

Teaching about the Korean Comfort Women

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During World War II, human rights violations against women took on gargantuan proportions of indescribable horror. The Japanese military engaged in the systematic abduction of women from China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and other nations and confined them to military installations in Japanese-occupied territories to serve as sexual slaves. Between 50,000 to 200,000 women and girls were abducted by the Japanese to serve as *We Ahn Boo* (a Korean term meaning “Comfort Women”) for its troops in military comfort stations (ianjo) throughout Asia. The majority of the abducted women were from Korea.¹

The Korean *We Ahn Boo* were mostly uneducated, sexually inexperienced teenagers from rural areas who were taken from families, schools, and rice fields either by force or on the promise of work in factories. During this historic period of Japanese brutality, these women became infected with venereal diseases; were coerced to induce abortions in often multiple pregnancies; or were simply discarded by the wayside when considered “useless” to the soldiers. One expert has estimated that fewer than 10 percent of the Korean comfort women survived World War II as a result of the disease and damage inflicted by this experience.²

After the War

After the defeat of the Japanese Army, the majority of Korean women, aged, physically and mentally broken, could not return home to their native country for a multiplicity of complex reasons. Some were forced to die with Japanese soldiers on the battlefield; others were killed in caves or trenches; still others were locked into submarines and sunk at sea; and many were simply abandoned, finding themselves in an unknown foreign country. Others had no choice but to remain in previously Japanese-occupied countries because of severe illnesses or lack of

means to return home. The women’s major reason, however, was their sense of profound shame and guilt.³ The few survivors who were able to return home endured indescribable suffering and humiliation. Many could not marry, and those who attempted marriage—without revealing their background—often failed in their marriage because of shame, guilt, ill health, or prejudice from their families and communities when their past was learned. Today, these women live isolated and alone in crippling poverty and failing health.

Redressing Grievances

After World War II, discussion of the plight of comfort women began to emerge in Korea; but it was not until the 1990s, when a brave former *We Ahn Boo* made a public testimony of her experiences, that the issue began to surface to the general public. Since that momentous revelation, 234 Korean women publicly identified themselves as former comfort women; of these, only 99 women are still alive today.⁴ Since other survivors have concealed their identity, their exact number will never be known.

Today, the crime against these women has become a painful dispute between governments and civic groups. When

a Japanese historian found a number of documents revealing the deep involvement of the Japanese military in the comfort women system, the Japanese government acknowledged the injustice. In fact, in 1993 the Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono issued a public statement that acknowledged these actions and apologized on behalf of the Japanese military.⁵ Unfortunately, since then, the Japanese government has consistently attempted to withdraw the 1993 Kono statement, insisting that it has no legal responsibility for what occurred.

Compensation for surviving comfort women has been implemented by privately raised funds under the auspices of The Asian Women’s Fund, between 1995 and 2007. The Korean government has also contributed to the women’s compensation since the 1990s, and Korean NGOs established the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan to conduct research. The “House of Sharing,” a home for the surviving victims, was built from private donations to offer those women still alive a place of safety and comfort. In 1996, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights approved research studies into the human rights abuses of the Korean comfort women and urged the Japanese government to apologize and take financial responsibility.⁶ The foreign governments of Canada, The Netherlands, the European Union, and the United States, as well as international organizations such as the International Labor Organization, International Commission of Jurists, and Amnesty International have raised their

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

(These suggestions are presented for classes whose students are of an appropriate age to study this topic)

After reviewing pictures, paintings, and writings of Korean comfort women through the Internet

- Express your reaction in class. Then write a letter to a comfort woman. (<http://en.womenandwar.net/contents/home/home.asp>)
- After watching the online video on Korean comfort women discuss how to prevent the repetition of such a tragedy in the future. (<http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/eng/>, go to Resources > Digital History > Historical Videos) differentiate between 'the comfort women system' and 'licensed prostitution.'
- Reflect on the reason(s) why the Japanese government only accepts moral responsibility for the comfort women, disregarding any legal responsibility.

Student Assignments

After reading related reports (such as the U.S. House of Representatives Resolution 121, Reports of the Human Rights Commission, International Labor Organization, the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action on Human Rights, the Beijing Declaration, and Platform for Action by the Fourth World Conference on Women), students are required to submit a 5- to 6-page report analyzing the issue from various standpoints:

- Abuse of women in patriarchal societies (gender inequality)
- Violence against poor, uneducated women (class inequality)
- Discrimination under Japanese colonial rule (racial inequality)
- Violations of individual human rights by another nation-state.

Assessment

The teacher uses pre-established writing rubrics implemented at the beginning of the school year.

voices requesting Japan to apologize and compensate the victims.

Future Generations

In order to educate future generations about crimes against humanity, for effective global citizenship, the topic of comfort women in both Korea and Japan has been addressed intermittently in history textbooks since the beginning of the 1990s. Most of the textbooks describe the exploitations in only a few paragraphs. However, since the founding of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform in 1997, which is embedded in strong nationalism, Japanese textbooks have omitted the comfort women issue altogether.⁷ From the Korean standpoint, a new effort to discuss the issue from the perspectives of gender equality and human rights was begun in the early 2000s. Hopefully, more historical truth on the We Ahn Boo will continue to be collected and disclosed to the public by the Museum of History, which opened its doors in 1998. Most encouraging is a new joint effort between Korea and Japan toward historical reconciliation by establishing a Korean-Japanese Joint Committee for Historical Research.⁸

Conclusion

The Japanese government treats the comfort women issue from a moral standpoint, insisting that compensations are reparations. The Korean government, however, demands from Japan an official apology, monetary compensation, and a public statement of deep regret about its failure to protect these women against the brutality of the Japanese military. Korean NGOs treat the issue from a nationalistic and feminist point of view, portraying it as massive sexual exploitation. The issue is not solely related to the power relationship between two nations. The brutality of abductions of the We Ahn Boo by the Japanese military during World War II compel an examination into international

human rights violations viewed from the perspectives of gender, class, racial inequality, and violence inflicted on a people of one nation-state by another.

Notes

1. C. Sarah Soh, *Japan's Responsibility Toward Comfort Women Survivors* (Japan Policy Research Institute (JPRI), May, 2001), www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp77.html.
2. Chung Chin Sung, "Testimonies on War Crimes against Women in Conflict Situations," in *Testimonies of the Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights* (Vienna, Center for Women's Global Leadership, 1993), 21-22.
3. Ibid.
4. House of Sharing, "Comfort Women," www.nanum.org/eng/index.html.
5. Congressional Research Service Memorandum, U.S. House of Representatives Resolution 121 Japanese Military's "Comfort Women" System (Washington, D.C., 2007).
6. Northeast Asian History Foundation, "Q & A on Historical Issues on Japanese Military Comfort Women." http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/?sub_num=116#arti2.
7. Ibid; Yali Zhao and John D. Hoge, "Countering Textbook Distortion: War Atrocities in Asia, 1937-1945" *Social Education* 70, no. 7 (2006): 424-430.
8. Northeast Asian History Foundation, "Q & A on Historical Issues on Japanese Military Comfort Women."

WEBSITES:

The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

<http://en.womenandwar.net/contents/home/home.asp>

Northeast Asian History Foundation

<http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/eng/>

House of Sharing

www.nanum.org/eng/index.html

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