8th Grade Lesson

Monuments, Memory, and Global Diplomacy in Local Communities: The Brookhaven Comfort Women Statue

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Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE)

SS8H12: Explain the importance of developments in Georgia since the late 20th century.
d: Analyze Georgia's role in the national and global economy [and political landscape] of the 21st century.

Background Information

Who Were the "Comfort Women"?



During World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army forcibly conscripted, abducted, or deceived an estimated 200,000 women and young girls into military sexual slavery. Mostly drawn from occupied territories including Korea, China, the Philippines, and Indonesia, these women were euphemistically labeled "comfort women" by Japanese military authorities. For decades following the war, survivors lived in isolated silence due to trauma, shame, and severe societal stigma.

Beginning in the early 1990s, courageous survivors like Kim Hak-sun in South Korea publicly broke their silence, demanding official historical recognition, apologies, and legal compensation from the Japanese government.

Statue of a Girl of Peace

To preserve this history, acclaimed South Korean husband-and-wife sculpting team Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung designed the "Statue of a Girl of Peace." The original monument was erected in 2011 directly across from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea during the 1,000th weekly protest rally held by survivors and their supporters.



Every visual element of the artists' bronze design carries deliberate, historical meaning:

- The Seated Girl: She is sculpted as a teenage girl with short, cropped hair, representing the average age when the victims were stolen from their homes. Her clenched fists represent resolve and the long, ongoing struggle for justice.
- The Raised Heels: Her bare feet rest on the ground, but her heels are lifted slightly. This symbolizes the instability survivors felt when they returned home, unwelcome by their communities and caught in limbo.
- The Bird on the Shoulder: A small bird perches on her left shoulder, acting as a spiritual bridge connecting the survivors who are still living with those who passed away in silence.
- The Empty Chair: Next to the girl sits an empty, life-sized bronze chair. It invites visitors to sit beside her to share her burden, while simultaneously honoring the countless victims who died before seeing their history recognized.

The Japanese Government's Stance and Legal Arguments

“Comfort women" statues have been erected in various cities across the United States and other countries, such as Germany, Canada, and Australia, to honor the hundreds of thousands of women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. These memorials, often spearheaded by local human rights groups, serve as global symbols to raise awareness about wartime sexual violence and to advocate for historical justice.

However, the Japanese government has consistently sought the removal of these monuments, arguing that they foster anti-Japanese sentiment and actively lobbying local authorities worldwide to dismantle them.

The international controversy over "comfort women" monuments stems from a direct clash between local human rights advocacy and Japan's official diplomatic stance. While Japan issued a landmark admission in its 1993 Kono Statement, acknowledging that the Imperial military was involved in managing wartime brothels and that women were recruited against their will, its contemporary position relies on strict legal defenses and contested terminology.

The cornerstone of Japan’s position is the 1965 Claims Settlement Agreement with South Korea. Backed by $500 million in economic aid, Japan argues this treaty settled all wartime compensation claims "completely and finally." To reinforce this, Japan signed a 2015 bilateral agreement with South Korea, offering an official prime ministerial apology and 1 billion yen for a survivor foundation. This pact declared the issue resolved "finally and irreversibly." Although South Korean survivors rejected the deal because it was made without their input, Japan maintains that these state-level treaties are binding and that local monuments violate international law.

Beyond legal treaties, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs actively challenges how history is framed globally. The government officially objects to the term "sex slaves" as historically inaccurate and disputes the widely cited estimate of 200,000 victims, claiming it lacks archival proof. Furthermore, contemporary administrations argue that while private brokers used

deception and coercion, no surviving military documents prove a systemic policy of physical abduction directly by Japanese authorities.

Ultimately, Japan views these global monuments as political tools that foster anti-Japanese sentiment and disrupt foreign relations. This creates a direct conflict with local municipalities, which view the statues as universal symbols honoring human rights and raising awareness about modern human trafficking.

How the Comfort Women Statue Came to Georgia

In the 21st century, Georgia transitioned into a major hub for global business, immigration, and international diplomacy. By 2017, the state hosted a thriving, politically engaged population of over 100,000 Korean Americans, predominantly clustered throughout metro Atlanta.

Seeking to raise awareness of wartime human rights violations and modern human trafficking, a local grassroots organization called the Atlanta Comfort Women Memorial Task Force initiated a campaign to bring a replica of the *Statue of a Girl of Peace* to Georgia.

The task force initially reached an agreement with the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in downtown Atlanta to house the monument. However, under immense pressure from the Japanese Consulate in Atlanta and corporate entities worried about damaging lucrative economic ties between Japan and Georgia, the Center reversed its decision, leaving the monument without a home.

The Brookhaven Decision and Global Controversy

Looking for an alternative public site, the task force approached the City Council of Brookhaven, Georgia, a newly incorporated city located northeast of Atlanta. Recognizing an opportunity to take a stance against modern human trafficking and stand in solidarity with its Asian American residents, the Brookhaven City Council approved the monument.



On June 30, 2017, Brookhaven dedicated the monument in Blackburn Park, making it the very first comfort women statue erected on public land in the American Deep South, and only the second public-land installation in the entire United States (following Glendale, California in 2013).

The dedication instantly sparked an international diplomatic dispute right in suburban Georgia:

- The Opposition: The Japanese government and local corporate representatives argued that the statue would cause anti-Japanese sentiment, jeopardize local investments, and disrupt delicate foreign relations.

- The Defense: Brookhaven leaders defended the installation. They argued that local communities have a civic responsibility to honor international human rights and use historical markers to draw attention to present-day crises like sex trafficking in metro Atlanta.

Comfort Women Monuments Across the United States

The dispute in Brookhaven is part of a larger, ongoing nationwide movement to establish markers honoring these victims. Notable installations across the country include:

- Glendale, California (2013): The first *Statue of Peace* on public land in the US, located in Central Park, which survived a high-profile federal lawsuit aimed at its removal.

- San Francisco, California (2017): Features the "Comfort Women's Column of Strength" in St. Mary's Square, sculpted by Steven Whyte. It depicts three teenage girls—Chinese, Korean, and Philippine—holding hands, which famously prompted the mayor of Osaka, Japan, to sever its 60-year sister-city relationship with San Francisco.

- Palisades Park, New Jersey (2010): The first ever comfort women memorial monument erected in the United States, placed outside the public library.

- Fairfax County, Virginia (2014): A dedicated Memorial Peace Garden built on the grounds of the Government Center.

- Other installations span locations in Manhattan, NY; Nassau County, NY; Hackensack, NJ; Fort Lee, NJ; Union City, NJ; and Southfield, MI.

This geographic footprint proves that modern Georgia is no longer isolated from global developments; rather, its local municipal decisions are directly enmeshed within complex international geopolitics.

Suggested Teaching Activity

Step 1: Hook (5–7 Minutes)

Show the class a photograph of the Brookhaven *Young Girl's Statue for Peace* without providing any initial background context.

Ask students to observe:

- What do you notice about the girl's expression, clothes, and posture?
- Why do you think the sculptors decided to put an empty chair right next to her? Who or what is that chair inviting to sit down?

Briefly define the historical context of World War II "comfort women," introduce the sculptors Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, and explain that this specific statue sits inside Blackburn Park in Brookhaven, Georgia.

Step 2: Sourcing and Perspectives Document Analysis (20 Minutes)

Divide students into pairs. Distribute the source document packet containing the two contrasting viewpoints from the 2017 dispute. Instruct pairs to read the sources and complete a brief analytical T-Chart detailing Economic/Diplomatic Concerns vs. Human Rights/Community Expression.

Source A: The Opposition (The Japanese Consulate Perspective)

- Source Articles: Japan Consul General's 'Comfort Women' Comments Trigger International Criticism (Rough Draft Atlanta) and Comfort Women Statue Unveiled in Brookhaven (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

  The Diplomatic Concern: Tomoko Ohyama, a Japanese consul in Atlanta, stated that the 2015 agreement between Japan and South Korea resolved the issue and that a public memorial would "undermine the progress" made between the nations, expressing concern that the monument would lead to friction or the targeting of Japanese American residents.

  The Local Opposition: Consul General Takashi Shinozuka argued that the monument was not a simple piece of art but a "political tool" that stood as a "symbol of hatred and resentment against Japanese." He also questioned the historical scale of the atrocities and argued the city moved in haste without consulting all local residents or considering the economic ties between Japan and the state of Georgia.

Source B: The Defense (The Brookhaven City Council Perspective)

- Source Articles: Brookhaven Makes History to Memorialize WWII 'Comfort Women' (Rough Draft Atlanta) and Brookhaven Monument to Memorialize 'Comfort Women' (Patch News)

  The Civil Rights Argument: Councilmember John Park stated: "International human rights tribunals, United Nations groups and rapporteurs have all affirmed the history of the Comfort Women and that their fundamental human rights were violated." He noted that the city bears witness to their suffering so that history never repeats itself.

  The Global-Local Connection: Mayor John Ernst defended the choice by linking it directly to current local issues: "By establishing this memorial, we are raising awareness of the ongoing problems of sexual and human trafficking taking place in metro Atlanta and the world today."

  The Civic Stance: Councilmember Joe Gebbia clarified that the memorial was a moral stance against human trafficking rather than an attack on a foreign nation,

comparing it to preserving the historical memory of Auschwitz: "This is a moral issue and we are taking a moral stance. This is a statement about who we are as Brookhaven."

Step 3: Class Discussion — Who Decides Local Memory? (15 Minutes)

Bring the class back together from their pair work for a whole-group discussion. Guide the conversation using the following discussion questions to explore the tension between local community values, international treaties, and historical accountability:

- **Treaties vs. People:** Japan points to the 1965 and 2015 treaties to argue that the matter is legally closed between governments. However, local survivor groups argue that true justice hasn't been achieved because the victims themselves weren't included in the negotiations. Can a historical human rights issue truly be declared "finally and irreversibly" resolved by a government treaty if the survivors reject the terms?

- **The Power of Words:** Words carry immense power in how history is remembered. Advocacy groups use the term "enforced military sexual slavery," while Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs argues the term "sex slaves" is factually inaccurate because they find no official wartime documents proving direct military abduction. Why does the specific wording used on a historical plaque or monument matter so much to both the survivors and the governments involved?

- **Local Responsibility:** Why do you think a grassroots group chose a suburban park in Brookhaven, Georgia, to remember an event that happened in Asia over eighty years ago? What responsibility do local communities have to honor international history and human rights?

Step 4: Exit Ticket Synthesis (5 Minutes)

Instruct students to complete a 3-sentence exit ticket answering:

1. Why did the construction of a statue in Brookhaven, Georgia, cause a diplomatic argument between international governments?
2. How does this event demonstrate Georgia's growing role in global affairs in the 21st century?

Recommended Resources for Teachers

The Comfort Women Justice Coalition offers excellent resources to help educators build background knowledge on the history of comfort women. Their website includes historical overviews, video clips, oral histories, lesson plans, and other instructional materials for classroom use.

For more information, visit: Comfort Women: The Unresolved History and click this link to download the PDF Lesson Plan and Teaching Packet.

Images used:

1. A photograph of Japanese Military “Comfort Women” victims taken as prisoners by Chinese forces in Songshan, Yunnan Province, China, in September 1944. The photo was taken by Private Charles H. Hatfield of the U.S. Army’s 164th Signal Photo Company (Source: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, RG 111, Entry SC, Box 356 / Seoul Metropolitan Archives).
2. Dyana Bagby, Statue of Peace in Blackburn Park, Brookhaven, GA via https://roughdraftatlanta.com/2017/09/20/comfort-women-memorial-relocated-main-blackburn-park-brookhaven/