

Indonesian Comfort Women:

The Influence and Struggle of Traumatic Experiences by Former Comfort Women Still Relevant Today

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Chapter 1: Colonialism

Colonialism is a dark part of humanity's history. Tens of millions of men, women, and children endured unimaginable suffering. Colonization embodies humanity's tendency towards hypocrisy and violence. European colonizers often referred to native Africans as "backwards and savages". Yet, colonizers also murdered millions of Africans, while subjecting even more to slavery. The suffering caused by colonization all around the world is very clear and grim. Tens of millions of men were tortured, starved, and beaten into submission. Millions of women were raped and abused. Meanwhile, colonizers grew rich off of the backs of enslaved and colonized people's labor. In times like these, it isn't surprising as to why colonized people often preferred death.

Chapter 2: Indonesian Colonization

Indonesia is a country that is not unfamiliar with the brutality of colonialism. First, it was by the Europeans. By their hands, the soon-to-be Indonesians suffered greatly. Millions of people died due to inhumane working conditions, and even more were displaced. Resources were stolen that could have been used to develop the region. For more than 300 years, the people of the archipelago endured these treatments. Then came the Japanese. At first, Indonesians perceived the Japanese as liberators. They were welcomed as Indonesia's savior from European oppression. Japan's propaganda particularly resonated with the local population. However, the reality of Japanese occupation soon dissipated the enthusiasm. The revelation that the Japanese regime was often as, if not more, exploitative than the Dutch soon became clear.

The Japanese implemented many new policies upon the local population. This includes more mundane areas of society, such as reforming the education system, government subdivisions, and art. Some of these reforms did, in fact, have a positive impact upon Indonesian society. However, other reforms were more cruel and oppressive. These include military conscription for both men and women, *Romusha* where thousands of Indonesians were forced into labor to help in the war effort, secret police snuffing out dissent among citizens, and repression of criticisms of the government and the war.

Chapter 3: Comfort Women (Capture and Treatment)

One of the most horrific practices brought by the Japanese occupation was the use of comfort women. Comfort women, or *ianfu*, were women forced into sexual slavery by the

Imperial Japanese armed forces during World War 2. Thousands of women, some as young as 11, from all over Japanese occupied territories were forced into prostitution to provide sexual services to Japanese servicemen. These women and girls were often subjected to abuse, torture, medical neglect, and trauma. The use of comfort women remains as one of the most horrific human rights issues in the 20th century. As Indonesia was a big part of the Japanese empire, many women from the archipelago were forced into comfort women.

It is hard to estimate how many Indonesian comfort women there were. Conflicting studies and reports, combined with the lack of documentation and the sensitive nature of the topic, makes estimating the number of victims almost impossible. It is estimated that there were around 40 so-called “*comfort stations*” established by the Japanese in the archipelago, though due to insufficient documentation, some researchers estimate the number to be much higher. Particular hotspots of these comfort stations were located in Sumatra, West Java, and Celebes (now Sulawesi). The number of comfort women housed within the stations ranged between fewer than 10 to as much as 40. According to Japanese researcher, Prof. Aiko Kurawasa, women working in prostitution industry were taken initially. However, as the demand for the comfort women increased, the Japanese sought to increase their numbers. The Japanese forced more and more women into working as comfort women. Sometimes the Japanese would ask local district and clan leaders to provide comfort women. Due to the hierarchical structure of these areas, it was impossible for the women to deny their authorities. Many women were also the victims of deception. Recruiters often promised the women with legitimate jobs such as factory worker, nursing, or other forms of employment. They were also often told of educational opportunities, which were highly appealing to young women seeking to improve their lives. Other times, women were simply coerced with threats and intimidation to join. There were also many girls abducted and kidnapped by the Japanese military. Some of these girls were abducted on their way home from work or school, while others were kidnapped in their homes while their parents were away.

The treatment of these women were horrific and inhumane. Oftentimes, these women were forced to have sex with multiple soldiers daily, often with little regard to the woman's wellbeing. Some documentation mentioned women being raped by up to 50 soldiers daily. They were also severely dehumanized. They were often referred to as, not as “people”, but derogatory names such as “*female ammunition*”, “*military supplies*”, or even “*public toilets*”. Unsurprisingly, they were also often abused and tortured. Sometimes by the soldiers during the rape, or they were tortured for showing resistance. Oftentimes, when a comfort woman shows hesitation or was caught trying to escape, they were severely punished. These punishments include being beaten with hot spatulas, feet tied with tight rope, burning, whipping, and other forms of torture. Basic human needs were also often severely insufficient. Food, water, housing, and plumbing were often not enough for the amount of women the stations were housing. Medical care was also rarely given. Medical care was often restricted to only treating

sexually-transmitted diseases, sterilization, and abortion. Not surprisingly, these conditions led to the women developing long-lasting psychological trauma.

Chapter 4: Allies

Even during the war, the issue of the use of comfort women by the Japanese was of little importance to the Allies. One Australian translator, *Frederick Arblaster*, recalls a group of women surrendering alongside Japanese soldiers. When questioned, a Japanese officer insisted that they were Red Cross and hospital nurses. Despite the ruined clothes and battered faces, *Frederick* simply responded “*they’re the funniest looking Red Cross and hospital staff that I ever saw in my life*”. He asked his commanding officer for permission to question the women, however the officer told him “*don’t waste your time, sergeant. Let’s go*”. Unfortunately, the end of the war wasn’t yet the end for the comfort women. Though sources vary and often contradict, an *Associated Press* review of historical records indicated that American authorities permitted the use of the comfort women. The documents claimed that comfort women were still used by American troops after 1945. This supposedly went on until 1946, when General Douglas MacArthur shut the comfort women system down.

Chapter 5: Survivors and Their Experiences

Despite the hell these women faced during the war, some still survived. Due to incomplete documentation, it is very hard to pinpoint the exact number of survivors. However, it is safe to say that a very large portion of them did not survive. For example, in South Korea, out of 240 recognized by the government, only 9 survived. Over the decades, multiple comfort women from all across Southeast Asia have come out with their experiences. The amount of information we currently have of the inhumane treatment these women faced were thanks to, in large part, the testimonies of surviving comfort women. Despite their undoubted resilience and testimonies, these women were often stigmatized by society. There are multiple factors as to why the issue of comfort women wasn’t taken more seriously. For one, the nations impacted by Japanese occupation were left both economically and politically crippled. Hence, it was deemed that there were more “important” matters than addressing reparations for these comfort women. Secondly, it was seen as a way to maintain peace. Governments were unwilling to bring up the issue of comfort women, fearing deteriorating relations with Japan post-war. Third, there was a stigma around sexual violence in Indonesia. Because sexuality is taboo in Indonesian culture, these women were often ostracized. When these women came out and shared their stories, many people viewed them as willing sex workers that provided services to Japanese soldiers. Due to these factors, most of the surviving comfort women didn’t come out with their stories, fearing rejection from society. As a result, they were unable to get the necessary medical (both mental and physical) treatment they deserved. While some did manage to lead decent lives, others weren’t so lucky. Some died in poverty, while others were unable to bear children as a result of the physical damage they endured.

Undoubtedly, the horrors these women faced influenced their lives after the war up until today. These women were often overwhelmed by their traumatic experiences and developed many mental problems. Problems such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Multiple books and research projects have shed light on the lives of these surviving comfort women. For example, the book “*Comfort Women: Troost Meisjes*” by Dutch journalist *Hilde Janssen* and photographer *Jan Banning* has an interview with a surviving comfort woman named *Niyem*. In the book, Niyem shares her story and experiences of being a comfort woman. She was taken at the age of 10 and forced into a military camp. During the interview, Niyem mentioned “*I was nothing but a toy, as a human being I meant nothing*”. This undoubtedly stemming from the utter neglect and carelessness of the soldiers that raped her. After she escaped and returned home, she did not dare tell anyone of her experience. Niyem said “*I was afraid that no one would want me, that I would be left out. But people still abused me by calling me a Japanese hand-me-down*”. This thinking didn’t cease after the war, however. The trauma she experienced left her with a feeling of worthlessness. This deeply affected her relationships with people post-war. Her traumatic past and the scars it left on her surely influenced and hindered her abilities to connect with and trust people.

Niyem’s story is, unfortunately, not entirely unique. Her story is very similar to that of *Ronasih* from West Java. As showcased by the WUNRN, Ronasih was picked up by a Japanese soldier on her way home from school, and systematically raped for three months. Her father visited the barracks multiple times, offering himself as free labor for the release of his daughter. After the war, Ronasih decided to wait and married late. She explained “my wounds hadn’t healed yet, I was afraid, I wanted to get better first”. Ronasih has been married 5 different times. Although not mentioned specifically, it can be inferred that her past had influenced her way of connecting with people, leading her to re-marry multiple times.

Surviving comfort women not only faced internal mental problems, but also external problems. Another survivor, Suharti, was interviewed by Prof. *Akihisa Matsuno*. Suharti was taken along with a group of other young girls. They were transported to Balikpapan. She “served” there for 6 months, where she escaped after allied bombing of Balikpapan. In the interview, she tells Prof. Akihisa Matsuno of her experiences post-war. She mentioned how it was very hard for her to tell her story, due to the stigma around sexuality, even sexual violence. Her trauma and the stigma she faced influenced her into feeling that she was isolated by her community, forced to suffer in silence. Unfortunately, most surviving comfort women in Indonesia experienced this too. The shame they had of being comfort women, although forced to, still made them isolated from the people around them.

Fortunately, the influence of the comfort women’s past isn’t all negative. Multiple surviving comfort women have come out and become activists towards the recognition of the

issue of comfort women. In Dr. *Katharine McGregor's* book, “*Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia*”, she explores the impact of traumatic experiences of survivors and how many of them later became activists. These activists have advocated for reparations and justice for the surviving comfort women, both in Indonesia and all over Southeast Asia. They have encouraged surviving comfort women to come out with their stories and break their silence. Dr Katherine also examined the impact Japanese and Korean activists in assisting Indonesian activists in regards of sexual violence. These activists have not only advocated for the comfort women issue, but also for women’s rights in general. Their traumatic experiences had influenced them into wanting to advocate for women all over the world as to not experience the same things they did. This leads to more power to women’s rights activists, strengthening the push towards gender equality around the world.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Though we, rightfully, view the acts committed on these women (both during and post-war) as barbaric and inhumane, we must realize aspects of their experiences still exist today. Countless women are still forced into sex work today, similar to the comfort women of the past. In 2024, the US Department of State estimated that 27 million people are being exploited by human traffickers worldwide, a majority of which are women and underage girls being trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Sexual exploitation of women and underage girls aren’t only done by criminals, but also by the public. For example, Pornhub. Pornhub has faced severe backlash due to their ties with sex trafficking. Reportedly, Pornhub has hosted many videos by sex traffickers of coerced sex, rape, and even child sexual abuse. These videos often have tens of thousands of views, leading to further sexual exploitation of the victims. This isn’t only exclusive to Pornhub, however. Multiple video-hosting websites host videos of sexual violence against women and underage girls. Today, cases of rape, coercion, and sexual assault make up a significant portion of the porn industry.

Today, 1 in 3 women have faced physical or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. Problems with sexual violence against women aren’t only in direct exploitation, but also in the stigma around victims. For example, in the US, only around 25% of rapes and sexual assault was reported to the police in 2018. Globally, less than 40% of women victims seek help (therapy, counselling, etc), and less than 10% report it to law enforcement. These harrowing statistics can be explained when we understand the stigma rape and sexual assault victims face. Victim blaming is often done by society. Questions such as “What was she wearing?” or “Why didn’t she fight back?” openly implying that the victim was responsible for the assault. This leads to many victims feeling shame and guilt, believing that they somehow “deserved” to be raped or sexually assaulted. They might also fear retaliation. In many cases, victims are further harmed by either the perpetrator or their community when they come forward. This is because

their community or perpetrator fears that their reputation might be damaged. This is particularly relevant when the perpetrator is someone with high social status. Women are less likely to come forward with reports of their rape if their rapist was a highly-regarded businessman or politician. Culture also plays a role in this. Discussing sexual violence is taboo in some cultures, which leads to victims being silenced. These fears of societal backlash by their community and fear of dismissal leads to victims feeling socially isolated, hence unable to get the help they need.

The story of the comfort women is a horrific example of the exploitation of women. However, we must not only condemn it, but also fight so that it never happens again. As we can see, the fight for the abolition of sexual exploitation of women is not over. Millions of women are still sexually trafficked every year, the porn industry profits off of illegal and child pornography, and rape victims still are stigmatized by society. From these statistics, it is obvious that the fight for justice for victims similar to the comfort women are far from over. We, as a society, must understand that the remnants of the patriarchy from the past still exist within our current society. It starts from us as individuals. We must realize our own patriarchal biases and their potential damage to women's rights issues. Only when we understand that, can we start to protect and heal the victims of these crimes.

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