



## ASIA FOCUS

# THE RECOGNITION OF THE “COMFORT WOMEN”, GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT AND PATRIARCHY

*Interview conducted by Eva Rof Sanchez,  
Graduated Student from the Catholic University of Lille, with*

**Mari Miura** / Professor, Sophia University Tokyo, Japan

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## AUTHORS' PRESENTATION



**Mari Miura** / Professor, Sophia University Tokyo, Japan

Professor in the Law Department at Sophia University, Tokyo. Her areas of specialization are contemporary Japanese politics, welfare state theory and gender studies. She also holds a doctorate in political science from the University of California, Berkeley (UCB).

*Interview conducted by **Eva Rof Sanchez**, graduated student from the Master 2 History - International Relations - Geopolitics program at the Catholic University of Lille. She conducted this interview for her thesis under the supervision of Claude Leblanc.*

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The collection is edited by **Barthélémy Courmont**, director of research at IRIS and lecturer at the Catholic University of Lille, and **Emmanuel Lincot**, associate researcher at IRIS, professor at the Catholic Institute of Paris and sinologist. It is part of the IRIS Asia-Pacific Programme.



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## INTRODUCTION

*"More than anything, I categorically reject the term 'comfort women'! Since it means something warm and gentle. We weren't 'comfort women', we were victims of abduction and rape by the Japanese army!*

Jan Ruff O'Herne

These words, spoken by Jan Ruff O'Herne, a former "ianfu" ("comfort woman" in Japanese), and used in the comic strip "Femmes de réconfort" (*Comfort Women*)<sup>1</sup>, bear witness to the trauma still suffered by former "comfort women". This innocuous phrase actually hides a sordid euphemism referring to thousands of young women and girls kidnapped during the Japanese conquest of Asia and used as sex slaves by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second World War, between 1931 and 1945.

Throughout this article, the term "comfort" will be enclosed in quotation marks, since, in the words of Jan Ruff O'Herne, the system of "comfort houses" was in fact more akin to sexual slavery than consoling places for soldiers.

Sexual slavery is defined as follows by Jean Fernand Laurent, special rapporteur to the United Nations in 1983 on the suppression of trafficking in human beings and the exploitation of the prostitution of others: "Like slavery in the usual sense, prostitution has an economic aspect. As well as being a cultural phenomenon rooted in the images of men and women conveyed by society, it is a market, and a very lucrative one. The commodity here is human pleasure, or the imagination of pleasure. This commodity is unfortunately offered by the intimacy of the woman's or child's body. The alienation of the person is more serious here than in slavery in the usual sense, where what is alienated is labour power, not intimacy".<sup>2</sup>

The "comfort women" affair refers to the abduction of between 200,000 and 400,000 women who were very young. Most of them were minors (around 12 to 15 years old), and they were mostly Korean, coming from North then South Korea, at that time not separated. "Comfort women" were used all over Asia, in all the Japanese colonies (Philippines, Taiwan, China...)

<sup>1</sup> J. Kyung-a, « Femmes de réconfort- Esclaves sexuelles de l'armée japonaise. », Magneron (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Fernand-Laurent, Report of Jean Fernand-Laurent, Special Rapporteur on the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. United Nations Digital Library System, March 17, 1983.

established during the war. South Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910 under the name of “Chô-sen” (“Land of the Calm Morning”).

The system was supposedly ceased with Japan's surrender in 1945. However, these “comfort houses” were still used after the war, notably for American soldiers in South Korea in the 1950s. In 1991, the case was brought to light by the testimony of Kim Hak-sun, a former “comfort woman”. Since this time, “comfort women” were in majority considered as “dishonoured” by their families and countries, because used and tainted by the enemy. They were heavily criticised and rejected among South Korean society.

Japan has, to this day, still not given an official government’s apology to South Korea, and the latter is seeking to use this issue as a geopolitical asset today. However, the number of “Ianfu” women still alive and well enough to fight for their recognition has drastically diminished. In other words, their memory is dying. Will the “comfort women” who have not died manage to hear the Japanese government's apologies they have been waiting for all their lives? In addition, how can justice be served for those who have already disappeared?

The current geopolitical context, with the war in Ukraine and the rise of extreme nationalism in the political arenas of most of the world's countries shows the importance of historical memory. This work of remembrance also involves refuting the theories that establish the male sexual act as a need, to which the female subject should submit to, as they do not feel the same carnal desire. The transmission of memory must also counter revisionist theories refuting the existence of “comfort women” or equating them with paid prostitution, but also to lift the dishonour that has, almost systematically, been affixed to survivors by their own families and countries, considering them “tainted” by the enemy. Finally, the work of remembrance is vital to counter the instrumentalization of a historical fact for political and geopolitical ends.

To understand this historical chapter, and to see how its memory still has an impact on the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea, we have discussed with Mari Miura; a Professor at the Faculty of Law, at Sophia University in Tokyo. She is also a specialist in contemporary Japanese politics, welfare state theory and gender studies. She holds a doctoral degree in political science from the University of California, Berkeley (UCB). Her work has enabled us to understand an analysis through the gender prism, showing how women can be weaponized during armed conflicts.

## AN OFFICIAL APOLOGY FROM THE JAPANESE GOVERNMENT?

In the 1990s, Japan faced a five-year political change, with the conservative party (Liberal Democratic Party –LDP) leaving to a more progressive political party, a coalition with the Japanese Socialist Party. During this period, the Imperial Japanese Army's responsibility for the "comfort women" affair was acknowledged, notably by the Kônô declaration of the Japanese government's Secretary General in 1993. However, this statement did not constitute an official apology. Mari Miura adds "They [the Japanese Government] don't want to apologise because they don't want to accept the verity of colonisation. In the 1990s the dynamics had changed in the Japanese politics, that is why we saw some changes on the "comfort women" issue. But there was a huge backlash against this apology move." The backlash was reinforced by the very conservative opinion of the Japanese media who are opposed to any more possibilities of apologies.

For her, if the "comfort women" memory struggles to be recognised in Japan, it is due to a strong patriarchal pattern and a denial ideology in the Japanese current conservative government. She believes that there is a lack of solidarity in the Japanese society with the "comfort women" because Japanese citizens are unaware about the subject. Most of people think that "comfort women" were in reality prostitutes paid by the Japanese soldiers instead of sexual slaves. "Many people consider that the issue is just an international relationship between Japan and South Korea. Most people don't know that there were Japanese comfort women and comfort women outside Korea. People think this is just a Japanese Korean issue."

Mari Miura's vision echoes with the recent choice of the right-wing government to re-edit historical scholar books without including the responsibility of the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II in civil mass suicides or in the "comfort women" issue<sup>3</sup>. "The rewriting history situation is an answer to the apology situation in the 1990s. The denial is the core ideology."

The Professor recalls a documentary realised by Miki Dezaki, a graduate student from Sophia University, called *Shusenjo — The Main Battleground of the "Comfort Women" Issue*. This movie was well received in Japan, as more people tended to learn about the issue. The movie, available in streaming, was more watched in Japan than in the rest of the world, showing the interest of the Japanese public for this unknown affair.

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<sup>3</sup> P. Messmer, « Au Japon, les nouveaux manuels scolaires réécrits sous l'influence des révisionnistes », *Le Monde*, July 1, 2023



## A STRONG PATRIARCHY IDEOLOGY IN JAPAN AS WELL IN SOUTH KOREA

Moreover, Mari Miura links the actual depiction of sexual violence and violence against women in Japanese “pop-culture” (anime, manga, massive pornography industry) with the lack of solidarity of the Japanese population against “comfort women” and the strong support of masculinist movements. Japanese culture is heavily sexualised, and the industry follows a public sex ideal shared by men, where violence or unclear consent is the norm. These representations may bring confusion about women pleasure and the use of violence in sexual intercourse as a norm.

Mari Miura notes that feminism in Japan is still a small circle but is growing, also thanks to these kind of violence against women affairs. “Feminism based on the experience of victimhood of such violence is quite active. They [Japanese feminists] see that histories are connecting, what they experience in Japan now is related to what happened to “comfort women” in the past. They see this kind of historical linkage, they go to Korea, take actions with activists in Korea to support “comfort women.” However, these feminist movements are still heavily criticised and rejected amongst the popular opinion in Japan. For example, the activist Nito Yumeno, founder of the association Colabo who seeks to help young girls by avoiding them to fall into the sexual industry, was strongly harassed online and in the places where her team proposed help<sup>4</sup>.

Nowadays, the South Korean government level is very male dominant<sup>5</sup>, with a strong nationalist position on the subject. They will use the “comfort women” affair to gain a better position in the geopolitical world *vis-à-vis* of Japan or the United States. On the other hand, South Korean women activists supporting “comfort women” try to seek justice and take a completely different path than the government or political parties.

## AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT REMAINS ON THE SIDELINES

Mari Miura gives us a fair point of view of the international community, which seems to want to acknowledge the “comfort women” issue but also seeks to avoid any real involvement on the subject, so as not to offend Japan or South Korea, which can be important allies, particularly for the United States in the face of China or North Korea. This same international

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<sup>4</sup> Harassment leads to review of support service for abuse victims

<sup>5</sup> A. Gunia, “How South Korea’s Yoon Suk-yeol Capitalized on Anti-Feminist Backlash to Win the Presidency”, *Time*, March 10, 2022

community tries to avoid having to justify their own colonial period, when a majority of colonising countries used systems of sexual slavery for their armies, for example France in Algeria or Vietnam. “Japanese government uses the argument that they were not the only one to use “comfort women”, and many other countries had similar systems. I think there is a resentment among the conservative side about why Japan should be the only country to be heavily criticised even though other countries have done the same.”

For Mari Miura, the biggest difference between Japan and the rest of the international community is that they never officially banned public prostitution systems while it was prohibited in most of the other countries, especially to control sexual diseases and the health of soldiers. For Japan, the prostitution system is really institutionalised since before the Meiji era (1850’s). Mari Miura considers that controlling sex has been embedded in the state building. Apologising for the “comfort women” issue, would mean for Japan to criticise the core of the state ideology and state building.

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