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Comfort Women Policy under Moon Jae-in Administration: A Victim-Centered Postcolonial Feminist Approach in South Korea

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Abstract
The issue of "comfort women" continues to cast a shadow on diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan. These women, coerced into sexual slavery during Japan's colonial rule, represent a profound case of historical gender-based violence. This study explores the South Korean government's policy response to the comfort women issue during President Moon Jae-in's administration (2017-2022), particularly emphasizing justice, recognition, and victim-centered approaches. Utilizing postcolonial feminist theory and the gender mainstreaming framework, this qualitative descriptive-analytical research draws upon secondary data including official documents, civil society reports, and academic studies. The findings highlight Moon's break from past administrations by dissolving the 2015 Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, institutionalizing memorialization, and integrating survivor narratives into national consciousness. However, the administration also faced diplomatic tension with Japan and internal challenges in reconciling human rights advocacy with foreign policy constraints. This article provides insights into the role of feminist-driven foreign policy in addressing historical injustices within postcolonial and diplomatic contexts.
Keywords: *Comfort Women, Moon Jae-in, Postcolonail Feminism, Gender Mainstreaming, Human Rights.*

Abstrak
Isu "*Comfort Women*" terus membayangi hubungan diplomatik antara Korea Selatan dan Jepang. Wanita-wanita ini, yang dipaksa menjadi budak seksual selama masa penjajahan Jepang, merupakan kasus kekerasan berbasis gender yang mendalam dalam sejarah. Penelitian ini meneliti respons kebijakan pemerintah Korea Selatan terhadap isu wanita penghibur selama pemerintahan Presiden Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), dengan fokus pada keadilan, pengakuan, dan pendekatan yang berpusat pada korban. Dengan menggunakan teori feminisme pascakolonial dan kerangka pengarusutamaan gender, penelitian deskriptif-analitik kualitatif ini memanfaatkan data sekunder berupa dokumen resmi, laporan masyarakat sipil, dan kajian akademik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemerintahan Moon berbeda dari pemerintahan sebelumnya dengan membubarkan *Reconciliation and Healing Foundation*, menginstitusionalisasikan memorialisasi, dan mengintegrasikan narasi korban ke dalam kesadaran nasional. Namun, pemerintahan ini juga menghadapi ketegangan diplomatik dengan Jepang serta tantangan internal dalam menyeimbangkan advokasi hak asasi manusia dengan batasan kebijakan luar negeri. Artikel ini memberikan wawasan tentang peran kebijakan luar negeri berbasis perspektif feminis dalam menangani ketidakadilan sejarah di konteks pascakolonial dan diplomatik.

Kata Kunci: *Comfort Women*, Moon Jae-in, Feminisme Pascakolonial, Pengarusutamaan Gender, Hak Asasi Manusia.

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Introduction

The legacy of Japanese military sexual slavery, commonly referred to as the "comfort women" system, remains one of the most complex and unresolved histrocial phenomena in East Asian[1] international relations. This issue is deeply rooted in the colonial history of Korea under Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945, when tens of thousands of Korean women, along with women from other occupied territories, were forced or deceived into serving as sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army.[2] The term "comfort women" itself is a euphemism that obscures the violence, trauma, and human rights abuses suffered by these women. This historical wound has continued to influence South Korea's domestic politics, collective memory, and foreign policy decisions for decades[3].

In the context of South Korea's history, the comfort women issue has become more than just a bilateral problem with Japan, it is a symbol of the nation's struggle for historical justice and gender equality. Survivors, often referred to as "halmeoni" (grandmothers), have continued to demand sincere apologies and legal responsibility from the Japanese government, and these demands have shaped public discourse as well as policy debates within South Korea. The presence of weekly Wednesday demonstrations in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul since 1992 underscores how deeply rooted this issue is in South Korea's civil society movement. These demonstrations, documented extensively in governmental and NGO reports, provide important evidence of how memory and activism intersect in the quest for justice[4].

Understanding the phenomenon of comfort women requires a multidimensional analysis that spans historical, political, sociological, and gender perspectives. Historically, the issue gained international visibility through survivor testimonies in the early 1990s, which challenged both Japanese and Korean governments to address the crimes. Politically, it has been a barometer of South Korea-Japan relations, often surfacing during negotiations, summits, and international forums. Socially, it has

[1] Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
[2] Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
[3] Fitria, Z. R., & Harmonis. (2024). *Diplomasi dan negosiasi Korea Selatan terhadap isu comfort women pada era Moon Jae-in*. Kultura: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum, Sosial, dan Humaniora, 2(2), 104–117.
[4] Kim, B. (2023). *South Korea's partial withdrawal from the 2015 Korea–Japan comfort women agreement: Changed national role conceptions via increased social influence (2015–2018).* ASIEN: The German Journal on Contemporary Asia, 164/165, 70–95.

become a focal point of civil society activism, with NGOs and transnational advocacy networks pushing for justice and recognition. From a gender perspective, the comfort women system epitomizes structural violence against women, deeply intertwined with patriarchal and colonial power dynamics.

Previous administrations in South Korea adopted varied approaches to this sensitive issue. The Kim Young-sam administration in the 1990s created a fund for victims, but this approach was criticized for relying on private donations rather than state funds. The Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak administrations oscillated between pragmatic diplomacy and symbolic gestures. Under President Park Geun-hye, the 2015 bilateral agreement with Japan was presented as a "final and irreversible" resolution. However, many survivors argued that they were excluded from negotiations and that the agreement failed to meet their expectations for justice. This gap between state policy and victim expectations became a central problem that subesquent administrations had to address[5].

When President Moon Jae-in assumed office in 2017, he inherited not only a contentious bilateral agreement but also a domestic landscape where public opinion strongly favored a more justice-oriented approach.[6] Moon's administration articulated a vision of foreign policy that aligne with universal human rights norms and gender justice principles. This vision manifested in decisions to dissolve the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, expand memorialization efforts, and engage survivors in policy dialogues. The administration's approach reframed the comfort women issue as not merely a bilateral dispute but a broader human rights and postcolonial justice matter. Moon Jae-in also emphasized that any resolution must uphold the dignity of survivors and reflect their voices directly, a stance documented in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 2018 Task Force Report[7].

The phenomenon also reflects South Korea's evolving identity in international relations. By addressing historical injustices, South Korea positions itself as a state committed to transitional justice and moral diplomacy. This stance resonates with

[5] Adityani, F. D., Susiatiningsih, H., & Paramasatya, S. (2023). *Memori dan trauma dalam hubungan internasional: Pengaruh isu "comfort women" terhadap kerjasama keamanan Jepang dan Korea Selatan.* Journal of International Relations Diponegoro, 10(2), 123–138.
[6] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, *Task Force Report on the 2015 Agreement* (Seoul: MOFA, 2018).
[7] Ula, F. A., Subandi, Y., Amini, D. S., Nurgiyanti, T., Subekti, B., & Wiratma, H. D. (2021). *Efektivitas rezim Comfort Women Agreement antara Jepang dan Republic of Korea (ROK) dalam penyelesaian masalah Jugun Ianfu di ROK*. SEIKAT: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial, Politik dan Hukum, 2(2).

global movements advocating for the rights of victims of wartime sexual violence, such as survivors in Bosnia, Rwanda, and other conflict zones. In aligning with this movements, South Korea not only addresses its own historical grievances but also contributes to setting international norms on gender-based violence and state accountability. South Korea's engagement with international organizations, including United Nations forums and human rights committees, further demonstrates its intent to universalize the comfort women issue as a global human rights challenge rather than a narrowly defined bilateral grievance.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, the comfort women issue exemplifies how the voices of marginalized women often silenced by both colonial structures and patriarchal systems, can be brought to the center of national and international discourse[8]. The activism of survivors and their advocates challenges dominant narratives and insists on a more inclusive and truthful historical record. This perspective also critiques the instrumentalization of women's suffering for state interests, urging policies that prioritize the dignity and agency of survivors. Spivak notion of the "subaltern" is evident in the way survivor's testimonies disrupt official narratives and demand accountability from both domestic and foreign actors.

In light of these complexities, the present study focuses on analyzing the transformation of South Korea's comfort women policy under Moon Jae-in's administration. It seeks to answer critical questions: How did Moon's policies integrate victim-centered approaches into state practice? In what ways did postcolonial feminist ideas shape policy outcomes? How did these policies influence South Korea's diplomatic relations with Japan and its international image? By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on transitional justice, feminist foreign policy, and the politics of historical memory. This introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive discussion of the policy measures undertaken, their domestic and international reception, and their broader implications for both gender studies and international relations.

In sum, the comfort women phenomenon is not merely a historical episode but an ongoing arena of contestation over memory, justice, and identity. Moon Jae-in's tenure represents a pivotal moment in this struggle, offering insights into how a state can

[8] Nurinaya, N., & Siswatiningrum, E. (2025). Signifikansi peran perempuan adat Papua dalam upaya iklim berkelanjutan. *JOSH (Journal of Sharia)*, *4*(2).

confront its historical traumas while navigating the constrains of international diplomacy. The following sections will examine these dynamics in depth, using the frameworks of postcolonial feminism and gender mainstreaming to interpret the policies and their impacts.

Research Method

The method used in this research is a descriptive qualitative method. This method was chosen because the study seeks to analyze and describe South Korea's comfort women policy under Moon Jae-in's administration[9] comprehensively and contextually. Research using qualitative methods is conducted by analyzing and describing a problem in depth, reviewing official government documents such as the 2018 Task Force Report on the 2015 Agreement, NGO reports from the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance, and relevant academic works.[10] This research also involves analyzing sentences and policy statements in detail to provide clear and systematic reports.

In addition, this qualitative research focuses on ontological activities, namely understanding how state policies reflect underlying principles of justice, gender, and historical accountability. The data collected comes from words, sentences, or images that have meaning and are able to spur understanding for example, survivor testimonies, government press releases, and commemoration materials.[11] The researcher emphasizes detailed, complete, in-depth sentence descriptions that illustrate actual situations, policy changes, and the lived realities of the comfort women issue during Moon Jae-in's administration to support the presentation of data and analysis[12].

Result and Discussion

Major Policy Shifts and Institutional Actions

Moon Jae-in's administration enacted a series of bold and symbolic policy reforms that reshaped South Korea's approach to the comfort women issue. One of the most prominent steps was the dissolution of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation in 2018,[13] which had been established under the 2015 agreement with Japan. Survivors

[9] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013).
[10] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, *Task Force Report on the 2015 Agreement* (Seoul: MOFA, 2018).
[11] Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance, *Annual Report 2022* (Seoul: KCJR, 2022).
[12] Chariska, A. E. (2023). *Dampak penyelesaian isu comfort women terhadap diplomasi Jepang dan Korea Selatan*. GIJ: Global Issues Journal, 1(2).
[13] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, *Task Force Report on the 2015 Agreement* (Seoul: MOFA, 2018).

argued that the agreement was reached without their full involvement and failed to deliver justice. By dismantling the foundation, Moon Jae-in signaled a commitment to victim-centered justice and demonstrated responsiveness to survivor demands. This move was not simply a rejection of past policy, but an active effort to rebuild trust between the government anf survivors.

The administration also declared August 14 as National Memorial Day for comfort women, a day marked with nationwide ceremonies, speech by high-ranking officials, and cultural events that honor survivors experiences[14]. Funds were allocated to build memorial halls and preserve historical artifacts. Additionally, the Ministry of Education collaborated with historians and activists to ensure that comfort women history was integrated into the national curricula, making this subject part of formal education across elementary, middle, and high school levels. On the international stage, South Korea used opportunities such as United Nations sessions and global human rights summits to position the comfort women issue as a matter of universal justice, moving it beyond a strictly bilateral narrative with Japan.

The urgency of Moon's policies becomes evident when looking at survivor demographics: there were 47 officially registered survivors in 2015, but by 2022 only 11 survivors remained. This sharp decline in numbers created a pressing need for immediate action. To address this, the government expanded welfare programs under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. These programs provided monthly stipends, enhanced medical care, and access to psychological counseling. In several cases, survivors received home visits from trained social workers, ensuring their living conditions were monitored and improved. Civil society reports confirmed that these measures positively impacted survivors' wellbeing, despite occasional challenges in bureaucracy or funding allocations. Survivors were also regularly consulted through forums and roundtable meetings, allowing them to directly inform policy updates.

Table 1. Survivors and Key Policy Milestones (2015-2022). Source: MOFA (2018); KCJR (2022).

Year	Number of Registered Survivors	Key Policy Initiative
2015	47	Bilateral agreement signed

[14] Puspasari, M. A. P., & Susiatiningsih, H. (2020). *Jalan terjal implementasi Reconciliation and Healing Foundation oleh Korea Selatan dalam hubungan dengan Jepang*. Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional, 17(1), 97–120.

		under Park Geun-hye
2018	31	Dissolution of Reconciliation and Healing Foundation
2019	25	First official Comfort Women Memorial Day observed
2021	14	Integration into national curriculum implemented
2022	11	Continued UN-level advocacy

Postcolonial Feminist Insights on Policy Outcomes

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, these reforms reveal how Moon's administration placed survivors at the center of the discourse. Using Spivak's framework of the subaltern, the study interprets how marginalized voices those previously unheard in state diplomacy began to influence policy.[15] Survivors' testimonies, shared in public hearings and Wednesday demonstrations, became guiding principles for government action. Instead of portraying survivors as passive victims, the state acknowledged them as active participants shaping the narrative of justice. This represents a profound shift from earlier administrations that often prioritized diplomatic convenience over the dignity of survivors.

Gender Mainstreaming in State Implementation

Caroline Moser's concept of gender mainstreaming is clearly visible in Moon's policy measures.[16] Gender-sensitive planning was incorporated into ministerial agendas, and cross-ministerial committees included women leaders and civil society experts to ensure survivor needs were prioritized. When designing educational materials, survivor representatives and women's organizations were consulted to verify

[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[16] Caroline Moser, *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training* (London: Routledge, 1993).

historical accuracy and respectful portrayal. Workshops and training programs for government staff were introduced, educating them on trauma-informed approaches when interacting with survivors. These actions embedded gender considerations deeply within state structures, ensuring that they were not treated as afterthoughts but as central guiding values.

While Moon's policies elevated South Korea's human rights profile, they also led to diplomatic friction with Japan. Japanese officials expressed concern that dismantling the 2015 agreement undermined bilateral trust. However, Moon maintained that a resolution without survivor participation could never be legitimate. Intenational observers, including human rights organizations, lauded South Korea's stance as as a model of victim-centered diplomacy. The comfort women issue. Therefore, evolved from a localized grievance into a symbol of global resistance against wartime sexual violence.

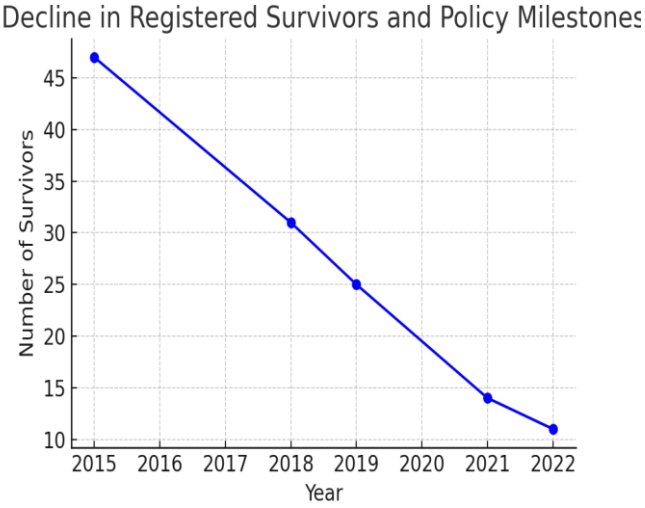


Figure 2. Decline in Registered Survivors and Major Policy Milestones (2015–2022). Source: MOFA (2018); KCJR (2022).

(A line graph illustrating the data in Table 1, showing the downward trend in survivor numbers and highlighying key policy milestones).

In summary, Moon Jae-in's administration not only revised existing policies but built a multidimensional framework that combined historical memory, survivor welfare, feminist theory, and diplomatic advocacy. These integrated efforts underline how a nation can confront its past while shaping progressive international norms,

resulting in a detailed case study for scholars of international relations and gender studies alike.

Conclusion

The Moon Jae-in administration represents a significant shift in South Korea's handling of the comfort women issue. Centering survivor voices, emphasizing historical justice, and promoting gender mainstreamin marked a notable evolution from previous governments. Although this approach incurred diplomatic friction, it realigned national policy with ethical and human rights imperatives. The comfort women issue illustrates how historical intersects with foreign policy, gender advocacy, and postcolonial identity. As the number of survivors diminishes, the urgency of continued advocacy and eduactional efforts remains. This study recommends sustained state engagement in historical justice, the institutionalization of gender-based policymaking and the documentaion of survivor testimony for future generations.

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