

Open Letter concerning the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme

## **THE VOICES OF ‘COMFORT WOMEN’ BELONG TO THE MEMORY OF THE WORLD**

We call for the dialogue to be set out without delay

23 October 2025

Japanese Committee for Joint Nomination to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register

Dear Director-General of UNESCO

We, the Japanese Committee for Joint Nomination to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, are a group of citizens who have been working in Japan for over three decades calling for justice and recognition for the victims of sexual violence perpetrated by the Imperial Japanese military during WWII. Respecting the UNESCO Constitution’s principle that ‘since wars begin in the minds of women and men, it is in the minds of women and men that the defences of peace must be constructed’, we submitted in 2016 nomination for a collection of records under the title *Voices of the ‘Comfort Women’* to UNESCO’s Memory of the World International Register, alongside civil society organisations from seven other countries.

While UNESCO’s Memory of the World has various records of state violations of human rights inscribed on its list, registers concerning gender-based violation remain scarce. Notably absent are records of sexual violence, particularly that perpetrated by military forces. Denying sexual crimes committed by one’s own military, disparaging the women affected and distorting the facts is a common tactic not only in Japan. By coming forward and revealing the facts of their own suffering and calling for justice, the survivors forced into Japan’s military sexual slavery during WWII have given courage to victims of wartime sexual violence worldwide, and their struggle has been a catalyst to bring such crimes to justice. This testimony is of global importance because militarism is on the rise and gender discrimination remains persistent, so that designating the *Voices of the ‘Comfort Women’* a Memory of the World is entirely consistent with the UNESCO Constitution. Preserving and making their voices accessible will be part of the commitment that what happened to them should never be repeated.

In April 2017, we were notified that the Memory of the World’s Register Subcommittee (RSC) considered the *Voices of the ‘Comfort Women’* documents as ‘irreplaceable and unique’. Nevertheless, in October 2017, the International Advisory

Committee (IAC), under previous UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, recommended 'postponement pending dialogue' with another party for this international nomination. Eight years on this delay is to be regretted because many of the survivors who testified to the harm inflicted upon them have died while awaiting the inscription of their voices on the Memory of the World International Register. It is deeply regrettable that no 'dialogue' towards this inscription has ever been realised during Director-General Azoulay's term of office.

Determined that the suffering of the women who broke their 50-year silence must not be erased, we have struggled through the threats of violence from historical denialists in Japan and continued our work to preserve the 'comfort women' documents, and make them accessible, especially to the next generation.

The nominators of *Documentation on Comfort Women and Japanese Army Discipline*, the NGOs with whom we are supposed to have the 'dialogue' with, are one of the leading groups who have contributed to and cultivated the ground for historical denialism relating to 'comfort women'. They have even openly stated that their nomination is to prevent the *Voices of the 'Comfort Women'* being inscribed in the International Register. This intention could be seen as contrary to the very purpose of the Memory of the World Programme. On the other hand, we have learned that some of the relatively small collection of records they have reportedly submitted overlap with those included in the *Voices of the 'Comfort Women'*. We believe that the objective of the 'dialogue' recommended by the IAC -- 'with a view to leading to a joint nomination to encompass as far as possible all relevant documents' -- is within reach.

Director-General, the fact that this issue is not a matter of conflicting views between the perpetrator and victim States is proven by our participation from Japan in this joint effort for the inscription of the *Voices of the 'Comfort Women'*. we request you to hold a forum for dialogue without delay so that the nominated records of wartime sexual violence will be inscribed in the Memory of the World International Register. This would achieve the purposes set forth in Article 1 of the UNESCO Constitution, and to help achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Engaging in dialogue with those who have denied the testimonies of 'comfort women' victims is of significant concern to those of us in Japan. We are, however, determined to spare no effort to ensure that records concerning Japanese military 'comfort women' are inscribed as part of the Memory of the World International Register through this UNESCO dialogue, while as many survivors as possible remain alive.

Having recommended the arduous path of 'dialogue', we sincerely hope that UNESCO will take responsibility for the implementation of this 'dialogue' until the objective of 'leading to a joint nomination to encompass as far as possible all relevant documents' is achieved.