

Stories that Make History

Genocide and Mass Violence in the Age of Extremes



Edited by Frank Jacob

Volume 3

Stories That Make History

The Experience and Memories of the Japanese Military
Comfort Girls-Women

Edited by The Research Team of the War & Women's
Human Rights Center, The Korean Council for the
Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

Translated by Angella Son

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Dedicated to

all *halmonis*

beloved grandmothers

and

our *comfort girls-women*

others suffering from sexual and war violence in the world

you and I desiring and taking action for the respect for human dignity for all

Translator's Preface

Fifteen Years Later

Among the estimated 50,000 to 200,000¹ Korean young girls and women who were mobilized as sex slaves for the Japanese military, only 240 of them were registered as *comfort girls-women* with the South Korean government by the end of 2018, and only twenty are still alive today (as of August 31, 2019). Most of them are in their late 80s and 90s. Out of the twelve *comfort girls-women* whose stories are shared in this volume, only three are still alive today. The *halmoni* Kang Il-chul, Lee Ok-seon and Gil Won-ok are in their early 90s. It is dreadful to imagine how much of this “living his(her)tory” will still be alive about ten years from now. It is with this sense of urgency in mind that this book, which is a translation of the original volume into English, is created, a response to a void in these published stories in languages other than Korean. This book is an effort to preserve and make their stories available to the world and an invitation to encourage and ask readers to join in the act of justice and compassion for *comfort girls-women* and other victims of war and sexual violence.

Note that I created the term *comfort girls-women* to replace the widely used term “comfort women,” often placed inside quotation marks. This term has three significant aspects: (1) the italics signify that the word “comfort” has a different meaning – sexual slavery—than its usual meaning in the term “comfort women” of entertaining and providing pleasure to men; (2) the addition of the word “girl” underscores the young age of the victims who were forced into sexual slavery; and (3) the word “women” reflects the long period – about three-quarters of a century – they endured without a satisfactory resolution to their situation. Also, currently, Korean *comfort girls-women* are referred to in Korean as *halmoni*, which means “grandmother” and is a general term for elderly women in Korea.

The notion of comfort women progressed through various transformations, especially during the intense period of heightened war conflict toward the latter part of World War II. Ideally, it was understood as a profession by which

¹ These numbers are estimates because fact finding to ascertain accurate numbers is not possible due to the fact that, to eliminate any evidence of the systemic execution of sexual slavery by the Japanese military, it killed many *comfort girls-women* at comfort stations at the end of war and destroyed many military records. Moreover, the Japanese government has not disclosed the surviving military records about *comfort girls-women*. Some *comfort girls-women* also died on their way back to Korea.

women offered comfort to stressed soldiers during wartime by performing (singing and dancing) and providing companionship. In Chosun, these entertaining girls and women were known as *kisaeng* and were professionally trained in singing, dancing, and poetry. What makes the issue of *comfort girls-women* complex and difficult to engage with “clean” discussions between the perpetrator and victim and among the rest of us is due to the fluidity of the meaning of the term “comfort.” Japan had legalized and normalized prostitution and used the term “comforting” in place of prostitution that is executed voluntarily by women for economic gain. Because of the fluidity of the term “comfort,” used both for what it literally means and how it is a euphemism for prostitution, both activists and scholars seeking justice for *comfort girls-women* emphasized the deceptive, violent and forced nature of recruitment to prove that *comfort girls-women* were not comforting but were forced into sexual slavery. This became common rhetoric for *comfort girls-women* registering with the South Korean government and is evident in most of the stories in this volume.

The research team struggled with this very issue back in 2004 when they were compiling Gil Won-ok *halmoni*'s story. Gil *halmoni* was not taken by force to comfort stations but voluntarily went with her friends to make money to help her father obtain his release from prison. She also went to the comfort station for a second time thinking that she was going to sing at places like bars. The research team initially did not know whether her story could be a part of the book. In the midst of their genuine struggle with the discrepancy between Gil *halmoni*'s story and the existing repertoire of what *comfort girls-women* were in South Korea at that time, they came to a realization about how narrowly *comfort girls-women* were defined because of the patriarchal influence, especially the Confucian virtues. Korean girls' highest virtue is to keep their chastity until they are married and Korean *comfort girls-women* were yet again forced to fit their life into a box, i.e. the involuntary loss of chastity as opposed to an exercise of subjectivity to support their families. It was a time to repent and free themselves from the shackles of entrenched and dehumanizing societal duress from a patriarchal system about which they thought they were already mostly aware. They concluded that, instead of forcible and involuntary recruitment, the conditions at comfort stations should be the main criteria in determining whether one was a sexual slave.

I concur with the research team and propose that Yoshimi Yoshiaki's criteria of *comfort girls-women* should be uniformly adopted. Regardless of how they are recruited and transported to comfort stations, *comfort girls-women* were sex slaves if the conditions at comfort stations warranted it so, conditions such as coerced sexual intercourse, harsh scrutiny, physical violence, an inability to leave, nominal or no compensation, hunger, constant exposure to sexually

transmitted diseases, etc. No debate about the manner of recruitment and transportation should take place. Moreover, no compulsivity about a 100% rule should be used as a criterion for evidence. Sexual slavery is recognized even if there were *comfort girls-women* who had more freedom, made money, or engaged in romantic relationships with Japanese soldiers as these were exceptions and most *comfort girls-women* were subject to sexual slavery. This will facilitate more focused negotiations between the Japanese government as the perpetrator and *comfort girls-women* as the victims. There is no question about the wretchedly inhuman working conditions that *comfort girls-women* had to face day in and day out at comfort stations. The initiation of their work was usually by gang rapes. They were constantly subject to intolerable violence and went without adequate or any pay. They were coerced to have an unimaginable number of sexual encounters, especially during weekends (e.g. Gong Jeom-yeop, Kim Hwa-ja, and Kim Soon-ak had 27 to 40 sexual intercourses during weekends) and were prone to contracting STDs. For instance, five out of the twelve *comfort girls-women* in this book (Gong Jeom-yeop, Seok Soon-hee, Lee Ok-seon, Roh Chung-ja, and Jang Jeom-dol) contracted syphilis. They were perpetually hungry, had no personal freedom to go into and out of comfort stations, and were controlled by a fear of violence and death.

What is alarming is how young *comfort girls-women* were when they were transported to comfort stations; most of them were as young as 11 and they were usually not older than 18. The ages noted in this book use the Korean age system in which a baby is one year old at birth. A Korean age is usually one year older, in some cases two years older, than an American age. It is grossly misleading to talk about *comfort girls-women* only in terms of women since they were children or youths when they were conscripted into sexual slavery. These children and young girls were in situations of extreme displacement from their families, friends, hometowns, language, name, culture, etc. Most of all, they were displaced from their girlhood and humanity. Their girlhood was arrested at the point of arrival at comfort stations. They, in fact, stopped being a human for the most part. They were thoroughly objectified by the horrific experiences of sexual slavery by the Japanese military and were used as a tool to satisfy the Japanese military's needs to the point that their dignity as a human was obliterated, for some, even to the point of non-existence.

They were abandoned by the Japanese military to be used as *comfort girls-women* and no acknowledgment of the treacherous and systematic sexual enslavement imposed on them has come forth from the Japanese government. Tragically, they experienced a second abandonment by the South Korean government, its people, and, in some cases, even their families. They were fortunate enough to stay alive in spite of the efforts of the Japanese military to kill off all *comfort girls-*

women in order to eliminate evidence of the institutional system of sexual slavery just as they destroyed many of the military records. They had gone through extremely distressful situations and risked their lives to return home, but they were at best not welcomed and at worst rejected. The Korean government and people have been too slow to recognize their victimization and accept the innocence of these women and to embrace their pain, sorrow, and suffering and to advocate for justice for them. Some of their families were afraid that they would be the object of shame if their daughter, sister, or mother were *comfort girls-women*. This turning of their innocence into inadequacy or shame, actively by the Japanese government, passively by the Korean government and its people, and helplessly by *comfort girls-women* themselves, compounded their long, miserable suffering for half a century until Kim Hak-soon broke the silence in 1991 with the support of Korean and Japanese activists, even though the first comfort station outside of Japan was established by the Japanese military in 1932 and World War II ended in 1945. After World War II, no part of the war resolution was about *comfort girls-women*. Korea did not claim redress for *comfort girls-women*, nor did Japan offer to pay or provide care for them. Neither United Nations troops nor the United States suggested any reparation for them. It became a moot point and disappeared from people's attention.

In the late 20th century, religious and secular women's organizations in South Korea were very active in addressing women's human rights and societal well-being, including sex tourism from Japan to South Korea. They determined that sex tourism was rooted in the system of *comfort girls-women* in operation during World War II.² South Korean women activists then started their justice work for *comfort girls-women* and founded the Korean Institute on Chongsindae on July 10, 1990 and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan in November of 1990. Yoon Chung Ok and Lee Hyo-chae were their leaders, and these organizations helped Kim Hak-sun bring a suit against the Japanese government in August of 1991. Inspired by Kim Hak-sun, the Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki found some relevant documents which were published by Asahi Shinbun on January 11, 1992. This prompted a statement of apology by the Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi on January 17, 1992, and the Kono statement was issued on August 4, 1993 acknowledging the involvement of the Japanese military in the system of *comfort girls-women* and

² For further details on the discussion, please see my work "The Japanese Secret: The Shame Behind Japan's Longstanding Denial of Its War Crime against Korean *Comfort Girls-Women*" in *Japanese Military Sexual Slavery: The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims*, eds. Pyong Gap Min, Thomas Chung and Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 291–319.

stations. These apologies have been criticized for Japan's reluctance to take full and legal responsibility for its war crimes. Nonetheless, some successful milestones have been reached at the United Nations, the "Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery" in 2000, and the United States Congress (House Resolution 121) on July 30, 2007 stating that Japan was legally accountable for sexual slavery during World War II. However, in the same year of 2007, the Japanese conservative party, led by the Abe administration, reversed Japan's admission of its guilt in the Kono Statement. Abe stated, "[t]he fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion."³ In addition, Japanese nationalists argued that *comfort girls-women* were willing prostitutes to earn money and no sexual slavery existed during World War II, and thus that Japan is not accountable for any *comfort girls-women* issues.

Moreover, Japan's effort to whitewash its atrocious and horrendous war crimes such as the Nanking massacre and *comfort girls-women* issues started in 1955 by adopting more censorship on textbooks. The government textbook authorization system has been used to reject textbooks including unfavorable depictions of Japan during World War II. In addition, a group of far-right nationalist revisionists sponsored the publication of the *New History Textbook* in 2000 to rewrite history. Makoto Watanabe, an associate professor of communications and media at Hokkaido Bunkyo University, is dismayed by Japan's efforts to revise history and states:

A decade ago, the far right said it was going to "reinterpret" Japanese history, essentially allowing them to put a positive spin on everything. But now they are simply trying to erase things like the Nanjing Massacre and the comfort women from history books. To delete anything that is seen as negative from our history means that young people are ignorant about their own nation's past. And not knowing about Nanjing or other uncomfortable facts means that they are not able to make appropriate decisions on the future of our country.⁴

Influenced by the 1993 Kono statement, by 1997, there were seven textbooks in Japan that contained *comfort girls-women* issues in their content. The number of textbooks decreased under the influence of Abe and other revisionists and there were three and two textbooks mentioning comfort women in 2002 and 2006 respectively. Eventually, by 2012, there were no textbooks that informed

³ Hiroko Tabuchi, "Japan's Abe: No Proof of WWII Sex Slaves," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2007. Accessed March 2, 2019. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/01/AR2007030100578.html>.

⁴ Julian Ryall, "Japan's 'Nationalist' School Books Teach a Different View of History," *DW*, August 15, 2017. Accessed November 6, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/japans-nationalist-school-books-teach-a-different-view-of-history/a-40092325>.

Japanese children and youths about comfort women issues in Japan.⁵ Japan's effort to revise history did not stop with textbooks in Japan but extended to textbooks in the United States. In December 2014, Japanese officials met with McGraw-Hill officials in New York and stipulated that one of their textbooks was erroneous on facts about *comfort girls-women* and other issues and that it should revise the textbook accordingly. In response to this demand from Japan, McGraw-Hill rejected it and released a statement saying: "Scholars are aligned behind the historical fact of 'comfort women' and we unequivocally stand behind the writing, research and presentation of our authors."⁶

On December 28, 2015, pressured by the Obama Administration, Japan and South Korea entered a "final and irreversible" agreement of reconciliation under which Japan was to issue a statement of apology and create a fund of one million yen with which to pay Korean *comfort girls-women* and South Korea was to remove the *Sonyeosang* (peace statue) in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Unfortunately, the agreement was received with fury and indignation, especially by Korean activists and *halmonis*, because the victims were completely ignored in the making of the agreement. The victims did not think that Japan's apology was a true apology since it did not include Japan's admission of guilt. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō confirmed that the apology was not part of the December 28, 2015 agreement.⁷ As a result, twelve of the surviving victims are bringing suits against the Korean government. President Moon Jae-in ordered a review of the agreement which was made by his predecessor Former President Park Geun-hye and made an announcement at the end of the year 2017 confirming the position of much of the South Korean public whereby the agreement did not reflect the crucial voices of victims and thus was flawed. In the meantime, Japan has been urging Korea to stand up to the agreement and, most recently, implemented trade restrictions on chemicals essential to tech industries in South Korea. Moreover, Japan removed South Korea from its whitelist in August 2019 and, in turn, South Korea removed Japan from its whitelist in September 2019. The tension between the two countries is escalating.

5 Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, Tokyo, Japan.

6 Martin Fackler, "U. S. Textbook Skews History, Prime Minister of Japan Says," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2015. Accessed November 12, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/world/asia/japans-premier-disputes-us-textbooks-portrayal-of-comfort-women.html>.

7 *Japan Times*, "Abe Confirms Japan Not Considering Apology Letters for 'Comfort Women,'" October 3, 2016. Accessed March 2, 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/10/03/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-confirms-japan-not-considering-apology-letters-comfort-women/#.WjsPVIWnGpp>.

A note to the reader is in order. In general, stories written by novelists or told by people are usually coherent with respect to time, space, and the progression of plots, and, for the most part, have full information in explicit or implied forms. When readers or listeners are done reading or listening to the stories, there is usually a clear sense as to the intent of the author, although there could be a few questions still begging for the readers' continued reflections. If there is any ambivalence in the story, it is usually created by the willful intention of the author or storyteller. Ambivalence, however, is the major characteristic of the stories of the twelve *comfort girls-women* in this book.

What the readers will find is incongruity in all of the stories even though the research team put their best efforts into compiling coherent stories. It is expected that these *comfort girls-women* would forget some details of their recruitment, transporting, and life at a comfort station and of their return home since it happened fifty to sixty years prior to 2004. Even with some deleted memories, coherence is usually intact in people's memories. However, memories of these *comfort girls-women* are not as reliable as the level that is often expected of storytellers. For instance, Kim Bong-yi suffered from mental disturbance from the trauma of her life as a *comfort girl-woman*, to the extent that she hardly remembers the location of the comfort station, her life there, and the way she came back home. Roh Chung-ja, another *comfort girl-woman*, shared that she was involved in entertaining the soldiers with singing and dancing and that she did not engage in taking "customers" despite having admitted so earlier. It was found out that Roh had dementia at the time of her interviews in 2002.

Whatever caused their partial amnesia or partially tangled memories, the research team has, nonetheless, compiled coherent stories in the background of ambivalence. I encourage readers to suspend their usual expectations of coherent stories, especially if they are seeking logical, sequential, and accurate facts with the eye of an analytical mind. Instead, I encourage readers to receive the life stories of these *comfort girls-women* with both their hearts and minds in the fullest operation and hear the inner stories that they are desperately trying to convey to us today. Their voice was completely denied and resuscitating their sleeping or almost disappeared voices would require further healing in the core of their selves. We thus need to hear their incoherent stories by listening to both what is told and what is left unspoken. We need to be mindful about how sexual slavery alters a person's life forever and inevitably, especially their future relationship with sex. Moreover, reflection and critical analysis are in order when determining what factors contributed to their continual struggle to make their ends meet and try to stay away from abusive situations. When we think deeply and honestly about this, we cannot but be humble to admit that we have overlooked or even were oblivious about their plight. We have put the

least of our trust in the possibility of their transformation from the atrocity of pain and suffering into thriving delight and joy. Their stories ended in this book in 2004, but their life stories continued and the gradual transformation of their lives from pain and suffering to hope and joy followed. Moreover, the transformation of their identity from helpless victims to courageous activists for justice and peace for the world inspired and continues to inspire many to be part of their journey to justice and peace. I thus encourage and ask readers to join in the acts of justice and compassion for *comfort girls-women* and other victims of war and sexual violence.

May the words of *comfort girls-women*, “No more wars!” and “No more victims like us, *comfort girls-women!*” come alive!

Angella Son
August 31, 2019
Madison, New Jersey

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My work in this project owes deep appreciation to many people and organizations. I am most grateful to the twelve *comfort girls-women* for their willingness to be vulnerable and for their courage to re-experience the trauma yet again in sharing their stories. The sharing of their stories, which are painful and all prefer to forget about, was not a passive act but a result of an agonizing struggle with their sense of shame and fear of isolation. It was their proactive subjectivity to reveal the truth of the unbearable and horrifying nature of war and the abuse of the weak that accompanied the war. Moreover, their fierce passion to prevent any future atrocities that they had helplessly experienced was behind their willingness and courage to bear the unbearable. They are heroes for turning weakness into strength.

I am deeply grateful to the research team and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter, the Korean Council) for having produced the original book in 2004 that represents their resilient commitment, scholarly acumen, and profound compassion. Their tireless work wisely kept the mission of the project in balance with the needs of the twelve *comfort girls-women* and readers. They did not compromise the authenticity and well-being of the twelve courageous people for the sake of the ambitious accomplishment of “perfect” testimonies, nor did they insist on “clean” testimonies for the readers. Their sacrifice and dedication are worthy of wholehearted commendation. They left an indelible mark in shaping history by offering a history that is dangerous, piercing, and desolate so that peace and joy may be given birth gradually in the courageous twelve *comfort girls-women*, other *comfort girls-women*, and the rest of us.

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justice act concerning affordability for readers, i.e. making the story accessible to anyone, rich or poor. I appeal to others to join in this justice act by donating to the Korean Council (its new name is the Korean Council for Justice & Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan), and information about donations can be found on the page following these acknowledgments.

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Preface

Attempting to Politicize Memory

This book contains the voices of twelve Japanese military *comfort girls-women*. The societal interest in the *comfort girls-women* issue, ignited by the public testimony of Kim Hak-soon in 1991, has been linked to domestic and international activism by groups such as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery (hereafter the Korean Council)⁸ and the research of scholars. The fact that activism and the interest of the academic world kicked into gear and actively sustained themselves over this issue during the past decade was, of course, due to the courageous testimonies of *comfort girls-women*, whom we may refer to as living proof. In 1993, the stories of 19 *comfort girls-women* were woven into a book that was the first volume of testimonies. Since the first compilation of testimonies came out, their stories have continued, and five testimonial books had been published by 2001. If this book is to be classified as another volume of testimonies, it will be the sixth one.

This book was written by a research team of 17 members who came together as a group on May 19, 2002. It is the result of more than several dozen team meetings over a period of two years after the team met for the first time and held a workshop. During the meetings, the team put their heads together and sketched out their thoughts and, when they were not together, used internet discussion boards to exchange their opinions. Our team first examined the five published volumes of testimonies to differentiate between the women who had been included in the five volumes (sixty-six in total) and the women who had not. Among the seventy-six women who had not been included in the testimonial books, we again made our selection, choosing the ones that were relatively easier to approach regardless of their not-so-great current health status, and began to collect existing data on them. Then, the research team members were divided on a regional basis, and the interviews were set up to be shared.

Regarding the basic methods and skills of interviewing, not only did we learn through the formal form of lectures, but we also continued to talk with one another and coordinate our plan of action throughout the whole interview process, from before the interview started to the day that it ended. We held a countless number of discussions ranging from the tastes of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* to the difficulties in interviewing; we also wrestled

⁸ Its current name is the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

with such questions as, “What was missing from the interviews? How should we solve the parts that were hard to understand during the interviews? How should we record and edit? What problems were in each record of interviews?” and so on. The actual interviews were conducted in a flexible manner based on activity schedules for each local research team. Sometimes, extraordinary measures were even employed to ensure the consistent progress of the overall work. When a specialist was needed for the interviews by teams, that is, when the interviews were not going smoothly, I, as the research director, went to Masan, Daegu, Cheongju, Gwangju, Jeong-eup, Gochang or Boryeong as needed. And, if there were unfamiliar terms or names of places among the stories of the *comfort girls-women* for the researchers, or if historical knowledge about war or medical knowledge was required to understand their stories, we invited the relevant experts as external instructors to listen to their explanations and helped each other to understand.

In this way, despite the fact that the book is based on the solid teamwork of and the meticulous preparation and examination of interviews by the research team members, it started with various limitations. First of all, because this study began with the goal of preparing a report to be submitted within a given timeframe, there was not a lot of time to build enough trust between the *comfort girls-women* and the researchers, and this left the researchers bent mostly on collecting materials for a story. Therefore, the research team either gave up on the ongoing interview or made a unilateral decision not to include the interview in the book even though several parts of the interview were successfully concluded – when the *comfort girls-women* dragged on in time while opening up to their stories, when the memories were too blurred to form a consistent story, when the appointment times were changed here and there and the interview was missed, when they showed aggressive attitudes and did not tell the stories we were interested in hearing (i.e. their experiences of the comfort stations), or when they told their stories and the part of the narrative on their experiences of the comfort stations was too limited. In other words, while we could guess as to why these women used various self-expressions such as silence, distortion, exaggeration, avoidance, aggressive language, etc. during their encounters with the researchers, as well as the important meanings implied by these various expression methods, we could not include them in their stories. However, after submitting their report, the research team was conscious of these problems and pondered on them when they were preparing the book. That is, we re-edited their stories so that they could reveal as accurately as possible the intentions of the words of the *comfort girls-women* while they told their stories, and at the same time, we included an Introduction to holistically examine and discuss the research work and an Interviewer’s Commentary to

show the individual researcher's participation experience and their reflections thereon. In particular, in the second part of the Introduction, "To speak about the experiences of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women's* experiences," the characteristics and meaning of the oral acts in which the *comfort girls-women* tell their past, the characteristics of the oral situation, the factors affecting the oral acts, and others were analyzed in detail.

Although the women who were the objects of this project are each given the same label of Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*, their individual life experiences are distinctive and different from one another, not only in their specific experiences at the comfort station but also before and after this period up to the present time, and their present lives are intertwined with their past experiences. Nonetheless, our research team began the research with the constraint that our study could not deviate too much from its nature of a customized production, i.e. a report in the form of a testimonial book which was requested and sponsored by the Ministry of Gender Equality. At the same time that we received a request from the Ministry of Gender Equality, we also requested all the *comfort girls-women* to testify according to the same basic story frame of a testimony. The basic components of each *comfort girl-woman's* story include the following: date of birth, hometown, level of schooling, sibling and other family relationships, how they were drafted, transporting route and means of transportation, life at the comfort station, how they came out of the station, when and how they returned home, marriage and family formation, means and activities of livelihood, types of diseases they may have contracted, present life, etc.

As a result, rather than noticing the complex emotional layers, social relationships, or contradictory understandings and interpretations of their lives – all of which these women had shown while giving their testimonies – and considering these aspects as things of significance in creating a so-called thick description of each of the women's stories, we researchers were at risk of creating a thin description of each of the women's lives in stereotyping each life and focusing only on their life at the comfort stations by eliminating or minimizing them due to treating these thick descriptions as obstacles to the production of the testimonial book. Therefore, as discussed in detail in the third part of the Introduction under the theme of "Problems in the reproduction and editing process of oral statements," we have made many efforts to reduce risks in various ways in this study. For example, in laying down the stories of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, we sought, as far as was possible, not to destroy their memory structures and, at the same time, to expose the interaction between the researchers and the women. That is to say, we have attempted more proactive examinations of methodologies beyond that of the binary perspectives of nationalism and feminism about the traditional *comfort girls-women* while

considering the process of the stratified meaning and interpretation of the oral statements.

The researcher's role does not end with just listening to the story of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, as the researcher is burdened with conveying the story so that readers can easily understand it. That is, the researcher must make an uncomfortable decision of drawing a line somewhere between orality and readability rather than just transferring the tangled stories of the women's past experiences and present perspectives. The experience of our research team, in which we had to repeat the process of editing and revising over several dozen times, delineates such a discomfort. The detailed discussion about this is also shown in the Introduction and the Interviewer's Commentary written by each research team member. In addition, this book does not only introduce the so-called success stories of the interviews but also includes the Interviewer's Commentary on the failed interviews. This reveals not only the diversity of situations, conditions, and contexts of interviewing the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, but also reveals the complex interactions of various factors involved in the process of editing their stories.

This book would not have seen the light of day if it had not been for our research team, who worked hard with diligence, earnest minds and the conviction that the story of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* is not just their story, but our story also, until the very end to make the voices of the *comfort girls-women* heard and to convince us. In particular, after the task of submitting reports had been completed, even when I, the research director, was absent because of unavoidable circumstances, Choi Kija, Kim Eunkyung, Oh Yeonju, and Kang Hyunju embraced the rest of the research team, who were about to disperse, strengthened them and took charge of some of the other team members' share of the work besides their own to lead the process of revisions and editing that was repeated over several dozen times. Without their efforts to the end, this book surely would have become a thin book with less weight. The fact that this book, based on the experiences and memories of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, was able to be made into a thicker book in a new attempt to write history owes thanks to the great contributions of Kim Eunkyung, Choi Kija, and Park Jungae who repeatedly engaged in self-reflection and wove those reflections into the Introduction. Among the research team members, there are those who participated diligently in the first half of the interview work, but due to the various reasons I have described above, the stories of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* that they organized were not able to be published in this book. The researchers Kim Mihyeon, Yang Nayun, Lee Sunyeong, and others belong in this category, but it would be greatly remiss of me if I ignored their efforts. In addition, I want to show my gratitude to the

staff of the Korean Council who, even when hectically busy with their ever-present piles of administrative work, always welcomed our research team members warmly and were never sparing with help, whether it be material or emotional. I also give profound thanks to the people of the Ministry of Gender Equality, who laid down the bridge so that the veiled and hidden voices of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* were able to be conveyed to us.

Those to whom I want to express my gratitude and respect the most are none other than the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* themselves. All the while having to smooth down their pained breast many times over and with eyes brimming with tears, they opened their hearts and poured out their stories that were buried deep inside. And all because of that, we were able to boldly participate in this project of writing a new history. One of the *comfort girls-women*, who told us her life story while emphasizing, “Even if it is just one person, we have to let people know more about this problem of ours,” passed away before the book was published. Saying, “It is like a dream that I survived. But an utterly terrifying nightmare of a dream,” she self-assuredly remembered her past, unlike the other women, saying “There is nothing to be ashamed of. This is because I had to have done something shameful to be ashamed.” Now, looking at the transcript of her story again, I regather my posture.

May 10, 2004

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for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

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Introduction

The Stories of the Survivors of the Japanese Military *Comfort Girls-Women*: The Making of the Memories and Meaning

Why the ‘Story’?

The oral stories of the surviving victims of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* have been the most appealing evidence in bringing to light the *comfort girls-women* problem as a social issue in our time and in asking Japan to take responsibility for its actions. It is crucial to include the voices of the survivors in the activism to resolve the issue of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*. However, using their testimonies in attempts to raise and resolve the problem of *comfort girls-women* and talking about and listening to their experiences can be considered the same project but at the same time, should be considered different. Testimonies that require accurate facts can be an appropriate way to fill in the blanks in historical records, but they do not necessarily reveal the subjectivity of the oral storytellers who evaluate and interpret their own lives as the subjects of their stories. If we were to limit the interview process in gathering the experiences of *comfort girls-women* to just listening to their testimonies, we could have made the mistake of paying attention to only the stories we as interviewers wanted to hear.

Unlike the serious testimonies that demand the preciseness of facts, the *comfort girls-women*'s spoken words were brought up to the level of story or narrative to emphasize the subjective experiences they carry. This is not only to respect the subjective interpretation of those telling the story but, at the same time, to demolish the formal discourse that has been built differently to that of the victim's personal experience.

For the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, to recall their past means that they are protesting against the power of history, a history which the public at large currently perceives to be the truth. According to Walter Benjamin, the history created by the remnants of the *comfort girls-women*'s memories includes the pluralistic notion of history. And history as pluralism has many gathering points; that is, history may be diverted in various directions and be connected to different futures and presents than what exists now. According to this perspective, this book aims to reconstruct history based on each individual *comfort girl-woman*'s experience and memories to search for critical gathering points of the past, abandoning the conventional view of history that is often objective and inevitable.

Up until now, the conflict that arose between the memories of the individual victims and the official memory of “the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* who

had been taken forcefully” resulted in the former being tabooed. And the history of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, which our society recalls, has been confined to the latter. There is no such thing as the suffering of girls who were sold to brothels due to poverty and then taken to comfort stations without knowing what was going on. What difference is there in terms of its brutality and depth in the suffering of girls who were forcefully taken by the Japanese military and girls who were sold to brothels because of poverty, and then taken to comfort stations?

The problem of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* arises at the contact point where the patriarchal system of the *Chosun* dynasty meets the nationalism of Japanese colonialism. Therefore, simplifying the problem of the *comfort girls-women* with the provision of ‘forced abduction’ hinders our understanding of the interactions between various ideologies that are contained within. Such a provision also does not allow us to view the issue of patriarchy and prostitution as another dimension of the issue of *comfort girls-women* while neglecting the experiences of many girls and young ladies who were sold to brothels. These girls and young ladies, who were victims of patriarchy and colonialism, have always been treated as exceptional cases and have been excluded from the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* issue, despite the fact that they were equally subjected to violence through sexual slavery at comfort stations by the Imperial Japanese Army. This is because the concept of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* was formed with too much focus on the enforcement of the forced transporting process. In this book, however, by moving beyond the preexisting understanding of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* that is centered around forcibleness in how they were taken away, we propose that its concept should be reconstructed by focusing on the memories of the *comfort girls-women* themselves and their actual experiences of sexual slavery in the comfort stations.

Being conscious of this problem, in this book, we intend to abandon the modifier, forced seizure, and start highlighting the personal experiences that have been excluded from the framework of national discourse. In other words, we want to reconstruct the history of the individual victims through their story, which has never been publicized within the grand discourse.

However, the historicization of memory does not mean that we erase and place the memory of the *comfort girls-women* within the discourse of nationalism. The process of speaking and listening to the *comfort girls-women* experience in and of itself is a challenge to the existing discourse of history, and it opposes identifying the experiences of the surviving victims of the *comfort girls-women* in a singular manner and as part of the discourse of nationalism. To historicize the experiences of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* is an attempt to bring back their experiences as the history of women that had been owned exclusively by national history, and to see the nation again in the eyes and memories of the victims.

To Speak About the Experiences of the Japanese Military *Comfort Girls-Women*

When the interviewers asked the Japanese *comfort girls-women* survivors for their oral stories, their responses were very diverse. Some were saddened by the fact their stories were not included in the previous books that had been published and asked us why we had to come so late, while others were reluctant to have us even visit them. For those who seemed very welcoming, doing the interview meant that they would become known in their neighborhoods because after being introduced in the media, it is often the case that people start to recognize them and treat them with more respect. There was one who was very proud and had her registration of *comfort girls-women* kept in picture frames and displayed on the walls in her living room. Although, since we assumed that they would still be affected by a long-term victim mentality, we expected that they would be passive in sharing their stories about themselves, it did not take us long before we realized how wrong and hasty we were as we saw them actually lead the interviews. In fact, to these women, their past seemed to be a source of power that allowed them to overcome their present realities. Once they received the certificate of registration that they were *comfort girls-women* and started to share their past, they regained their 'joie de vivre' and, in some cases, were healed even of long-term illnesses. This tells us that the very act of speaking out about their past is in itself a process of healing.

But still, a large number of *comfort girls-women* survivors were not happy about their private lives coming to the surface. Our research team had focused on the surviving victims who had never been included in the past publications, but they were often reluctant to be interviewed. Their main reason for it was that they were afraid of their families and friends finding out about their past. The interviewers tried their best to explain how meaningful this work was to history, but such efforts were powerless against those who cried out, "History is good, but I have to live first." Even in the cases of those who reluctantly said yes to the interview, the interviewers would only be allowed to visit their homes when there was no one else around, or they requested that the interview take place elsewhere, away from their home. In such cases, they started revealing their stories only after they had been assured several times that we would not disclose any information that revealed their identity.

For many of the *comfort girls-women* survivors, their past remained a shameful experience that they should keep hidden in their hearts until their death. They often blamed themselves and experienced guilt for living a deceitful life, keeping their secret from their husbands and their children. Such internal anxiety, even today, sixty years or so after their experience, still manifests

itself in nightmares or mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. Their experience of sex slavery has never been buried with history; rather, it is like a ghost that keeps coming back to haunt them to this day.

It has long been considered taboo for *comfort girls-women* survivors to talk about their experiences. And although it was imposed on them by the patriarchal Korean society, oblivion was *their* way of survival. Their confessions like “although it is unfair, I am being liberated [from my past experiences]” and “I could not live if I were to remember it all” are testaments to the fact that oblivion was their choice and their survival method to endure their harrowing life experiences. Therefore, the process of remembering their “true but unreal and dreamlike” past is a difficult journey for them, like going through a foggy maze, because it is what they had tried so hard to forget. This journey is the process of facing the root of their pain, and their act of telling the story meant reproducing and being re-traumatized by that pain. This is why it required a special decision and a great determination by them to start sharing their past.

But speaking out about the *comfort girls-women* experience in Korean society is not just a matter of a personal decision by them to open their mouths. The oral stories of surviving *comfort girls-women* are intertwined with multiple layers of a complex web. For the *comfort girls-women*, speaking of their past could mean risking a divorce from their husbands, bruising the hearts of their children, and engraving a scarlet letter onto their hearts, to name just a few. Sometimes the opposition from their community members, the so-called other husbands such as their sons, adopted sons, and nephews whom they psychologically and financially relied on, would cause them to change their minds even after coming to a hard-won decision to share their stories.

Even if the restoration of pride, the sense of historical duty, and the subsidies received from the government form an axis that motivated them to voice their experiences, the negative glances of and keeping in check of them by society and their family form another axis that creates anxiety, constantly making them hesitant about revealing their identity as a *comfort girl-woman*. The oral testimonies of the surviving victims of the *comfort girls-women* experience were born out of constant restlessness, conflict, and torments between the two axes. Therefore, the act of speaking out, for the *comfort girls-women* survivors, is the act of breaking out from the aforementioned complex web and rejecting the chain of silence that had been tied around them. To speak about their own lives that they were “ashamed of but are not shamed by” is an act of subjectivity away from the patriarchal ideology that Korean society has been spreading and imposing on them and the rest of the Korean society.