

WOUNDS THAT WON'T HEAL: COMFORT WOMEN



A statue of a girl representing the "Comfort Women" conflict at the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Chung Sung-Jun - Getty Images.

From 1910 and throughout World War II until 1945, the Japanese Empire occupied Korea during an expansive era in which they managed to conquer parts of China and other Asian countries. The activity of the Imperial Japanese Army, as well as any reference to this episode in Japan's history, is something that the country of the Rising Sun wants to be forgotten. Although less than a hundred years have passed since then, the younger generation sees Japan as the cradle of technology and video games, the mecca of manga and anime, in a new conceptual configuration that is a far cry from the expansionist era. This is the extent of the Japanese softpower.

Although Japan is interested in maintaining this historical facelift, there are voices calling for justice and these are the ones of all those Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, Malay,

Taiwanese, Indonesian women, who were part of the so-called "comfort women".

A schematic practice

Experts estimate that up to 200,000 women in Korea and other Asian countries were forced to be sex slaves for the Japanese. The ways in which these women were brought into brothels ranged from direct abduction of victims from their own homes, deception (many were told they would work in health care or catering only to be enslaved) to coercion (women were held at gunpoint to be taken to brothels, or taken away after being raped).

The brothels where they were sent were called "comfort stations," and some of them were run and supervised directly by the Imperial Japanese

Army. The soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army waited in single file in the brothels, the victims were raped 50 to 60 times a day.

For the recruitment of these women, an administrative line was developed to find "effective" women in the various occupied countries. The main victims were the daughters of those who had fought against the occupation or refused to accept assimilation policies - such as changing the family's surname to a new Japanese one.

They were told that if they enlisted in the Patriotic Service Corps their families would be freed. They were then sent to any occupied territory to be turned into sex slaves for the troops stationed there. During the displacement they were forcibly sterilized.

As the war intensified, more comfort women were requested by the troops and there was less and less room to respond to all the requests, so the violence increased when it came to adding new additions to the brothels. When a new village was attacked, everything was razed to the ground and the women were raped.

There is evidence of capturing young men to satisfy the desires of homosexual soldiers.

Forgiveness and a solution that ignores the victims

Japan first officially apologized for its crimes in 1992 and then during a speech in 1995. Even so, Japan's stance toward South Korea (the country with the largest number of such victims) has always been to deny the numbers:

While the crimes of the colonies have been accepted, the actual number of women forced into sexual slavery is also said to have been between 10,000 and 20,000. Illustrative of

Japan's position on this issue, Shinzō Abe—who served as Japanese Prime Minister from 2006 to 2007, and from 2012 to September 2020—is part of the Nippon Kaigi organization, which denies the existence of Japanese crimes, including female slavery.

In the years when Japan apologizes for its crimes, Korean comfort women survivors break their silence. Among the most popular was the activist Kim Bok-dong, who passed away in early 2019 and who would go to the Japanese embassy in Seoul every day to demonstrate.

Since then, the Korean and Japanese governments have spent years trying to reach an agreement on the compensation that the victims deserve, but Tokyo has often refused, believing that South Korea was demanding too much money.

The meetings dealing with this issue have been affected depending on the South Korean administration at the time and its view of the contemporary Japanese government. For example, since 2012, there has been no bilateral relations between the two countries on this issue, as then President Park Geun-hye refused to hold any bilateral talks with Japan if it did not see a genuine commitment on resolving the issue.

It was not until 2015 when an agreement was reached between the two governments to formalize an apology and pay compensation, but this was rejected by the surviving victims' association because they had not been involved at any point during the negotiation.

In 2017, relations between the two governments were strained when several statues were placed in commemoration of the victims of this practice, one of them being placed in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. It was around this time that a recording of the time was made public in which

comfort women can be seen at one of the so-called "comfort stations".

The relationship has continued to deteriorate as a year later, South Korea's Supreme Court ruled that citizens could sue Japanese companies for their use of Korean forced laborers during World War II. In 2019 Japan removed South Korea from its list of preferred trading partners.

The most recent news on this still unresolved case came out on January 8, 2021, when a South Korean judge ruled that Japan must pay damages to 12 victims of sexual slavery during Japan's military expansionist era. This sentence responds to a complaint filed by these victims in 2016. Tokyo's reactions to the ruling have been to reject the conviction and to recall that Japan is outside South Korea's jurisdiction.

While the two governments continue their disputes using this conflict as a catalyst, the reality is that today there are still survivors who are not receiving neither the apology they deserve nor the compensation they demand. Memory and insistence are crucial for justice to be done, in order not to forget all those who suffered and perished and in order to guarantee that these atrocities will not be committed ever again.

Adrian Caravaca Caparrós

Graduated in East Asian Studies
by the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and
Master's student in International Journalism at
Blanquerna

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Publicado por:



Vía Laietana, 51, entlo.3ª. 08003 Barcelona
Tels.: 93 301 39 90 – (31 98) Fax: 93 317 57 68
e-mail: info@anue.org

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Generalitat de Catalunya
Institut Català de les Dones