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Toward Resolution of the Comfort Women Issue—The 1000th Wednesday Protest in Seoul and Japanese Intransigence

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Translated by A. Tawara, N. Tajima and O. Schaefer

Japanese original text [here](#).

On August 1991, Korean former “comfort women,” (women who were forced to serve as sex workers for the Imperial Japanese Army) including Kim Hak-sun, the first to speak publically about her experience, began to raise their voices. Before then, the issue had only been discussed quietly in postwar Japanese society. Previous testimonies had come from soldiers, partly in the form of romanticized memoirs of their time spent with the women.

One important new witness is Mizuki Shigeru, a leading Japanese manga artist, who provided detailed descriptions of a “comfort station,” that is, a military brothel, in his book “*Soin Gyokusai Seyo* [All of You Shall Die for Honor]” (14-15.) based on his personal wartime experience. In his afterword he wrote, “I can’t help but feel irrational resentment when I write war chronicles. Maybe the spirits of the war dead make me feel that way.” There Mizuki told of a soldier who shouted, “Thirty seconds for each!” and another who said, looking at the long queue in front of the station, “Hey Sis, about 70 more to go. Be patient.” This important historical testimony reveals how the Japanese army set up comfort stations in the very front lines at that time. (See Matthew Penney, [War and Japan: The Non-Fiction Manga of Mizuki Shigeru](#))

The existence of comfort women, a suppressed issue that had almost been forgotten in postwar Japan, came to the fore in 1991. That was when the surviving comfort women started to talk about their own experiences. Women who were forced into providing sexual services started making people aware that the “comfort women” system had been nothing but sexual slavery. Until then, discussion of the issue had been considered taboo in Korea, and many victims had been unable to talk about it at all, even with their families.

In January 1991, some of Korea’s former comfort women and their supporters started a protest march in the bustling lunch-hour street in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. They had only one demand: acknowledgment of the crime in the form of an apology from the Japanese government to each and every one of the former comfort women. The apology — meant to make the Japanese public widely aware of the harm done to these women as a historical fact — includes a vow to never repeat the same mistake, and to acknowledge that the issue has not been settled legally.

Every week for the past 20 years, 1,000 times now since the first demonstration, they have continued the Wednesday protest. On December 14, 2011, the group marked its 1000th protest. Simultaneous protests were also held in several places in Japan, and were attacked relentlessly by vocal opponents.

[Video](#) of the event and unveiling of the monument with English subtitles and Korean original.

In Osaka, some shouted “Liars!” at the protesting women despite the fact that the Japanese government had long since acknowledged the existence of “comfort stations” and “comfort women” based on official wartime documents. A high school girl responded to the shouts by saying, “I wish it were a lie.” Don’t we all. More than anyone, the victims no doubt strongly wish that their gruesome experiences were just a nightmare.

On the 1000th day in Seoul, KwonHae-Hyo, the M.C. of the event, put it this way: “*The halmeonideul* [respected “elderly women”] wish that they would not need to hold the Wednesday protest anymore after next week.”

On that day three actresses conveyed the feelings of the Harumoni in their dramatic reading of a Korean translation of this monologue by the American writer Eve Ensler.

Courtesy of Eve Ensler and V-Day

Each year in conjunction with the V-Day Spotlight, Eve pens a new monologue. This is her monologue, written in 2006 in conjunction with V-Day’s sponsorship of a comfort women speaking tour in the United States. It is based on the testimonies of the ‘Comfort Women.’

Say It

By Eve Ensler

Our stories only exist inside our heads

Inside our ravaged bodies

Inside a time and space of war

And emptiness

There is no paper trail

Nothing official on the books

Only conscience

Only this.

What we were promised:

That I would save my father if I went with them



The comfort woman statue outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul is dressed according to the weather by citizens. Photo by Shin So-young.

That I would find a job
 That it was better there
 That I would serve the country
 What we found:
 No mountains
 No trees
 No water
 Yellow sand
 A desert
 A warehouse full of tears
 Thousands of worried girls
 My braid cut against my will
 No time to wear panties
 What we were forced to do:
 Change our names
 Wear one piece dresses with
 A button that opened easily
 50 Japanese soldiers a day
 Sometimes there would be a ship of them
 Strange barbaric things
 Do it even when we bleed
 There were so many
 Some wouldn't take off their clothes
 Just took out their penis
 So many men I couldn't walk
 I couldn't stretch my legs
 I couldn't bend

I couldn't.

What they did to us over and over:

Cursed

Spanked

Tore bloody inside out

Sterilized

Drugged

Slapped

Punched

Raped.

What we saw:

A girl drinking chemicals in the bathroom

A girl killed by a bomb

A girl beaten with a rifle over and over

A girl's malnourished body dumped in the river

To drown.

What we weren't allowed to do:

Wash ourselves

Go to the doctor

Use a condom

Run away

Keep my baby

Ask him to stop.

What we caught:

Malaria

Syphilis

Gonorrhea

Stillbirths

Tuberculosis

Heart disease

Nervous breakdowns

Hypochondria

What we were fed:

Rice

Miso soup

Turnip pickle

Rice

Miso Soup

Turnip Pickle

Rice Rice Rice

What we became:

Ruined

Tools

Infertile

Holes

Bloody

Meat

Exiled

Silenced

Alone

What we were left with:

Nothing

A shocked father who never recovered

And died.

No wages

Hatred of Men

No children

No house

A space where a uterus once was

Booze

Smoking

Guilt

Shame

What we got called:

Ianfu--Comfort Women

Shugyofu--Women Of Indecent Occupation

What we felt:

My chest still trembles

What got taken:

The springtime

My life

What we are:

68

79

84

93

Blind

Slow

Ready

Outside the Japanese Embassy every Wednesday

No longer afraid

What we want:

Now soon

Before we're gone

And our stories leave this world,

Leave our heads

Japanese government

Say it

Please.

We are sorry, Comfort Women

Say it to me

We are sorry to me

We are sorry to me

To me

To me

To me

Say it.

Say sorry

Say we are sorry

Say Me

See Me

Say it

Sorry.

This [video](#) prepared by Okano Yano documents the December 14, 2011 commemoration of the 1000th Wednesday demonstration before the Japanese embassy in Seoul and the unveiling of the statue (Korean and Japanese text).

This [video](#) is a presentation of a demonstration by the Women's Action Network, Tokyo in support of the comfort women commemoration and analyzing the issues. (Video in Japanese with English text.)

Okano Yayo, a specialist in Western political philosophy and modern political theory, teaches in the Graduate School of Global Studies at Doshisha University. Her most recent book is Justice Rooted in an Ethics of Care: Reconceptualizing Equality (in Japanese).

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