

Military Sexual Slave Women during World War II

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Outline

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I. Overview and testimonies of victims

Overview

In my opinion, the story of sexual slaves exposes the real character of the colonial-imperial power of ultranationalist, militarist pre-War Japan, which ruled over Korea during the first half of the 20th century. During World War II, many young Korean girls were forced to serve as sexual slaves for Japanese soldiers on the battlefields. In this process, they experienced the ravaging of their bodies; and even if they survived this, their humiliation prevented most of them from ever returning home.

The first recruiting of prostitutes for the Japanese army was among women from the "red light districts" in Japan. Since the majority of these women had venereal diseases, however, and since very few wanted to work for the soldiers, young and healthy Korean women were then forced into service. The colonial authorities tricked Korean women from farming regions, offering them "a chance at easy labor," such as washing army uniforms or working in factories. These verbal enticements being mostly unsuccessful, finally the Japanese colonial power began forcing poor, unmarried women into military sexual slavery. The numbers of these women increased rapidly during the Pacific War; from 1942, more than 100,000 women were known to have been forced into such sexual slavery.

Testimonies

"According to one victim's testimony, they had to eat rice balls brought by a managing soldier while other soldiers were on top of them. They were even forced to wash themselves while

lying in bed. Even though their lower parts were infected and swollen, they were forced to continue working. During air raids, they were made to service soldiers in air raid shelters. During one day, 10 women would service a total of 3,000 soldiers, who would wait in lines up to three kilometers long. When defeat was certain, the Japanese soldiers treated the women more brutally, forcing them to continue as prostitutes at the front lines. Most of these women died from starvation or other illnesses at the front. Moreover, the Japanese soldiers often killed these women with machine guns, particularly during battles" (Yong-bock Kim, *Minjung Theology*, chapter 3).

"The man who had accompanied us from Taegu turned out to be the proprietor of the comfort station we were taken to. We called him Oyaji [i.e. boss or master]. I was the youngest among us. Punsun was a year older than me and the others were 18, 19, and 20. The proprietor told me to go into a certain room, but I refused. He dragged me by hair to another room. There I was tortured with electric shocks. He was very cruel. He pulled out the telephone cord and tied my wrists and ankles with it. Then, shouting "konoyaro!" [i.e. "You rascal"] he twirled the telephone receiver. Light fleshed before my eyes, and my body shook all over. I couldn't stand it and begged him to stop. I said I would do anything he asked. But he turned the receiver one more. I blacked out. When I came round my body was wet; I think that he had probably poured water on me" (Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women, Sexual slavery and prostitution during World War II and the US occupation*, 2002. pp.50).

"Having to serve so many men made my sexual organs swell up, and I had to go to see a doctor. When I went the first time, my stomach hurt to the extent that I thought it was going to burst" (Tanaka, pp.52).

"Even though I had no venereal disease, I had to have treatment, because I kept bleeding and couldn't pass water. Perhaps it was a bladder infection. There were some women whose vaginas were so swollen and were bleeding so profusely that there was no space to be inserted inside" (Tanaka, pp.52).

Kim Hacksun describes how she managed to tackle forceful services during her periods: "when our menstruation was due we used cotton wool obtained from the surgeon. We had to serve soldiers during our periods. We tried to avoid them at this time, but they just forced their way in and there was nothing we could do to stop them. We had to make small cotton wool balls and insert them deep inside our wombs so that no blood leaked out. When we didn't have enough cotton we had to cut into small strips and roll this up to use instead" (Tanaka, pp.53).

Huwang Kumju testifies: “the new girls were to serve the officers, as they were virgins. The officer didn’t use condoms, so quite a few of us became pregnant quite early on, but we were naïve and weren’t aware of it. I was all right. But those who were injected with “No. 606” without knowing that they were pregnant, they began to feel chilly, their bodies swelled, and they started to discharge blood. (The most common treatment for venereal disease was an injection of salvarsan, or “No.606” in Japanese medical corps’ terminology.) Then they were taken to the hospital to undergo curettage. After curettage was operated three or four times, they became barren” (Tanaka, pp.53).

Yi Sunok, a Korean woman who was taken into a comfort station in Guangdong, testifies: “among soldiers, some carried a flask of alcohol at their side. They would get drunk and become violent. Not long after I arrived, I was stabbed on the thigh by one. This happened after I tried to refuse him when he went for me several times. I screamed when I was stabbed and the other women and soldiers in the station rushed to my room in surprise. I had to continue to serve the soldiers, even while I was receiving treatment from the military hospital. When this wound had nearly healed, another soldier pushed me backwards for not welcoming him. My hip was hurt, and my thigh began to swell because of the impact. It became so swollen and painful that I had to have an operation” (Tanaka, pp.56).

Mun P'ilgi describes a similar experience: “there were many times when I was almost killed. If I refused to do what one man asked, he would come back drunk and threaten me with his sword. Others simply arrived drunk, and had intercourse with their swords stuck in the *tatami*. This left the *tatami* scarred, but this sort of behavior was more a threat to make me accede to their desires and give them satisfaction” (Tanaka, pp.56).

Pictures

The pictures on the next few pages add to the testimony of victims.



전선의 이동으로 일본군 무개트럭에
실려 이동하는 조선인 위안부들

Women on a military truck were transported to a comfort station (from cyber memorial on the website for the Korean council for the women drafted for military sexual slavery by Japan. www.womenandwar.net/english).



A pregnant Korean woman and other Korean sex slaves and a Japanese soldier (from cyber memorial on the website for the Korean council for the women drafted for military sexual slavery by Japan. www.womenandwar.net/english).



“Deprived virginity,” a Korean sex slave drew this picture (from cyber memorial on the website for the Korean council for the women drafted for military sexual slavery by Japan. www.womenandwar.net/english).



"There and then", a Korean sex slave drew this picture (from cyber memorial on the website for the Korean council for the women drafted for military sexual slavery by Japan. www.womenandwar.net/english).



Heaps of corpses thrown near the territories of boarder between Burma (now Myanmar) and China; most of them were Korean sex slaves reported (from cyber memorial on the website for the Korean council for the women drafted for military sexual slavery by Japan. www.womenandwar.net/english).

II. Sexual slaves' postwar experiences

Abandonment

Yoshiaki Yoshimi reports in his book, *Comfort Women* that the Japanese navy issued a repatriation order in September 1944, and Japanese comfort women were sent back to the Japanese mainland. It appears, however, that the Japanese army did not return comfort women from other countries to their homes, except in a few special cases. There were many sexual slaves who were left out and unable to return home to their own home countries. In 1988, Yun Jong-ok visited a former sexual slave living in Hat Yi in Thailand. Pe Pong-gi, who was forcibly brought to Okinawa's Tokashikijima, entered a civilian relocation camp in Ishikawa after the Japanese military's surrender, but she was now given an opportunity to return to her home town. When she left the relocation center, she said, she was beaten down by the thought that "she had been deceived and brought there by the Japanese military and then abandoned in a strange country." She never returned to Korea and passed away in October 1991 (pp.192 -193). Yoshiaki argues that the above examples are drawn from the experiences of Korean women, but it is possible that cases of Chinese and Taiwanese women who stayed behind in Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands, as well as cases of Indonesian and other women who were taken away their countries and never returned, will eventually be confirmed (pp.193).

Suffering the aftereffects of Disease and Injury

Yoshimi points out that after the war, former sexual slaves suffered the aftereffects of diseases, injuries, and psychological trauma, as well as social discrimination on account of having been made sexual slaves (pp.193). These women suffered physical afflictions such as sexually transmitted diseases, uterine diseases, hysterectomies, and sterility; and mental illness such as nervous diseases, depression, and speech impediments. According to Korean women's testimony, there was a case in which a family was destroyed when the oldest son born to a former sexual slave woman began to exhibit symptoms of syphilis. There were also some whose bodies ached on rainy days because they had been beaten repeatedly in the comfort stations. Some women got married, but many were second wives. Most were later divorced. The former sexual slave women who came forward with their stories had unhappy lives after the war.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

In case of Korean women, many former sexual slaves shared such suffering as being unable “to sleep without the door being open, even in wintertime, when get depressed” (Yoshimi, pp.195). Another example of PTSD (that haunts former sexual slave women) is evident in the case of Choi Myong-sun (a fictitious name). She became neurotic after her thirtieth birthday, and she began to experience symptoms of dementia. She described how at the time she “would suddenly despise her husband, break out in goose flesh, and go out of her mind, yelling at him to Get out!!” (pp.195).

The damage done to Dutch former sexual slave woman Jeanne O’Herne was also extremely profound. She describes one aspect of her suffering as follows. “Even after almost fifty years, I still experience this feeling of total fear going through my body and through all my limbs, burning me up. It comes to me at the oddest moments in which I wake up with nightmares and even feel it when just lying in bed at night. But worst of all, I felt this fear every time my husband made love to me. I have never been able to enjoy intercourse as a consequence of what the Japanese did to me” (pp.196).

Living with Social Discrimination: the Suffering Never Ends

Yoshimi argues that social discrimination oppressed these women. Hwang Kum-ju confided that “I get sick of thinking about how I live out my life and then die without being despised by other people and without suffering from illness as well” (pp.196). Park Sun-e recalled that “I couldn’t lead a dignified life, and when I think of how I ruined my child’s whole life, I am mortified, but there’s no help for it” (pp.196). Yoshimi says that the discrimination from their families as well as the pressure these women exerted on themselves was profound. Kim Hak-sun married but was told by her husband that “she was a filthy woman, who’d had sex with soldiers” (pp.196).

Yoshimi points out that in the midst of all this oppression, abandoning efforts to conceal the past and coming forward itself became a certain sort of liberation from mental restraints. Kim Dok-chin (a fictitious name) described how she went to the Korean Council to testify, and “since I wanted to say, it seems that half of my bitter feelings dissolved” (pp.197). Mun Pil-gi related how, “when I finally spewed out all the things I had kept locked up inside me all that time, I felt a great weight had been lifted off my chest” (pp.197).

III. Theological reflection

Human suffering is a religious theme. All religions and even nonreligious ideologies have responded to the existence of irremovable suffering of innocent people. Basic religious and theological questions arise regarding about innocent people's suffering. Most of times, we ask questions in a skeptically negative way. If God is a good personal creator being, how can he let such horrible things happen or why does not he stop them? Is suffering God's will? Is God the source of evil? Does God permit suffering that comes from other sources? Oftentimes, in my opinion, some apply such questions inappropriately. For example, Pat Robertson argued that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment against homosexuals. He improperly applies God's punishment to a certain group of people in order to disagree with them. Through my theological reflection about human suffering, i.e. sexual slave women during World War II, I would like to propose a sharp turn: we must attempt to view human suffering in a positive way rather than a negative way even though there is inside a tension between outrage and such an acceptance.

Jonathan Glover, an English ethicist points out in his book *Humanity* that in Europe at the start of the twentieth century most people accepted the authority of morality and that reflective Europeans were also able to believe in moral progress. At the end of the century, it was hard to be confident either about the moral law or about moral progress. After experiencing two major world wars, Europeans asked skeptically about God's credentials for the role of a moral authority. It became a catalyst to bring the collapse of the authority of religion and decline in belief in God in secularizing Europe. Glover argues that such collapse and decline are reasons for it now being a problem for many who are not philosophers in Europe.

Harold J. Berman in his article *Faith and Order* talks about Western people's integrity crisis. Many men and women in their early fifties ask themselves with utmost seriousness about what their lives have stood for and where they are headed. He argues that one major symptom of this threatened breakdown is the massive loss of confidence in religion. It can be assumed that some sort of chain reactions related to human suffering and skepticism about a moral authority and one's integrity produce this loss of confidence in religion.

Inside a shift from the skeptically negative view about human suffering to a positive one, an issue of outrage still remains. However, such an outrage should be overcome. Dorothee Soelle in her book *Suffering* points out that the problem of suffering lingers inside the tension between outrage and acceptance, both voiced most clearly in the book of Job. She says that "The power of anger in the work of love necessitates outrage, protest, and resistance, but

there are also patience, independence and inner freedom in those who bear the unbearable burden” (Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, Fortress Press, 1975).

Another angle on such an outrage is that anger provoked by observing innocent people’s suffering humiliates us and leads us into deep introspection. It makes us humble to accept the fact of how violent and evil we are. This way of looking at human suffering can be an alternative to the ways to prevent it from causing by our own faults and evilness. God is not the source of evil. God does not make us suffer alone but suffers with us. God wants to be with us in our suffering. If all these are true, logically one’s outrage provoked by observing innocent people’s suffering is really going toward oneself and God under suffering.

Now God the Co-sufferer is asking all of us in our outrage, “When innocent people are suffering, where are you and what do you do for them and for your God under suffering?” When we happen to face such questions, what should be our answers? We cannot blame God the Co-sufferer for human suffering that God does not cause. Human suffering such as sexual slave women during World War II and the Holocaust of the same period is a human responsibility. Part of being our evil and our ignorance about other’s evil means that innocent people suffer. Human ignorance about social evil such as wars, colonialism, and global economic injustice makes the poor, the weak, and the marginalized suffer more. God the Co-sufferer is challenging us about what to do whenever our outrage becomes provoked.

God co-suffered in Christ’s suffering at the cross and Christ fulfilled God’s life-giving grace that brings life in abundance. The cross of Christ symbolizes an understanding of human suffering in which humans may participate in God’s pain and Christ’s suffering. There is always in human participation the role of religion to heal the innocent victims of human suffering. To ponder about how to heal the innocent victims of sexual slave women and how to prevent such suffering from causing again by our ignorance and evilness is our imperative.

Bibliography

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