Narratives of Women's Agency and Victimization: South Korean Military Sex Workers' Construction of Identity During the 1960s-1970s

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"I am a Korean citizen and the government had the responsibility to take care of me. What it did was exactly the opposite of that."
– A former military sex worker[1]

On June 25, 2014, as the South Korean government paid tribute to war veterans on the sixty-fourth anniversary of the Korean War, 122 elderly women gathered on the fourth floor of Seoul Women's Plaza for a press conference. Three human rights activists and a lawyer, all female, joined these women to file a lawsuit against the Korean government for human trafficking. The women quietly remained in their seats until the lawyer, Jin Kim, broke the silence by condemning the South Korean government's sole honorific recognition of the Korean-War veterans as national heroes. She claimed that the South Korean government, in cooperation with the United States military, exploited these women's bodies and violated their human rights for national interests. They built brothels and forced women to provide sex to U.S. military personnel stationed in South Korea after the war. Therefore, the

[1]Claire Lee, *written* and *translated*, "My Country Pimped Me to U.S. Soldiers," *The Korea Herald*, 9 December, 2015.

Korean state now has a duty to compensate the women.[2] While Kim spoke, some of the plaintiffs "wiped their tears with a handkerchief." After Kim finished her speech, one plaintiff rose and explained to the journalists: "We did not know that prostitution was illegal in this country. The state officials constantly told us that what we did was an act of patriotism, but the Korean government has completely turned a blind eye to us once the country gained some wealth. We formed the backbone of the Korea's economic miracle, but most of us still live in an extreme poverty and suffer from many diseases."[3]

While much of South Korea's media minimally covered the victims' denunciation of their past experiences, these women filed a lawsuit against the central government for the first time in the nation's history.[4] This movement represented the willingness of former military sex workers to proclaim their solidarity, victimhood, and agency. Such collective action allowed these former sex workers to construct a collective identity as patriotic victims who deserved public sympathy and respect. In traditional Korean society, women who sold their bodies for sex were perceived as immoral whores, thus constituting a peculiar type of

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[2]Jae-Hong Kang, written. Katherine (Hye Ryun) Yang, trans., "To the Korean Government which Only Cared about the Health of U.S. Military: Treat Your Own Citizens with Dignity," *The Hankyoreh*, July 4, 2014.

[3]Jae-Hong Kang, trans. Katherine (Hye Ryun) Yang, *The Hankyoreh*, July 4, 2014. Although she seemed to make a bold statement, 46,000 Korean military sex workers approximately "earned $70 million in 1969 alone," when South Korea's GDP was only about $7.5 billion. Please look at Na-Young Lee, "The Construction of U.S. Camptown Prostitution in South Korea: (Trans) Formation and resistance," University of Maryland. College Park, 2006, 143. http://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/4162/umi-umd-3959.pdf;sequence=1 Also look at "South Korea GDP: 1960-2016," http://www.tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/gdp.

[4]According to *Asahi Shinbun*, only a few Korean journalists from left-leaning newspaper companies such as *Women News*, *The Hankyoreh and Kyunghyang Shinmun* showed up to the press conference. Toru Higashioka, *written*. Sayuri Umeda, *translated*, "Former Korean 'Comfort Women' Serving U.S. Military File Damages Lawsuit," *Asahi Shinbun*. 28 June, 2014.

criminal.[5] Yet, the women's victimization narrative challenged the public's prevailing view of former military sex workers as degraded human beings. Unlike "comfort women" who gained national and international legitimacies as innocent victims "who had been forcibly violated" by the Japanese military during their colonial occupation of Korea, the camp-town sex workers for American soldiers were always "deemed to have freely and willingly sold their bodies."[6] Furthermore, by filing a lawsuit at the press conference, the former military sex workers made themselves visible in the public arena and declared their national contributions and patriotic sacrifices. While doing so, they claimed their innocence and vulnerability. Paradoxically, the women's victimization narratives allowed them to exercise agency by contesting the stigma against military sex workers, thereby elevating their social status in a patriarchal, Confucian-based society like South Korea.

The scholarship regarding military prostitution for the American GIs stationed in South Korea has largely overlooked how these women's behaviors and conscious construction of narratives forged identities as both victims and agents for political and cultural purposes. By analyzing memoirs, testimonies, autobiographies, and oral history interviews of thirteen women who served as military sex workers during the Park – Nixon era, this article investigates their self-portraits of victimhood and agency. Limitations of the sources such as women's selective memory and biases in addition to political motives certainly exist and must be addressed. Yet, after careful examination of each source, this article argues that the women primarily constructed victimhood when narrating the circumstances far beyond their control in an attempt to elicit public sympathy and alter conventional perceptions while thwarting salient stigma against military sex workers as being innately promiscuous and morally degraded. Women additionally constructed discourses to justify

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[5]Saundra Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus, *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* (New York: New Press, 1992), 301.

[6]Katharine H.S. Moon, "Military Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* (January 2009), 34.

the legitimacy of their occupations and to express their individual agency, although to a lesser extent.[7]

Scholars have adopted several approaches ranging from political to macro-level transnational analysis to examine military prostitution for American soldiers stationed in South Korea. Political scholars explore how both governments actively sponsored and regulated military prostitution to strengthen diplomatic ties between them.[8] Despite scholars' insightful and nuanced analysis, such feminist approach focuses too much on a dichotomous gender system, which normalizes heterosexual entitlement of the American military. More importantly, both scholars' state-centered interpretations fail to challenge the discourses of global hierarchy. Historians and sociologists address this elision by deploying a postcolonial lens to examine military prostitution in South Korea. They look at the United States as a "neo-colonial authority" that forced South Korea to subjugate to American interests through work in American military camps. They contend that military prostitution played a central role in expanding and maintaining the U.S. Empire in South Korea during the postcolonial era.[9] While these interpretations frame military prostitution as a mechanism of power in global relations, scholars understate the role of the South Korean state in constructing and maintaining brothels around U.S. military bases on the peninsula.

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[7] Among them, Yun-Ja Kim's autobiography especially emphasized the women's collective agency that challenged patriarchy and the authoritarian government within the naturalized connections between individual, family, community and state.

[8] Katharine H.S. Moon, *Sex among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S. – Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) and Na-Young Lee, "The Construction of U.S. Camptown Prostitution in South Korea: (Trans) Formation and Resistance," University of Maryland. College Park, 2006. http://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/4162/umi-umd- 3959.pdf; sequence=1.

[9] While tracing the history of military prostitution in South Korea back to the Japanese colonial period, Cumings posits that military prostitution functioned as an imperial endeavor. Moon also criticizes the hypocrisy of the U.S. government in acting as a "benevolent liberator" in South Korea while concurrently sexually exploiting Korean women in the same way that colonial overlords do to their subjects.

They also fail to grant sex workers agency by rendering them as weak and passive victims during a "tragic" epoch in South Korean history.

Historians and anthropologists breakthe political boundary that previous scholarship has elided by exploring diasporic nationalism fomented and pursued by former Korean military sex workers who followed their American GI husbands to the United States.[10] By interpreting the women's oral histories, scholars articulate their struggles with coming to terms with their prostitution past while navigating seismic shifts in the formation of their own identities abroad through a cogent discursive analysis. A final group of scholars examine military prostitution as the aftermath of globalization's macro-processes. Drawing on theoretical concepts of Foucault's bio-politics and Marxism, literary scholars utilize the term "sexual proletarianization" as an organizing tool to understand how female military prostitutes—racialized and sexualized wage workers—played a significant role in South Korea's economic growth and industrialization.[11]

Most women used language of victimization to describe the former Korean military sex workers. However, framing victim discourses as "genuine" self-constructions of the sex workers proves challenging since a vast array of these testimonies, memoirs, and biographies were penned and published by feminist

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[10] Ji-Yeon Yeo, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2002). While examining the lives of the Korean military brides as first-generation immigrant women in America, Yeo explores their unique adaptations to the new environment, as well as their efforts to maintain personal relationships with their Korean families and motherland, and preserve their ethnic identity. Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Cho traces "the unspeakable pasts" of Korean military brides in the States, but she extends her research by adopting a transgenerational approach to explore how the transformation of these women's identities from "Western princess" into "GI brides" affected and shaped the next generation within the Korean diaspora in the United States.

[11] Jin-Kyung Lee, Service *Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

groups and non-government organizations between the late 1990s and early 2000s. While these military sex workers portrayed their stories through these publications, the publishers' underlying motives nonetheless mediated and rearticulated the voices of these women. In fact, one anonymous woman confessed that it was only in the 1990s that she started to recognize herself as a victim soon after she met with Korean feminists and activists from a non-government organization called *Shimteo* (a place of rest).[12] This self-awareness, or lack thereof, indicates that the rise of the feminist movement and NGOs in South Korea during the 1990s played an integral role in constructing victim identity of the military sex workers and in shaping these women's perception of themselves. Cultural memory consequently became rearticulated through certain epistemological frameworks as a result of epochal contingencies.

The autobiography of former military sex worker, Y. J. Kim, unequivocally depicted Korean military sex workers as active agents. While Kim consistently portrayed herself as independent and fearless, she also highlighted the collective identity and agency of sex workers. Although the editor of her book might have played a role in shaping Kim's personal narrative, a non-NGO affiliated company published her autobiography. In fact, despite her emphasis on the issues that appealed to feminists, she criticized Korean feminists who played the "leading roles" instead of military sex workers themselves in constructing public discourse of military prostitution. Kim decried how some Korean feminists objectified prostitutes as research subjects rather than empowering them.[13] Her criticism of the feminists implies that Kim might have purposely constructed narratives that challenged the framing of former military sex workers as helpless victims. Kim unequivocally sought to portray military sex workers as active agents who shaped their own identities. Pictures of Y. J. Kim, especially the ones that captured the moments when she worked as a military sex worker, helped readers visualize her past experiences and better understand her

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[12] Claire Lee, "My Country Pimped Me to U.S. Soldiers."

[13] Yun-Ja Kim, trans. Katherine (Hye Ryun) Yan, *Big Sister from the American Town Screaming to the World* (Seoul: Samin Publishing Co, 2005), 255.

temporal and spatial boundaries. Kim's choice to insert images of herself conveyed her willingness to reveal her life and show that she was not ashamed of the choices she made regardless of social and political conventions.

On October 1, 1953, nearly two months after the Armistice Agreement, the United States and the Republic of Korea signed the Mutual Defense Treaty in Washington to fortify the bilateral security alliance.[14] While the treaty permitted the United States to station troops in South Korea indefinitely, it promoted a win-win situation for both countries. For America, having its own armed forces in South Korea allowed them to maintain its hegemonic influences over East Asia while safeguarding South Korea and Japan from communist threats such as North Korea, China and the Soviet Union.[15] The treaty also benefitted the Republic of Korea by securing the U.S. military commitment to the Asian state, which strengthened the Republic's national security while reducing its defense spending.[16]

The Vietnam War, however, taught the United States that direct military involvement did not necessarily enhance national security.[17] As a result, President Richard Nixon announced a new foreign policy, known as the Nixon Doctrine, on July 25, 1969, proclaiming that national security was "the responsibility of the people whose freedom is threatened."[18] From that moment on, the President of South Korea, Chung-Hee Park feared that the Nixon administration would withdraw American troops from the Korean

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[14] Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, The Avalon Project, *Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, "Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea; October 1, 1953." http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp.

[15] Joo-Hong Nam, *America's Commitment to South Korea: The Decade of the Nixon Doctrine* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 76.

[16] Seung-Joo Lee, *Linking Trade and Security: Evolving Institutions and Strategies in Asia, Europe, and the United States*, ed. Vinod K. Aggarwal, Kristi Govella (Springer Publishing, 2013), 135.

[17] Nam, 80. Under the U.S. security umbrella, South Korea primarily focused on economic growth.

[18] Richard Nixon: "America's Role in Asia." 25 July, 1969. *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2205.

peninsula.[19] Park recognized both the importance of U.S. troops in the defense of South Korea from communist threats and the direct linkage between U.S. military presence and Korea's economic development.[20]

To keep the U.S. military in South Korea, Park sought to appease Washington by accommodating "U.S. interests"[21] via the regulation of prostitution for the U.S. military to prevent the spread of venereal diseases. Under President Park's direction, the "Base Community Clean-Up Committee" was organized in 1971, which formulated "purification policies" such as the construction of clinics that specifically treated sexually transmitted diseases, enforcement of women's weekly medical checkups for venereal disease, and increasing the registration of women as "licensed prostitutes."[22] Not only did the South Korean government institutionalize prostitution for the U.S. military, it also supervised military sex workers to maximize national interests.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the women's narratives about the military prostitution during the 1960s and 1970s was the government's institutionalization of prostitution for the U.S. military stationed in South Korea. By constructing a collective identity as state victims, the former military sex workers highlight their patriotic sacrifices for state interests while condemning the Korean government for exploiting its own citizens. They claimed that the state not only failed to protect its citizens, but it also exploited and violated female citizens for national interests. Such "unorthodox" behavior of the South Korean government became a driving force behind the women's construction of collective victimhood.

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[19] Memorandum of Conversation: *FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1969-1976*, VOLUME XIX, PART 1, KOREA, 1969-1972. http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d35.

[20] Katharine H.S Moon, *Sex among Allies*, 44. For instance, U.S. troops alone contributed about 25 percent of the country's GNP in the 1960s

[21] Katharine H.S. Moon, 78, 84.

[22] Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation. "Now We Can Tell: Sex Among Allies – Base Community Clean-Up Campaign." Katherine (Hye Ryun) Yang, trans., Filmed (Feb 9, 2003). YouTube video. 55:05. Posted 5 July, 2014.

J. J. Kim noted that the Department of Tourism and Transportation organized a monthly meeting to encourage military sex workers while complementing and lauding their national contributions. Kim's testimony reveals that at the meeting, South Korean government officials opened their speeches by thanking the women, and proclaiming that military sex workers were "true patriots who were saving the country" from poverty and communism.[23] Y. J. Kim also recalled the monthly meeting, stating that Korean government officials often called the sex workers "hidden patriots" and "dollar earners."[24] She claims that the women, as "personal diplomats," had to learn "proper" English through foreign language classes that the government sponsored. Interestingly enough, even the name of the club at which Kim worked at the time was called the "U.N. Club." She recalled: "English teacher told us that we should never talk to American GIs like 'buy me drink.' Instead, we should speak to them, 'I am glad to meet you. May I sit down? Would you buy me a drink?'"[25] Such humorous accounts, however, revealed that the Korean government considered military prostitution a serious national policy and considered the sex workers' relationships with the U.S. GIs a people-to-people form of diplomacy.

While depicting themselves as state victims, many women blamed the Korean government for exploiting their bodies and sexuality for national interests under the thumb of the United States. An anonymous former military sex worker blamed the Korean government by stating, "my country pimped me to U.S. soldiers. The Korean government organized weekly checkups, and not showing up to them meant being locked up at a separate medical facility for days. I was forced to get weekly checkups with painful treatments for sexually transmitted diseases."[26] The "separate medical facility" was a state-run medical institution specifically built to treat venereal diseases of military sex workers,

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[23] Jung-Ja Kim, 159.

[24] Yun-Ja Kim, 105.

[25] Yun-Ja Kim, 106. Also her interview with MBC for "Now We Can Tell: Sex among Allies – Base Community Clean-Up Campaign," trans. Katherine (Hye Ryun) Yang.

[26] Claire Lee, "My Country Pimped Me to U.S. Soldiers."

nicknamed the "Monkey House." It gained the nickname because many women tried to escape the facility from an upper floor window due to merciless painful treatments of injections of penicillin, regardless if one was allergic to the medicine or not; when one escaped, it looked as though a "monkey were hanging on" from the outside.[27] Another former sex worker, Min, recalled that she used to inject herself with any antibiotics available at local pharmacies prior to checkups to prevent testing positive in the hope of avoiding penicillin injection.[28] Y. J. Kim also stated in her autobiography that the Secretary of Health and Human Services stressed that the women had to take weekly checkups seriously and receive immediate treatment if they were diagnosed with venereal disease.[29] Women's statements illustrate their great fear of weekly checkups for venereal disease, and the Korean government's merciless treatment toward the military sex workers to secure its national interest. As "private diplomats," the first and foremost duty of the military sex workers was to maintain their bodies free of venereal disease for national and diplomatic purposes.

Some women complained that despite their patriotic sacrifice, however, government agents treated them as "traitors" of the country. J. J. Kim portrayed herself as a victim of a government agent's verbal abuse. She demonstrated that when she was sent to the county police station for failing to possess her official sex worker I.D., instead of calling her name, police officers told her, "Come this way, you fucking Western whore."[30] Such derogatory lexicon does not simply reflect police disrespect and misconduct towards military sex workers but also reflected the officers' severe condemnation of these women for selling their bodies to the imperial Western man, thereby betraying Korea's ethnic nationalism and pride. Kim claimed that while incarcerated, she and other military sex workers were forced to sing the national anthem of South Korea numerous times by the police officers.[31] By forcing sex workers to sing a symbolic song of South Korea,

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[27] Yun-Ja Kim, "Now We Can Tell: Sex among Allies."
[28] Claire Lee, "My Country Pimped Me to U.S. Soldiers."
[29] Yun-Ja Kim, 123.
[30] Jung-Ja Kim, 183.
[31] Ibid., 185.

the government agents sought to instill patriotism in the military sex workers whom they considered being traitors of the country. Y. J. Kim described a similar situation as well. At a monthly meeting where the government officials and politicians praised military prostitutes for their patriotism, one of the government agents who did not know her name called her "Western princess," which made her feel ashamed of herself instead of feeling proud.[32] Kim constructed a victim identity by describing the government agent who humiliated her and violated her dignity as a human being.

Based on the government agents' hypocritical and conflicting attitudes towards military sex workers, one could simply argue that the Korean government never truly considered these women "patriots;" sex workers were always looked down upon by Korean politicians and officials who fraudulently praised them to maximize national interests. However, such an analysis would be quite simplistic and reductive. In order to understand the conflicts, scholars need to understand Korea's traditional patriarchal system. Military prostitution during the late 1960s and 1970s in many ways broke conventional notions of patriarchy; men, as well as the entire nation, depended upon women for their survival, and women protected men by participating in national security instead of the reverse. More importantly, Korean men lost control over their women's bodies to American men who already threatened their manhood by fighting against the communist enemy on their behalf. While the Korean government agents acknowledged the vital roles that the military sex workers played in contributing to its national interests, they expressed feelings of anxiety and incompetence as men by calling the women derogatory names. By disparaging these women, who challenged Korean manhood and patriarchy, Korean men sought to reformulate their masculinity and regain a sense of virility.

Even though tracing the elements of victim discourses demonstrated that women's self-representation and traumas grew beyond a single cause and effect, the women nonetheless identified domestic violence as the underlying factor behind their suffering. Koreans perceived domestic violence as physical and

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[32] Yun-Ja Kim, 108.

psychological traumas, which greatly impacted the victim's mental and emotional stability. Moreover, unlike poverty and a lack of education that many Koreans shared collectively, domestic violence was a problem that few Koreans suffered from, which suggested that domestic violence represented the precondition for the self-construction of victimhood.

Most Korean women who worked as military sex workers portrayed themselves as poorly educated orphans and helpless victims of poverty and domestic violence. Considering the historical background, such claims are unsurprising; war broke out in Korea in 1950 and lasted until the armistice agreement was signed in July 1953, which further ravaged an already poor and newly autonomous country. The combination of the postwar baby boom and the poor infrastructure resulted in food and job shortages in Korea.[33] As a result, the country mainly depended upon U.S. assistance for survival during the 1950s.[34] Women, who worked as military sex workers during the late 1960s and the 1970s, were born during the Korean War into abject poverty.[35] Many of them claimed that they were either born orphans or raised within a poor family. Min-Ja Park describes her childhood as a helpless youth and poor orphan: "I was dropped in an orphanage during the Korean conflict," where she stayed until she "escaped" from the place at the age of nine. She did not know whether she lost her birth parents during the war or if she was given up. Nonetheless, she described extreme poverty as an orphan without any way to escape it.[36]

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[33]Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 32. Brazinsky describes the aftermath of the Korean War: "Total property damage from the war in the ROK was estimated at more than $3 billion. Three years of fighting had annihilated 900 industrial plants… The war had destroyed 600,000 homes and rendered thousands of others uninhabitable."

[34] Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 407.

[35] Public Broadcasting Service. By J. T. Orinne Takagi, Hye Jung Park. "The Women Outside," Filmed 16 July, 1996.

[36] Min-Ja Park, Kyung S. Hong trans. "Story of My Life 1" from *Great Army, Great Father: Militarized Prostitution in South Korea; Life in GI Town* (Du Rae Bang, Cham-Sarang Shim Teo, Korean Church

Myung-Bun Kim also testified about her poor childhood. Although she was not an orphan, her family was so poverty-stricken that her mother went out to the street everyday "to collect bottles to sell so that the family might not starve to death."[37] The narratives of Park and Kim elucidate the dearth of job opportunities or resources as a means of survival for poor Korean women at the time other than living off people's garbage. According to Byung-Nim Yoo, director of My Sister's Place or *Durehbang*, a non-government organization that assists former military sex workers in Korea, most Korean military sex workers in the 1960s and 1970s were from rural areas who grew up in poverty without access to a formal education; all they had were their own bodies and a great responsibility to support their family.[38]

These women also pinpointed their lack of education as one of the features of their victimization. They claimed that familial poverty and their gender undergirded their lack of education accomplishment. S. J. Lee explained that her family was so poor that she had to stop her education after primary school.[39] M. J. Park identified her orphan status as the reason for her lack of education.[40] Interestingly, in her relatively short, one-page testimony, Park mentioned her inability "to read or write" three times, which indicates that not receiving any formal education unconsciously bothered Park throughout her life. Although scholars point to correlations between women's lack of education and prostitution, due to the fact that a low-level of education severely limited employment opportunities, it was not uncommon for many Korean women to receive little or no formal education during the 1950s and 1960s because of the salient belief that

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Women United, The National Campaign for Eradication of Crime by U.S. Troops in Korea, 1995), 29.

[37] Myung-Bun Kim, "A Home Called a Happiness" from *Great Army, Great Father*, 34.

[38] "Now We Can Tell: Sex Among Allies – Base Community Clean-Up Campaign."

[39] Shin-Ja Lee, "The Story of My Life 3" from *Great Army, Great Father*, 31.

[40] Min-Ja Park, *Great Army, Great Father*, 29.

education was a privilege and not a necessity.[41] As such, most Korean women were poorly educated but did not become sex workers.

Apart from familial poverty and lack of education, most Korean military sex workers also described themselves as victims of domestic violence, which eventually pushed them into the sex industry. M. J. Kim narrated to her future publisher that since she was twelve years old, she was constantly beaten and raped by her stepfather and two stepbrothers. Kim stated, "I would not have left home if those bastards didn't touch me. And if I had not have left home, I would not have lived like this."[42] At the age of sixteen, she fled from her home and began working as a military sex worker. Even though Kim expressed her enmity towards the men who raped her, she primarily blamed her mother for her personal tragedies. Kim complained: "My mother was not a good mom. She should have never remarried after my father passed away. I know that she got married again for her own happiness."[43] She criticized her mother for failing at motherhood and for not protecting a powerless child while prioritizing her own happiness. To Kim, an ideal mother would sacrifice herself for her family, but her mother was selfish and neglectful. Academic Jiweon Shin supports Kim's claim by defining conventional motherhood in Korea as "an idealized crystalized personification characterized by devotion to children, parental affection, and self-sacrifice."[44] Rather than perceiving her mother as another domestic victim,

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[41] Jae-Hee Ahn, "Analysis of Women Doctorates Entering the Labor Market in Republic of Korea" *from Korean Education in Changing Economic and Demographic Context*, edited by Hyunjoon Park, Kyung-Keun Kim (Springer: Singapore, 24 November, 2013), 60. Most families considered education for women "consumption rather than an investment" and less than a quarter of middle school students were females in 1958.

[42] Myung-Ja Kim, *First Testimony of U.S. Military Comfort Women: The Truth behind the Military Camptown,* as told to Hyun-Sun Kim, trans. Katherine (Hye-Ryun) Yang (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2013), 51.

[43] Ibid., 40.

[44] Jiweon Shin, "Social Construction of Idealized Images of Women in Colonial Korea: The 'New Woman' Versus 'Motherhood'" from *Decolonization Perspectives from Now and Then*. Edited by Prasenjit Duara (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 239.

Kim constructed a victim identity for herself by juxtaposing her child tragedy with her mother's selfish image.

J. Yeon also described herself as a victim of domestic violence, which became a major factor that contributed her becoming a military sex worker. She claimed that her biological father first raped her when she was sixteen years old. Every time her mother was away from home, he forcefully demanded sex. When he found out that she was pregnant, he forced her to "get rid of it." After she got an abortion, she left home and became a military sex worker.[45] J. Yeon's account depicted her as a helpless and defenseless victim who was abused and overruled by her vicious and incestuous father. In fact, she highlighted her victimhood by emphasizing her father's physical aggression and sexual domination. J. Yeon's narrative revealed that she became a military sex worker because she ran away from home to escape domestic violence.

Many women blamed family poverty and domestic violence as a predicate for victimization by human trafficking and pimps since they could not rely on their families. M. J. Park describes herself as a victim of the nefarious human trafficking industry, detailing how a pimp kidnapped her while she was begging for food on the street.[46] J. J. Kim also claims that her friend sold her to a pimp after she left home at the age of sixteen due to her stepfather's constant physical violence towards her. When she told one of her friends that she was looking for a job, her friend informed her of a job opening at a textile factory. Instead of getting her the factory job, however, her friend sold Kim to a pimp for military prostitution.[47] Her narrative suggests a strong connection between the employment agency and human trafficking for the military prostitution enterprise. As these women composed victimization narratives, they emphasized their economic and social vulnerability, which made them easy prey for human traffickers.

However, most women constructed their victimization by portraying the military sex workers' exploitative relationship with their Korean male pimps. Y. J. Kim describes how prostitutes

[45]Yun-Ja Kim, 232.
[46]Min-Ja Park, 29.
[47]Jung-Ja Kim, 70.

were perpetually in debt to their pimps so they could never save money for themselves.[48] She contends that one of the reasons for their financial difficulty was the exploitative, hierarchical relationship between sex workers and pimps. J. J. Kim describes her relationship with her pimp as "slave owner and slave." When she brought a soldier to her room, she was not allowed to spend more than fifteen minutes with him. After she finished "her service," her pimp sent her to a different club without a break in between even for snacks.[49] S. M. Um also details a similar story in her testimony of being "beaten by my pimp who accused me for eating too much."[50] These testaments reveal that pimps solely viewed the women as lucrative commodities to be sold to American GIs. Women's descriptions of an exploitative and hierarchical pimp-prostitute relationship evinced how pimps victimized the military sex workers by demanding total obedience from them in pursuit of financial gain.

Some of the women framed military sex workers as the victims of substance abuse and countless abortions due to their pimp's exploitation. J. J. Kim describes how a pimp forced her to take drugs to ensure that she followed orders.[51] She proclaimed that, on the first day at work, she was forced to sleep with an African-American soldier. When she told her pimp that she was a virgin and was very scared to sleep with "a foreign man," her pimp gave her *Secobarbital*, which he told her was "a painkiller" that would make her feel good. Since that day, she had to take the drug every day in order to deal with her harsh reality and to sleep with her American clients.[52] Beyond drugs, abortion was also closely linked with pimps' exploitation. In her testimony, an anonymous woman confessed that during her twenty-five years as a military

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[48] Yun-Ja Kim, 96.

[49] Jung-Ja Kim, 76.

[50] Sang-Mi Um, *Great Army, Great Father*, 32.

[51] Numerous women described their drug use as another feature of their victimization narratives. Some women even claimed that taking the sedative drug became a daily routine for many of the military sex workers (see Jung-Ja Kim's autobiography, 69-70). A woman named Su-Ok Kim stated that she took drugs to forget about her GI boyfriend's physical and emotional abuses.

[52] Jung-Ja Kim, 70.

sex worker, she had twenty-five abortions. Every time she had an abortion, she had to borrow money from her pimp to pay for the operation, which eventually put her into great debt. She asserted, "Birth control pills named *Sarubia* existed. But my pimp refused to lend me money to purchase the pills."[53] Her statement suggested a possibility that her pimp calculatingly prevented her from taking the birth control pills to maximize his profits. In constructing this victimization narrative, these women also described themselves as lonely and vulnerable individuals who lacked a firm support system.

Besides the physical aspects of vulnerability, several of the women constructed their victim identity by describing their runaway GI boyfriends or husbands. Forming such victimization discourses elucidate the military sex workers' emotional vulnerability, which categorized them as victims of love. J. J. Kim illustrates her own victimization when she "met a very good-looking 'black' soldier…I was not a type of woman who would fall in love easily, but I fell for him…one day, he just disappeared…Later I found out from someone else that he went back to the States…I did not have the money for rent, so I went back to my pimp."[54] Kim conveys her attraction to her GI boyfriend; however, her boyfriend left without notifying the woman with whom he had shared a life with because he seemingly did not care for her. Although her narrative does not convey emotional or psychological suffering from the breakup, it is clear that Kim certainly found the relationship worthy of mentioning implying that the relationship emotionally and psychologically impacted her to some degree. Kim's only complaint about the breakup was her boyfriend's failure to pay the rent, proving that her boyfriend was more of a financial supporter than a "lover," although her professions of love render it hard to discern.

Another former military sex worker, S. J. Lee, portrayed herself as a victim of a romantic relationship with an American GI. She noted that she met her child's father, whom she referred to as "Johnny's dad," at a club she worked at, but "Johnny's dad left Korea without a word." Lee had lived with two other U.S. GIs

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[53] Sang-Mi Um, *Great Army, Great Father*, 11.

[54] Jung-Ja Kim, 194-195.

after "Johnny's dad," and was married to one of them. The third one was a married man who promised to marry her after divorcing his fifth wife, but that never materialized. Both of them "left just like the others did."[55] Her account reveals her narrative of victimization; Lee easily fell for men's empty promises of a future together. Most women would have been quite careful to become involved with a man who had been married five times, because it raised questions of his loyalty and responsibility as a husband. Additionally, her choice of dating a married man disclosed Lee's sense of victimization; having gone through a difficult life as a marginalized person, she felt entitled to whatever she could get.

Though the majority of military sex workers in the 1960s and 70s in South Korea constructed victimization narratives, a sizable number of women built narratives of agency to portray themselves as resilient survivors, and proud breadwinners who supported their families. Among the agency discourses, Y. J. Kim's self-penned autobiography illustrated military sex workers' agency the most. She constructed narratives that placed the military sex workers at the center of the Korean society, and described them as active agents and female warriors. Kim's narratives particularly emphasized the importance of the women's collective agency. In addition to that, she portrayed herself as both independent, and part of a female collective who protested against the government's definition of her.

Many women portrayed prostitution as voluntary, and articulated an agency narrative to construct a survivor identity. In her testimony, former military sex worker, S. S. Park, confessed that she decided to become a prostitute for the U.S. military stationed in South Korea because her body was already "ruined" by Japanese soldiers—during the Asia Pacific War. She noted that she was "a hard-working girl who wanted to marry a farmer someday" until the Japanese drafted her as a "comfort woman" by force. Although the sexual exploitation continued even after Park became a sex worker for the U.S. military, she made her living off the money she earned for her sexual service.[56] Her statements demonstrate that she became a military sex worker as a means of

[55] Shin-Ja Lee, *Great Army, Great Father*, 39.
[56] Soon-Sil Park, *Great Army, Great Father*, 32.

survival in a society that traditionally embraced patriarchal cultural values and taught society that "chastity for a woman is more precious than life."[57] As a result, single women who lost their virginity felt that they did not have other options as a means to survive but to use their already "fallen" bodies. Moreover, another former military sex worker, Y. J. Kim affirmed that when she felt that she did not have any place to stand in the Korean society, she found comfort and a career opportunity in *Kijichon*. Kim noted: "I did not want to live in a society that did not embrace me. So I decided to go to *Kijichon* to make lots of money. Dealing with American men was not bad. In fact, they were much better than Korean men who ruined my life."[58] She portrayed herself as an agent who refused to settle for less or compromise her self-respect. Kim saw herself as standing up to the oppressive Korean society, and rejected her victimization. Women's narratives characterized the U.S. military camp-town as an opportunistic place where they could start over and gain control of their lives again.

In fact, the former female military sex workers described *Kijichon* as an "imagined community" that promoted and strengthened women's solidarity. Although there were significant numbers of U.S. military bases stationed in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, many of the former military sex workers referred to every *Kijichon* as their "little own community" where they collectively shared painful memories and hard lives.[59] According to Hyun-Sun Kim, a feminist activist and human rights' advocate seeking Korean government compensation for these women, the majority of them referred to other military sex workers as "my better half" or "part of me," even though most of them had never even met with each other due to the scattered locations of the U.S. military bases in South Korea.[60] Her statement shows that women used *Kijichon* as a mechanism to forge close bonds amongst themselves despite their physical separation. Kim's sentiments also reveal that the military sex workers deeply understood each

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[57] Katharine H.S. Moon, 40.
[58] Yun-Ja Kim, 100.
[59] Ibid., 187. See also, Jung-Ja Kim's testimony, 230.
[60] Hyun-Sun Kim, *First Testimony of U.S. Military Comfort Women*, 232.

other, and shared great sympathy for one another. Women felt a sense of belonging and connection, not through physical proximity but through emotional sharing. By constructing *Kijichon* as their own "imagined community," these women increased their agency and bonds.

While constructing their collective identities, some military sex workers portrayed themselves as breadwinners who fulfilled family responsibilities. An anonymous sex worker stated that although she owed debt to her pimp, she still enjoyed being able to "wire money to support my mother and my siblings."[61] Her statement portrayed her as a dutiful daughter and sister who supported her family even during tough times. Another former military sex worker, Min, also noted the following: "I had a big family who depended on me. Every month I sent most of my earnings to my family. They lived in a countryside. I'd never told them what I did though, because I did not want them to feel bad or sorry for me. But with the money I made as a sex worker, I sent all my siblings to college. One of them even became a University Professor."[62] Min's statement revealed her pride and agency in supporting her family, especially in expressing her satisfaction with her siblings' academic achievements. She also represented herself as a dutiful family member, which is why she had not revealed her occupation to her family. Instead, Min underlined her ability to make enough money to send her siblings to college by working as a sex worker, thus legitimizing prostitution as a form of employment. In addition, her statement that she "did not want them to feel bad or sorry for" her reflects Min's rejection of being perceived as a poor victim. By constructing agency narratives, these women depicted themselves as respectable people who carried a great responsibility to support their families.

A sizable number of women constructed narratives to describe themselves as authoritarian and independent agents. While most women paid attention to their individual roles when constructing agency discourses, Y. J. Kim's autobiography demonstrated the women's collective actions as well. Instead of crafting a personal narrative of her own life, she chose to include

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[61] Claire Lee, "My Country Pimped Me to U.S. Soldiers."
[62] Ibid.

the women's unified movements, which emphasized the military sex workers' collective agency. She consciously constructed narratives describing the women as people who had power and control over their lives and circumstances.

Y. J. Kim used the agency discourse of prostitution as a way to prove control over her body. She stated that whenever she attended the government-organized monthly meeting, she was annoyed by the Korean government's attempt to control the military sex workers. Kim voiced her frustration and ridicule of the Korean government: "I wanted to scream many times to the government: Stop saying such nonsense! I knew what the government was saying to me. 'Dearest Ms. Western Princess, You are a hidden patriot for bringing dollars to the country. I hope you are proud of yourself for selling your vagina and sucking Americans' dick' … But you know what? My body did not belong to the country; it belonged to me."[63] Kim claimed that she was fully aware of the general perception of military sex workers in Korea as being looked down upon, and the government's motivation behind the public training. She portrayed herself as a conscious intellectual who knew the Korean government's calculation of using her body and sexuality to maximize state interests. She blamed the South Korean government for being hypocritical towards the military sex workers by asking them to take pride in their patriotic work, which society was ashamed of. In fact, the government of South Korea had prohibited prostitution by code of law since 1961.[64] She refused to become a victim of such political schemes; however, by proclaiming sole authority over her body, Kim rejected the notion of being a government agent. Many women claimed that in reality, they were not interested in politics to the extent that they had never even voted in their lives.[65]

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[63] Yun-Ja Kim, 187.

[64] Judy L. Postmus, *Sexual Violence and Abuse: An Encyclopedia of Prevention, Impacts, and Recovery* (ABC: CLIO, 2012), 304.

[65] In 2002, a NGO did a survey on the participation of the former military sex workers in South Korea's Presidential election. The organization found out that many women did not know how to participate since they had never voted in their lives. *First Testimony of U.S. Military Comfort*

In contrast, another former military sex worker, J. J. Kim described herself as a patriotic agent. In her testimony, Kim asserted that patriotism played a significant role in shaping her as a sex worker. She recalled the monthly meetings and speeches delivered by government agents. She claimed that after she heard the same speech over and over again, she started to believe that her hard work would make South Korea a rich nation someday. Such belief triggered her to provide "great service" to U.S. GIs for more dollars.[66] Kim's narration does not simply reflect her naiveté; it rather demonstrates Kim's patriotism, and her sophisticated knowledge about geopolitics. It shows that Kim tried to fulfill her duty as a responsible citizen, and believed that her sacrifice would lead to the nation's wellbeing. She knew that she was working as a military sex worker because of South Korea's military and economic dependence on the United States for survival. She believed she would stop working as a sex worker when South Korea had become financially independent from the U.S.

Besides their relationship to the State, Y. J. Kim portrayed her relationship with a U.S. GI as a feature of agency. She claimed that her relationship with American military personnel helped her gain economic profits and assert her authority. When a military sex worker and her GI boyfriend agreed to live together, the boyfriend first had to pay "her price" to her pimp to make sure "all three parties were satisfied."[67] Although women had to depend on their military boyfriends to "buy" their freedom from their pimps, Kim asserted her agency within the relationship. She noted the following:

> Living with a U.S. GI was very common for women in *Kijichon*. Because the soldiers generated stable income to us, we did not have to work. My first living boyfriend was a middle-aged white man named Monce. I did not love

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Women: The Truth behind the Military Camptown, Hyun-Sun Kim, trans. Katherine (Hye Ryun) Yang, 31.

[66] Jung-Ja Kim, 156.

[67] Information excerpted from "Cohabitation between Sex Workers and U.S. GIs" in *First Testimony of U.S. Military Comfort Women: The Truth behind the Military Camptown*, 196.

> him, but I needed the money that he brought home every month. The most difficult part of living with him was his daily demand for sex. It was just painful. I tried everything to avoid the moment; I got him drunk, and gave him full massage so he could fall asleep. Some days, I taught him Korean songs all night long, but instead of teaching him actual lyrics, I changed the lyrics and said every swear word that I knew. Every time I looked at his serious face trying to repeat after me, I laughed until I cried… Monce wanted to marry me, but I did not accept his proposal.[68]

Kim constructed agency narratives in numerous ways. First, she claimed that she strictly used her boyfriend as a financial supporter without emotional attachment. Her statement shows that Kim protected herself from the danger of facing vulnerable situations such as being heartbroken once the "arranged" relationship was over.[69] She gained financial stability through her relationship. Second, her statement shows that Kim did not allow her boyfriend to use her only for sex; when she did not want to have sex with him, she found ways to avoid it, which indicated that she had controlled their sex life. This also shows that Kim used her American boyfriend's lack of proficiency in the Korean language for personal pleasure and satisfaction. By rejecting Monce's marriage proposal, she proclaimed her independence and asserted power over the relationship between a Korean sex worker and an American military worker. Her narrative also breaks the conventional notion that women from poor countries desperately sought refuge in rich countries while portraying herself as an independent woman who constructed her own life without man's assistance.

Y. J. Kim's narratives also reveal that women's collective actions played crucial roles in shaping military sex workers' identities as active protesters. By portraying women's

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[68] Yun-Ja Kim, 108.

[69] Jung-Ja Kim, 196. I say it was arranged because it was a non-verbal agreement between female sex workers and American soldiers that they would live together as along as the U.S. GI stayed in Korea unless they decided to get married.

organizations and solidarity, Kim informed readers that these women actively sought their agency, legitimacy and rights as workers. In her autobiography, Kim illustrated the three "major" demonstrations that were led by the military sex workers in the early 1970s. Kim described the first demonstration, which occurred to protest against the "unfair treatment" between sex workers and U.S. soldiers regarding venereal disease checkups. Only sex workers were punished for having sexually transmitted diseases, the soldiers that solicited them did not face disciplinary action.[70] Kim argues that the military sex workers recognized their marginalization and lack of agency as individuals, so they organized a collective action as evidence of their willingness to fight against injustice and inequality.

Kim described the second demonstration as a portrayal of women's collective power, which took place when U.S. GIs distributed flyers comparing the prices of women to prices of shoes and bags. Kim claimed that such an inhumane attitude by the American soldiers towards the Korean sex workers angered women in *Kijichon* so much so that more than one thousand women came out on the street on 3 May, 1971. They screamed, "We are not shoes! We are human!" until the U.S. Commander came out of the base and made a formal apology to them.[71] Kim described the Korean female sex workers as standing up to U.S. masculine authority, and letting the U.S. troops know that they would not tolerate American GIs' mistreatment of the military sex workers. While discussing the demonstrations, she depicted the Korean women as brave warriors who fought for dignity and respect.

Kim also used an agency discourse to describe the third collective action in order to highlight narratives of women's collective agency. In response to a soldier named Steven, who brutally killed a sex worker, Kim divulged what she witnessed:

> Young-Soon was lying in bed naked. She was stabbed many times in her breasts and her vagina. Her bed was covered in her blood. Her dog was hiding under the bed.

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[70] Yun-Ja Kim, 114.

[71] Yun-Ja Kim, 129-131.

> Her mouth was filled with tissues. She was holding her fists tightly… U.S. office of special investigation sent some American men to examine her body, but our country men, two Korean police officers, did not take any action but standing politely and watching the U.S. investigators. We could not take it anymore. We came out on street. Some of us directly went to the U.S. base, while some of us went to the county police station. We cried and screamed all day long and night fighting for justice. Under the Park's dictatorship, nobody had even thought of fighting against the United States or the Korean government, but we did, and we got what we wanted. For the first time in Korean history, an U.S. GI was charged with murder and received a life-long sentence in the Korean court.[72]

Kim's account certainly highlights a collective identity of the military sex workers who recognized the inadequacy of civil, diplomatic, and human rights on their own to achieve their rights and justice. Women quickly realized the need to create an organized body to uphold their rights as sex workers, but more importantly as human beings. Kim constructed an agency narrative to portray the military sex workers as active agents who tirelessly contested and challenged both Korean and U.S. authorities, for justice and improvements in the legal, political and social conditions of military sex workers. Kim also described these women as people who challenged traditional Confucian gender roles, which still had great influence on Korean society at the time, by publicly expressing their opinions. In contrast, Kim described Korean males (police officers) as weak, incompetent and cowardly individuals who not only failed to protect their own citizens but who were also subordinate to American power. Kim emphasized how the female sex workers mobilized and protested the state authority at a time when the Korean majority suppressed their desire to speak up under Park's military regime.[73] Her agency

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[72] Ibid., 186-187.

[73] Jung-In Kang, trans. Katherine (Hye Ryun) Yang, *Understanding Democracy*, (Seoul: Literature and Intellectual Publishing, 1993), 35-36. In this book, Jung-In Kang, a Professor at Sogang University, stated that

narrative illustrated the sex workers as a collective identity, which brought influential change to their working environment, as well as social and political climates.

Although feminist scholar Na-Young Lee referred to the 1960s and 1970s as "the heyday" for *Kijichon* and "the dark day" for the female military sex workers who completely lost their authority and freedom. Most of these women balanced both autonomy and restrictions over their lives to some extent.[74] Thus, it might have been difficult for the former military sex workers to simply label themselves as victims and agents. Yet, they strategically constructed both identities to achieve what they wanted: They wanted to be perceived and treated as people who deserved respect and dignity. Most women in society cast themselves as victims of circumstances far beyond their control, such as poverty, domestic violence, human trafficking, and emotional vulnerability. Thus, constructing victimhood became a strategy for the former military sex workers to justify themselves as women who had been forced into an illegitimate industry, and to preserve their dignity as human beings. In contrast, constructing an identity around women's own agency justified the legitimacy of their labor and described themselves as people who deserved dignity and respect. Y. J. Kim's narratives especially highlighted the military sex workers' individual and collective agencies that challenged both patriarchy and the authoritarian state. More importantly, while these women's victimization and agency discourses reconstructed their identities, they challenged the economic, social, and cultural inequalities that they faced within the frameworks of authoritarian regime and patriarchy.

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in fact, people who criticized the government in public were sent to jail under the Park regime. President Park frequently sent official agents out to public places to arrest people who complained about the government.

[74] Na-Young Lee, 124.