

Abstract

This paper explores the two common views about the comfort women system during World War II. One viewpoint states that the comfort system was a comprehensive organization of sex slavery carried out by the Japanese military. Another viewpoint argues that the comfort stations were a system of licensed prostitutes. This paper uses documents written by comfort women survivors and Sarah Soh's novel to show that the comfort system was catalyzed by societal factors such as patriarchy, classism, colonialism, and national pride. Moreover, this paper demonstrates that the societal issues let Korea avoid responsibility on the home front. It is only with honest reflections can a resolution be achieved from Japan and Korea, bringing to light the sexual exploitation and violence against all women in war and peace.

Reconciliation of Two "Truths": The Complex Issue of Comfort Women

Korean women and girls comprised the predominant portion of comfort women—women used as sex objects by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. Today the issue of comfort women remains a controversial and complex topic. A common viewpoint is that it was a systematic and comprehensive system of sex slavery carried out by the Japanese military. However, others view comfort women merely as licensed prostitutes. Both of these viewpoints polarize the issue of comfort women, but fail to recognize the societal issues that facilitated the so-called “comfort system.” Factors of structural power in Korea such as patriarchy, classism, colonialism, and nationalistic pride facilitated the operation of the comfort system.

The first viewpoint argues that the comfort system was a comprehensive system of sex slavery; many young girls were systematically deceived and drafted into “comfort stations.” For example, Kim Soon-duk, a comfort woman survivor wrote, "When I was 16 years old, Japanese officials told us that girls 15 and older should not stay in Korea, but should instead go to Japan to work at military supply factories or become military nurses... My mother was needed at home more than I was, so I decided to go." ¹ Another survivor, Moon Pil-gi, recounts how a Korean in her neighborhood deceived her:

One day a man in our village visited me when my parents were not around and asked me if I was interested in going to a good school. One night... he then insisted that I get on board with another girl and literally pushed me into it [truck] in spite of my reluctance.²

¹ Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, ed., *Comfort Women Speak Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 2000), pg. 37.

² Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, ed., pg. 65.

Japanese officials and Korean collaborators actively and systematically sought out girls who felt a responsibility to fulfill filial duty or girls who wanted an education or employment opportunities. Many young girls, such as Kim Soon-duk, were deceived into the comfort women system by their own neighbors; neighbors who were swayed by the power the Japanese army held over its colony, Korea. Through deception and false promises made by the Japanese officials and Korean collaborators, these oral histories describe a systematic and organized recruitment system young girls and women into the comfort system.

These testimonies from survivors reinforce the view that the Japanese government is to blame for their sufferings. One survivor recounted, "The only thing I want now is that Japan show true repentance and act accordingly."³ Another survivor said, "I just want to receive clear apologies and compensation from the Japanese government."⁴ Comfort women survivors condemn the Japanese government for the atrocities they've endured, supporting the argument that comfort women system was one of sex slavery carried out by the Japanese government.

Another viewpoint holds that the comfort women system was simply licensed prostitution and hence legal during the Japanese colonial period in Korea. The argument for the comfort women system as licensed prostitution came from Japanese conservatives wishing to maintain national honor. These individuals sought to avoid war responsibility by overlooking the atrocities the Japanese military committed. By deeming the system legal, in a regulated environment similar to United States camps in Seoul and Okinawa, the "comfort stations" were claimed to prevent rape and satisfy the needs of men. In a

³ Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, ed. pg. 9.

⁴ Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, ed., pg. 67.

legal system, women should be consciously aware of the work they are entering, and enter willingly. However, several comfort women survivors' testimonials challenge the legality of the comfort women system. Many accounts told stories of women and young girls unknowingly entering the comfort women system. Women were promised education or factory jobs but ended up as sex slaves. For example, a young girl named Mun P'il-gi recollected, "On an autumn day in 1943, a man in his fifties who lived in our village and worked as an agent for the Japanese approached me and told me that he could introduce me to a place where I could both earn money and study..."⁵ She was enticed by the promise of education, but was instead deceived into being a comfort woman. In contrast to a system of legal prostitution, Mun P'il-gi did not voluntarily or knowingly enter the comfort women system.

Furthermore in a legalized prostitution system, women should receive adequate medical care and financial compensation. An account by Ms. K, a comfort women survivor, undermines this perspective. Ms. K writes, "A military doctor inspected us on a regular basis, but we all ended up having venereal diseases. Some girls died from these and other illness."⁶ The comfort women were not given proper medical care, undermining the viewpoint that the system was regulated and legal. The testimonies also show that the women were not paid for their services. As Ms. K attests, "In exchange for sex, soldiers apparently paid some kind of military money, but our supervisors took the money, saying that they would save it for us. In any case, I never received a penny from them."⁷ Legal

⁵ Soh, Sarah. pg. 82-84. *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2008), pg. 228.

⁶ Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, ed., pg. 103.

⁷ Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, pg.104.

prostitutes should receive compensation for their job, but a lack of compensation shows that the system was not properly regulated and dissimilar to legalized prostitution today.

The tragedy of the comfort women issue, however, should not be limited to these two viewpoints. By polarizing the issue of comfort women, Korean society glosses over the structural factors of patriarchy, classism, and colonialism, which led to the implementation of the comfort women system. One internal factor that enabled the comfort women system was the engrained patriarchy in Korea's social structure. For example, Mun P'il-gi was deceived into the comfort women system by the promise of education, an education that her father refused to give her. She recounts,

My father, however, was adamantly opposed to the idea of a girl studying, saying that educated girls turn into 'foxes.'... He beat me severely and threw me out of the house... I was allowed to return home only after I promised that I would never go to school again.⁸

In the eyes of her father, Mun P'il-gi's role was to maintain the home and feed the family; education would have corrupted her. Mun P'il-gi's desire for an education drove her to find an alternative course but she was tragically deceived into the comfort woman system.

Moreover, the large socio-economic gap in Korea also facilitated the sexual violence committed against lower-class women. Many women who were deceived into entering the comfort women system were lured by the promise of employment. For example, Hwang Keum-ju recounts, "When I was 11 years old, I had to leave home because my family was very poor...So I went, I wasn't kidnapped, I was officially drafted...All the girls thought that we were going to work at some kind of factory."⁹ Due

⁸ Soh, Sarah. pg. 82-84.

⁹ Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, pg. 5.

to the large socio-economic gap in Korea, lower class women were vulnerable because they urgently needed money to survive and support their family.

Another factor that enabled the comfort women system was the practice of colonialism in Korea, which facilitated the dehumanization of women. Soh argues that imperial Japan planned to implement the comfort women system using women of its colony, forcibly if necessary.¹⁰ The Japanese state operated an ethnicity-based discrimination, deeming its colonized people as an inferior race and suitable for such exploitation. For example, a Japanese soldier threw coal at a comfort woman who refused to receive him. Yet, he did not receive proper punishment because as a comfort woman survivor noted, "they [Japanese] did not regard us equal human beings."¹¹ The imperial colonial system reinforced the idea that Koreans and comfort women in particular were an inferior race, allowing such abuse and treatment to be widespread and acceptable.

The maltreatment of comfort women from their colonial rulers reinforced the last structural factor that facilitated the comfort system, the nation wanting to avoid responsibility for the suffering of the comfort women. Despite the end of the War, the comfort women issue continues to be taboo in modern Korea. Soh deems this phenomenon the blinding effect of nationalistic pride, which has prevented critical self-reflection in modern day Korea.¹² For example in 1992, the movement to build a memorial to the comfort women in Korea was

denied owing to strong opposition by the Association of the Widows of War Dead and Deceased Policemen...They adamantly objected to the placement of a memorial to 'ugly comfort women' next to the

¹⁰ Soh, Sarah. pg. 230.

¹¹ Schellstede, Sangmie Choi, pg. 66.

¹² Soh, Sarah. pg. 239.

tower dedicated to the memory of their husbands, who had died for the nation.¹³

The wives of the Korean soldiers didn't want the memory of their husbands to be juxtaposed next to a statue that memorializes the suffering of the country. They hope for their husbands to be remembered for their valiant efforts, without addressing the complex factors that supported the comfort women system in Korea.

By denying the comfort women memorial, Koreans also tried to forget the part they played in enabling the comfort women system. Fearful of being shamed and deemed as pro-Japanese collaborators, few Koreans have been willing to share their complicity in the recruitment of young girls and women for personal gain.¹⁴ The testimonies of comfort women show that local Korea village men worked with the Japanese military to enlist young girls into the comfort women system. For example, Moon Pil-gi wrote, "One day a man in our village visited me when my parents were not around and asked me if I was interested in going to a good school... He then insisted that I get on board with another girl and literally pushed me into in spite of my reluctance. The driver was a Japanese and drove us away the minute we got in the truck."¹⁵ For Korea to come to terms with its dark history, Koreans must not shy away their part in the suffering of their compatriot's sufferings. National pride and self-pride maybe tarnished, but the truth will allow for an acceptance of responsibility of Korean men and the structural factors that led to the comfort women system.

The comfort women issue remains controversial in Korea and Japan today. For progressive scholars it is tempting to categorize the comfort women system as sexual

¹³ Soh, Sarah. pg. 230.

¹⁴ Soh, Sarah. pg. 237.

¹⁵ Soh, Sarah. pg. 82-84.

slavery in recognition of the degradation of countless women. Conservatives, on the other hand, seek to label the system as prostitution. However such a one-dimensional analysis would not tell the larger narrative of engrained societal structural violence against women. The first step to transforming the prevailing attitude of comfort women is recognition by both Korea and Japan. Only honest reflections can lead to reconciliation between Japan and Korea, and hopefully led to the awareness of sexual exploitation and violence against all women in war and peace.

Works Cited

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