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The Dilemma of Acknowledging Victimhood and the Alienation from One's Own Memory

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It is said that the memories surrounding the Japanese military's "comfort women" have entered the post-memory era. It has become not uncommon to read news articles about the deaths of "comfort women" victims and to count the number of remaining "survivors." As of July 2025, out of 240 Korean "comfort women" victims, 234 have passed away, leaving only six survivors. What does the term "remaining survivors" mean to us at this point? Those who have concluded their lives transitioned from "survivors of victimization" to simply "victims." Do they represent a different meaning now?

One of the typical narratives about Japanese military "comfort women" is that "after being suppressed for over 50 years, the memories of the victims have finally found an audience who can empathize with them, making it possible to write history from the victims' perspective." Similarly, in response to the "2015 Korea-Japan Agreement," which prioritized national political interests, the principle of "victim-centered problem-solving" was reaffirmed. So, what is a "victim-centered approach"? Have the "voices" of victims that we have encountered thus far been "victim-centered"?

To answer this question, this article focuses on three aspects. First, it focuses on the "oral accounts" of victims that have competed with the socially recognized "victimhood." It examines the interviewers' purposes and the victims' narratives: the narrative here means not only the spoken words but also avoidance, silence, and contradictions. Second, this study also investigates changes in the social memory of the Japanese military "comfort women" issue, focusing on news reports and mass media, and the two-way process of how they both draw from and shape victims' memories. Third, it traces the effects that the denial of Japanese military "comfort women" victimhood produces. By delving into the missing links in social memory, this paper explores how the denial narrative, which has gained momentum by exploiting these gaps, is reconfiguring the same social memory from which it originated.

In South Korea, to recognize someone as a victim of the Japanese military "comfort women," one must possess "expert knowledge and judgment." In June 1993, Korea passed its first law to support the livelihood of survivors. Since then, the Korean government has maintained "protection, support, and commemoration programs for victims of the Japanese military 'comfort women'." This law defines victims as "those who were forcibly mobilized by the Japanese imperial regime and compelled to live as comfort women." These two conditions, "forced mobilization" and "compulsion to live as comfort women," became the focus for the investigators and review committee members' assessment of the victims' claims. Moreover, when investigating victims' claims, the experts naturally pay more attention to their process of forced mobilization and life in comfort stations. The problem was that in the early 1990s, there were no "comfort women lists" collected by credible authorities (consulate police, military police, or business owners), and there was only a small body of academic research on the history of Japanese military "comfort women." There was a widely accepted perception that the Japanese military and government operated an organized system of wartime sexual violance, and that this was the most significant characteristic of the Japanese military "comfort women" system. However, whether there was a structural connection between the "organized and systematic"

nature of this system and the practices of "forced mobilization" and "coercion into becoming comfort women" was not thoroughly examined. As a result, the decision regarding "comfort women" victimization had to rely heavily on the testimonies of the victims themselves.

Many victims found it nearly impossible to rigorously reconstruct their experiences into "testimonies." These women, who experienced their initial mobilization, transportation, and assignment between their mid-teens and early twenties, were not provided with reliable information. Some reported their experiences based solely on the memory of being "taken away during the war and subjected to hardships by the Japanese military," without knowing what "comfort women" meant. In most cases, circumstantial memories took precedence over factual memories regarding by whom, when, why, where, and how they were taken. Japan's disclosure of documents was minimal, and academic research was slow to progress and was not shared uniformly among experts. The place name "Doraku" remaining in the victims' memories was recognized by those who were involved as "Indonesia," and the "comfort station where they were taken by truck for two days from Harbin Station" was simply recorded as a comfort station in Harbin. Victims who were at a comfort station in Taiwan, which was used not only by soldiers but also by civilians, worried that others might not recognize their experiences as "victimization."

Above all, the victims lacked the language to describe what they had experienced. The Japanese military "comfort women" system was operated within the framework of modern Japan's prostitution management policies, with regulations on working hours, fees, and leave restriction. Life in the comfort stations, where relationships with pimps, soldiers, and fellow victims, as well as state surveillance, intertwined, was not solely characterized by violence. It was not until the 1990s that the term "sexual violence" came into widespread use to describe all forms of sexual violence arising from power dynamics, beyond physical violence. Victims, when asked about their experiences by interviewers, could only describe what was then considered "sexual harm" according to prevailing norms. Describing moments of "sexual harm" was no easy task for those

who had lived in an era when "chastity was considered a virtue for women," both for the speakers and the listeners. Their experiences of "sexual harm" were imagined through harsh language, silence, emotional turmoil, awkwardness, and the inability to speak up.

Nevertheless, when examining the oral interview records left by the victims, it becomes clear that they have shared their experiences in diverse ways within the category of victimhood. This is a crucial aspect that must be reexamined, as it transcends the socially defined notion of "victimhood."

There are some recent studies that focus on the popular narrative about Japanese military "comfort women," which has been told since Korea's liberation. They point out that the social memory of "comfort women" underwent a transformation starting with Kim Hak-soon's testimony in 1991. In the 1980s and 1990s, narratives about Japanese military "comfort women" were consumed as sensational stories combining "national tragedy" with the sexual experiences and violence endured by women with low social standing, amid the convergence of commercial journalism and nationalism. With the underlying nationalism and misogyny being unchallenged, the public began to hear the testimonies of survivors, and the media and the public expanded the narrative of the "comfort women" based on their existing perceptions. As a result, the experiences of the "comfort women" were interpreted within the scope of what was considered acceptable as "sexual violence victims" at the time. The media and public outlets selectively edited or framed victims' experiences to fit the narrative of "safe sexual violence victim stories." Although the victims' experiences originated from the pretext of serving Japan's "national interest," they converged with Korean nationalism, and the part of the victims' stories that did not fit seamlessly into nationalism was dismissed as "dangerous" and was not allowed to become a topic of public discussion.

Without criticism of nationalism and misogyny, social memory solidified around the victim narratives that fit the discourse of "victimhood." The stories of victims were materialized as the stories of girls and grandmothers. As state-led right-wing politics gained momentum, his-

torical revisionists gained power and intensified their attacks on victims in the name of "Japan's honor." Through this process, the victims' oral testimonies were stolen and turned into weapons used to stab them. They were called fake victims because "they signed a contract," "they made money," and "they had relationships with soldiers." Although many experts, politicians, and "good-willed citizens" are angry about this historical distortion, they have been unable to avoid relying on the existing "victimhood" discourse to respond to historical revisionism. Their debate became trapped by the framework set by the revisionists who turned it into a political issue, and within the public discourse, the "victimhood" of the Japanese military "comfort women" became further reinforced. Some parts of memory of the victims were seen as undermining their "victimhood," and these undesirable memories were pulled out of the popular narrative of the "comfort women."

The "victimhood" regulates the victims' experiences. It continues to function as a criterion for judging their experiences. This inversion makes it difficult to approach the victims' language and experiences, to reflect on the Japanese military "comfort women" issue, and to seek solutions. We need productive debate, not meaningless political wrangling. The social memory of Japanese military "comfort women," which has been fossilized as as mere stories of girls and grandmothers is losing its connection to reality. There are concerns that these stories of victims, which have affected the cause of "preventing the recurrence of sexual violence," would become nothing more than "old stories" for the so-called "post-memory" generation. We must deconstruct the "victimhood" rooted in nationalism and misogyny, and restore the memories of victims excluded from the "typical comfort women narrative" to fully explain the suffering of Japanese military "comfort women." Only when we dismantle the structural repetition of wartime and peacetime sexual violence and discuss the responsibility of the state and civil society can a victim-centered narrative of the "comfort women" history be possible.

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