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The Disgusting Story of the Japanese 'Comfort' Women

During World War II, the Japanese forced thousands of women into sexual slavery. Known as the 'comfort women', their story is one of the most shameful events, ever perpetrated in history.



Mythili the dreamer

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“I was a sex slave for the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II.”

This statement made by a feeble old woman in a historic news conference in 1991, Seoul, South Korea sent shivers across the world. Kim Hak-sun was the first-ever ‘comfort woman’ to come forward to expose the Japanese Imperial army’s heinous crimes against countless women during World War II.

Kim was 17 years old when she was abducted by a group of Japanese soldiers and taken to a Chinese town. She was raped that night, and that started a painful ordeal at a military brothel that lasted several months. Finally, she was able to escape with the help of a silver coin peddler from Pyongyang.

And more than 75 years since the war, we still don’t know much about these women. The details of these comfort women and the crime against them have been scant and shrouded into bureaucratic records that were either destroyed or provide vague information.

There are very few survivors and an estimated 90 percent of “comfort women” did not survive the war. In many cases, those who survived suffered from serious injuries and were unable to forget their traumatic pasts. Many suffered from venereal diseases and were unable to bear children. Others could not marry due to the burden of the shame deeply etched within their hearts.

And after the end of World War II, documents on the brothel system were systematically destroyed by Japanese officials, as Japan started rebuilding itself post-war. And in the process, the story of its enslavement of women was downplayed as an undesirable remnant of the war to be left, buried, and forgotten as a brutal by-product of a long, bloody war.

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The story of the 'comfort women'

Though military brothels existed in the Japanese military since 1932, they expanded further after the infamous episode of the Rape of Nanking, in which Japanese troops began a six-week-long massacre that essentially destroyed the Chinese city of Nanking (modern Nanjing). Along the way, Japanese troops raped between 20,000 and 80,000 Chinese women.

This mass rape horrified the world and dented the image of Japan. Due to the immense international pressure, Emperor Hirohito ordered the military to create the so-called “comfort stations,” or military brothels, in an effort to prevent further atrocities and ensure a steady and isolated group of prostitutes are available to satisfy Japanese soldiers’ sexual appetites.

And according to reports, the Japanese military began these comfort stations with volunteer prostitutes in occupied parts of China around 1931. But as the military expanded its territory, they turned to enslave women of the occupied areas.

Women were rounded up on the streets in an organized manner and convinced to travel to what they were told to nursing units or medical jobs, or purchased from their parents as indentured servants. Some survivors have reported that they were originally promised jobs like cooking, laundry, and babysitting for the Japanese Imperial Army.

Once they were at the brothels, the women were forced to have sex with their captors under brutal, inhumane conditions. As per Japanese records, there was one comfort woman assigned for every 70 soldiers and saying that their treatment was inhuman would be an understatement. The testimonies of the survivors are horrifying even to hear; repeated rapes, agonizing physical pain, pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and bleak conditions.

As a survivor, Maria Rosa Henson, a Filipina woman who was forced into prostitution in 1943 recalls.

“There was no rest. They had sex with me every minute.”

And as the Japanese began to lose the war, these comfort women were left behind to fend for themselves. Most of them never made it back to their home country and others returned as late as the 1990s. Those that made it home either kept their secret or lived a life marked by the shame of what they'd endured.

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75 years later, the issue is still unresolved

The sexual slavery has been a thorn in the relations between Seoul and Tokyo, along with Japan's alleged historical distortions in its school textbooks to downplay the crimes.

In 1993, Japan conducted a month-long investigation into the issue in response to growing pressure from Asian neighbors. In August, the then Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan Yohei Kono formally acknowledged and apologized for operating “comfort stations” and forcing women to provide sex to the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II.

Top highlight

But it is not until 2015 that Japanese Premier Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issued a formal apology. It was in accord with an agreement with the South Korean government. And along with the much-awaited official apology, Japan contributed 1 billion yen to a foundation formed to help the surviving women.

Some people believe that these reparations are still not enough. While a number of survivors have accepted compensation over the years, many South Koreans see the issue as unresolved because of what they consider as a lack of sincerity from the Japanese government. And while Japan says it

has done its best to help the women heal “psychological wounds”, the survivors aren’t buying it.

The wounds are just too deep to be healed back and maybe 75 years is too less a time to forget them and move ahead.

As Sherrilyn Kenyon has rightly said.

“The worst wounds, the deadliest of them, aren’t the ones people see on the outside. They’re the ones that make us bleed internally.”

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About the author-:

Mythili is a programmer by passion and a connoisseur of fine arts like painting, calligraphy, and pottery. She writes in the twilight between relationships, creativity, and human behavior.

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