# Policy Forum 07-029: ‘Holier Than Thou Politics of Comfort Women Apology’: This Should Be Primarily About the Treatment of Women

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## Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 07-029: ‘Holier Than Thou Politics of Comfort Women Apology’: This Should Be Primarily About the Treatment of Women", NAPSNet Policy Forum, April 05, 2007, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/holier-than-thou-politics-of--omfort-women-apology-this-should-be-primarily-about-the-treatment-of-women/

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Policy Forum Online 07-029A: April 5th, 2007
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By Katharine H.S. Moon

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## I. Introduction

Katharine H.S. Moon, Associate Professor of political science at Wellesley College and Associate Fellow at the Asia Society in New York City, writes that "The Japanese system of sexual slavery was first and foremost an atrocity perpetrated on women, not nations. Often, these were women of lower classes or women underprotected in some way by their own people. And whether they were Korean or Dutch or South Pacific Islander, their bodies, minds and souls hurt equally."

This article originally published by ABC.com

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## II. Article by Katharine H.S. Moon

- "'Holier Than Thou Politics of Comfort Women Apology': This Should Be Primarily About the Treatment of Women"
By Katharine H.S. Moon

Tokyo and Washington are both in the thick of "comfort women" politics. To some Japanese, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is a hero, a leader who is man enough to stand up for Japan by refusing to engage in what some Diet members have called a "masochistic view of history." Despite his recent (somewhat forced) apology, Abe has publicly challenged the global charge that the Japanese imperial government (and military) had a sure hand in creating and maintaining the comfort women system during World War II.

To other Japanese, he is a political embarrassment and source of moral shame, for how can the leader of Japan brazenly deny the facts and figures that so many historians and other scholars in both Japan and the world -- not to mention, the United Nations, for which the Japanese have a high regard -- have dug up and agonizingly analyzed over two decades? It sounds a little too similar to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's refusal to accept the historical veracity of the Holocaust.

Closer to home for most Americans, including those on Capitol Hill, the House hearings on protecting the human rights of comfort women and Resolution 121 (to urge Japan to apologize and take responsibility for the comfort system) serve at best as an educational tool for politicians and the American public alike, which knows little about the Asian aspects of World War II. At worst, it serves as a welcome distraction to those who are sick of hearing about U.S. human rights violations and wartime mistakes and atrocities in Iraq and elsewhere.

Critics of Abe and other Japanese conservatives blame Tokyo for playing a disingenuous round of "apology diplomacy," which amounts to a decade or so of various Japanese leaders bowing deeply and stating soberly that Japan had indeed made mistakes in the recent past and hurt a lot of people with its imperialistic ambitions around Asia.

But if disingenuousness were a sin, Americans, Koreans, Chinese and others should not turn a blind eye to their own misdeeds. Who here hath no sin that he should cast the first stone? Although Korean and other Asian women suffered the abuses of the comfort system most severely, Japanese

government officials weren't the only ones who had a hand in it.

Korean civilians served as human traffickers, pimps and overseers for the system of sexual slavery instituted by the Japanese military. One could argue that such people were also coerced, but we do not have good evidence that individual Asians, except the Japanese, bear no guilt. Also, Korean men fought as soldiers in the Japanese military, and some of them certainly knew about the plight of their female compatriots. Yet, that did not stop them from regarding the women as mere prostitutes and soiled goods.

Rep. Eni Faleomavaega, chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, may be correct that "nowhere in recorded history has the U.S. military as a matter of policy issued a directive for the coercion of young women in to sexual slavery." But records of Americans in uniform who regularly oversaw and maintained numerous versions of the sex industry for U.S. troops in Korea, Okinawa, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam certainly do exist. I have seen some with my own eyes.

Regrettably, comfort women politics serves as an occasion for mutual nationalist bashing and counterbashing rather than an opening for governments and people around the world to engage sincerely in the quest for what might constitute and advance women's human rights and the protection of civilians during wartime.

The Japanese system of sexual slavery was first and foremost an atrocity perpetrated on women, not nations. Often, these were women of lower classes or women underprotected in some way by their own people. And whether they were Korean or Dutch or South Pacific Islander, their bodies, minds and souls hurt equally. This applies also to the tens of thousands of Japanese women who were forced or deceived into the military sex system. Their silence -- and the lack of international advocacy on their behalf -- is most striking.

Japanese leaders need to get over the nasty domestic politics of its wartime past. Not only is that necessary for better relations with its Asian neighbors (and possibly the United States). It is also necessary as a way to fulfill the duties of elected office. A recent poll taken this winter by a major Japanese daily shows how out of touch Abe is with his own people: Unlike Abe, only 6.2 percent of respondents regard the push for the reform of the Japanese constitution (and through it, renewed nationalism) as a national priority. But 62 percent want government leadership on reforms related to pensions, health care and social security. The Japanese people as a whole are not eager nationalists, but they do want to improve their country.

Finally, Japanese leaders need to figure out how to keep their word-a virtue still respected by Asians--and hence, national credibility. Official apologies once pronounced, can't simply be revoked.

### III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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