Can the Japan-Korea Dispute on “Comfort Women” be Resolved?

Gabriel Jonsson*

About 80 percent of the estimated 70,000-200,000 comfort women Japan took by coercion from 1932-1945 were Korean. The Japanese government claims that the 1965 Japan-Republic of Korea (ROK) Normalization Treaty is the authority to support its argument that the comfort women do not have a claim at international law but they were not even mentioned in it.

The issue was long neglected for pragmatic reasons. When Korean women raised the issue around 1990 and the former comfort woman Kim Hak-sun came out in 1991, it emerged as a point of dispute. Japan has given no official apology to the victims.

Museums in Seoul and Tokyo focus on victims’ sufferings enhancing understanding. The feeling of guilt regarding an unresolved issue should be enhanced among visitors. Only time will tell if the 70th anniversary of World War II and the 50th anniversary of

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pares how museums in Japan and Korea present the issue and investigates whether they could contribute to resolve it or not. The author has found no study analyzing and comparing contents of The War and Women’s Human Rights Museum in Seoul and The Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo. Significantly, the museums differ from other means to resolve the comfort women issue in one important respect: they visualize past history and display a vast amount of information at one place. What impact could such a strength have on resolving the issue?

Museums are important as educational institutions giving them authority. On the basis of their physical structures and authority, they offer opportunities for groups to institutionalize their narratives in a way that other media cannot provide. A museum is a place to exercise power since as statements of position a museum both illuminate and omit. A museum asserts values and makes attempts at legitimization that can be contested. The concept of performativity that refers to “...the rather general quality something might have by being a virtue of performance” is applied (data on the role of museums are from Gustafsson, 2011: 48. “Performativity” is from Loxley, 2007: 140). By analyzing the two museums, three specific issues that include the relations between perpetrators and victims are investigated: How is the issue presented? What interpretations can be drawn from the presentations? Can the interpretations affect the countries’ policies on the comfort women issue and contribute to a solution?

II. The Emergence and Early Development of the Comfort Women Issue

Estimations of the number of comfort women range from 70,000 to 200,000. About 80 per-cent were Korean but women from Japan (mainly former professional prostitutes), China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, East Timor, India, Guam and the Netherlands were also victims. One reason why the majority was Korean wo-men is that they resemble Japanese
women. In Korea, systematic and often coercive recruitment of the majority of the former comfort women by the Japanese forces took place under the banner of the Chôngsindae (“Voluntary Labor Service Corps”) but also Koreans were involved in the business. The Chôngsindae was ostensibly established to procure women for work in factories or to perform other war-related duties to assist the Japanese army but instead many women were deceived into serving as military sexual slaves.

The ostensible purpose of the comfort women system was to lift the morale of Japanese soldiers, reduce the spread of venereal disease (comfort women were regularly checked) and to reduce the frequency of rape committed by Japanese soldiers. The soldiers suffered from stress at the battle-front and frequent rapes created anti-Japanese feelings in occupied areas. Since the Japanese military took the women abroad, the women became weaker by not having social acquaintances and not knowing the language. Military “comfort stations” were in place by early 1932 at the latest. Japan began to draft Korean women in full force from around 1937 when its army invaded China. For more than four decades after World War II, none of the affected nations in Asia officially raised issues regarding the war-time sexual abuse of their women by the Japanese military. Since the political and economic situation in Korea was extremely unstable after World War II and the Korean War (1950-1953), other issues were more important than the comfort women, although the government knew about them. Such a situation hindered a solution of the issue. A common opinion is that the Korean government is responsible for not having raised the issue for four decades. The issue is now widely known among the Korean public, although they do not know about it in detail.

At the end of World War II, many comfort women were killed, abandoned or forced to commit suicide. There are estimates that only about one-quarter and one-third, respectively, of all comfort women survived their hardships but the numbers cannot be verified. The survivors were saved by the allied forces upon Japan’s defeat in the war. Since the Confucian Korean society emphasized chastity and associated any kind of sexual defilement with promiscuity, women who returned home were too withdrawn and feared ostracisation from society and their families. If any of the former comfort women had publicly exposed their experiences they would not have received sympathy but would have been criticized and seen as a humiliation to their family. The Japanese government as well as the public was silent since, if the comfort women issue would become known worldwide, it would become a new post-war issue to handle in Japanese-Korean relations (author’s visits to the Museum of Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military, June 28, 2014 and the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum, July 3, 2014; Coomaraswamy, 1996: 4; McDougall, 1998: 39-40; Pak, 2014: 61-2; Raymond, Mathur and Roman, 2003: 41, 46, 54; Soh, 1996: 1226-7, 1228, 1230, 1231-2; Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM), 2009; Yoon, 2010: 47-8, 50, 82-3).

Since the Korean society was not ready to warmly protect the women, they received another wound. President Syngman Rhee (1948-1960) pursued an anti-Japanese foreign policy hindering interaction but for President Park Chung Hee (1963-1979) Japan was a model to be emulated. Following talks that began in 1951, a Normalization Treaty was signed in 1965 showing that economic matters were far more important for the Korean government than the comfort women issue that it avoided. Although a cooperative relationship developed, the emotional conflict between the countries continued to exist. The contents of the treaty are the authority that Japan cites to support its argument that the comfort women do not have a claim at international law, but they were not even mentioned in it.

Also the slow social and political development of Korean society following the Korean War caused the delay until 1990 to deal with the comfort women issue hindering a solution. The issue became known thanks to the formation in the mid-1970s in Japan of the Asia Women’s Association and its examination of the history of prostitution that came to include comfort women. When women activists finally raised the comfort women issue, the Korean government initially ignored them. The ostensible reason was the lack of documentary evidence on which to press charges against Japan, since the Japanese government had destroyed most of the records relating to comfort women. In
addition, the 1965 Normalization Treaty foreclosed the Korean government from making any further claims for reparations for damages incurred during the colonial period. The Korean government abandoned citizens’ rights too easily. The patriarchal culture context of androcentric sexism and traditional elitist attitudes in dealing with social injustice inflicted upon the poor and powerless in the Korean society are other explanations of the government’s inactivity on the issue (Raymond, Mathur and Roman, 2003: 46, 47-9, 54; Soh, 1996: 1230-1231; Yoon, 2010: 82, 183).

III. Rise in Activities in the 1990s

From 1988 the Korean Church Women’s Alliance formed by former Ehwa Woman’s University Professor Yun Chung-ok pursued the comfort women issue. The democratization of Korea in 1987 enabled her and her colleague Professor Lee Hyo-chae to make the issue public. Prior to the state visit by President Roh Tae Woo (1988-1993) to Japan in May 1990, on May 22 the Korean Church Women’s Alliance requested, along with the National Female College Students’ Representative Council and the Korean Women’s Association United, for the first time the demand for Japan to investigate the comfort women issue, to apologize for its involvement and to provide compensation to be conveyed. On May 25, President Roh requested a list of the comfort women but the Japanese government responded that there was no such list. However, during a state banquet for President Roh, Emperor Akihito (1989-) formally expressed his regrets for the sufferings the Japanese colonial rule had caused for the Korean people.

When Councillor Motooka Shoji of the upper house of the Japanese parliament demanded on June 6, 1990 that the government investigate the comfort women issue it refused and maintained its official position to regard military comfort stations as private enterprise. When he again raised the comfort women issue in the parliament in April 1991, the government repeated that it was not involved and that all issues emanating from the Korean occupation had been resolved through the 1965 Normalization Treaty. Previously, on November 16, 1990 37 women organizations jointly formed the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (KCWS, Chungdaehyop). The purpose was to investigate and make public the comfort women issue, to request the Japanese government to meet six demands and prevent reoccurrence of the tragic history. The demands were to: 1) open materials to the public and investigate the real situation, 2) admit the crimes, 3) provide an official apology, 4) give legal reparations, 5) erect memorial tablets and build a historic museum and 6) record the issue in history textbooks and teach it. Since the KCWS did not regard giving legal reparations only as a question of providing money to the victims, it added in 1993 punishment of the perpetrators. The width of the demands implies that a solution was considered urgent.

On August 14, 1991 widow Kim Hak-sun (1924-1997) became the first woman to publically testify her life as a comfort woman for Japanese troops during the Pacific War. She had got angry from the Japanese government’s response in June 1990 and the Japanese Embassy’s reply in April 1991 to an open letter sent by the KCWS in March demanding an apology. The government’s investigation showed that there was no evidence of the forced drafting of Korean women as comfort women. No apology could be provided. Kim was kidnapped in Beijing at the age of 17 and was drawn to a sub-unit of the Japanese Army with more than 300 soldiers. Later, when the KCWS demanded that the Korean government establish a policy to support the comfort women, it ignored the demand but made a request to the Japanese government to investigate the issue (author’s visit to the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum, June 11, 2014; Chaeil chosonin wianbu chaep’an-ul chiwônhanûn moim, 2011: 90; Han’guk chôngsindae munje taech’aek hyôbûihoe, 2014: 48-9, 54, 73, 392; Park, 2000: 201; Pilzer, 2012: 35; Raymond, Mathur and Roman, 2003: 49, 50-51; Soh, 1996: 1226, 1232, 1233; Yoon, 2010: 117-118, 124-5; Yoon, 2013: 41, 43, 44).

In January 1992, historian Yoshihi Yoshiaki discovered in the Self Defence Ministry’s archives government documents establishing the direct role of the Japanese military in maintaining the comfort
stations that were published in the *Asahi Shimbun*. On January 8, 1992 the weekly Wednesday noon demonstration organized by the KCWS together with the comfort women in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul began on the occasion of Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi’s visit reconfirming that a solution was considered urgent. On January 17, a private apology that recognized the military involvement and coercion as well as human rights violations was made by him. However, as argued by the Standing Representative of the KCWS, Yoon Mee-hyang (2010: 51), through the vague formulations on who exerted coercion and committed human rights violations the Japanese government escaped from its responsibility. The government denied that it had established the comfort women system, recruited the women and operated the comfort stations. Later, Cabinet Chief Secretary Kato Koichi issued a general apology to comfort women regardless of their nationality.

Besides diplomacy, also the UN became involved in the work to resolve the comfort women issue. On February 6, 1996 the UN condemned Japan for forcing tens of thousands of women into sexual slavery for its imperial troops during World War II. The UN special rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy from Sri Lanka, had in January 1996 concluded in her report that Japan should 1) acknowledge that the establishment of comfort stations was a violation of international law and accept legal responsibility for that violation, 2) pay compensation to the victims, 3) make a full disclosure of documents and materials on the comfort women issue, 4) publicly apologize to the survivors in writing, 5) raise awareness of the issue by amending educational curricula and 6) identify and punish the perpetrators involved in the recruitment and institutionalization of comfort stations. The recommendations closely resemble the six demands the KCWS had consistently made.

Her report was adopted by the UNHRC in April 1996. The comfort stations were defined as military slavery. In responding to the report, the Japanese government denied its legal responsibility by claiming 1) that present international law cannot be applied retroactively, 2) that slavery does not accurately describe the “comfort stations” and that prohibition against slavery was not international law at the time of World War II, 3) that acts of rape in international conflict were not prohibited by international law when World War II raged and 4) that the laws of war would only apply to conduct committed by the Japanese military against nationals of a belligerent state but not Korea since it had been annexed. In June 1998, the UN special rapporteur American Gay J. McDougall presented her final report at the UNHRC and concluded that the Japanese Army had violated the prohibition against slavery and war crimes and that these were crimes against humanity.1 It recommended that the Japanese government should punish the responsible and pay compensation to the victims. When the UNHRC adopted the report in August 1998, the comfort stations were defined as rape stations (Coomaraswamy, 1996: 1, 24; Gustafsson, 2011: 156; Han’guk chôngsindae munje taech’aek hyôbûihoe, 2014: 102, 394; Kawada, 2011: 332; Maeda, 2011: 755, 756; McDougall, 1998: 1, 39; Park, 2000: 201; Yoon, 2010: 17, 51, 119-120).

**IV. The Role of the Japanese Government**

A major issue in the public debate in both Korea and Japan on the comfort women has been the official role and responsibility of the Japanese government. Not until mid-1992 did the Japanese state admit its role in the management and supervisions of the “comfort stations” several months after Professor Yoshimi had published his discovery of official documents confirming the state’s heavy involvement in the comfort women system. It was conceived, planned and supervised by the Supreme Headquarters of the Japanese Imperial

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1. Article 6(c) of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal in Nürnberg in 1945 defines crimes against humanity as “murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population before or during the war, or persecutions on political, racial, or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.” From McDougall, 1998: 33, fn. 23.
that the comfort women were engaged in prostitution voluntarily. The Japanese government refused to compensate the women by arguing that the issue had already been legally settled but the issue remained unresolved.

In March 1993, President Kim Young Sam (1993-1998) announced that the government would seek no material compensation from Japan for former comfort women but would insist that the Japanese government thoroughly investigate the matter to uncover the truth and make a comprehensive, formal apology. The National Assembly passed on May 19, 1993 the Social Security Law for the Comfort Women during the Japanese Colonial Rule to support the former comfort women that included financial support, food assistance, free medical insurance and renting priority of government housing. In August 1993 the government disbursed five million wôn (about $6,250) to each survivor and announced that it would pay 250,000 wôn in 1995 ($312.50) in additional monthly support in 1995.

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Forces and the government in Tokyo. Since neither the Korean nor the Japanese government responded positively to efforts to resolve the problem, the KCWS submitted a petition to the UNHRC, dated March 4, 1992. It requested the Commission to investigate atrocities committed against Korean women during World War II and help pressure the Japanese government to pay reparations to individual women who had filed lawsuits. Subsequently, the UNHRC placed for the first time the issue on the official agenda for its meeting in Geneva in August 1992. Three delegates from the KCWS and one former comfort woman testified. Partly owing to lobbyism by feminist and humanitarian activists, the UNCHR’s Sub-commission for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities called the Japanese “military comfort women” system “a crime against humanity that violated the human rights of Asian women and the international agreement prohibiting forced labor that Japan signed in 1932.”

Also after the Japanese government in 1993 finally admitted coercion in recruiting Korean comfort women, Japan denied any possibility of material compensation to the survivors. The reason for denying coercion was that although the drafting of women was made legal by 1942, female recruitment was nominally implemented on the basis of “voluntary” participation. Indeed, until 1993 Japan argued that the comfort women were engaged in prostitution voluntarily. The Japanese government refused to compensate the women by arguing that the issue had already been legally settled but the issue remained unresolved.

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3. The authority for Japan’s position that there is no legal basis for compelling it to pay compensation to the comfort women for its human rights atrocities is the 1965 Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning the Property of Korea. Japan asserts that all claims were resolved between the two nations at this agreement and are final. Consequently, any claim by the comfort women at international law is of no force and effect. Japan’s position derives its authority from Article II of the Agreement stating: “The contracting parties confirm that the problem Concerning property and interests of the two Contracting Parties and their nationals (including Juridical persons) and concerning claims between Contracting parties and their nationals, including those provided for in Article IV paragraph (a) the Treaty of Peace with Japan signed at the city of San Francisco on September 8, 1951 is settled completely and finally.” From Raymond, Mathur and Roman, 2003: 4-5.

4. The sum $312.5 was calculated by the author based on Soh (1996: 1236) recording that five million wôn was approximately $6,250.
The Japanese Imperial Forces had directly recruited the women and transported them to comfort stations through coercion in violation of the International Convention for the Suppression for the White Slave Traffic that Japan had acceded to in 1925. Japan also admitted that it had violated international laws by persecuting Korean women but contended that their establishment was not a war crime or crime against humanity. Seoul’s response to the Kono statement was that the comfort women issue was resolved diplomatically and it has since maintained this principle. However, as suggested by Yoon (2010: 51-2) through the vague formulations on who exerted coercion and committed human rights violations the Japanese government again escaped its responsibility. The main responsibility was put on private recruiters. The military was only slightly involved. In reality, the military had ordered recruitments, decided the rules and fees at the comfort stations and the date of use for each military unit, conducted the examination of venereal diseases and supervised the stations (Cho, 2014: p. 1; Park, 2000: 202; Soh, 1996: 1236; Totsuka, 2013(a): 2-3, 6; Williamson, 2013: 2).

While the comfort women issue remain unresolved, in November 1994 the International Commission of Jurists recommended that the Japanese government pay “as a purely interim measure” $40,000 to each survivor. Within a week a group of 105 lawyers (37 Korean and 68 Japanese) released a statement that proclaimed the Japanese government’s responsibility to compensate the former comfort women based on international laws. The official Japanese response to the mounting pressure from the international community was to deal with the compensation issue at the non-governmental level. By December 1994, Japan had drawn up a compensation plan that called for raising non-government funds to pay a lump sum to each survivor. The KCWS rejected the proposal and urged that the Japanese government, as perpetrator of the crime, pay the compensation to admit its legal responsibility. Also 28 Japanese civil organizations urged the government to withdraw the plan, showing that it was contested also in Japan. The comfort women wanted an investigation of the reality of the issue and restoration of their honor and dignity prior to receiving compensation from the state.

The apology in July 1995 by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of World War II became the basis on which the government established the Asian Women’s Fund the same month. The purpose was “to protect women’s human rights in Japan and the world.” The Fund would express “... a sense of national atonement from the Japanese people to the former ‘comfort women’ and to work to address contemporary issues regarding the honor and dignity of women.” Prime Minister Murayama noted that “the scars of war still run deep” and that the problem of the so-called ‘war-time comfort women’ is one such scar, which, with the involvement of the Japanese military forces of the time, seriously stained the honour and dignity of many women. This is entirely inexcusable. I offer my profound apology to all those who, as wartime comfort women, suffered emotional and physical wounds that can never be closed (McDougall, 1998: 38, 39; Pak, 2014: 66; Soh, 1996: 1236-7; Soh, 2000: 124; Yoon, 2010: 167-8).

The Asian Women’s Fund collected contributions from ordinary citizens, trade unions, business and workplaces. Japanese newspapers and TV generally argued that the fund was a disguised measure for the government to escape from its legal responsibility. However, minority right-wing opinions claimed that since the comfort women were ‘prostitutes’ there was no need to compensate them. Like Japanese media, Korean media and NGOs, particularly the KCWS and Christian organizations, strongly opposed the fund arguing that it was a disguised measure for the Japanese government to escape from its legal responsibility. Since money was collected from the public, it made the government’s responsibility vague making the money immoral. The establishment of the fund contradicted the victims’ hopes for an apology from the Japanese government, punishment of the responsible and state compensation restoring their dignity. Many Korean women requested it to be withdrawn.

However, on January 11, 1997 at a hotel in Seoul payments were secretly made from the fund to seven victims who accepted the money since they lived under difficult circumstances but most victims
have requested direct compensation from the Japanese state. Compensation provided was two million yen ($19,572) whereas medical services amounted to three million yen ($29,357). The welfare money was reportedly sent under the name of the ghost company Asia Dialog to avoid the impression that the Japanese government had paid. A letter containing an apology from Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro was conveyed. The Japanese military had severely hurt the honor and dignity of the Korean women. The seven victims were criticized by Korean media and NGOs for having sold their souls for money.

When disbursements of 38 million won (approximately $47,500) per person were made by the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003) in accordance with a domestic support system, these victims were excluded but 142 other survivors were paid. The Asian Women’s Fund was disbanded in March 2007 following coordination with related countries. The Japanese government has since allocated small amounts of money to individuals who worked for the fund who then take the survivors who received “atonement money” to restaurants etc. NGOs supporting the victims criticized such measures claiming that they discriminate the victims not accepting the “atonement money” and creating other kinds of frictions

V. Is a Solution of the Issue Possible?

The account shows that the parties have failed to reach a diplomatic solution not least because Japan since 1990 has not pursued a consistent policy to resolve the comfort women issue. In retrospect, it could be asserted that the Korean government should have raised the issue much earlier and that it is regrettable that it was more important to develop cooperative relations with Japan than to resolve the issue.

However, considering that Japan at the time was stronger than Korea which was ruled by President Park who admired Japan, it would have been virtually impossible to act differently. With regard to resolving the issue, on August 30, 2011 the Constitutional Court concluded with a majority of six consenting against three dissenting votes that the Korean government’s failure to act on the comfort women issue was unconstitutional. The ruling emphasized the obligation to undertake dispute settlement procedures defined in Article 3 of the Agreement on the Settlement Concerning Property and Claims and the Economic Cooperation between the Republic of Korea and Japan signed on June 27, 1965. On September 15, 2011 the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade suggested to hold talks to resolve the issues related to this agreement but Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected the suggestion the same day by reconfirming that all claims had been resolved by the 1965 Normalization Treaty.

Since the Court decision virtually ordered the Korean government to take action, President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) forcefully urged at the summit held on December 18, 2011 that Japan’s Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko act to settle the issue: “Genuine courage is needed to reach a preferential solution of the comfort women issue as a barrier between our two countries. I hope that you as Prime Minister immediately take the lead to reach a solution. I expect a high-level political decision rather than a businesslike conception.”

The National Assembly passed on October 8, 2008 a resolution demanding Japan’s formal apology and full compensation to comfort women to restore their honor and dignity. From July 2009-March 2013, 55 Korean city councils adopted resolutions urging the Japanese parliament and the government to officially recognize and apologize for the comfort women system to restore the women’s honor.

Rather than apologizing, Prime Minister Noda counterattacked and urged President Lee to remove the bronze statue of a young girl seated across the road in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. The legal basis of the demand was the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic
had taken no tangible action on the comfort women issue, although it has acknowledged that almost all women were taken by deception or coercion. Japan is therefore obliged under international law to punish the perpetrators but no one has been punished. As suggested by the Japanese scholar Totsuka Etsuro (2013(a): 8), “this non-punishment should be condemned as one of the worst examples of de facto impunity in world history.” In contrast, the punishment by the war crimes tribunal of the Allied Forces was accepted by Japan. In 1948, the Dutch Military Tribunal implemented the punishment, including one death sentence, of ten personnel of the Japanese Imperial Forces who had enslaved 35 Dutch comfort women victims in Indonesia. Japan thus admitted that actions against the comfort women were serious offenses that deserved a death penalty when white women were involved. However, Japan has never acknowledged that the same crimes against Asian, mainly Korean, comfort women were an offence. This attitude should be condemned as shameless contempt of and discrimination against Asian women.

As argued by the American, Indian and Romanian scholars Christopher Raymond, Mohita Mathur and Petru Roman (2003: 51-2, 55), the comfort women issue will remain unresolved until Japan offers an apology and extends or is forced to extend a remedy(ies) for the horrific human rights violations it committed against the women during its colonial rule. A remedy should contain an apology to surviving comfort women for their sufferings, an acknowledgement that the drafting was implemented systematically and forcibly with the government’s knowledge, a recognition that the purpose was for sexual slavery and should be regarded as a crime against humanity, an acceptance of moral and legal responsibility and, finally, an extension of monetary compensation from the Japanese government. The similarity to the demands raised by Radhika Coomaraswamy and the KCWS is striking in spite of the time elapsed.

Anyhow, in 2007 the Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo declared that there was no evidence to prove that coercion was enforced. At a parliament session in 2012, the government had retrogressed from the 1993 Kono statement by saying only: “the Government of Japan is also deeply pained when thinking of the comfort women who experienced immeasurable pain and suffering.” As of January 2013 Japan had taken no tangible action on the comfort women issue, although it has acknowledged that almost all women were taken by deception or coercion. Japan is therefore obliged under international law to punish the perpetrators but no one has been punished. As suggested by the Japanese scholar Totsuka Etsuro (2013(a): 8), “this non-punishment should be condemned as one of the worst examples of de facto impunity in world history.” In contrast, the punishment by the war crimes tribunal of the Allied Forces was accepted by Japan. In 1948, the Dutch Military Tribunal implemented the punishment, including one death sentence, of ten personnel of the Japanese Imperial Forces who had enslaved 35 Dutch comfort women victims in Indonesia. Japan thus admitted that actions against the comfort women were serious offenses that deserved a death penalty when white women were involved. However, Japan has never acknowledged that the same crimes against Asian, mainly Korean, comfort women were an offence. This attitude should be condemned as shameless contempt of and discrimination against Asian women.

The American-Korean scholar Chunghee Sarah Soh (1996: 1231) concurs with his opinion by writing that the trials ignored the same ordeals suffered by Indonesian women. In the author’s view, considering the 1993 Kono statement and the payments and an excuse from the Japanese prime minister in 1997 through the Asian Women’s Fund, the opinion is not entirely correct but the two acts were not as explicit acknowledgements as the punishment in 1948 was undermining their significance. Finally, it should be noted that in 2013 Japanese mass media and education did not fulfill their original tasks but had continuously distorted repor-ting about the historical understanding of Japanese-Korean relations. Also, whereas in 1997 following the 1993 Kono statement all nine history textbooks in compulsory education included the comfort women issue, only three did in 2002, two in 2006 and none in 2012 (Totsuka, 2013(a): 1, 3, 6, 8; Totsuka, 2013(b): 271; WAM, 2013: 3, 6; Yoon, 2010, 2010: 55).

The opinion of the Japanese NGO Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM, 2013) concurs with the views of Raymond, Mathur and Roman by writing “The fact that the State Party has not
yet accepted its legal responsibility for Japan’s military sexual slavery system is in itself an impediment to redress for the victims who suffered grave human rights violations.” In order to stop further violations of the survivors’ human rights, the Japanese government should immediately fully acknowledge historical facts and accept legal responsibility for the military sexual slavery system. The Japanese government needs to make an apology that is acceptable for the survivors, take legislative and administrative measures for compensation, teach the historical facts concerning the comfort women through textbooks used in compulsory education and make a clear reference to the issue in national history museums in order to prevent a recurrence and, finally, refute any denial of facts by politicians and the media. Previously, from June 2008-March 2013 39 local Japanese assemblies had passed statements calling on the Japanese government to resolve the issue by thoroughly investigating the comfort women system and exerting its honest and sincere efforts to recover victims’ dignity (WAM, 2013: 1, 4-5, 24-5). Although opinions in Japan on how to apologize are divided, it is from the above account hard to expect that such a situation would contribute to change the government’s position.

Yoon (2010: 55, 174, 175-6) points out that one reason for Japan’s failure to recognize its responsibility towards the comfort women is that right-wing politicians argue that by recognizing the Asia-Pacific War as a war of invasion, ancestors’ pride would be hurt and it would be a serious insult to the souls of those killed. Another obstacle is the movement to inherit the value system from World War II that would like to amend Article 9 of the “Peace Constitution” prohibiting Japan to pursue war and only permitting maintenance of self-defense forces.

VI. Museums in Korea and Japan

As we have seen, Japan and Korea have consistently failed to reach a diplomatic solution of the comfort women issue due to their incompatible opinions. On May 5, 2012 the KCWS opened the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum in Seoul. Preparations had been made since 2003 without any support from the Korean government. In June 2014, the museum had attracted 17,000 visitors. It is an open space to remember comfort women’s history, educate people and tackle the Japanese military sexual slavery issue. The museum presents the issue from the victims’ perspective. It has two floors and gives a chronological account similar to this study. At the bottom floor, paintings by comfort women are shown on the wall. Photos of war zones are exhibited and the footage of the women whose stories are printed on the entrance ticket can be seen. The visitor can enter a small and dark space similar to comfort stations to feel isolation and oppression experienced by the women. The wall in the stairways is exhibited with photos and messages of some of the women.

On the second floor, the history room exhibits Japanese military documents reconfirming that the comfort women system was a war crime committed by the Japanese government and military. Activism on the issue described above is presented. There is a replica of the contested bronze statue of a young girl in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. The floor shows the painful experiences of 26 Korean comfort women, one woman each from Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines and the Netherlands and their life after the war with photos of all women. Dates of dead women are inscribed. The case of Kim Hak-sun is raised. Notably, the term “comfort women” is said to reflect the position of men towards women and to be used by the Japanese government to conceal and diminish the military sexual system. In 1995, Radhika Coomaraswamy instead used the term “Military Sexual Slavery During War” and labeled “comfort stations” “rape centers.” A video is shown from the Wednesday demonstrations’ (Author’s visit at the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum, June 11, July 3, 2014; Han’guk chôngsindae munje taech’aek hyôbûihoe, 2014: 20; The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (KCWS), n. d.). The museum is highly informative and
focusing on victims’ sufferings as well as showing a video on the Wednesday demonstrations concretizes the issue enhancing understanding. As no other medium, the museum presents a vast amount of data at one place. The staff can respond to visitors’ inquiries.

The Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) in Tokyo opened on July 31, 2005 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of World War II. The number of visitors until May 2014 was 21,000. The one-plan museum is run by the NGO with the same name. Since the museum is located within a multi-storey building, it is far less visible than its Korean counterpart. The WAM holds seminars to enhance understanding of its exhibitions, makes research on the comfort women issue and takes action to bring justice to the women and survivors of military sexual violence throughout the world. Two of its goals are to apply gender justice to all issues of wartime sexual violence, starting with the comfort women, and to document experiences of sexual violence, to probe its causes and to bring its perpetrators to justice. The idea to establish the museum came from the prominent journalist and feminist activist Yayori Matsui (1934-2002) whose books and articles are available here. After her death, a committee was formed and a campaign was launched to raise funding for establishing a museum that eventually received no government support but relied entirely on donations. Whereas many foreign media and the KCWS came when the museum opened, only Okinawa Media and Asahi Shimbun came from Japan. In 2007, WAM received the Pax Christi International Peace Award.

At the entrance, a chronological account spanning the years 1894-2005 is displayed with photos of comfort stations besides. The data is similar to that in Seoul but more detailed by recording the date and place of more historical events and covering a longer time interval. The issue is presented also here from the victims’ perspectives by displaying photos of 155 survivors and their names. They are from the Philippines (70), South Korea (28), China (22), Taiwan (16), North Korea (7), East Timor (4: two from the Indonesian occupation 1975-1999), Korean women in Japan (2), Indonesia (2), the Netherlands (2), Japan (1) and Malaysia (1). More detailed information is recorded about 12 of the women, including Kim Hak-sun (Korea 3, Japan 1, the Philippines 1, Taiwan 1, China 1, the Netherlands 1, Indonesia 1, Malaysia 1, East Timor 2: both from the Indonesian occupation). A lot of written materials are available as well as many videos and DVDs.

Two differences are the absence of a space resembling a comfort station and messages of comfort women on the walls. Another is that the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery suggested by Yayori Matsui and held in Tokyo from December 7-12, 2000 to hear the voices of perpetrators, victims and experts from ten countries on the comfort women issue is presented. The purpose of the tribunal that took two years to prepare was to ask the Japanese government to take responsibility for its war crimes. There were 1,300 participants, among which 390 were victims. Nine prosecution teams from North and South Korea, China, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan, Malaysia, East Timor and the Netherlands submitted a country indictment against top Japanese military and political officials for the injustice of the comfort women system.

The tribunal widely established the truth of the Japanese military sexual system as a war crime and a crime against humanity. It found Emperor Hirohito (1926-1989) guilty and responsible for the crimes by not preventing them. One year later he was declared guilty for his responsibility to give orders, although most documents on the comfort women were burnt in order to protect the Emperor. Also nine high officials and generals were found guilty. The joint final judgment of the tribunal that was confirmed in 2001 urged the Japanese government to pay reparations to the victims but it did not respond afterwards (author’s visit at the WAM, June 18, 19, 2014; Han’guk ch’ŏngsinjwa munje taech’aek hyŏbŭihoe, 2014: 20, 415; Kim, 2012: 176; KCWS, n. d.; Video Juku and VAWW-NET Japan, 2001; WAM, 2010; Yoon: 2013, 46). Also the WAM and particularly its photos of victims concretize the issue enhancing understanding. As its Korean counterpart, the museum presents a vast amount of data at one place and the staff can respond to visitors’ inquiries. However, a limitation of both museums is that since they were established mainly for a domestic audience the exhibitions are displayed almost exclusively in Japanese or Korean
reducing their information value for international visitors but at WAM the personnel speaks English.

VII. Conclusions

Japan took from 1932-1945 an estimated 70,000-200,000 comfort women from occupied territories, among which about 80 percent were Korean. The policy was implemented by coercion and violated international law that Japan had pledged to observe. The recruitment was also a crime against humanity. The Japanese government claims that the 1965 Japan-Korea Normalization Treaty is the authority to support its argument that the comfort women do not have a claim at international law but they were not even mentioned in it. Since 1965 a cooperative relationship has developed, but the emotional conflict has continued to exist.

The comfort women issue was long neglected by both countries for pragmatic reasons. Comfort women suffered from great difficulties after 1945 by not being welcomed in the Korean society. Following efforts by Korean women to raise the comfort women issue around 1990 and the coming-out of the former comfort woman Kim Hak-sun in 1991, it emerged as a point of dispute. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (KCWS) founded in 1990 has made great efforts to resolve the comfort women issue elevating it both in Korea and abroad. The issue has also been raised through the UN Human Rights Commission that adopted condemnatory resolutions in 1992 and 1996.

Although Japan twice in 1992 and once in 1993 and 1995, respectively, acknowledged that the comfort women system was implemented through coercion, it has neither provided an official apology to the victims nor given any official monetary compensation. Secret payments made through the non-public Asian Women’s Fund in 1997 were controversial. An apology from the Japanese prime minister was also conveyed. Apologies have not satisfied Korea since they did not explicitly point out the legal responsibility of the Japanese government. In sum, the measures taken by Japan show that it is hard to reach a diplomatic solution. If Japan does not offer an official apology and extends or is forced to extend a remedy(ies) for the human rights violations it committed against the comfort women, the issue will be difficult to resolve. However, one factor that perhaps could contribute to make Japan offer an official apology and extend remedies is if the split of domestic opinions on the apology question could contribute to change the government’s position but only time will tell if such a situation occurs. This study does not indicate any clear signs that such a situation is likely to develop.

The strength of the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum in Seoul and the War and Women’s Human Rights Museum (WAM) in Tokyo run by solidarity organizations is that they focus on victims’ sufferings reconfirming that violations of their human rights took place and concretizing the issue. As no other medium, the museums visualize past history and present a vast amount of data at one place. Applying the term “performativity” on the presentations, the feeling of guilt regarding an unresolved issue 70 years after World War II ended should be enhanced among visitors. Although people knowing in advance about the issue should already have this insight, a broader audience could benefit from visiting the museums helping to enhance public knowledge needed to exert pressure on the governments to act. However, the low number of visitors indicates that public interest in the comfort women issue is limited in both countries but particularly in Japan considering the huge difference in population size. Yet, as the museums also organize public activities they could by enhancing public knowledge exert pressure on the governments to resolve the comfort women issue but the consistent lack of political will to do so repeatedly noted in this study is hard to overcome. If the museums could contribute to change such a situation, they can play a meaningful role to resolve the issue as they both have similar targets.

Only time will tell if the 70th anniversary of World War II and the 50th anniversary of the Japan-Korea Normalization Treaty in 2015 will become an opportunity to resolve an issue that has infected Japanese-Korean relations too long, although it has not hampered the develop-
ment of cooperative relations. Presumably, cooperative relations will remain regardless of whether the comfort women issue is resolved or not. Although Japan and Korea lived without raising the issue until the early 1990s, since it then was raised it now needs to be resolved to heal the wounds of the few comfort women still alive and to help overcome the emotional conflict between the two countries that has continued to exist since 1965. Otherwise, victims may have all died without having their dignity restored long after their human rights were violated. Tension will remain. The moral responsibility of the Japanese government to once forever admit its past human rights violations should be stronger than its wish to preserve honor.

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