Kim, Seung-kyung, and Na-Young Lee. "Shared History and the Responsibility for Justice: The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan." *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism*. By Barbara Molony and Jennifer Nelson. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 193–212. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474250542.ch-009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 00:53 UTC.

Copyright © Barbara Molony, Jennifer Nelson and Contributors 2017. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Shared History and the Responsibility for Justice: The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

Seung-kyung Kim and Na-Young Lee

Introduction

Contemporary South Korean women's movements developed within the context of large social movements that dealt with the broad social and political issues confronting the nation. Because they formed part of these larger movements, however, women's political activities were often regarded as auxiliary, and less important, than the activism led by men. The progressive coalition that brought down the military dictatorship in the 1980s (discussed below), for example, included women's organizations, but they were nearly invisible among the male-centered antigovernment, pro-labor, and pro-democracy forces. Korea's progressive movement was firmly rooted in androcentric nationalism and left-wing historical materialist perspectives, and issues related to class struggle/labor struggle/political struggle provided the movement's core agenda. Issues related to gender received little attention from members of the progressive coalition beyond the women's movement activists.

In the 1990s, a more democratic political order took hold, and, with the end of the dictatorship, the urgency and unity of the progressive coalition faded. In this new context, women's movements focused more on women's experiences as women, and issues related to sex, sexuality, and sexual violence against women became important items on their agenda. This agenda led to the establishment of women-only organizations; increased interest in women's studies on college campuses; and produced a plethora of legislation regarding gender equality and sexuality.

The more open political climate of the 1990s also facilitated renewed interest in achieving justice for Korean comfort women¹ who had been forced into sexual slavery during the Second World War. In 1990 a coalition of thirty-seven women's groups organized the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Han'guk chŏngshindae munje taech'aek hyŏbŭihoe; The Korean Council, hereafter). The Korean Council members interviewed survivors and presented a case against the Japanese government to international human rights NGOs (International

FIGURE 9.1. The first Wednesday demonstration, January 1992.

Source: Credit: The Korean Council.

Labor Organization; Amnesty International) and to the UN Human Rights Committee. Obtaining justice for the comfort women became one of the most visible feminist issues for Korean women's movements on the international stage over the next two decades.

This chapter focuses on the genealogies and trajectories of the Korean Council and maps the transnational activism of the comfort women movement. The comfort women movement stands as an important example of postcolonial feminist practice and presents a clear case of how "the personal is political." As part of this movement, the surviving comfort women became empowered to speak for and about themselves, and in so doing they transformed themselves from invisible victims/ghosts to important spokespersons for transnational peace movements. Thus, this chapter contributes to the ongoing discussion of the possibility and meaning of transnational women's movements within the context of the postcolonial nation.

Women's movements in the 1980s: Sociopolitical context

The decade of the 1980s, centering on Chun Doo Hwan's 5th Republic (1981–87), was characterized by a fierce struggle between the military dictatorship and the rising forces of civil society. The decade opened with student demonstrations calling for increased democratic rights, and these demonstrations were met with harsh political repression. Chun Doo Hwan began his crackdown on political opponents even before he took over the presidency, when he ordered troops into Kwangju City in May 1980 to suppress pro-democracy demonstrations, leading to hundreds of civilian deaths in the Kwangju

massacre.² Although the facts about what happened in Kwangju were initially suppressed, knowledge of the massacre eventually became widespread and prevented Chun from ever gaining the level of legitimacy that was accorded to the previous dictator, Park Chung Hee, who ruled over South Korea from 1961 to 1979. After he became president, Chun was unable to curtail the people's appetite for democracy, despite his use of a broad array of repressive measures, including imprisonment, torture, and executions. Opposition to Chun's presidency increased until June 1987 when street demonstrations composed of students, workers, and middle-class citizens, in what has been called the Great June Uprising, called for an end to military dictatorship.

The parallel development and expansion of the democratization movement and the women's movement during the 1980s requires a closer examination in order for us to understand the complex topography of the women's movements of twenty-first century Korea. In the midst of this dramatic era, during which time citizens' yearning for democracy was the defining agenda, the contemporary women's movement organizations began to form. These organizations differed from their predecessors in being more overtly political than earlier women's organizations had been, and especially in their engagement with issues concerning class.³ The Association for Women's Equality and Friendship (Yösong P'yöng'uhoe)—a progressive group of women intellectuals including women professors, women college students and graduates, and women workers—founded in 1983 illustrates how the women's movement aligned itself with the social transformation movement. The Association opened up a new agenda for women's movements, describing itself as the first organization to have a clear program for women's liberation since the division of Korea.⁴ Their membership agreed that women's liberation required the total restructuring of society, but they disagreed among themselves about how this should be achieved. Although this group drew their membership mostly from female academics, they were constrained by their position that the women's movement should be led by working-class women,⁵ and the Association fell apart in 1986 because of disputes around class issues.

Despite its short-lived status, the Association had a significant impact as former members went on to establish several key women's organizations, including the Korean Women's Associations United (Han'guk Yösong Tanchë Yönhaphoe), the Korean Women's Association for Democracy and Friendship (Han'guk Yösong Minuhoe), and the Korean Women Workers' Association (Han'guk Yösong Nodongjahoe). Their two feminist agendas—promoting democracy and centering marginalized women within the women's movement—continued to be important objectives of these women's organizations.⁶

While the core of the women's movement defined itself as politically progressive during the early 1980s, women were also forming other less explicitly political organizations. The Korea Women's Hotline (Han'guk Yösong'ui Chönhwa) was established in 1983 in order to protect women from domestic violence. This group sought to

protect women from all forms of violence; improve women's welfare; establish gender equality within the family, the work place and the society; and encourage women to actively participate in politics, economy, society, and culture so that they can contribute to the peace and democracy of Korea.⁷

Another group that shied away from political confrontation, Alternative Culture (Tto Hanaüi Munhwa), was founded as a feminist cultural organization in order to foster feminist consciousness through publications and the organization of cultural activities and lectures. It was dedicated to creating "an equal and open society where women and men have true companionship, and children grow up with freedom, through planting a seed of an alternative culture" in Korean society.⁸

As opposition to the dictatorship of Chun Doo Hwan was reaching its peak in 1987, progressive women formed two important new organizations. The first, the Korean Women's Associations United (KWAU), was established as an umbrella organization for progressive women's groups, encompassing twenty-one existing member organizations. As part of progressive women's movements, KWAU supported democratization and declared that the women's movement could not be separated from a democratization movement.⁹ The second, which immediately joined KWAU, was the Korean Women Workers' Association, which was established to advocate for the rights of women workers. The founding members of this organization were women workers who had been active in the democratic labor movement in the 1970s and activists from the Association for Women's Equality and Friendship. It was the first national women's organization for and by women workers, promoting the rights of women workers and condemning gender discrimination in recruitment and employment.

During this period, women's groups also worked to eliminate prostitution and provide alternative survival strategies for prostitutes, or, at the very least, to protect women who were prostitutes from the sex trade's worst abuses. A highly visible location for prostitution was in the "camptowns" (*kijichön*) that formed around American military bases. Prostitutes serving foreign soldiers in camptowns were resented and highly stigmatized with labels such as "UN madam," "Western princess," or "Western whore." Both the South Korean and US governments tolerated this camptown prostitution as a necessary evil and formulated policies aimed at control rather than suppression.¹⁰ As anti-American sentiments increased during the Chun administration, the attitude toward US bases became more hostile and nationalistic, especially after 1992, following the gruesome murder of a camptown prostitute by an American soldier. Her murder led to mass protests against camptown prostitution and other "US crimes against Koreans." The groups that were important in organizing against camptown prostitution included Korean Church Women United (Han'guk kyohöe yösöng yönhap, founded in 1967), My Sister's Place (Durebang, founded in 1986), and The United Voice for the Eradication of Prostitution (Hansorihoe, founded in 1987). In the 1990s, feminist views that regarded prostitution as a form of violence against women which should not be tolerated by society increasingly dominated the discussion of the issue.¹¹

Emergence of the comfort women movement

During the 1970s and 1980s, progressive Christian women's groups worked to address a variety of social issues, such as promoting workers' rights, reunification, and peace, and opposing prostitution.¹² Korean Church Women United (hereafter

KCWU) was particularly important in challenging the practice of what was called “Kisaeng tourism,”¹³ the use of Korean women to provide sexual services for visiting Japanese men. During a seminar held by KCWU on “International Kisaeng Tourism” in April 1987, amid an atmosphere of nationalistic outrage at the sexual exploitation of Korean women by foreigners, the issue of Japanese military comfort women was raised.

At that time, Professor Yun Chung-ok of the Department of English at Ewha Woman's University and a member of KCWU was the only scholar investigating the comfort women issue, and she was invited to speak at the seminar. Professor Yun had narrowly escaped forced draft into the *Chōngsindae* (“Volunteer Corps”; *teishintai* in Japanese)¹⁴ when she was a first year student at Ewha Womans University, and felt a sense of responsibility toward those women of her generation who could not return to their hometowns after “their service.” Motivated by her experience, she located relevant documents and survivors.¹⁵ Shocked by Yun's talk about the “hidden story” within colonial history, the KCWU established a Research Committee on the *Chōngsindae* Issue under the Committee on Church and Society to support Yun's research.¹⁶ In 1988, KCWU organized an international symposium on Jeju Island titled “Women and Sex Tourism Culture,” and during the symposium Yun presented a talk about the issue of “Japanese military sexual slavery.” A strong sense of awakening rapidly spread among the Korean women's movement and organizations facilitated by the increasing openness of Korean society.¹⁷

Another important figure in bringing the issue of the comfort women before the public was feminist sociologist Lee Hyo-chae. Lee pointed out the need to understand both *Kisaeng* tourism and the abuse of the comfort women in the context of a national history that included colonial occupation and the division of the country. In November 1990, Lee Hyo-chae and Yun Chung-ok led a coalition of thirty-seven women's organizations to found the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. Relying on the testimonies of surviving comfort women,¹⁸ the Council built up a case against Japan and presented it to the UN Human Rights Committee. As a result, a transnational alliance on comfort women issues was formed in 1992. The Council has led the surviving comfort women and their supporters in demonstrations in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul every Wednesday since 1992 in an effort to force the Japanese government to accept full responsibility for its actions during the war and to compensate survivors. (See also Chapter 12 by Vera Mackie in this volume.)

As the Korean women's movement emerged as an increasingly visible force during the 1990s, many women activists began to argue for gender justice as the basis for true democracy and increased their focus on issues such as sex, sexuality, and sexual violence.¹⁹ As the women's movement directed its attention to systematic sexual violence in society, it became possible to understand comfort women as being the victims of systematic sexual violence, and thus to see their quest for justice as part of a continuing struggle against patriarchy and continuing gender inequality that facilitate violence against women.

Many factors contributed to the more than forty years of silence on the issue of comfort women that preceded the emergence of their quest for justice as an

international issue. First, international power dynamics in East Asia following the end of the Second World War meant that "less was demanded of Japan than Germany in terms of criminal and economic accountability."²⁰ In its quest to maintain control of events in East Asia, the United States helped rebuild "its former enemy into an economic powerhouse and competitor."²¹ The US government also wanted to use the rebuilt Japan as an anticommunist bastion against the emerging communist forces in East Asia—including the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea.²² As a result, Japan and its colonial regime in Korea received a less thorough vetting than did Germany following the conclusion of the war, and many of the injustices committed by the militaristic Japanese government were left unaddressed. And when the United States liberated Korea in 1945, it divided the country into American and Soviet sectors, imposing an unwanted national division that inevitably led to the Korean War and that has persisted to this day. Furthermore, within the part of Korea under its control, rather than completely dismantling the colonial state, the United States left many of its elements in place. The US-occupied Korea thus retained imperial, colonial, and military attributes. In the aftermath of the Korean War, US domination persisted through intensive militarization and a neocolonial relationship. Thus, the United States also shares some responsibility for perpetuating the colonial legacy and for the silence regarding comfort women.

Second, the South Korean government was in no position to raise the issue of comfort women because it was so powerless due to persistent national poverty and its own neocolonial subordination. The overriding necessities of security and economic growth led to negotiations to normalize relations with its former colonial oppressor, and in 1965, Park Chung-Hee's military regime signed the Treaty on Basic Relations between Korea and Japan. Under this treaty, "Korea gave up the right of its citizens to sue the Japanese government for civil damages" in exchange for reconstruction funding of \$500 million in "economic development grants and loans."²³

Korean patriarchal attitudes toward sex also acted to prevent the issue from being raised publically. The deeply entrenched Confucian cultural norms labeled women who had been sexually abused by foreigners as "defiled."²⁴ The defiled daughter or wife brought shame to her family. Accordingly, former comfort women had to hide their experiences even from their families, or, in many cases, were simply unable to return to their former homes. Additionally, for Korean people as a nation, comfort women symbolized the helplessness and impotence of Korean men who had not protected their own women, families, and nation from their foreign enemy. Lost sovereignty was symbolized by young Korean virgins collectively raped by Japan, the colonizer. This traumatic memory haunted Korean society and contributed to the survivors' lifelong suffering.

Third, domestic factors in postwar Japan hindered the comfort women issue from being exposed. As many scholars have pointed out, "a defensive posture of nationalism and a long militaristic history made Japan 'an extraordinary example of forgetting, suppression, or denial by significant and influential groups in the population.'"²⁵ The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been used to foster an attitude of victimhood that erased Japan's sense of responsibility or guilt about its wartime

aggression. Consequently, postwar Japan has tried to reconstruct its national identity by emphasizing the wartime suffering of the Japanese, while ignoring victims from other nations.²⁶ The pervasive ethos of victimhood has made it difficult for the victims of the Japanese empire to achieve a “new beginning” in the post-Cold War environment, and it has limited Japanese acceptance of responsibility for the plight of the comfort women.²⁷

The comfort women movement that arose in the 1990s had to overcome all these forces that had kept the victims silenced for forty years. Its leaders were politically inspired female activists, churchwomen, and students who had played a pivotal role in the Korean democratization movement, and even many of those who did not identify themselves as feminists found themselves questioning the pervasive hegemonic gender ideology and androcentrism of male activists and movement organizations. Ironically, the same patriarchal ideology that had played a part in suppressing the voices of the comfort women reinterpreted the newly emerging issue in nationalist terms and threatened to drown out the voices of the survivors. Male Korean nationalists from the progressive movement appropriated the newly revived issue of comfort women by framing the issue in terms of dichotomous divisions of “us vs. them,” “comrade vs. enemy,” “victim vs. offender,” and “good vs. bad.” “To disclose the truth,” “thorough apology,” “compensation,” “national pride/shame,” “our chaste girls forcibly drafted into sexual slavery,” and “innocent victims” were the most commonly employed phrases in South Korean media editorials and activist articles. The Japanese government’s response in denying its responsibility and refusing to issue an official apology or compensate the survivors, as well as its characterization of the comfort women as “voluntary prostitutes,” further fueled Korean nationalistic sentiments.

Shared histories

Korean women in the generation that came of age during the last phase of Japanese colonial rule endured a time of hardship and danger in their teenage years. In this section, we present the stories of two women who lived through these dark times. One was forced to become a Japanese military comfort woman and eventually became active in the survivors’ movement. The other one was able to avoid becoming a comfort woman, but always felt sense of a responsibility toward those who had been less privileged than her, and went on to become the founder of the comfort women’s movement.

Kim Bok-dong was born in 1926 into the family of a small farmer in Yangsan, Kyŏngnam province. Her father passed away early due to stress from a loan that he had guaranteed. Her mother was left with six children to take care of and worked transporting dung. Kim left school after fourth grade because her mom was worried about her safety. Her older sisters had all married early to avoid conscription by the Japanese, but she was too young, so she was still living with her mother. However, when a family had no son, Japan sought out daughters to contribute to its “patriotic war effort.” She became a comfort woman when she was fifteen years old, and came back home in 1945 when she was twenty.

One day, my village head came to our house accompanied by a Japanese man who was wearing a brown jacket without military insignia. We were wearing light Korean skirts and blouses, so it must have been in either spring or fall. The village head then had more power than the present day provincial governors. The Japanese man who came spoke Korean very well, and he told my mother: "You have to give us your daughter, so we can send her to the *Teishintai* (*Chôngsindae* in Korean). You don't have any sons, but even daughters need to work for the country. If you refuse to send her, you will be considered a traitor and will not be able to stay in this village." My mother asked, "What is *Teishintai*?" They told her, "She will be working in a factory that makes military uniforms. She only has to work for three years. She will be sent home even before the three years are up if you let us know that she is about to get married, so you have nothing to worry about. If she wants to earn more money, however, she can continue to work for longer than the three years." Although I don't remember very clearly, they also wanted my mother to sign some kind of form but my mother refused to do it because she remembered how my father went through a horrendous time because he signed something by mistake. So, I could not refuse to go, and that was how I was conscripted.²⁸

Kim recalls her first traumatic day at the "comfort station":

The women who had been raped by the soldiers were washing their bloody clothing. Two other women and I discussed committing suicide as we were putting our laundry out on the veranda. The three of us used gestures to ask a Chinese cleaning man to get poison for us. I had one *won* that my mother had given me. That was a lot of money at that time. I gave that to the Chinese cleaning man. The Chinese man brought us a bottle of something and a big bucket of water. It was not poison; it was *ppaegal*. One of the women said that it was liquor, and you can die from drinking too much liquor, so let's drink, so we shared *ppaegal*. It felt like my throat was on fire; we drank some water to calm our throat and then drank again. Afterwards, we just blacked out.²⁹

Kim describes the difficulty she had in returning home after the war ended³⁰:

We were told that there was a ship to take us back home. I walked half a day to get to the ship, but there was no ship there. Eventually, a ship actually showed up. It was really big; big enough to hold 300 people. I was told that this was the last ship going back to Korea. It took several months to get to Pusan and it made many stops to board more people, but only Koreans. When we got to Pusan, we were quarantined for 15 days in the ship ... When I was discharged, I was given 100 *won* and a train ticket to Mulgüm. When I arrived, my mother told me to eat tofu. Both of us had changed so much that it was hard to recognize each other, and we cried and cried. It had been five years since I left home; I was fifteen when I left and twenty when I came back. My brother-in-law seemed to know that I had been a "comfort woman," but he did not tell my mother. He just told her that I had worked as a nurse.³¹

Yun Chung-ok was born in 1925 into a wealthy family in Kangwŏn province. She studied in Seoul during the war, but had to withdraw from college to avoid being conscripted into *Chōngsindae*.

I think it was in November, 1943. I was 17 years old, and a first-year student. Even during high school, teachers urged us to volunteer to become nurses, and we were told to go to the *Chōngsindae*. It became worse after I went to the college. Ordinary men were just picked up and forced to go to the labor corps. Men were urged to volunteer to be student soldiers while women were told to volunteer as *Chōngsindae*. One day, all of us first year students were gathered together in the basement of the main building. Two people, one of whom was wearing a uniform, distributed printed forms. We were not given any time to read the content, but we were told to sign the form with our thumbprint. And then they collected the forms and left. I did not even know what was there. After that incident, I withdrew from college.³²

After she withdrew from college, Yun's parents tried to arrange a marriage for her, but she refused to get married, so her father took his family and went into Kūmgang Mountain. Yun recalls, "Any man would do. A man could be much older, a widower with three or four children, even a man with TB was okay. One of my Kyunggi high school friends married a man with TB and soon became widowed. So, any man was okay—it was that urgent."³³

Yun remembers, "There was fear and I was afraid. Even now, when I remember that time, there is no light, no day; it is all dark night, and cold. From the time when I quit school until independence, we lived in *Kūmgangsan* to avoid the war, and I felt like I have been forced into a long tunnel where everything is damp with cold wind and rain."³⁴

She continues, explaining how she began to understand what some women had been forced to do and the terrible fate that her parents helped her avoid:

I did not even know about what "comfort woman" meant. I heard from an uncle who had been forced into the labor corps that many young women did not go into *Chōngsindae*, but instead became comfort women, and how miserable their lives were ... I must have been around twenty when I first asked about comfort women and began to learn more about the women who had been comfort women. After I learned about them, my question changed from "what are comfort women?" to "how could anyone do this to another human?"³⁵

Kim Bok-dong was sent to a US-run internees' camp after the defeat of Japan, but she was eventually able to return to Korea. She could not even tell her mother about her horrible experiences, and she kept them deep inside her heart, but they surfaced without warning and the memory hurt her deeply. After liberation, Yun Chung-ok returned to Seoul, but she could not free herself from the tragic stories that she had heard. These stories made Yun angry at those who committed these crimes against young women, and about the loss of human dignity that could never be replaced.

During the Japanese colonial period, these two women, Kim Bok-dong and Yun Chung-ok, led very different lives, but they both suffered from living in a colonized country, and they endured feelings of fear and anxiety. These two women's overlapping experiences embody aspects of the dark period of colonial rule. Yun lived in continual fear, although she was able to escape Kim's fate, and Kim tried to buy poison to kill herself after being raped by soldiers.

Who is ultimately to blame for the wrongdoing during this period? Japan's colonial policies and its expansionist war; Korea's poverty and its patriarchal system that were the basis of the structure that sacrificed young Korean women; the Korean men who lied to young women about the work they would do (as in the case of Kim Bok-dong); the Japanese soldiers who kidnapped young women (as in the case of Kim Hak-soon described below); the Japanese soldiers who routinely raped these young women (in most cases); the Japanese soldiers who managed the "comfort stations" and Korean men who actively conscripted young women (Yun Chung-ok); and afterward the Koreans who maintained silence, ignored their misery, and looked down upon them (in most cases). Many parties have some responsibility for this injustice.

The genealogies: Sharing political responsibility

What made it possible for these women's long suppressed stories to finally emerge? The end of the dictatorship and the country's growing openness provided the essential preconditions for the discussion about comfort women to begin, but it was the work of a few dedicated individuals who got the comfort women movement started in the late 1980s.

In many ways Yun Chung-ok was the catalyst for the comfort women movement. "Guilt" and "anger" were the terms that Yun used to describe her emotions about the issue of comfort women. Her sense of guilt was generated by her awareness that she had been exceptionally privileged in her own life. She was born into a wealthy family, was able to escape the Korean War (1950–53) by studying abroad in the United States, became a professor of English at Ewha Womans University, and thus lived a very different life from those in her generation who had been forced to become comfort women. She explained, "Although I was born into a family that was better off than many others, we were all born in an unlucky country." She felt haunted by the stories about Japanese military comfort women, and that haunting drove her to learn as much as she could about comfort women.

Although they were not spoken about much, the wartime stories about comfort women never completely disappeared. Yun remembered listening to a 1960s radio drama, *Hyonhaet'anün algoitta* (The Sea Knows),³⁶ running from August 1960 through January 1961, about a student soldier during the Second World War, and especially his experience at a "comfort station." In the 1970s, she remembers reading a collection of narratives about life under colonial rule, *Punnoŭi Kyejŏl* (The Wrath of the Season), published in 1977, that included patriotic fighters of the independence movement, student soldiers, conscripted laborers, and comfort women.³⁷ The photos of comfort

women in the collection haunted her. And she read a book about military comfort women (*Jugun Ianfu*) published in 1973 by Senda Kakō, a Japanese reporter who had investigated their situation. She later traveled to Japan to meet Senda. Senda was an editor at the *Mainichi News* who had become interested in the issue of the comfort women after seeing wartime photographs of young women and wondering who they were. Yun also began to seek out former comfort women in order to get their testimony about what had taken place. The first woman she was able to meet with was Pae Pong-gi, who had been pressed into wartime service in Thailand, and was living in Okinawa after the end of the war. Yun visited her in 1980.

Despite Yun's commitment to the cause of the comfort women, she describes herself as "not feminist activist material," and credits Lee Hyo-chae, her friend and colleague at Ewha, with being the movement's founder. Lee and Yun knew each other from their time as students at Ewha. Both women studied in the United States, and both returned to become professors at Ewha. As a sociology professor, Lee was deeply involved in the democratization movement and organized women's groups. Lee's research group, *Saeöl* (*Saeroun ōl*, New Spirit), trained many young women leaders who later became leaders of the women's movement. As Yun describes it:

Even though I was not an advisor [of *Saeöl*], I got involved. We protected students who were hiding from police ... I have never thought that I would become involved in a social movement, but Lee was always an activist.³⁸

Chi Eun-hee, who went on to become Minister of Gender Equality, studied at Ewha as a student of Lee Hyo-chae. She recalls:

Saeöl was the first organized group. Its first cohort included Shin Heisoo and Lee Ok-kyung. The group was organized by Professor Lee. I was interested in issues related to Korean society's class and stratification system, but I did not have a feminist liberation perspective. Professor Lee came to Ewha when I was a senior and she made us do research in a poor neighborhood. That research and readings related to women's liberation helped to develop my ideas.³⁹

Shin Heisoo also credits Lee with inspiring her to become an activist: "Professor Lee was the advisor of *Saeöl*. Through participating in *Saeöl*, I realized that I needed to understand sociology in order to change the society. So, I changed my major when I began my graduate studies."⁴⁰ Shin went on to serve as an expert on the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women from 2001 to 2008, where she was instrumental in bringing the issues of comfort women and other women's human rights to the world's attention.

Chung Chin Sung, another important figure in the research on Japanese military comfort women, met Lee through the Korean National Christian Coalition (Han'guk Kyohoe Yōnhap), and through her she joined the Korean Council movement. As a historical sociologist, she went on to research and publish extensive historical accounts based on the survivors' testimonies and is considered to be the leading authority on comfort women.

Yoon Young-ae, who became the secretary of the Korean Church Women United, was introduced to Yun Chung-ok by Lee Hyo-chae. At that time, Lee was serving as the President of the Korean Women's Association United and was a member of the Peace Unification Board of the Korean Church Women United. As a devout Christian, she considers her work to be a calling from God. She worked on the staff of the Korean Council during its first ten years and was instrumental in bringing comfort woman survivor Kim Hak-soon to the public's attention.

All of these women were brought into the Korean Council through their relationship with Lee Hyo-chae. They spent their college years under the Yusin dictatorship of Park Chung Hee,⁴¹ and, because of Lee, learned to be socially conscious about women's lives and to understand the necessity of organizing. They united as members of the Korean Council and also became key figures in other women's movement organizations. As political theorist Iris Young writes, "If we see injustices or crimes being committed by the institutions of which we are a part, or believe that such crimes are being committed, then we have the responsibility to try to speak out against them with the intention of mobilizing others to oppose them, and to act together to transform the institutions to promote better ends."⁴² The members of the Korean Council met their responsibility by speaking out and mobilizing for the cause of obtaining justice for the comfort women.

The growth of the movement: (Re)structuring of trauma

An important aspect of the movement was that activists met with victims and learned to understand their deep-seated trauma. This was not only intellectually important for informing people about the facts of what had occurred, but also a deeply moving emotional experience for both the activists and the survivors. In April 1991, Yoon Young-ae began her search for comfort women, and she remembers her first meeting with one brave survivor:

I was introduced to Kim Hak Soon *halmŏni*⁴³ in July 1991, by a survivor of the atomic bomb. As I listened to her story, I was overwhelmed with emotion. She told me: "I no longer have a husband and I don't have any children. I have no one to worry about, so I can talk now. Now I attend church, and I believe that God wants me to fight for this issue, and that is why he has let me live until now. I am ready to talk, and I will talk if you give me an opportunity." Even then, I was worried because I didn't think I could let her talk about her experiences when I knew how hard it must be. However, she called me again. So, I contacted the Korean Council, and we arranged to have Kim Hak Soon to do a press conference on August 14 since the 15th is Independence Day.⁴⁴

Kim's press interview shook Korean society, and the Korean Church Women United established the *Chŏngsindae* hotline on September 18, 1991. The vivid testimony from survivors dramatically transformed the Korean Council's movement, and made it possible for others to come forward, including Kim Bok-dong in January 1992.

Yun Chung-ok asserts that it isn't that she has helped the survivors, but that the survivors have helped her by opening her eyes so that she can understand society. Yoon Mi-hyang, current director of the Korean Council, also reflects on the effect that the survivors had on her: "meeting with *halmönis* crushed my arrogance and conceit. I truly appreciate the opportunity of meeting them. Before I met them, I was full of myself telling college students to think about our nation's humiliating history, and that I was furious and outraged. How could you be silent about this history? I am embarrassed about my arrogance."⁴⁵

Yoon Mi-hyang's reflections on her own arrogance, and how she became much more humble after meeting the survivors, demonstrate the impact that the survivors have on the movement. The way the survivors and researchers/activists work together is the most important factor in the Korean Council's movement. It has made it possible for the movement to raise issues related to structural injustice and to address the continued suffering of the survivors.

Shin Heisoo, one of the initial members of Saeöl, attended the UN's Human Rights Committee meeting in August 1992. This was during the Bosnian war when the news about the mass rape and massacre shook the world. The news from Bosnia brought the world's attention to sexual violence against women in the context of war and made it into an issue of universal human rights. Shin recalls:

FIGURE 9.2. The 1,000th Wednesday demonstration and Peace Monument (Statue of Young Girl, *sonyösang*) with two survivors, Gil Won-ok and Kim Bok-dong.

Source: Credit: The Korean Council.

Professors Lee Hyo-chae and Chung Chin Sung held a press conference, followed by the testimony of a survivor, Hwang Geum-joo. That we brought the survivor and she presented her own testimony was the most important factor in generating so much attention. Also, because of the Bosnian war where "ethnic cleansing" was being carried out, the attention was there.⁴⁶

The researchers and activists who were not alive during the Second World War felt anger, pain, fear, and frustration about the suffering of the comfort women not only through their compassion for the survivors and their individual experiences, but also because the movement reinterpreted those experiences as an archetypal evil. Jeffrey Alexander's discussion of cultural trauma⁴⁷ provides a useful way of understanding this process. Just as the West's interpretation of the Nazis' murder of the Jews came to be understood in more absolute terms, as Holocaust rather than as simple military atrocity, in the years after the Second World War, the abuse of the comfort women came to be viewed in the context of colonialism, war crimes, rape, and systematic violence against women. And, since these issues continue to trouble the world, the comfort women movement still has a great deal of relevance.

Responsibility for justice

"[C]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that has left an indelible mark on their group consciousness, and changed their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."⁴⁸ It is up to what Alexander terms "carrier groups" to make meaning out of the legacy of a cultural trauma. The Korean Council activists did this by supporting survivors and collecting their testimony, holding the Wednesday demonstrations, demanding the truth and political responsibility, and forming international alliances and coordinating activities with international organizations. Through these activities, they informed the world about the comfort women, revealed their suffering, and mobilized new supporters who empathize with their cause.

Iris Young argues that by virtue of living in the same historical period, we are responsible for addressing "structural injustices" in which we are implicated but for which we are not to blame.⁴⁹ Since everybody who lives in Korea is implicated in creating and reproducing the mass trauma of the victims and survivors, everyone is responsible and obligated to work to change the structure. Being responsible requires both remembering the origins of the movement and continuing the movement. In order to express remembrance, the Korean Council dedicated a statue of a young girl (*sonyōsang*) at the Japanese embassy and opened The War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul. The Korean Council also looks to the future through education for future generations, working toward justice for the surviving comfort women, and initiating the "Butterfly Fund" to assist women who have been the victims of systematic military atrocities around the world.

On International Women's Day in March 2012, two "comfort station" survivors, Gil Won-ok and Kim Bok-dong, established the fund to support victims of sexual violence in other countries.

FIGURE 9.3. The first beneficiaries of the “Butterfly Fund”: Victims of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Source: Credit: The Korean Council.

We have established the “Butterfly Fund,” which financially aids victims of sexual violence from the Congo and Vietnam wars and their families. The dream of the “Butterfly Fund” is to change war to peace and give hope to the victims of war-time sexual violence through support and solidarity. The fluttering butterfly stirs its wings with all its power to fly high free from discrimination, subjugation, and violence. Our dream is that *halmōnis*, “Comfort Women,” and all other women will spread their wings wide and fly freely like the butterfly. Through this fund’s activities, the Korean Council wants to stop violence against women in armed conflicts, promote a firm solidarity among us and our friends, set history right, heal the wounds of the victims, and uphold truth and justice.⁵⁰

This groundbreaking idea would not have been possible had the identities of comfort women not changed through participation in the movement. Through engagement in activism that has reached beyond nationality, race, gender, and language, comfort women—once invisible “ghosts,” helpless victims, and sexual slaves—have raised the world’s consciousness.

Coda

On December 28, 2015, the governments of South Korea and Japan announced that they had agreed to a “final and irrevocable resolution” about the issue of comfort women. At the press conference held in Seoul, the foreign ministers of the two countries presented

the agreement that included an apology from the Japanese government and a payment of \$8.3 million to provide care for the surviving women. The Japanese government's public apology and their willingness to make a payment from the government's funds was an unexpected compromise for Japan's Prime Minister, Abe Shinzō, who has generally been unwilling to express contrition for Japan's behavior during the Second World War.

According to the agreement, the Japanese government will pay the money to a foundation to be established by the South Korean government to provide medical, nursing, and other services to the surviving women. In return, Japan demanded that Korea stop criticizing Japan over the issue and requested that a statue commemorating the comfort women be removed from its place in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul (see also Chapter 12 by Vera Mackie in this volume). The statue, which was erected in 2011 by the Korean Council, depicts a young girl (*sonyōsang*) "barefoot, her hands clenched in her lap, she sits in a chair and stares impassively, a symbol of thousands of Korean women who were used as sex slaves by Japan's army from the early 1930s until 1945."⁵¹ The Korean Council said in a statement: "it is unacceptable for the government to talk about taking down or moving the statue."⁵²

Of the total 238 women who have come forward, only 45 were alive at the time of the agreement, and the survivors expressed dissatisfaction with it. When the first vice foreign minister, Lim Sung-nam, came to explain the deal to the survivors at their shelter in Seoul, Lee Yong-su, one of the surviving women, shouted at him: "Which country do you belong to? ... You could have at least let us know what kind of deal you were striking with Japan." And she told the press, "The agreement does not reflect the views of former comfort women, and I will ignore it completely."⁵³ She added that the accord fell far short of the women's long-standing demand that Japan admit legal responsibility and offer formal reparations. She also said that she opposed the removal of the statue in front of the Japanese Embassy.

The Korean Council also vehemently opposed the deal, which it described as "humiliating diplomacy," and said that "The agreement is nothing but a diplomatic collusion that thoroughly betrayed the wishes of comfort women and the South Korean people."⁵⁴ The Korean Council said, "Although the Japanese government announced that it 'feels (its) responsibilities,' the statement lacks the acknowledgment of the fact that the colonial government and its military had committed a systematic crime."⁵⁵ The group took issue with the fact that the agreement did not address the issue of Japanese history textbooks glossing over the scope of Japan's war crimes.⁵⁶ And, although the survivors were not particularly interested in financial compensation, the amount that was offered, "roughly \$180,000 per survivor," was so low that it was felt to be insulting.⁵⁷

Despite the announcement by the two governments that the issue has been resolved, neither the survivors, the Korean Council, nor the Korean public accepted the agreement.⁵⁸ The survivors no longer remain silent; they have been voicing their thoughts loud and clear.

Notes

- 1 "Comfort women" was the label that Japan used to designate those women who were exploited as sex slaves for their soldiers. The "comfort women" were part of

- the “Chōngsindae,” the Volunteer Labor Corps (who were actually conscripted, and not volunteers). The term is often enclosed in quotation marks to indicate its untruthfulness, but it has become the general term used by many scholars to refer to the women who were sex slaves to the Japanese military. The United Nations uses “Japanese Military Sexual Slave” as its formal term.
- 2 Many Koreans expected that the United States would be sympathetic to demonstrations calling for greater democracy in South Korea, and were bitterly disappointed when the US military command allowed South Korean troops to be deployed to Kwangju where they killed hundreds of antigovernment protesters. The resulting Kwangju massacre ignited the anti-American sentiments in South Korea. Gi-Wook Shin, “South Korean Anti-Americanism: A Comparative Perspective,” *Asian Survey* 36, 8 (1996): 787–803.
 - 3 Seung-kyung Kim and Kyoung-Hee Kim, “Mapping a Hundred Years of Activism: Women’s Movements in Korea,” in *Women’s Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism*, ed. Mina Roces and Louise Edwards (London: Routledge, 2010), 197.
 - 4 Sŭng-Hŭi Yi, *Yōsōng Undonggwa Chōngch’i Iron* [Women’s Movement and Political Theory] (Seoul: Noktu, 1994), 341.
 - 5 Cho Joo-Hyun, “Yōsōng chōngchēsōng’ūi chōngch’ihak: 80-90nyōndae han’gugūi yōsōng undong’ūl chungsimūro” [“Gender Identity Politics: The Case of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Korea in the 1980s and 1990s”], *Han’guk Yōsōnghak* [Journal of Korean Women’s Studies] 12, 1 (1996): 138–79, 9.
 - 6 Kang Nam-Sik, “Han’guk yōsōng undong’ūi chaengjōmgwa panghyang” [“Issues and Goals of the Korean Women’s Movement”], Paper presented at the Korean Women’s Studies Annual Conference, Seoul, November 20, 2004, 15.
 - 7 Han’guk Yōsōng’ūi Chōnhwa [Korea Women’s Hotline]. www.hotline.co.kr
 - 8 Tto Hanau Munhwa [Alternative Culture]. www.tommon.co
 - 9 Cho Joo-Hyun, “Gender Identity Politics,” 8.
 - 10 Katharine H. S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Cynthia Enloe’s pathbreaking work on how military prostitution is constructed and maintained at the nexus of international politics and national security reveals the interlocking relationship among militarism, sexuality, nationalism, and military policy; how “private” sexual relations are intimately related to international politics. Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women’s Lives* (London: Pandora Press, 1988); *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); *Maneuvers: International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).
 - 11 Katharine H. S. Moon, “Resurrecting Prostitutes and Overturning Treaties: Gender Politics in the ‘Anti-American’ Movement in South Korea,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, 1 (2007): 129–57.
 - 12 Christian women were relatively well educated and were very active in the Independence Movement during the colonial period. They were also interested in the issues of equality and human rights during the military dictatorship. Chung Hee-Jin, “Chugōya sanūn yōsōngdūrūi ingwōn” [“Women’s Human Rights, Who Can be Alive When Dead”], in *Han’guk Yōsōng In’gwōn Undongsa* [History of Korean Women’s Human Rights Movements], 301–58 (Seoul: Hanul Academy, 1999), 314.
 - 13 *Kisaeng* were female traditional entertainers under the Yi dynasty (1392–1910), but *Kisaeng* houses persisted into the colonial period (1910–45) and later as brothels with a cultural veneer.

- 14 *Chōngsindae* ("Volunteer Corps") were nonvoluntary drafts of women instituted by Japan in the final days of the Second World War to get workers for military industries. Although this was primarily for factories, some of these women ended up as comfort women (*Wianbu*, Japanese military sexual slavery).
- 15 Yun Chung-Ok, interview by Na-Young Lee, December, 2012.
- 16 Yoon Young-Ae, interview by Na-Young Lee, July, 2012.
- 17 C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 372–3.
- 18 Kim Hak-Soon became the first woman to testify publicly about her experience as a comfort woman in August 1991. She and two other women later filed a lawsuit in Tokyo against the Japanese government.
- 19 Nicola A. Johns, "Mainstreaming Gender: South Korean Women's Civic Alliances and Institutional Strategies," PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2003, 110.
- 20 Tammy E. Kim, "Performing Social Reparation: 'Comfort Women' and the Path to Political Forgiveness," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16, 2 (2006): 225.
- 21 Kim, "Performing Social Reparation," 226.
- 22 Chung Chin-Sung, "Chōnhu chōriwa chōngsindae munje" ["Post-war Readjustment and Comfort Women Issue"], *Hyōndaesa Yōngu* [Studies on Modern History] 7 (1995): 179–91, 180.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Yeong-Ae Yamashita, "Revisiting the 'Comfort Women': Moving beyond Nationalism," in *Transforming Japan: How Feminism and Diversity are Making a Difference*, ed. Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow (New York: Feminist Press, 2010), 213–27, 215.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Chung Chin-Sung, "Chōnhu chōriwa chōngsindae munje" ["Post-war Readjustment and Comfort Women Issue"], *Hyōndaesa Yōngu* [Studies on Modern History] 7 (1995): 181.
- 27 Mariko Izumi, "Asian-Japanese: State Apology, National Ethos, and the 'Comfort Women' Reparation Debate in Japan," *Communication Studies* 62, 5 (2011): 473–90, 486.
- 28 Han'guk Chōngsindae Munje Taech'aek Wiwōnhoe and Han'guk Chōngsindae Yeonguho [The Korean Council and the Research Center], *Korean Military Comfort Women Who Were Forcefully Conscripted 2* (Seoul: Hanul Academy, 1997), 84.
- 29 Ibid., 87.
- 30 Kim Bok-Dong was first taken to Guangdong, China, and then to various places where the Japanese army was stationed, including Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.
- 31 Ibid., 90–1.
- 32 Yoon Mi-Hyang, *Twenty Years of Wednesdays* (Seoul: Woongjin Junior, 2010), 110.
- 33 Yun Chung-Ok, interview by Na-Young Lee, 2013.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 *Hyōnhaet'an* is the name of the sea between Korea and Japan.
- 37 Han'guk Chōngsindae Munje Taech'aek Wiwōnhoe 20nyonsa P'yōnch'an Wiwōnhoe [Book Editing Team of the 20th Anniversary of the Korean Council], *Han'guk Chōngsindae Munje Taech'aek Wiwōnhoe 20nyonsa* [The 20th Anniversary of the Korean Council] (Seoul: Hanul, 2014), 30.
- 38 Yun Chung-Ok, interview by Na-Young Lee, 2013.

- 39 Chi Eun-Hee, interview by Na-Young Lee, 2015.
- 40 Shin Hei-Soo, interview by Na-Young Lee, 2015.
- 41 The *Yusin* period began when President Park Chung Hee declared a State of Emergency in 1972 and gave himself expanded powers. It lasted until his assassination by Kim Jae-kyu, the head of the Korean CIA, in 1979.
- 42 Iris M. Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 43 *Halmöni* (grandmother) is used to respectfully refer to an older woman.
- 44 Yun Chung-Ok, interview by Na-Young Lee, 2013.
- 45 When Yoon was asked about what makes her work rewarding, she responded: "In 2004, several survivors and I were invited by a university in the US, and a student asked, 'Halmöni, how were you able to come out to the public after going through such a nightmarish experience?' And the *halmöni* pointed me out saying, 'that young woman taught me that I did not do anything shameful.' That was my reward" (Yoon Mi-Hyang, interview by Na-Young Lee, 2013).
- 46 Shin Hei-Soo, interview by Na-Young Lee, 2015.
- 47 Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012).
- 48 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 1–3.
- 49 Young, *Responsibility for Justice*.
- 50 Han'guk Chöngsindae Munje Taech'aek Wiwönhoe [The Korean Council], "Butterfly Fund" (2010), https://www.womenandwar.net/contents/board/normal/normalView.nx?page_str_menu=0406&action_flag=&search_field=&search_word=&page_no=1&bbs_seq=8381&passwd=&board_type=&board_title=&grade=&title=&secret=&user_nm=&attach_nm=®_dt=&thumbnail=&content=
- 51 Carol Giacomo, "Statue Honoring 'Comfort Women' Faces Uncertain Fates," *New York Times*, January 7, 2016.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Sang-Hun Choe, "Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime 'Comfort Women,'" *New York Times*, December 29, 2015.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Holly Yan, K. J. Kwon, Junko Ogura, and A. P. Tiffany, "South Korea, Japan Reach Agreement on 'Comfort Women,'" CNN, December 29, 2015.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Jonathan Soble and Sang-Hun Choe, "South Korea and Japanese Leaders Feel Backlash from Comfort Women Deal," *New York Times*, December 29, 2015.
- 58 The *Wall Street Journal* reported: "50.7% of the South Korean public felt the deal was unsatisfactory" (Alastair Gale, "Japan-South Korea 'Comfort Women' Deal Faces Backlash in Seoul," *Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 2016.)