

September 22, 2017

CWJC Statement at Unveiling of the Memorial for “Comfort Women” in San Francisco

We stand here today, united, as we bear witness to the suffering of hundreds of thousands of women and girls, euphemistically called “Comfort Women,” who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces in 13 Asia-Pacific countries from the early 1930’s to 1945. We stand here determined to win justice for all the victims of the Japanese military sexual slavery system, the majority of whom did not even live to see freedom. Through our memorial, we remember all our grandmothers who are alive, and all those who have passed on but are still with us in both spirit and memory. Through our transnational, multiethnic solidarity, we are also resolved to restore justice to those whose lives and suffering have been erased by nationalist politics or expediency.

This memorial is the product of unity among countless dedicated volunteers, activists, scholars and teachers, students, youth, parents and grandparents, professionals and retirees and others, who have joined under the united banner of the “Comfort Women” Justice Coalition to make this memorial a reality today. Much of the work was done away from the spotlight.

We stand here, guided by the powerful leadership of the surviving grandmothers themselves, who have led the global movement during the past decades. Their voices helped launch a global cry for accountability and justice. When Grandmother Kim Hak Soon courageously broke her silence, she helped pave the way for the international community to recognize sexual violence during war as a crime against humanity.

Echoing the grandmothers’ calls, we demand that the Japanese Government take full, official responsibility for the institution of sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army, an act that constitutes a war crime as well as a crime against humanity. The Government of Japan must implement the following actions:

1. Make a sincere, official, and legally binding apology;
2. Pay full reparations to the victims and their families;
3. Conduct a thorough investigation of the crime and punish those found guilty in a court of law;
4. Memorialize the victims and continue to teach its citizens an accurate and truthful history of Japan during its era of imperial expansion and World War II.

CWJC furthermore demands that Japan's apology and redress reflect the findings of the most up-to-date rigorous international scholarship. Recently, scholars have uncovered the fact that even more girls and women than previously known were enslaved, violated, and murdered in makeshift facilities in multiple war fronts across China, the Pacific, and Southeast Asia. These victims have left even fewer traces in official archives than those victims who were confined in the comfort stations set up in larger cities.

We want to go on record:

We condemn the Japanese Government's refusal to issue an official apology, and we denounce its diplomatic attempts to avoid taking full responsibility. These attempts include the 2015 so-called "agreement" between the governments of South Korea and Japan.

We have stood and will stand firm against all of the Government's obstruction and denialism, including its blocking of people's attempts to build memorials all over the world.

Let us remember that through their activism the grandmothers have stood with victims of state-instituted sexual violence all over the world.

Following their footsteps, we stand in solidarity with all those who have suffered from sexual violence. We are thinking of those in our communities who have been forced into sex trafficking, of the Yazidi women, the women in Syria, in Congo, and in Juarez, Mexico, and all those living near military bases. We are also thinking of those who suffered from sexual violence in the past, during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the genocide of indigenous people.

We dedicate our memorial to all the grandmothers and their unwavering resolve for justice. We pledge to continue our struggle against all forms of sexual violence, and for an end to the sexism, racism, colonialism, militarization, and war that fuel it. Standing here united in front of the memorial, we envision a world free from fear of sexual violence, where all women and girls can live a life with respect and dignity.