²

One of the signal achievements of this period was the proposal to the Japanese government of a settlement based on the needs and wishes of former “comfort women.” Entitled “Recommendations to the Government of Japan for Reso-

olution of the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” the plan was drafted by the 12th Asian Solidarity Conference on the Issue of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. Meeting in Tokyo from 31 May to 3 June 2014, the Conference was attended by representatives from eight countries. Its operating concept was “[a] Realistic Settlement is One that Victimized Women Can Accept.” The proposal was submitted to Prime Minister Abe on 2 June 2014, together with 529 official records and 53 supplementary documents pertaining to the “comfort women” acquired since the Kōno Statement. Below is a resume of the main recommendations.³³

To resolve the Japanese military “comfort women” issue, the Japanese government must recognize 1) that during the war, the Japanese government and military planned, established, managed, and controlled “comfort stations;” 2) that women were forced against their will to provide sex to military personnel in those facilities and kept there by coercive methods; 3) that different forms of victimization existed depending on whether the women were from colonies, occupied areas, or Japan proper, that the scale of victimization was extensive, and that the suffering continues today; and 4) that this system was a serious violation of human rights that contravened domestic and international laws in effect at the time.

In order to provide surviving victims with just reparations, the Japanese government must 1) apologize to individual victims in a way that is unambiguous, official, and cannot be overturned afterwards; 2) provide compensation to victims as proof of the legitimacy of the apology; 3) give a complete accounting of the truth (full disclosure of all official documents and further truth-finding, including hearings with survivors and others with firsthand and expert knowledge; and 4) take measures to prevent the recurrence of organized wartime violence against women by revising school curricula and textbooks, prohibit statements by public figures that deny or cast doubt on the points listed above, and officially rebut such statements.

The Japanese advocacy movement played a key role in drafting the recommendations, which were revised, refined, and finalized in close consultation with representatives from the countries Japan had victimized during the war. The end document clarified the objectives of the international redress campaign and helped forge a new sense of purpose and direction. The term “legal responsibility” is conspicuous here by its absence, but “compensation” in Point 2 of the reparation demands covers the state’s legal liability toward victim-survivors. The

release of additional official materials, obtained through the persistent efforts of many researchers, introduced important new information, enhancing our understanding of the “comfort women” system.³⁴

The Japan-South Korea Agreement (2015)

The so-called Abe Statement of 14 August 2015, which marked the 70th anniversary of Japan’s defeat in the Asia-Pacific War, included such key words as “colonial rule,” “aggression,” “reflection,” and “apology,” but it gave no indication of the historical referents.³⁵ Abe’s address was a clear retreat from the 1995 Murayama Statement, which expressed Japan’s “deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for its “colonial rule and aggression” in Asia. In Abe’s speech, the relation between subject (aggressor) and object (victims) is blurred, producing semantic confusion.

The Prime Minister writes, for example, that “there were women behind the battlefields whose honor and dignity were severely injured,” but that sentence is a general remark devoid of specific context. There is no explanation of how the women ended up “behind the battlefields,” how their dignity was injured, or what agent was responsible. Nowhere in this rambling statement does the term “comfort women” even appear. The Abe Statement appears designed to paper over the structural underpinnings of Japanese colonial rule, the Asia-Pacific War, and the “comfort women” system.³⁶

The Japan-South Korea Agreement of December 2015 followed the broad contours of Abe’s August discourse, subtly reflecting his historical worldview. On 28 December the foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea, acting on behalf of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and President Park Geun-hye, met in Seoul to unveil an unsigned bilateral memorandum on the “comfort women” question.

³⁴ Recent research has raised the number of military and other official documents found since 1993 to more than 1,000. Although many are from Ministry of Defense archives, the government refuses to recognize them. See Hayashi Hirofumi, Nihongun “Ianfu” Mondai no Kakushin [The Essence of the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Issue] (Tokyo: Kadensha, 2015), 83–85. Some of these materials are available on the Fight for Justice Website (see Footnote 32).


By mutual consent: 1) The Japanese government recognized its “responsibilities” for “an involvement of the Japanese military authorities” in the “comfort women” issue and reaffirmed Prime Minister Abe’s “most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as ‘comfort women.’” 2) The Japanese government agreed to “a one-time contribution of ¥1 billion through its budget” to a foundation to be established by the South Korean government for “recovering the honor and dignity and healing the psychological wounds of all former ‘comfort women.’” 3) In return, the South Korean government agreed to acknowledge “the fact that the Government of Japan is concerned about the statue built in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul from the viewpoint of preventing any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity” and promised to “strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner.” 4) Both governments confirmed that “this issue is resolved finally and irreversibly” and that each would refrain from “accusing or criticizing [the] other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations.”

After the agreement, however, Abe, his foreign minister, and some LDP lawmakers began backtracking. At the press conference in Seoul announcing the agreement, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio praised the accord for enhancing security arrangements between Japan, South Korea, and the United States; insisted that Japan’s ¥1 billion grant was not state compensation but a humanitarian contribution; and reiterated that the “comfort women” problem had been resolved once and for all. The bilateral agreement had little to do with “apologies and remorse,” but rather, it was a political deal that paved the way for closer trilateral economic and defense cooperation, under the watchful eye of Washington.

One month later, in January 2016, Abe was asked in the Diet if he would make a personal apology to former “comfort women.” The Prime Minister refused, insisting that “sexual slavery and [the story of] 200,000 victims are not facts.” Abe also reminded the Diet that his Cabinet decision of 16 March 2007 had officially rejected charges of coercion. He repeated his expectation that the statue in front of the Japanese Embassy would be removed. Foreign Minister

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37 The statue of a “comfort girl,” widely known as the Peace Memorial or Peace Statue of a Girl, was erected in front of the Japanese Embassy by South Korean civic organizations in December 2011 to protest the Noda government’s failure to resolve the “comfort women” problem.

Kishida publicly agreed. At the same time, a prominent LDP politician told party members at LDP headquarters that “comfort women” were “prostitutes by trade.”

How did the international community and human rights organizations view the 2015 agreement? In March 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in its concluding observations on Japan’s “military sexual slavery” criticized the accord for failing to adopt a victim-centered approach, and urged Japan to take “due account of the views of victims/survivors and ensure their rights to truth, justice, and reparations.”

In October 2016, as controversy continued over the “comfort girl” statue in Seoul and a second memorial later set up next to the Japanese Consulate in Busan, South Korea, the unexpected occurred. President Park was implicated in a major corruption scandal involving a close friend, sparking massive demonstrations across South Korea. Protesters took to the streets to accuse the South Korean president of malfeasance and demand her resignation. After four months of public agitation and political turmoil, Park was impeached for abuse of power, later arrested, and finally removed from office in March 2017. On 9 May 2017, Moon Jae-in, a well-known lawyer and human rights advocate, was elected president of South Korea in a special election.

President Moon did not reject the bilateral accord out of hand, but conducted a thorough review of the diplomatic process that had produced it. By then, Seoul had already established the Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing (28 July 2016) to administer the ¥1 billion grant from Tokyo. In November 2018, South Korean officials notified Japan that the Foundation would be dismantled and that the decision was based partly on feedback from survivors. There has been talk in government circles of returning the money to Japan. Meanwhile, the two “comfort girl” memorials remain in place.

Despite the wide perception gap that separates Japanese and South Koreans, both countries must work together to support UN recommendations calling for a victim-based solution, complete with a consultative mechanism for victims and their families. Neither side conferred with survivors about the 2015 agreement, and Abe has refused to apologize personally. But only an approach that accommodates the victims’ needs and wishes is likely to produce a lasting settlement. Moreover, this problem cannot be reduced to a bilateral dispute between Japan and South Korea. Wartime military sexual violence remains a diplomatic issue.

that negatively impacts Japan's reputation in Asia and the Pacific. It is in the interest of all concerned parties to resolve it meaningfully.

Conclusion

Japan's redress movement has been propelled by two forces: victim-survivors from Asia and the Pacific who stepped forward to expose the realities of the military “comfort women” system, and the historians, researchers, women's organizations, and civil society groups who responded to their cry for justice. This partnership has had wider ramifications. It encouraged victims of organized sexual violence in other armed conflicts to follow suit and publicize the wartime abuses they, too, had suffered. Examples include the aging survivors of Nazi-era forced prostitution in German camp brothels and the genocidal rapes that accompanied ethnic cleansing campaigns in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the early 1990s.

The achievements of the Japanese movement also influenced the establishment of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid-1990s and the creation in 2002 of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. To the international community, whether or not the “comfort women” were “prostitutes” is a moot point. The general consensus among world human rights experts is that such women were sex slaves, and that the “comfort women” system was an institutionalized regime of military sexual servitude.

Yet successive redress campaigns have failed to alter public perceptions of the “comfort women.” For the past 20 years, no other issue involving Japan's historical consciousness of colonization and war has elicited the same emotional responses from both the central authorities and the public as the “comfort women” question. Historical revisionists have attempted to deny Japan's war responsibility and suppress public discussion of a wide range of war-related disputes, but the question of military sexual slavery seems to arouse the fiercest resistance. Defying world opinion, “comfort women” revisionism in Japan remains rampant.

Why do revisionists attack this issue with such rancor? Kobayashi Yoshinori, a cartoonist and founding member of the Tsukurukai (Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform), depicted the “comfort women” as prostitutes in his 1997 political manga, Shin Gōmanizumu Sengen (The New Arrogance Manifesto). Kobayashi told readers to “overlook the sexual desire of men who fought for their homeland and future generations,” and asked the rhetorical question, “[t]hose people who call our grandparents rapists for visiting comfort stations be-
fore dying in battle are some kind of lowlifes, aren’t they?” Like Kobayashi, “comfort women” revisionists—most of them male—seem to share a common mindset: they regard the problem not only as demeaning to Japan, and thus a question of national pride, but also as a gender issue that consciously or unconsciously seeks to shame Japanese men, in general.

Two kinds of self-justification are at work here. First, revisionists portray Japanese aggression in the Asia-Pacific War as a fight for “the homeland and future generations.” Secondly, they justify the “comfort women” system as allowing men to indulge their sexual appetites while asking us to overlook this fact and not label them rapists. Kobayashi’s cartoons lack self-reflection on Japan’s peculiar brand of nationalism with its built-in colonialist ideology—throwbacks to the country’s history of colonial conquest and wars of aggression. Nor does it occur to the manga artist that the “comfort women” issue is fundamentally a question of women’s human rights. But Kobayashi is hardly alone in holding such views. To see this, I take a closer look below at both propositions.

First, I will examine the question of national pride and nationalism. Japan’s post-war education system did not foster a robust awareness of the nation’s history of colonial oppression and military aggrandizement. Unlike students in post-war Germany, Japanese students generally have not been encouraged to cultivate a sense of personal or national responsibility for confronting and rectifying that past. Japanese schoolbooks focus on the terrible destruction and trauma caused by the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but teach little about the horrific acts their own country committed against other Asian peoples. The media, too, tend to emphasize the nation’s wartime suffering, but downplay the mayhem its armies wreaked abroad.

In the early 1990s, as the “comfort women” became an international issue, the Japanese government did attempt to act responsibly, as shown by the Kōno and Murayama statements of 1993 and 1995 and the 12-year tenure of the Asian Women’s Fund (1995–2007). Although ineffectual, these responses envisaged limited restitution, official expressions of remorse, and promises to educate the public and future generations about the “comfort women” system.

Since the mid-2000s, however, LDP-led governments—notably the two Abe administrations—have attempted to undermine the Kōno and Murayama legacies and whitewash Japan’s pre-1945 colonial policies and war depredations. The growing popular appeal since 2007 of extremist groups such as the Zaitokukai and the rise of unabashed hate speech after 2013 cannot be understood apart

from the promotion of far-right values and policies by the Abe regime. Against this backdrop, an internationally discredited neocolonialist nationalism continues to thrive just below the surface of social and political life.

Secondly, I would like to take a close look at the question of gender. Japan is a preeminently male-dominant society. In 2016, for instance, the UN Global Gender Gap Index ranked Japan 111th out of 144 countries. At the start of his second term in late 2012, Prime Minister Abe pledged to help promote women to leadership positions in politics and the workplace, creating “a society where all women can shine.” Despite such campaign slogans, in politics, business, academia, law, medicine, the media, and other fields, men still dominate, and gender inequalities abound.

In patriarchal Japan, women are expected to refrain from reporting sexual assaults: rape victims should hide their shame, not broadcast it. When caught, rape suspects routinely insist that the victim agreed to sex. The argument that “comfort women” were not sex slaves but paid professionals is a variant of the “she agreed” defense. This hides inconvenient historical truths: wartime military sexual enslavement, the use of coercive measures to secure compliance, and the intentional recruitment of underage “comfort girls,” who were sexually inexperienced and thus free of venereal disease. Common to such arguments is the desire to escape accountability by blaming the victim.

Japan is a society that resists and suppresses public accusations of sexual violence. Historical revisionists have found fertile ground here for a narcissistic nationalism infused with unexamined colonialist assumptions. The gender identity of many Japanese men has roots in the same soil. This prompts some to displace their fear of a spoiled masculinity by verbally abusing the victims of military sexual servitude—a kind of “second rape” and source of post-traumatic stress for many victims.

The Japanese redress movement will continue to confront Japan’s revisionist forces over the “comfort women” issue until a lasting solution that victim-survivors can embrace wholeheartedly is reached. The struggle to achieve gender equality and overcome a pervasive and sometimes toxic neocolonialist nationalism will prove decisive in the ongoing quest for justice.
