

COMFORT WOMEN

“In Search for Understanding”

Reflection Essay

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Introduction

The Gender and Peace Studies course at the University for Peace focuses on how gender is intricately intertwined in every aspect of our lives. Throughout the course we have discussed the complex definition of “gender” and its relationship with family, science, war, human trafficking and prostitution, as well as religion. In entering this course, I had little understanding of the large role gender played in our lives. However, as I found myself seeking understanding on different global issues involving women, I realized that the only way for me to have a true understanding of how and why these acts of violence and oppression continue to happen in today’s society was to seek out the underlying premise of these issues, which was gender. One is the “comfort women” issue, which I have become very involved in as an active volunteer after a visit to the House of Sharing, a museum dedicated to sexual slavery, and residence to former “comfort women”. Only when I have gained a deeper understanding of gender’s role in the world, will I feel that I am able to help in searching for ways to resolve these atrocities.

“Comfort Women” Issue

During the second Sino-Japan war, the Japanese invaded the Chinese capital of Nanking in 1937. Now known as the “Rape of Nanking”, the Japanese inflicted a mass amount of violence as they looted, set fire and brutally attacked and raped the people of Nanking. Officials of the Japanese military were nervous that if acts like this continued, international attention would be brought and that they would be met with an increased defense as they continued to work their way through South East Asia. This incident was the catalyst which ignited the expansion of the comfort station system (Rosello.Pg 160), initially set up in 1932 with official documents stating Shanghai as the first station. The reasoning for this was to raise morale among troops, maintain discipline, and the prevention of violence of looting, arson, rape, STD’s, and espionage. (Yoshiaki. Pg 56) It is estimated that 50,000 to 200,000 women from more than nine countries in South East Asia were persuaded, tricked, and abducted into this system of military

sexual slavery, with the predominant number coming from the colonized country of Korea. These women ranged in age from about 11 to 30 years old and were forced to service up to 60 men a day.

Though these violent incidents against women happened over 60 years ago, it took almost 50 years for them to come to light. The perpetrators, victims, and witnesses all stayed silent for years, even when documented evidence was right in front of them. Visitors to the House of Sharing find themselves numbed by the violence committed against these women, and are forced to ask; how is it that an act to this magnitude could go unvoiced for so long? It is this question that I would like to evaluate upon completing this course.

Understanding

First, I would like to look at the “comfort women” and the circumstances that have inhibited them from speaking out about the injustices set upon them. Korean history and tradition are based on the ideas of Confucianism, which is based on the relationship of Heaven and earth. The balanced relationship of the two is a yin and yang, where yin is expressed to be dark, **earthly**, and receptive representing the female (inferior) and yang expressed through light, active, strong, and **heavenly** representing the male (superior). Confucianism sees this relationship as the creation of family, which is deemed sacred. The women’s position is viewed to be subordinate and subject to their father as a daughter, to their husband as a wife, and to their son. (Weisner-Hanks. Pg 115) These women in a Confucian and patriarchal society, prior to their experiences, were seen as extensions of their fathers and viewed their futures as a wife and mother. Yet these dreams of a bright future were torn away from them by these acts of violence, their highly valued chastity stolen. Due to the idea of their sexuality, belonging to their father and then their husbands, many felt immense “shame.” For these women (girls at the time) to speak of these events, would not only bring shame on them, but their families. Many of those who did survive found it difficult to enter into relationships, both from the terror that was inflicted upon them and for the fear of their experiences being known. Of the women who did marry, many found themselves victims of domestic

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