

The Comfort Women Movement: Breaking the Silence on the Human Rights Issue of Wartime Sexual Violence Against Women

ABSTRACT

From 1932 to 1945, Imperial Japan enslaved an estimated 50,000 to 200,000 women, 90% of them from Korea, to serve at 'comfort stations' as 'sexual outlets' for Japanese men (Park-Sonen,2012:283). The victims, named 'comfort women' (a euphemism for 'sex slaves') served an estimated 5-60 soldiers per day, 'resulting in an estimated fatality rate of up to 90%, compared to 27% of front-line Japanese combatant soldiers' (CWJC,2016). The comfort stations were 'systematically planned, established, and controlled by the Japanese imperial government' – it was a blatant manifestation of wartime state-sanctioned sexual violence against women (Howard,1995:25). The 'comfort women movement' is a human rights movement that aims to criminalise Japan for its sexual enslavement of colonised women and demonstrates an ongoing struggle against South Korea and Japan's structures of colonial and patriarchal structures of oppression that prolong and exacerbate the plight of the comfort women. The purpose of this investigation is to examine, using a social constructionist lens, the critical role of the comfort women movement in recognising, internationalising, and memorialising the plight of the comfort women and in the process, advancing the human rights of victims of state-sanctioned wartime sexual violence onto the international agenda.

I. Introduction

In ‘Human Rights and Social Movements’ Neil Stammers argues that ‘ordinary people working together in social movements have always been a key originating source of human rights’ (Stammers:2009:1). Using Stammers’ social constructionist perspective and a particular manifestation of human rights – comfort women¹ rights – this investigation illuminates the indispensable role of social movements in advancing universal² human rights. First, it is argued that, through the problematisation of South Korea’s patriarchal norms, the comfort women movement transformed the victims’ experiences of sexual violence from a non-issue to an issue. Then it examines the movement’s use of domestic and international legal mechanisms to frame the comfort women issue as a human rights issue entitled to legal redress. Third, it asserts that the movement’s intersectional approach, spotlighting the multifaceted nature of victims’ experiences, has been critical in recognising their diverse identities and thus constructing an appropriate definition of the human rights of the women. Last, the movement’s relentless efforts to memorialise the comfort women is presented as the most promising challenger against the South Korean and Japanese governments’ complicities in erasing the comfort women’s histories and in the process, undermine their human rights.

II. Recognising the Comfort Women’s Plight

Top-level political leaders in the limelight, sitting across a negotiation table, tend to be locked into a position prioritising public goals – goals that do not include ‘private’ issues such as

¹Korean comfort women include both North and South Korean girls and women. Whenever this investigation speaks of Korea under Japanese colonisation, both North and South Korean comfort women are referred to, but whenever this essay speaks of postcolonial Korea, only South Korean comfort women are referred to.

²This investigation understands ‘the advancement of universal human rights’ as the integration of the comfort women issue, or on a broader scale, wartime sexual violence against women, into the international human rights regime.

sexual violence against women, and are therefore silenced. South Korea was no exception to this trend; for South Korean politicians, the comfort women's fate 'was not part of the national agenda' (Barkan,2000:52). Thus, South Korea's failure to address the women's victimhood, coupled with the Japanese government's refusal to admit their enslavement of comfort women, forced the survivors into decades of silence (Ramaj,2022:483). During this silence, the survivors 'tried their best to conceal their wartime lives as comfort women from their families and friends', and most of them suffered from low self-esteem, psychological trauma, and bodily pains from physical injuries and sexual abuses (Soh,2001:79).

The comfort women movement – a movement that 'broke' this silence, began on the 14th of August 1991 with Kim Haksoon's public 'coming out' as a former comfort woman (Park-Sonen,2012:291). Kim declared that 'her main purpose is not financial compensation, but the exposure of the truth so long concealed' and even 'contemplated suicide in the emperor's presence as a means of achieving this' (Hicks,1995:195). To prevent such a tragic means of protest, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter Korean Council), the South Korean NGO that organised Kim Haksoon's public coming out, proposed a lawsuit against Japan as an alternative to suicide (The Korean Council,2021). It is important to recognise here that the comfort women movement first arose as a 'sister movement' to South Korea's women's rights movement. Both the women's rights and comfort women movements, at their core, challenged the masculinist idea that women's rights stem from their subservience to men as daughters, wives, or mothers, and instead represented women as autonomous individuals that are entitled to human rights because of their 'humanhood', and not their daughterhood, wifeness, or motherhood (Choi,2009:1). In the case of the comfort women movement, the idea of women as autonomous individuals led to a shift in shame from the victims to the perpetrators, and in the process, became the most powerful

mechanism through which the comfort women could fight for their human rights (Shin,2016:90). Indeed, it was the women's rights movement's identification of comfort women as 'victims of sexual violence' instead of 'shameful prostitutes' that inspired women's rights activists to create the Korean Council in 1990 and empower Kim Haksoon to break the five decades of profound silence (Ruiz,2020;CWJC,2016;Shin,2016:88).

Until Kim's public testimony, there was 'virtually no research, investigation, or discussion on the subject in South Korea' (Kim&Choi,1998:123). Such an absence of the comfort women issue on South Korea's agenda and the resulting reluctance among comfort women to share their stories in the decades after WWII was South Korea's 'social conservatism' (Howard,1995:7). During this time, the patriarchal norm operating social conservatism designating victims of sexual violence as being implicated within the crime and that the women has their honour 'defiled by the enforced prostitution' continued to persist among the South Korean public (Kim and Choi,1998:132). Some even argued that 'keeping the women's dishonor silent was done as an act of favor to them', as silencing the women was seen as 'protecting' the women from the shame of having lost their virginity, considered worse than the victims' experiences of sexual enslavement (Park-Sonen,2012:288;Barkan,2000:53). Due to such brutal stigmatisation, most of the comfort women 'avoid[ed] contact with other human beings', making it difficult for them to live a normal social life (Chung,1993:24). Hence, albeit surviving Imperial Japan's sexual enslavement, the comfort women's plight continued as a result of the 'masculinist sexual culture' of patriarchal South Korea (Soh,2001:79). In this regard, one of the most significant successes of the comfort women movement has been its emancipation of the victims by providing them with a space where they can use their own autonomous voices to speak about their experiences – a space that the patriarchal South Korean

public failed to provide (hence the five decades of silence prior to the inauguration of the movement in 1991) (Kimura,2003:4,Park-Sonen,2012:289).

Kim's courageous agreement to speak at the press conference that the Korean Council organised gave other comfort women the courage to join her in a class action launched in the Tokyo District Court on the 6th of December 1991 (Ramaj,2022:484). During the litigation process, the comfort women and women's rights organisations illuminated the problematic nature of the 1965 Japan-South Korea reconciliation agreement (Barkan,2000:52). The fact that the comfort women were 'completely left out' of the terms of the agreement, an agreement that according to the South Korean and Japanese governments 'finalised all the war grievances' demonstrated the continued patriarchal oppression of the comfort women, notwithstanding the formal termination of their sexual enslavement in 1945 (Hicks,1995:172). Through problematising the complicities of both Japan and South Korea in further oppressing the comfort women in a highly publicised legal dispute, the comfort women movement succeeded in cultivating a broadened recognition of the comfort women issue among the South Korean public and the international community. Indeed, Kim's courage and the 1991 class action, had a 'domino effect' and more and more survivors from other postcolonial states including the Netherlands, Philippines, China, stepped forward to voice their testimonies (Kimura,2003:5).

III. Internationalising the Comfort Women Issue

George Hicks stated that he had 'never heard of the comfort women' until December 1991, when 'South Korean women, who were taking the Japanese government to court, made the front pages of the international press (Hicks,1995:7). In 1992, to consolidate further the burgeoning international recognition of the comfort women's endeavour to criminalise and

demand redress from the Japanese government for its sexual enslavement of South Korean women, the Korean Council decided to take the comfort women issue to the UN (Shin,2016:113). Thus began a series of UN Commission on Human Rights (UNHCR) hearings in Geneva on the comfort women issue, wherein the claim that ‘human rights include a women’s right to her bodily integrity’ acted as the cornerstone of the hearings and the resulting criminalisation of the Japanese government in the late 1990s (Tsutsui,2006:340;Soh,2001:80). These formal hearings provided a ‘major turning point’ in transforming the nature of the comfort women debate, from the 1991 domestic class action suit to an international human rights issue supported by international women’s rights activists and legal experts who shared their ‘valuable legal and tactical acumen[s]’ so that the comfort women, who were not familiar with the law, could make persuasive human rights claims (Soh,2001:69;Shin,2016:114). This led to the ‘belated deliberation by the UN of the Japanese military comfort women system as a crime against humanity that violated the human rights of Asian women’ (Soh,2001:70).

Theo van Boven, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Reparation to Victims of Gross Violations of Human Rights, declared after the hearings that reparation for the comfort women ought to not just include financial compensation, but also ‘restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition in the forms of disclosure of the truth, apology and acceptance of responsibility, criminal prosecution, and commemorations of the victims’ (Shin,2016:115). One of the comfort women movement’s earliest and most significant successes was the movement’s appeal to the UNHCR, as this formal, international recognition that the Japanese government was, indeed, responsible for its sexual enslavement of the comfort women and is thus obliged to provide the survivors with proper reparations marked the first step towards internationalising the comfort women issue (Tsutsui,2006:340;Hicks,1995:255). Since the hearings in 1992, more than hundreds of

international legal documents addressing the human rights of comfort women and, on a broader scale, state-sanctioned wartime sexual violence against women, have been published (CKLS,2022). In this light, Chunghee Sarah Soh, an expert scholar on comfort women, argues that it was the movement's advancement of the issue onto the UN agenda that shifted the comfort women issue from a bilateral dispute to a universal human rights issue (Soh,2001:84).

IV. Adopting an Intersectional Approach

The increased recognition of the comfort women's plight in South Korea and in the international realm led to more testimonies from more survivors, and in turn, prompted an increase in scholars across the globe dedicated to conducting research on the issue (Ramaj,2022:484). This then led to the excavation of critical pieces of evidence of Imperial Japan's sexual enslavement of its female colonial subjects, including official wartime government documents, confessions from former Japanese soldiers and government officials, diaries of comfort station managers, and photographs of the comfort women that the allied soldiers took after Japan surrendered (Wang,2020:2;CATW,2014). Such an increase in comfort women discourse led both scholars and activists to recognise the intersectional nature of the comfort women issue. Thus, the comfort women movement's dedication to ensure adequate reparations for the comfort women led its participants to put significant effort into attaining a complete and accurate understanding of their lived experiences, which, in turn, led to the adoption of an intersectional lens. The movement's narrative therefore became 'driven by survivors asserting their multifaceted identities' (Ruiz,2020).

Months after the movement's success in 1992 in advancing the comfort women issue onto the UN's human rights agenda, the movement publicised the intersectional nature of the comfort

women issue at the Asia Solidarity Conference on the Military Comfort Women Issue (Hicks,1995:247). During this historic conference, members of the Korean Council ‘gave an impressive synopsis of the dynamics of Japanese imperialism up to the war, an [intersectional] interaction of national, racial, sexual, and class contradictions’, and pointed out the responsibilities of both the Japanese and South Korean governments for the silencing of the issue (Hicks,1995:249). This declaration stressed that blaming either Japan or South Korea for the suffering of the comfort women is futile, as the oppression that both these nations perpetrated contributed, and upon interaction, compounded, the victims’ suffering.

On the one hand, the intersectional lens illuminated the complicities of South Korea’s patriarchal norms that stigmatised the comfort women as ‘shameful’ and in the process, forced them into a decades-long silence (Sato,2014:399). On the other hand, the intersectional lens also illuminated the fact that Imperial Japan targeted Korean women ‘because they were *Korean women*, not solely because they were women or because they were of Korean ancestry’ (Park-Sonen,2012:286). It was the ‘intersection of race and gender rendered the women dispensable sexual commodities in the eyes of the Japanese military’ (Park-Sonen,2012:287). In terms of gender, Japan’s decision to establish the comfort stations stemmed from the patriarchal belief in men’s ‘masculinist sexual rights’ – men’s ‘natural’ right to use female bodies to fulfil their sexual desires (Soh,2001:78;Min,2003:939). This rendered the objectification of female bodies not just acceptable, but natural (and thus inevitable), which led the Japanese to categorise the comfort women as rightless bodies that exist to please men (Hicks,1995:274;Soh,2001:85). This patriarchal belief operated alongside Imperial Japan’s racist assumption that Koreans are an ‘intrinsically inferior race (and therefore that Korean women are ‘more dispensable’ than Japanese women) to render Korean women the ‘obvious target’ to enslave (Park-Sonen,2012:285). In this regard, Imperial Japan’s masculinist

assumption that women exist primarily to satisfy a primordial male desire for sex and its colonial belief that Koreans are of an inferior race intersected to inform Japan's decision to enslave 'dispensable' Korean women (Chung,1993:23). It therefore becomes clear that South Korea's patriarchal stigmatisation of the comfort women for their 'shameful past' and Japan's patriarchal and racist decision to enslave Korean women 'tied together to make the victims' lives miserable' (Min,2003:938). Hence, to address the victims' intersectional plight, the comfort women movement aimed to publicise and problematise the multidimensional forces of oppression that operated the abuses of the comfort women's rights, and in the process, created a comprehensive list of the reparations that need to be made (Park-Sonen,2012:297).

V. Memorialising the Comfort Women's Stories

To most comfort women, one of the most significant contributors to their suffering had been the South Korean and Japanese governments silencing and stigmatising their truth. Therefore, memorialisation – a mode of official, visual, and public redress that is needed to strengthen the 'never again' narrative, that, never again, state-sanctioned wartime sexual enslavement against women, as in the case of the South Korean comfort women, occurs – has been one of the central reparations that the comfort women demanded ever since the inauguration of the comfort women movement (Larsen,2012;Ushiyama,2021:1267). The movement's successes in its memorialisation efforts include, but are not limited to, the integration of survivors' stories into national education curriculums, establishing a comfort women museum in Seoul, inaugurating monuments such as the comfort women statue, releasing documentaries centring around the women's stories, and establishing the 14th of August, the historic date that Kim Haksoon testified in public, as an official commemoration date (Ushiyama,2021:1255;Ramaj,2022:499).

The comfort women movement's memorialisation efforts transcended national boundaries – other countries, including the United States, China, and the Netherlands, began including the comfort women's stories into their national curriculums, establishing museums dedicated to comfort women, erecting the comfort women statues, translating, and publicising documentaries, and commemorating the 14th of August (Kim,2014:83). In particular, the international erection of the comfort women statue, also known as the peaceful girl statue, has been a tremendous success, and there exist 40 of these statues across the globe, including South Korea, Australia, Germany, and Canada (USIP,2022). One of the statues, located in San Francisco, California depicts a girl from the Philippines holding hands with Korean and Chinese girls. The Comfort Women Justice Coalition, the NGO that advocated for and funded the establishment of the statue in San Francisco, declared that memorialisation efforts 'all serve the long-term purpose of remembrance' which itself is a 'subversive act of resistance' to the persisting structures of oppression that operate to silence the comfort women (CWJC,2016). In this regard, through internationalising the comfort women issue and then sustaining the international recognition of the survivors' histories through memorialisation, the comfort women movement ensured that the comfort women's memories are 'no longer confined within national borders', and thus, engenders international efforts to guarantee comfort women rights – rights that survivors be entitled to proper redress and rights that protect all women from state-sanctioned wartime violence (Kim,2014:83).

VI. Conclusion

On the 2nd of September 2015, marking 70th years since Japan's surrender to the allied forces, Amnesty International released an article spotlighting the comfort women movement's 'fight for justice [that] has strengthened the voices of women all over the world' and how 'the voices

of these survivors have inspired a global movement demanding that crimes of sexual violence be redressed' (Amnesty International,2015). International human rights NGOs continue to praise the comfort women movement's monumental achievements that challenged the Japanese government, even in the face of lies and denial. Such enthusiasm is also seen on the international level – in response to the reopening of the 'Museum der Trostfrauen' ('Comfort Women museum') in Berlin on the 19th of October 2022, numerous major German news agencies, including Zeit Online, Sueddeutsche Zeitung and Berliner Zeitung, and so on reported on and celebrated the reopening. In this light, the comfort women movement is best described as a survivor-driven, international movement demanding state recognition of systematic sexual abuses, and asserting the multilayered identities of survivors (Ruiz,2020). The movement clarified, through the internationalisation of the comfort women's stories, to the world that the comfort women issue is not just a Korean or Japanese issue but a universal human rights issue (Kim,2017). Through this clarification, the movement succeeded in engendering a global conversation on state-sanctioned wartime sexual violence. This success is a result of the comfort women and the founders, leaders, and supporters of the comfort women movement in the 1990s, most of them being women's rights groups, strenuous efforts to couch the comfort women issue, first in the language of women's rights, and then in the language of human rights through its advancement of the issue onto the UN's human rights agenda. This was monumental, as prior to the movement, there existed no formal language that the comfort women could use to title, let alone explain their experiences (Kimura,2003:19).

The fact that, until the comfort women issue became internationalised in 1991, the issue of state-sanctioned violence against women 'has never been evaluated, let alone condemned, by the international community' demonstrates the indispensable role of the movement in advancing the comfort women rights, and in turn, the women's rights in general

(Chung,1993:25). Using the forces of ‘remembrance, resistance, and transnational solidarity’, the comfort women movement countered all forms of militarism, imperialism, and state-sanctioned violence against women and ‘paved the way for the international recognition of crimes of sexual violence’ (CWJC,2016;Ruiz,2020). Hence, recognising that wartime violence against women is not confined to South Korea, the comfort women movement adopted a more ambitious aim than reparations for the survivors – to dismantle the masculinist sexual culture in gender relations that render sexual exploitation and violence against women in wartime as ‘inevitable wartime casualties’ (Morris-Suzuki,2014;Stratton,2008:69). This universal aim to bolster women’s rights led the comfort women movement to ‘become an international human rights cause célèbre for the struggle against sexual violence in armed conflict at the United Nations, ILO, NGOs, and national legislatures’ (Shin,2016:88).

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