



# The Reformation of Public Memory: Campaign for Redress Shifts Public Memory of Comfort Women Issue

Sara Shields

Department of History and Government

MISERICORDIA  
UNIVERSITY

## Abstract:

The comfort station system established by the Japanese during World War II institutionalized sexual violence against women in order to supposedly prevent both violent rapes and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among Japanese soldiers. There are still arguments and denial over the issue of comfort women today, stating that these women were there of their own free will and were not enslaved. Until recently, they were regarded as “**military prostitutes,**” and were viewed as a disgrace by their respective cultures. However, evidence gathered since the early 1990s indicates that not only were comfort women sexual slaves of the Imperial Japanese military, but that the Japanese government and military directly collaborated to establish the comfort station system and to procure the women for them. A campaign to secure redress for the survivors began in 1992 and has been successful in reshaping public memory around the comfort station system.

## Background:

The widespread implementation of comfort station systems began after the **Nanking Massacre**. On December 13, 1937, Imperial Japanese troops captured the city of Nanking, the capital of the Republic of China, and began their siege. The Nanking Massacre lasted approximately six weeks and resulted in the death of approximately 260,000 noncombatants and the violent rape of 20,000 to 80,000 women and young girls. While comfort stations did exist before the Nanking Massacre, the establishment of comfort stations substantially increased across China after the Japanese occupation of Nanking. Supposedly, the purpose of comfort stations was to prevent both violent rapes and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among soldiers. Women and girls were procured for comfort stations through various methods such as coercion, deceit, kidnapping, or purchase. Procurement of women and girls through means of deception were most common in Korea, where many victims were told they would be leaving their families for the promise of work or education opportunities. Cooperation among Korean citizens in the abduction or deception of women was also present.

## Post-war Treatment:

As the War in the Pacific came to an end, many comfort stations were destroyed, and comfort women were killed by the Japanese military. Those who survived experienced discrimination and humiliation upon returning home. Plagued by mental and physical ailments, many survivors suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and insomnia, as well as chronic headaches, nervous breakdowns, and a fear of sexual intercourse. Physical afflictions such as sexually transmitted diseases, uterine diseases, and sterility were also common among survivors. This caused survivors to be viewed as worthless, especially in Chinese society where the ability to bear children determined the value of a woman.



Memorials help bring awareness and education to the issue of the comfort station system. With the issue gaining attention only a short time ago, memorials like this make the public aware of the campaign for redress.

Dslamng, Syzamie, *HK Central night Comfort women in art*, April 2021, Wikimedia Commons accessed April 26, 2021. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HK\\_Central\\_night\\_Comfort\\_women\\_in\\_art\\_April\\_2021\\_SS2\\_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HK_Central_night_Comfort_women_in_art_April_2021_SS2_02.jpg)

Activism surrounding the issue is also important for public awareness and education. Through sharing their testimonies, survivors allow their voices to be heard and their stories to be acknowledged.



Solery, Claire, *Comfort Women, rally in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, August 2011*, Wikimedia Commons accessed April 26, 2021. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Comfort\\_Women,\\_rally\\_in\\_front\\_of\\_the\\_Japanese\\_Embassy\\_in\\_Seoul,\\_August\\_2011\\_\(3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Comfort_Women,_rally_in_front_of_the_Japanese_Embassy_in_Seoul,_August_2011_(3).jpg)

## Campaign for Redress:

The **campaign for redress** for surviving comfort women began in December of 1991, when three former comfort women from South Korea came forward and filed suit in the Tokyo District Court. These women were the first to publicly hold Japan accountable for their experiences as former comfort women during World War II. After the emergence of the issue, in 1992, previously undiscovered documents had been recovered at the National Institute for Defense Studies Library and were made public. This put pressure on Japan to acknowledge their role in the establishment and implementation of comfort stations and provide justice to survivors.

Multiple activist organizations have been established around the globe since the emergence of the campaign for redress. They focus on bringing justice to surviving comfort women, advocating for survivors, and educating the public on the issue. The expanded attention given to the issue, as a result of these international organizations, has pressured Japan to issue an official apology and provide reparations to victims of the comfort station system.

Through activist organizations, survivors sharing their testimonies, and education regarding the issue, public memory of comfort women has shifted from survivors being viewed as a mark of disgrace, shame and humiliation to their respective cultures, to being victims of a system of institutionalized sexual slavery.

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