

# The ‘Comfort Women’ Never Left

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Governments in Japan and South Korea are repeating past mistakes, and women surrounding U.S. military bases are suffering the consequences.

It’s the same story repeated time and time again, in pop culture, war stories, and newsreels. A young, new soldier of upstanding character, fresh off the boat on their first deployment, is greeted by hordes of scantily clad women. For only a few dollars, the night could be quite entertaining. What’s a young boy to do?

We never seem to examine the women in these stories, how they reached this path, why they are in search of foreign currency, and what their lives are like beyond the few hours wrapped in a soldier’s arms. We seem to root against them and the vices they present. We see them represented in campaign ads like those during World War II telling men to protect themselves against the STDs and other consequences that these women present.

It was not until recently that stories of these women began to filter into U.S. media:

stories of former prostitutes suing the South Korean government, being forced to have sex with men on military bases in exchange for their foreign money, being treated as indentured servants at ‘juicy bars’, and of having their bodies sold to the U.S. military in exchange for positive relations.

But these stories come in excerpts. Indeed, it was not until an exposé by Politico was released in November of 2015 that we seemed to get a glimpse into this world. What is happening to the women in ‘camp towns’ around these military bases, what is the government’s involvement, and what is the responsibility of the U.S. military?

Prostitution in wartime is nothing new. During the 1940s, Japan made ‘comfort women’ commonplace. Women, many of them from South Korea, suffered under slavery-like conditions to please military men. While the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released an apology in 1991 to South Korea, the issue still rubs a raw nerve. However, the South Korean government developed a similar economy around military bases. “Camptowns” that have developed around the bases depend entirely on the U.S. military



Source: NYdailynews

economy as according to Na Young Lee at Feminist Studies, they center on selling sex to soldiers.

While there were attempts to control these practices in Japan, most local ordinances cracked down on the prostitutes themselves, rather than the soldiers. In 1946, according to Sarah Kovner in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, General MacArthur directed the Japanese government to “abrogate all laws that permitted licensed prostitution... But MacArthur’s decree did not close the market in sexual services, nor did it free women from all forms of debt bondage. It merely deregulated the market.” With Japan’s economy suffering and an influx of foreign currency to be gained from continuing to engage in prostitution, quitting the practice was not entirely appealing. In South Korea, we see the same desire for foreign currency. As outlined by Choe San-Hun at *The New York Times*, even though the country has argued with Japan over the responsibility it bears for “one of the ugliest chapters in its war-time history,” there are now former South Korean prostitutes accusing their former government leaders of encouraging them or forcing them to have sex with American soldiers who protected the country against North Korea. While the South Korean government is quick to criticize Japan for its use of slav-

proval for establishing UN comfort stations in return for the Allied Forces’ toil...The authorities are asking citizens to give much cooperation in coming days.” According to Vine, by 1958, there were 300,000 sex workers in the country. By 1965, 85% of GIs surveyed reported they had ‘been with’ or ‘been out with’ a prostitute. One woman, Kim Ae-ran, said in a recent interview to *The New York Times*, “Our government was one big pimp for the U.S. military.”

In November of last year, Stephen Evans reported for the BBC that the women talked of a system of official and compulsory check-ups on their sexual health. “It was complicit, and facilitated a system which now leaves them in poverty.”

While the women claim they were not made to work as sexual slaves, their situations may reveal otherwise. One woman claimed, “I accepted a job, and went to an establishment. As soon as I arrived I ran away. I ended up getting caught by the club owner and my club owner sold me off to another establishment and it was there that I took my first customer.”

As Evans claims, the South Korean government can say that by setting up clinics it was not complicit

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ery in “camptowns” and comfort stations, their own system offered women extremely little choice. According to David Vine of *Politico*, the arrangements between the U.S. government and South Korea’s were fully formalized after WWII. The U.S. began to use comfort stations originally used by the Japanese, and the idea was pushed even further during the Korean War. He quotes the *Pusan Daily*, “The municipal authorities have already issued the ap-

in facilitating prostitution, but was trying to protect the women involved. However the fact that women who tried to run were caught and sold tells a different story. Dr. Kathy Moon of the Brookings Institute, says that unlike the ‘comfort women’ of WWII who were forced to become sex slaves by the Japanese military, many of these women made a decision to work as prostitutes, but quickly became trapped. Moon explained, “Once these women were there,

they couldn't get out easily. They were raped continuously – raped by the manager.”

And it is hard to deny the government's culpability. As mentioned in Choe Sang-Hun's article, "...Parliamentary hearings also suggest that at least some South Korean leaders viewed prostitution as something of a necessity. In one exchange in 1960, two lawmakers urged the government to train a supply of prostitutes to meet what one called the 'natural needs' of allied soldiers and prevent them from spending their dollars in Japan instead of South Korea.”

In an effort to meet these 'natural needs,' South Korea has issued a special type of visa to attract women into the country. According to Vine, since the mid-1990s the economic growth in South Korea allowed some of the women to escape the "camp-town" bars and clubs, and the government sought a replacement. The creation of the E-6 'entertainment' visa has allowed 'promoters' to import women, mainly from the Philippines and the former Soviet Union. The visa requires an HIV test, and subsequent venereal disease tests every three months. But the women who apply for the visas, according to Vine and Clarie Lee at The Korea Herald, do not believe they are coming to work in the sex industry. While the women do sign a contract in their home country, as Vine argues, "They often end up in different clubs and working for a lower salary than promised...In [clubs] indebtedness and psychological coercion force the women into sex... Leaving... would subject them to immediate arrest, fines, imprisonment or deportation by the South Korean state and potentially violent retribution from those to whom they are indebted.”

The GIs are not blind to this system. In 2002, as discussed by Vine, a Cleveland television station had reported on how the military police officers were protecting the bars. One soldier said, "You know

something is wrong when the girls are asking you to buy them bread. They can't leave the clubs. They barely feed them.”

In the wake of research and reports on the conditions of these clubs and bars, the South Korea government did begin a crackdown, of sorts. In 2004, the South Korean government outlawed prostitution. According to Jeff Schogol in Stars and Stripes, by 2006 the punishment for patronizing a prostitute included repercussions including up to a year in prison, forfeiture of pay and dishonorable discharge. Sara Mendelson, author of a report on human trafficking and peacekeeping in the Balkans, stated that the military needed to spread the word in order for the policy to be effective. "The issue is not whether activists or experts in Washington D.C. know about it, it's whether the soldier in the field understands; it's whether the command in the field understands that this is a change from the previous regulation in the Manual for Courts-Martial.”

However, as military personnel have stated, blacklists of places of where not to go, tend to just give troops ideas of the best places to go.

And the bars are simply getting more creative. As Jon Rabiuff and Hwang Hae-rym reported in Stars and Stripes, 'juicy bars' have become more or less the norm in camptowns. One girl, Jenny, said, "If you don't sell a lot of drinks, [the bar owners] are going to push you to go out with a customer to make money...I was shocked the first night I worked there.”

Because many of the girls who come on E-6 visas aren't exactly informed of what their job will entail. One woman named Lori said that she "thought that we really have to sing because we sign a contract as a singer. I talked with some girls and said 'I really can't take it anymore. I don't want to go, I don't want to go with any guy.'”

The South Korean government officially licenses many of these 'juicy bars'. According to Stars and Stripes, "About 200 'entertainment establishments' get tax breaks through the Tourism Promotion Act on the condition they cater primarily to foreigners." There are advocacy groups that attempt to help the girls, a prominent one being My Sister's Place. Yu Young-nim, the director, said, "Three governments are to be blamed for their irresponsibility. The Philippine government for not working hard to create job opportunities for its poor people, the Korean government for not managing and controlling jobs [given to immigrants] and the U.S. government for neglecting its responsibility to supervise its soldiers and for not helping these victims."

But until any action on behalf of the government is taken, the girls are seemingly stuck. If they leave the club, they could be subject to arrest and deportation. According to Vine, the promoters and club owners often hold on to the women's passports. Those who marry GIs don't often fare much better.

ignore the attempts of commanders such as General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, as mentioned by The Washington Post's Dan Lamothe, who has worked to institute the policy of banning patronizing prostitutes with his troops, but has also attempted to stop fraternization at 'juicy bars', acknowledging that the economies of the establishments are linked to prostitution and human trafficking.

It would also be wrong to regard the U.S. military as blameless. There is a linked history with the Japanese and Korean governments to set up 'comfort stations,' as well proliferating cultural views of the women. As reported by The Washington Post's Mary Jordan, in 1995, after the rape of a 12 year old Okinawan girl, three U.S. servicemen were arrested. Instead of expressing remorse over the actions of his men, however, the admiral who commanded American forces in the Pacific said that the men were 'stupid' because, according to Jordan, "they could have hired a prostitute for what they paid for the rental car used to abduct the girl."

The current problem is one that lies within the national governments. Military personnel are told that they are not allowed to buy sex, but then planted in an environment filled with clubs and bars and a government eager for their money and telling them to participate.

Out of those who have attempted to go and live with a GI boyfriend, approximately 90% have been abandoned. It is estimated that out of those who are married, 80% end in divorce. "In fact, researchers and law enforcement officers suggest that most Korean women working in massage parlors were once married to GIs."

It would be wrong to place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the military. After all, this would

Yet, only blaming the US military also ignores the actions of other governments. In 2013, the mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, suggested that U.S. service members should consider soliciting prostitutes. Hashimoto, during a press conference, stated, "There are places where people can legally release their sexual energy in Japan. Unless they make use of these facilities, it will be difficult to control the sexual energies of the wild Marines."

According to International Business Times, 4% of South Korea's annual GDP comes from sex trade and prostitution. That's the size of the fishing and agriculture industries combined. According to the Korean Feminist Association, 1 out of every 25 women in the country is selling her body for sex.

The current problem is one that lies within the national governments. Military personnel are told that they are not allowed to buy sex, but then planted in an environment filled with clubs and bars and a government eager for their money and telling them to participate. Are military personnel completely lacking in self-control? No. They are set up to perpetuate the issue.

The South Korean government, in particular, can have success in preventing prostitution when it wants to. According to International Business Times, in 2006, the Ministry for Gender Equality offered cash incentives to companies whose male employees did not buy sex at office parties or business trips. The government can act when it wants to. But the desire for foreign currency from the camptowns and close relationships with the US military is seemingly overwhelming their desire to take care of the women in the camptowns.

## So What Should be Done?

To start, the policy on E-6 visas needs to be changed. If they can not leave for fear of deportation, even if mistreated or abused, they are essentially indentured servants to the clubs. The girls need more control upon entering the country. Some women, including Tessa Aquino, interviewed for The Korea Herald, were arrested on sex trade charges and then held for deportation when they tried running away from the club. While she was eventually allowed to stay, her case is not unique. Park Mi-hyung, head of the International Organization for Migration's Seoul office, argues that there should be a debate about

the continued existence of the E-6 visa in the face of the frequently reported cases related to human sex trafficking. "What we need is a system where all foreign workers can arrive and work in Korea with adequate legal protection, where they can earn their wages without being exploited during their stay here."

In addition, we need to consider the decriminalization of prostitution. Currently, military police protect the 'juicy bars' without paying heed to the girls that work there. Under a system of decriminalization, the act of buying sex would still be illegal, while the act of selling it would not. Therefore, the girls could be protected while those who abuse the system would be punished. Such a system has done well in countries such as Thailand. According to Wiwat Rojanapithayakorn in the Journal of Health Management, such a system punishes the sex business owners, pimps, costumers and/or parents of sex workers, but not the sex workers themselves. It gives the sex workers agency, by making them identifiable victims to the government instead of pushing them to the shadows of an illegal marketplace.

In order for decriminalization to be truly effective, some sort of cultural shift must take place within the governments of South Korea and Japan. For many, many years these countries have looked down upon prostitutes, but at the same time have praised those who worked well with GIs. As Kim Ae-Ran said, "They urged us to sell as much as possible to the GIs, praising us as 'dollar-earning patriots.'"

These governments cannot have it both ways. They cannot both aid the sex industry and condemn it at the same time. They cannot have visas that allow trafficking and then deport the women that try to save themselves from the industry. We must take action to ensure these women are treated with decency and humanity.