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A Comfort Women Redress Movement without Comfort Women

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“I was tricked and used. While the bear performs the tricks, the people take the money. For thirty years, I have been performing tricks. And that money has been taken by other people.”
 – Yi Yong-su, second press conference held on May 25, 2020¹

“속이고 이용하고. 재주는 곰이 부리고 돈은 몇 사람이 받아먹었습니다. 저는 30 년 동안 재주 넘었습니다. 그 돈은 몇 사람이 받아먹었습니다.”
 – 이용수 할머니, 2020 년 5 월 25 일 제 2 차 기자회견

Comparing herself to a bear performing tricks, former comfort woman Yi Yong-su testified to the public on May 25, 2020 regarding the exploitation of her and her fellow former comfort women by Yun Mi-hyang, former head of the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter referred to as the Korean Council). Since its founding in 1990, the Korean non-governmental organization has been the main advocate for former *wianbu* (위안부) or comfort women, a euphemism for the tens of thousands of women, the majority of whom were Korean, who were forcibly enslaved by the Japanese military from the early 1930s until 1945 to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers. From weekly protests every Wednesday outside of the Japanese embassy in Seoul to establishing comfort woman statues or “statues of peace” across the globe, the Korean Council has represented these women’s voices in a world that has often ignored and eventually forgotten them. The Korean Council claims its mission is to achieve “just resolution of the issue” and the “restoration of victims’ dignity and human rights.”² However, cracks began to appear in what had hitherto been a justice-seeking, dignity-upholding organizational image as former comfort woman Yi Yong-su criticized former head Yun Mi-hyang for exploiting sympathetic public sentiment surrounding the cause for her own personal material and political gain.³ Yi Yong-su described her and her fellow former comfort women as essentially tools used by the Korean Council. In doing so, she cast doubt on the Korean Council’s motivations and legitimacy as their advocate and ally.

In light of former comfort woman Yi Yong-su’s outcry and criticism against the Korean Council, a critical reconsideration and questioning of the Korean Council’s role as advocate is necessary, especially given its hitherto unquestioned relationship with the former comfort women in South Korea and also internationally. What is the relationship between the Korean Council and the former comfort women beyond this assumed, unquestioned relationship and the official image projected by the Korean Council? How does the Korean Council represent the survivors and the comfort women issue? I argue that the Korean Council has superseded the survivors’ individual wishes and capitalized on the comfort women issue to further their own idea of the movement, thus silencing and revictimizing the former comfort women again and resulting in a comfort women redress movement without comfort women.

After former comfort woman Kim Hak-sun publicly testified about her experiences in 1991 and raised the issue for the first time, a coalition of organizations supporting the comfort

¹ “이용수 할머니 ‘위안부 피해 할머니들 팔아먹어’ (2 차 기자회견 풀영상) [Grandmother Yi Yong-su ‘Exploit the Elderly Comfort Women Victims’ (Full Video of Second Press Conference)],” *YTN*, May 25, 2020. Throughout this essay, all quotations from Korean language sources are my own translations.

² “About Us,” The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), accessed April 13, 2021, <https://womenandwar.net/kr/about-us/>.

³ Justin McCurry, “‘Comfort Women’ Crisis: Campaign over Wartime Sexual Slavery Hit by Financial Scandal,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2020.

women began to form and grow into what would become an international movement. However, with the rapidly expanding movement came criticism of the redress movement leaders by several scholars regarding the right to self-determination (or lack thereof) of former comfort women. By examining the responses of redress movement groups to the Asian Women's Fund (AWF), a public-private fund set up by the Japanese government in 1995 to offer compensation to the former comfort women, Sarah Soh demonstrates how redress movement leadership in several countries, including South Korea, silenced dissident survivor voices for the sake of presenting a united national front against Japan.⁴ The AWF was met by severe backlash from several redress movement groups, which criticized the Japanese government for avoiding legal responsibility of establishing and operating the comfort women system. Soh questions whether the former comfort women are being "victimized anew" by the redress movement leadership in these countries as survivors were not allowed to exercise their right to self-determination regarding the AWF offer of compensation.⁵ By examining South Korean media, Hyunah Yang, likewise, illustrates parallel silencing and marginalization of the survivors but in relation to how South Korean nationalist discourse frames the comfort women issue in ways that redeploy patriarchal norms of female sexuality.⁶ I aim to further explore this question of silencing and misrepresentation that Soh and Yang illustrate by examining the relationship between the Korean Council and the survivors as exhibited through the May 2020 controversy. In doing so, I elucidate how the Korean Council is silencing dissident survivor voices to establish and further their own idea of the movement as an international women's and human rights movement. While these stories belong to the former comfort women, they are mediated through and appropriated by other actors, like the Korean Council, in ways that end up silencing the former comfort women and separating them from their own stories.

In order to evaluate the Korean Council's relationship with and representation of the former comfort women, I first examine the Korean Council's history since its inception in 1990 by exploring archives of the Council's past activities and publications, academic and non-academic. In doing so, I seek to understand how the Korean Council's motivations and stakes in pursuing justice for these women have shifted over time and how it has historically engaged with survivors' personal voices and pursuits of closure and healing. I then investigate specifically the May 2020 controversy and the various stances of and responses by both former comfort woman Yi Yong-su and the Korean Council by examining news articles, released public statements, and press conferences in relation to the controversy. In exploring and understanding the various stances and responses of both sides during this most recent conflict, I attempt to reveal the underlying dynamic between the Korean Council and the former comfort women and how that dynamic is silencing and impeding former comfort women from obtaining closure and resolution. Lastly, I explore the Korean public's response to the controversy as well by examining public comments on news articles and press conference videos. Through an examination of the Korean Council's relationship with the former comfort women, I hope to shed light on the relationship between human rights organizations and victims more broadly and elucidate underlying dynamics that led to misrepresentation and exploitation even in such a relationship centered on achieving justice for and restoring the rights of victims.

⁴ Sarah C. Soh, "Human Rights and the 'Comfort Women,'" *Peace Review* 12, no. 1 (2000): 123-129.

⁵ Soh, "Human Rights and the 'Comfort Women,'" 129.

⁶ Hyunah Yang, "Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing," in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 123-139.

Disregarded and Silenced

Just a few months shy of the Korean Council's 30th anniversary, former comfort woman Yi Yong-su revealed a truth that would reverberate across the comfort women redress movement in South Korea. Sporting a patterned blouse and light pink blazer with wisps of grey hair at her temples, Yi held a press conference on May 7, 2020 in a certain tea house in Daegu, South Korea, criticizing the Korean Council and specifically former head Yun Mi-hyang for using her and the other former comfort women.⁷ During the press conference, she questions the Council's use of donations asking where these donations went if they never ended up with the survivors and also calls to cease the weekly Wednesday demonstrations. In a follow-up interview, Yi states that she desires more of an emphasis on education and teaching students and younger generations correct history, which she remarks is not accomplished through the current Wednesday demonstrations: "Even if you come to a Wednesday demonstration, you don't learn a single thing. They chant, 'Apologize! Compensate!' but do they even know for what they are saying these things?"⁸ Additionally, Yi rejects the use of the term, "sex slave," when referring to her or the other former comfort women because it makes her feel incredibly dirty and ashamed. Ultimately, Yi wraps up the interview by affirming that she is not calling for the movement to end but rather a change in their methods; however, she emphasizes that "the Korean Council cannot be fixed but must be disbanded."⁹

Yi's startling press conference immediately sparked mass inquiries into the Korean Council's financial history as well as calls for Yun to step down from her position in the South Korean National Assembly, which she had run for and obtained after leaving the Korean Council. Amidst this charged environment, the Korean Council released a statement the following day on their website and various other social media channels addressing Yi's press conference.¹⁰ After describing how "utterly heartbroken" they were watching the press conference, the Council addresses the most controversial and publicly debated claim Yi made, which was the usage of donations. They recount how they have used funds and donations to aid the women financially, raise awareness in the international community, and support the many avenues of their work.¹¹ Currently, the Korean Council conducts a wide array of activities in addition to simply supporting the survivors such as the weekly Wednesday demonstrations, the international Statue of Peace project, solidarity campaigns to promote awareness of the issue, the

⁷ Jung Seok Kim, "이용수 할머니 '위안부 단체에 이용만 당해, 수요집회 없애야' [Grandmother Yi Yong-su 'Only Used by the Comfort Women Organization, Need to Get Rid of Wednesday Demonstrations']," *Chungang Ilbo*, May 7, 2020.

⁸ "[단독] 이용수 할머니 '윤미향 양심 없다, 왜 위안부 팔아먹나.' [[Exclusive] Grandmother Yi Yong-su 'Yun Mi-hyang Has No Conscience, Why Sell the Comfort Women']," *Chungang Ilbo*, May 14, 2020.

⁹ *Chungang Ilbo*, "Why Sell the Comfort Women."

¹⁰ The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), *A to Z Guide for Just Resolution of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Issue* (Seoul: The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 2020), 164-168, <https://womenandwar.net/kr/a-to-z-guide-for-just-resolution-of-the-japanese-military-sexual-slavery-issue-2020/>. In the year marking its 30th anniversary, the Korean Council published the *A to Z Guide for Just Resolution of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Issue*, an informational booklet on the comfort women issue aimed to help foreign audiences come to a better, more accurate understanding of the comfort women issue and redress movement. Throughout this essay, I often reference this guide as it includes key historical background on the Korean Council and several statements released by the Korean Council in response to the May 2020 controversy.

¹¹ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 164-166.

Butterfly Fund which aids current victims of wartime sexual violence, continued research and education, and even scholarships funded by the Council for students.¹² Additionally, the Korean Council also operates the War and Women's Rights Museum as well as a shelter for survivors who have chosen to live there. In total, the Korean Council runs an expansive enterprise over seven different areas, only one of which directly engages with and supports the survivors. According to the Korean Council's 2019 Fiscal Statement, their budget, comprised mostly of private donations and government subsidies, was around 1.3 billion won (approximately 1.2 million in US dollars) excluding assets.¹³ While a decently sizable budget, the sheer number of different activities the Council is engaged in greatly reduces how much can be used for each activity as well as for the former comfort women's own care and support.

The Korean Council justifies the use of their budget for these various activities in the name of achieving "just resolution" and "restoration of human rights" for the survivors. The Korean Council has insisted upon resolution through a "victim-centered approach" as "the only way to protect the dignity and human rights of all Japanese military 'comfort women' victims."¹⁴ However, a closer examination of the correspondence between the Korean Council and former comfort woman Yi Yong-su during the May 2020 controversy reveals that the Korean Council, despite its identity as an avid advocate for the former comfort women and its pursuit of a victim-centered approach, disregards and silences former comfort woman Yi Yong-su's voice and opinions.¹⁵

Yi comments during her interview that she simply did not know or understand many of the things the Council asked her to do, referencing the first testimony books published by the Korean Council: "Starting in 1993 the Korean Council testimony books came out, and they sold them for 6,500 won each. At that time, I didn't even know what the testimony books were."¹⁶ Given these comments and Yi's criticism of the Wednesday demonstration, some of the Korean Council's activities done in the name of the former comfort women do not actually reflect and follow the former comfort women's wishes. With the exception of the Butterfly Fund, which was founded by former comfort women Kim Pok-tong and Kil Wŏn-ok, the majority of the Council's other activities are creations of the Korean Council.

After detailing their history and financial campaigns, the Korean Council continues their statement by affectionately recalling its close familial-like bond with Yi Yong-su but, in doing so, implies that Yi Yong-su's thought out and planned outcry against the Council was but a consequence of "family conflicts." The Korean Council repeatedly mentions their thirty-year bond with the survivors that "is thicker than blood" and describes how despite the Japanese government's denial of the issue, they were able to survive "because of each other, through our shared rage, sorrow, laughter, and dreams for a hopeful future" and ultimately grow into "one

¹² "Activities," The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), accessed April 14, 2021, <https://womenandwar.net/kr/activities/>.

¹³ "2019 년도 결산 재무제표 [Financial Statements for Fiscal Year 2019]," The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), accessed April 13, 2021, <https://womenandwar.net/kr/account/?pageid=4&mod=document&uid=670>.

¹⁴ "The Korean Council Statement Calling for Immediate Discardment of Moon Hee-Sang Proposal and Resolution of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Issue through Principles of Victim-Centered Approach," The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), accessed April 25, 2021, <https://womenandwar.net/kr/the-korean-council-statement-calling-for-immediate-discardment-of-moon-hee-sang-proposal-and-resolution-of-the-japanese-military-sexual-slavery-issue-through-principles-of-victim-centered-approach/>.

¹⁵ A timeline of events during the May 2020 controversy is included on page 16.

¹⁶ *Chungang Ilbo*, "Why Sell the Comfort Women."

tight-knit family.”¹⁷ They also address Yi Yong-su’s relationship with former head Yun and state that Yi “has considered [Yun Mi-hyang] a daughter and close colleague of 29 years” ever since she called the Korean Council’s comfort women hotline in 1992, which was established a year after Kim Hak-sun’s testimony.¹⁸ In light of such a deep, familial daughter-mother-like relationship, the Council writes:

When [Yun] decided to resign as Chair of Board at the Korean Council on March 20 and run for office, we can only imagine the whirlwind of joy, sorrow, and disappointment [Yi] must have felt in sending away a cherished family member. This news came at a difficult time when the survivors, who have long led the movement with [Yi], were passing away one by one. The Korean Council sees and shares [Yi’s] pain and vow[s] not to take this lightly.¹⁹

To the Korean Council, the criticisms Yi outlined in her press conference are a reflection of her complex emotions from losing “a cherished family member,” which they themselves see and share in as well. However, in describing Yi in this way and painting her relationship with Yun as deeply familial and affectionate, the Korean Council minimizes Yi’s legitimacy and agency and the weight of her remarks and criticisms by reducing her to a bereaved and grieving woman who is going through a difficult time because of the loss of both a daughter-like figure and fellow former comfort women. In contrast, Yi shares that before holding the press conference, she seriously thought about it for an entire year, indicating that her public announcement of the Council’s misdeeds were much more than simply an overflow of her feelings but planned and thought out.²⁰ The Korean Council later mentions in the press conference they held several days later that, as with any family, “there will definitely be conflicts between family members but there will also be many joys...that is how we have maintained 30 years.”²¹ Thus, to follow the Council’s terminology and perspective, Yi Yong-su’s criticisms are but a normal and expected “family conflict” among a tight-knit family of over thirty years such as theirs, thus minimizing her agency in deciding to speak up as well as the legitimacy of her claims.

This first correspondence between the Korean Council and Yi reveals the disparity between the Korean Council’s victim-centered approach and the actual activities the Council pursues as well as the Council’s disregard of Yi’s criticisms as a “family conflict.” Eventually, the Korean Council concludes its statement emphasizing that it will take these recent events as “a serious and valuable opportunity to reflect on the potential shortcomings of the Korean Council and to strengthen our commitment to justly resolve the issue of sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army.”²² However, the Korean Council fails to address Yi Yong-su’s criticisms despite this statement of humble reflection, which I outline next.

As the forerunner of the comfort women redress movement, the Korean Council has called for the Japanese government to redress its historical exploitation of the former comfort women for the past thirty years. Ironically, the Council fails to redress its own flaws and wrongs

¹⁷ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 167.

¹⁸ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 166.

¹⁹ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 166.

²⁰ *Chungang Ilbo*, “Why Sell the Comfort Women.”

²¹ KBS News, “[풀영상] 정의기억연대 후원금 논란 관련 기자회견 / KBS 뉴스(News) [[Full Video] Press Conference about the Korean Council Donation Controversy / KBS News],” YouTube Video, May 11, 2020, <https://youtu.be/o1RjZHtqJDM>.

²² Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 167.

brought up by Yi Yong-su during the May 2020 controversy. After the initial correspondence between Yi Yong-su and the Korean Council and additional press conferences and statements, the Korean Council, Yi Yong-su, and several representatives of local comfort women organizations met at another fateful teahouse in Daegu, South Korea on July 3 to understand and discuss Yi Yong-su's demands. Afterwards, the Korean Council released a statement clearly outlining the demands and desires Yi had mentioned during the meeting, the majority of them repeating her previous criticisms and demands:

1. Change the format of the Wednesday demonstrations.
2. Continue building Statues of Peace.
3. Use the term, Japanese military "comfort woman" victim.
4. Educate the younger generation and encourage exchange between Korean and Japanese youth.²³

However, despite clearly hearing and understanding Yi Yong-su's demands and opinions through this meeting and countless other opportunities, the Korean Council mainly addresses the most publicized criticism, the embezzlement of donations, and ultimately does not heed or implement her recommendations but instead continues existing activities and operations.

Before this meeting but after Yi's first press conference, the Council held its own press conference after releasing an initial response statement.²⁴ Rather than address the various criticisms Yi Yong-su detailed in her press conference, they spend the majority of the time addressing the accusation of embezzlement of donations, a detail that Yi later does not even mention in her demands as outlined above. Furthermore, the Korean Council seemed far more concerned with the media's misrepresentation and distortion of their organization than responding to Yi's claims as evidenced by multiple pointed comments aimed at the reporters throughout the press conference and the near shouting match between the Korean Council and the reporters at the very end. Once again, the presence and voice of Yi Yong-su becomes marginalized in this battle between the Korean Council and the media over the Council's financial spending.

The Korean Council then published two statements for the Japanese Military "Comfort Women" International Solidarity Demonstration on August 12 in which they discuss measures they plan to take based on the recent controversy.²⁵ First, they state that they "are preparing measures to improve the accounting management system," and second, they have created an Introspection and Vision Committee "to organize improvement measures based on inspection and diagnosis of the structure and activities of the Korean Council."²⁶ However, even after meeting with Yi and listing her demands in a public statement, the Korean Council again emphasizes the measures it is taking to address the issue of their donation usage but addresses only one of Yi's demands. The Introspection and Vision Committee consisted of thirteen members, which included experts and representatives from women's rights, human rights, and civic groups, and conducted four meetings over the course of ten days. Over the course of those

²³ "Statements on Prosecution Investigation Results and Lee Yong-soo Halmoni's Press Conference in May 2020," The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), accessed April 15, 2021, <https://womenandwar.net/kr/statements-on-prosecution-investigation-results-and-lee-yong-soo-halmonis-press-conference-in-may-2020/>.

²⁴ KBS News, "Press Conference about the Korean Council Donation Controversy."

²⁵ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 172-178.

²⁶ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 174.

ten days, the committee established seven measures, two of which referred to the Council's accounting management system, one of which addressed Yi Yong-su's demand to educate the younger generation, and the rest of which seeks to either continue existing activities or foster better communication with citizens.²⁷ However, even the one measure that addresses Yi's demand for a greater emphasis on education is largely vague and general and fails to mention the Wednesday demonstrations, which is the context through which Yi Yong-su hopes education will be fostered and encouraged most. The Council mentions that they will "strengthen" research activities that will "academically" support the movement and "work together to develop educational contents and programs for future generations," yet there is no mention of what specific research activities the Korean Council will strengthen and whether the educational content and programs they seek to develop will be utilized in the Wednesday demonstrations.²⁸ Thus, while the Korean Council released a statement detailing their future actions and created a committee to devise measures to achieve these improvements, the Council ultimately fails to mention or reference Yi Yong-su's recommendations in any impactful or concrete way.

The Korean Council not only fails to mention or reference Yi's demands in their statements but goes so far as to ignore or disregard them as evidenced by the Korean Council's continued use of the term, "sexual slave," to refer to the former comfort women and the virtually unchanged format of the weekly Wednesday demonstrations. On May 25, immediately after Yi Yong-su's second press conference which was that same day, the Korean Council published a statement clarifying the various terminology.²⁹ Within this statement, the Korean Council remarks that the term "[s]exual slavery" best captures the actuality of the Japanese military 'comfort women' and is the official term used by the international community and academics.³⁰ The Korean Council further claims that its usage of the term is in no way meant to slander the survivors. However, given the movement is centered around and maintained for former comfort women like Yi Yong-su, should not the Korean Council follow what they say, especially if what the Council is doing in some way shames or degrades the women? Currently, the term continues to be used on their website, in their announcements, and throughout their resources.

Additionally, a comparison between Wednesday demonstrations before and after revealed virtually no change in the content or structure.³¹ First, I examined the 1440th Wednesday demonstration held on May 20, 2020, which was during the controversy but before the Korean Council declared a future action plan, to serve as an example of the "original" format of the demonstrations before Yi's criticisms.³² In general, the demonstrations include a combination of the following elements: a reading of a survivor's testimony, a weekly update or statement of the Council's current activities and plans, a chant consisting of their demands, solidarity statements by other activists or supporters, and a representative song played usually at the beginning or end of the generally half an hour to an hour-long event. I then observed the 1462nd Wednesday demonstration held on October 20, 2020 to see if there were any changes to the format or content

²⁷ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 177-178.

²⁸ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 178.

²⁹ Korean Council, "Statements on Lee Yong-soo's Press Conference."

³⁰ Korean Council, "Statements on Lee Yong-soo's Press Conference."

³¹ Because of COVID-19, the weekly Wednesday demonstrations are now broadcasted live on the Korean Council's YouTube channel so people can still participate virtually. I was therefore able to "attend" and observe these demonstrations.

³² MBC News, "1440 차 일본군 위안부 문제 해결을 위한 정기 수요시위 [LIVE M] 2020년 5월 20일 [1440th Wednesday Demonstration for the Resolution of the Japanese Comfort Women Issue [LIVE M] May 20, 2020]," YouTube Video, May 19, 2020, https://youtu.be/wGykD_ePyNo.

of the event but found that it was the same.³³ Thinking perhaps that possible changes to the demonstrations may not have taken effect by October, I decided to watch one final demonstration which was held on April 13, 2021 and found once again that the structure and content were entirely the same as the demonstration prior to the clarification of Yi's demands and criticisms.³⁴ These examples illustrate that the Korean Council directly disregarded or ignored several of Yi Yong-su's demands.

However, despite this silencing and revictimizing of the former comfort women, much of the Korean public still supports the Korean Council and views it as the former comfort women's allies and caretakers. While there are most definitely opinions criticizing the Korean Council and particularly Yun Mi-hyang, many comments on the news articles and press conference videos support the Korean Council for their thirty years of activities and even criticize Yi Yong-su for being ungrateful and unreasonable. One comment on a news article states, "I support the Korean Council...it is very hard for one organization to work this hard especially for the past 20 years under a conservative government," and another writes, "You [Yi Yong-su] should be thankful to the people who fought for the grandmothers in their stead...you don't know that gratitude."³⁵ Another comment goes so far as to tell Yi Yong-su to "shut her mouth," earning nearly 1,500 likes despite the 750 dislikes it also incurred.³⁶ However, what was even more shocking were the live comments during Yi Yong-su's second press conference deriding her for arriving late and making little sense throughout the press conference.³⁷ These comments criticizing Yi and supporting the Korean Council illustrate a bewildering phenomenon in which the Korean public essentially attacks Yi, the victim, for claiming the Korean Council is exploiting her and her fellow former comfort women. One comment posted after the live recording of Yi's press conference expresses this sense of bewilderment: "What is wrong with the live chat? Are they even Korean? Seeing *halmŏni* [a term which means "grandmother" in Korean that is often used endearingly and respectfully to refer to the former comfort women] cry is so heartbreaking..."³⁸ From the sharp divide in public opinion, it is evident that a large part of the public supports the Korean Council despite Yi Yong-su's strong criticisms against it, revealing even the Korean public's disregard of the former comfort women's opinions and voices.

While Yi Yong-su's cry for justice against the Korean Council might seem like an isolated and unexpected outburst from a single survivor, a nearly identical event and cry against the Korean Council occurred sixteen years prior in 2004, but, unlike Yi Yong-su's revelation, it went largely unnoticed. This chillingly similar statement from 2004 reveals a continuous thread of discontent and anger by the former comfort women against the Korean Council that has only recently been uncovered again publicly by Yi Yong-su.

³³ The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), "1462 차 정기 수요시위[기자회견] 실시간 라이브 정의연 정의기억연대 [1462nd Weekly Wednesday Demonstration [Press Conference] Live | Korean Council]," YouTube Video, October 20, 2020, https://youtu.be/-GTGXyw_G4g.

³⁴ The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), "1487 차 정기 수요시위[기자회견] 실시간 라이브 | 정의연 정의기억연대 [1487th Weekly Wednesday Demonstration [Press Conference] Live | Korean Council]," YouTube Video, April 13, 2021, <https://youtu.be/0JOOGNb1Vgg>.

³⁵ *Chungang Ilbo*, "Why Sell the Comfort Women."

³⁶ *Chungang Ilbo*, "Why Sell the Comfort Women."

³⁷ MBC News, "'정의연 논란' 이용수 할머니 2 차 기자회견 ['Korean Council Controversy' Grandmother Yi Yong-su Second Press Conference]," YouTube Video, May 25, 2020, <https://youtu.be/jWQnzDNs3Go>.

³⁸ MBC News, "Yi Yong-su Second Press Conference."

Amidst the flurry of news articles published during the May 2020 controversy, a Korean newspaper published an article revealing a past situation in 2004 almost identical to that of Yi Yong-su's.³⁹ According to this article, thirty-three former comfort women released a statement under the World Peace Mugunghwa Association (*mugunghwa* being South Korea's national flower), which was a group created by and comprised of former comfort women. The statement, titled, "The Korean Council who Made the Comfort Women Cry Twice, Close Down," likewise called for the Korean Council's disbandment and included extremely similar criticisms to that of Yi Yong-su. Like Yi Yong-su, the survivors criticize the Wednesday demonstrations, wondering what the point is of dragging two or three of them out every week in the rain or snow to these protests. They also ask where the donations and funds went and state that they had never received any, accusing the Council of embezzling money from the South Korean government and personal donors. Additionally, the survivors criticize former leaders (who also coincidentally left the group to run for office) for their lack of dedication to and effort for the movement while they were there, and they mention the controversy around the Asian Women's Fund in which former comfort women were essentially threatened against accepting the offer of compensation by redress movement leadership. In total, the statement written and released by these thirty-three former comfort women specifically mention three of Yi Yong-su's criticisms: the uselessness of the Wednesday demonstrations, the Korean Council's questionable use of donations, and the failures of the redress movement leaders. The remarkably similar demands and criticisms between the 2004 and May 2020 controversy reveal that Yi Yong-su's experience was not simply an isolated experience but one shared between a significant number of former comfort women. Thus, we can assume that this anger and discontent towards the Korean Council is not limited to Yi Yong-su alone but was a common sentiment among a number of former comfort women in the past as well. Unfortunately, as most of the survivors have passed away, Yi Yong-su is the only one today who can speak up regarding this issue.

As evidenced by both the 2004 and May 2020 controversy, the comfort women redress movement has long operated without a substantial inclusion of the former comfort women's voices. After thirty years of tirelessly working together with these survivors, why would the Korean Council not address and incorporate the opinions and desires of a survivor into the very movement built around and for her? What are the underlying dynamics driving this silencing of the former comfort women? This is what I uncover in the next part of my essay by examining the significance of the comfort women redress movement's status as an international women's and human rights movement.

In the Name of Women's and Human Rights

The 2004 statement begins with an extremely strong criticism of the Council, which echoes Yi's criticism that the Korean Council has just been using the women:

If someone asked the comfort women grandmothers what the Korean Council does, we would say this: "If you interpret their name at face value, they are a civic group representing Korea that is the forerunner in seeking to make right the distorted past by collectively addressing the issue of the comfort women who were taken by the Japanese

³⁹ Chu-hüi Hong, "2004 년 위안부 할머니 33 명 '정대협, 우릴 앵벌이로 판 악당' [2004 33 Comfort Women Grandmothers 'Korean Council, the Villains who Sold Us like Aengböris']," *Chungang Ilbo*, May 17, 2020.

military during the Pacific War while providing immense support for the grandmothers, but this is all fiction. In reality, they are an organization that sells the comfort women grandmothers for their own profit. They are the people who made the comfort women grandmothers cry twice.”⁴⁰

The Korean phrase, *tu pŏn ullida* (두 번 울리다) or “made them cry twice,” implies that the Korean Council essentially “kicked them who were already down” to use the equivalent English idiom, referring to the hurt and pain the former comfort women have already suffered under the Japanese and now are suffering again under the Korean Council. They go on to mention how emotionally overwhelming it made them to see the Korean Council fight for their rights and justice that even now the memory makes them want to tear up. However, they write that their tears “began to turn into anger as your [the Korean Council’s] real self was exposed one piece at a time.”⁴¹ Just as Yi Yong-su compared her and her fellow former comfort women to bears who perform tricks for the Korean Council’s profit, the survivors who wrote the statement in 2004 also draw upon a similar metaphor, comparing themselves to *aengbŏri* (앵벌이) or children coerced by thugs to beg or thief for the thugs’ profit. While spaced sixteen years apart, these two statements each accuse the Council of using the women for its own profit with vivid metaphorical imagery that emphasizes the exploitative nature of their relationship.

The thirty-three former comfort women who wrote the statement in 2004 and Yi Yong-su both accuse the Korean Council of exploiting and using them for its own financial profit; however, I believe there is a deeper conflict undergirding these accusations that the women perceive as financial exploitation by the Korean Council. In the 2004 statement, the women write that the Korean Council has been pursuing “the exact opposite path to ‘restoring the human rights of the comfort women victims’” and mention that they become infuriated, or literally so angry that they “gnash and grind their teeth” (*ch’i rŭl ttŏlda*, 치를 떨다), whenever the Council speaks of “restoring their human rights” and so forth.⁴² The former comfort women seem to be referring to a deeper complaint towards the Korean Council, which is that the Council has not been doing what the survivors had expected or desired, resulting in a deep sense of betrayal and anger. What the former comfort women in the 2004 controversy and Yi Yong-su in the May 2020 controversy perceive as embezzlement of donations is really a reflection of a disparity in goals and expectations as the Korean Council is likely using that money for various other activities that the women themselves may or may not have agreed to or even known about.

Later in the May 2020 controversy, the accusations of misappropriation and embezzlement of funds against the Korean Council turn out to be false after an official investigation into the Korean Council’s finances.⁴³ If we adhere to the results of the investigation, then the survivors were incorrect in their accusations, yet the anger and hurt experienced and expressed by these survivors do not seem false and groundless. Rather, they reflect a deeper anger towards the Council for failing to listen to them and instead following its own goals and idea of the movement.

I argue that the Korean Council has capitalized on the comfort women issue to further its own idea of the movement as an international women’s and human rights movement even if it is contrary to the former comfort women’s desires and opinions, resulting in the disappointment,

⁴⁰ Hong, “Villains who Sold Us like Aengbŏris.”

⁴¹ Hong, “Villains who Sold Us like Aengbŏris.”

⁴² Hong, “Villains who Sold Us like Aengbŏris.”

⁴³ Korean Council, “Statements on Lee Yong-soo’s Press Conference.”

hurt, and anger expressed by many survivors who experienced this difference in goals and direction as exploitation and silencing. I illustrate this by first following the transformation of the comfort women redress movement in Korea from a bilateral issue between Japan and Korea to an international women's and human rights campaign, then examining the interaction between the Korean Council and the former comfort women during the AWF controversy, and finally exploring the Korean Council's responses in the May 2020 controversy.

The Korean Council finds its inception in the pages of co-founder Yun Chŏng-ok's report on the comfort women issue, which was presented at an international seminar in 1988 organized by the Korea Church Women United (KCWU) in Jeju, South Korea.⁴⁴ Subsequently, in 1989 and 1990, feminist activists staged demonstrations and drafted letters demanding attention to the issue, and in November 1990, thirty-seven women's organizations in Korea combined to form the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery (the original name of the Korean Council) under the leadership of scholars Yun Chŏng-ok and Yi Hyo-je.⁴⁵ Both were professors at Ewha Womans University (Yi teaching sociology and Yun teaching English literature) before their retirement (1990 for Yi and 1991 for Yun), and both personally led lives that challenged conventional lifestyles of women and the traditional gender-role ideology in South Korea.⁴⁶ About six months after the Korean Council's founding, Kim Hak-sun publicly testified about her experience as a former comfort woman under the Japanese empire in August 1991 and became the first former comfort woman to share her story publicly. From there, the Korean Council created a hotline for former comfort women to reach the Council and began its weekly Wednesday demonstrations, which have continued to the present.⁴⁷ However, frustrated with both the Korean and Japanese governments' failures to address the issue, in 1992 co-founder Yi Hyo-je submitted a petition to the U.N. Human Rights Commission asking for an investigation into Japanese atrocities committed against Korean women during WWII, effectively launching the comfort women issue to the international stage.⁴⁸

Since that petition to the U.N. Human Rights Commission nearly three decades ago, the movement has now exploded into an international women's and human rights movement recognized by the international community. The Korean Council engages in numerous international campaigns, including the establishment of statues of peace representing the former comfort women across the globe. Currently, the Korean Council has established 143 statues across Korea and 35 across the world, with locations in the United States, Hong Kong, China, Australia, Germany, and more.⁴⁹ The Korean Council caters to an extremely wide audience with English newsletters available to foreign audiences and English translations of their Wednesday demonstrations.

While the comfort women issue has most definitely become an internationally recognized issue, I argue that this rebranding of the movement as an international women's and human rights movement has reaped negative consequences. Namely, that the Korean Council no longer shares the same goals and directions for the movement as the former comfort women and instead

⁴⁴ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 189.

⁴⁵ Sarah C. Soh, "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 12 (1996): 1232-33.

⁴⁶ Soh, "Movement for Redress," 1233-1234.

⁴⁷ As of the writing of this essay, the Korean Council has held 1,490 demonstrations.

⁴⁸ Soh, "Movement for Redress," 1234-35.

⁴⁹ "평화비 건립 지원 [Support for the Establishment of the Statue of Peace]," The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council), accessed April 29, 2021, <https://womenandwar.net/kr/peace-statue/>.

is framing the issue in a way that furthers its idea of the movement and silences the former comfort women.

This difference in goals and directions is revealed particularly in the controversy surrounding the Asian Women's Fund (AWF). In an attempt to resolve the comfort women issue, the AWF was set up in 1995, offering compensation to the former comfort women through a foundation set up by the Japanese government. The Korean Council strongly rejected the fund, arguing that it was primarily financed through private donations from Japanese citizens and thus not by the Japanese government.⁵⁰ From the perspective of the Korean redress movement leaders, accepting the compensation offered through the AWF allowed Japan to avoid legal responsibility for its complicity in establishing and maintaining the comfort women system.⁵¹ The Korean redress movement leaders not only rejected the AWF offer but also strongly discouraged and even prevented the comfort women from accepting the money.⁵² Indeed, the former comfort women who published a statement in 2004 state how the Korean Council condemned the seven women who accepted the AWF money and even prevented them from receiving the regular compensation offered by the Korean government. They recall how because of the Council's actions, those seven women "to this day still have *han* [a complex Korean word for the deep resentment of the Korean people] in their hearts."⁵³ They also criticize the Korean Council for preventing those who had not accepted the money from possibly accepting it by "checking the survivors' bank accounts multiple times" and "regularly threatening them over the phone" even though they knew that the majority of the former comfort women who accepted the money did so because they were struggling financially.⁵⁴

This conflict over the acceptance of the AWF offer reveals the different goals and ideas of the movement between the former comfort women and the Korean Council. The former comfort women desire resolution and justice but not at the expense of their own rights to self-determination while the Korean Council holds the integrity and goals of the movement as most important, enough to justify the silencing and oppression of the former comfort women. Sarah Soh comments on this irony of the Korean comfort women redress movement and states that while the movement is based on the representation of the comfort women as victims of gross violations of human rights, the emphasis has been on "righting the wrongs of the past" and little attention has been given to the exercise of the women's own rights to self-determination as evidenced by their treatment during the AWF controversy.⁵⁵ She questions whether the redress movement leaders are not silencing and revictimizing the former comfort women all over again in their efforts to maintain a united national front against Japan.⁵⁶

I extend Soh's analysis of the AWF controversy by arguing that the conflict between the survivors and the Korean Council is not only because of the Council's desire to maintain a united front against Japan but also reflects a fundamental difference between the Korean Council's idea and conception of the movement and the former comfort women's. A comment made by the former comfort women in the 2004 statement hints at this difference:

⁵⁰ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 70.

⁵¹ Soh, "Human Rights and the 'Comfort Women,'" 125.

⁵² Soh, "Human Rights and the 'Comfort Women,'" 125.

⁵³ Hong, "Villains who Sold Us like Aengbōris."

⁵⁴ Hong, "Villains who Sold Us like Aengbōris."

⁵⁵ Soh, "Human Rights and the 'Comfort Women,'" 128.

⁵⁶ Soh, "Human Rights and the 'Comfort Women,'" 129.

What have you been doing for the last 15 years for the restoration of our human rights? [In that area] we, as comfort women grandmas, have experienced nothing. On the contrary, we have experienced many violations of our human rights from you people. As an example, do you remember what Yun Chŏng-ok, your representative, said at a seminar...? ...“If you receive the AWF compensation, then you will become voluntary licensed prostitutes.”⁵⁷

From the Korean Council’s perspective, if the former comfort women were to take the compensation offered through the AWF, then the entire status of the movement as an international women’s and human rights movement fighting to end wartime sexual violence against women would be undermined. The former comfort women might as well become “voluntary licensed prostitutes” if they accept the money because that is how damaging their acceptance would be to the movement. For the former comfort women, the movement was a means to restoring their honor and dignity and achieving closure, not an international spectacle representing women’s and human rights. To the Korean Council, however, maintaining the integrity of the movement as an international women’s and human rights movement was more important than respecting the former comfort women’s freedom to make their own decisions.

I argue that this attitude continues today within the Korean Council. During the press conference held by the Korean Council in response to Yi Yong-su’s claims and criticisms, a reporter asks the Korean Council what they are going to do in response to Yi’s criticism of the Wednesday demonstrations as the cause of only more hatred between the young people of Korea and Japan.⁵⁸ Because of this fact, Yi calls for the complete ceasing of the demonstrations or, at the very least, a change in the Korean Council’s methods. Yet, rather than addressing Yi’s concern about the Wednesday demonstrations, head Yi Na-yŏng replies by emphasizing that the Wednesday demonstrations are not about certain individuals but rather a collective experience shared by people across the world. She states that the Wednesday demonstrations are a place in which women can come face-to-face with their own struggles as women and, in doing so, find healing. In essence, she is stating that the purpose of the Wednesday demonstrations has moved beyond simply protesting against Japan for the restoration of the former comfort women’s rights to fostering a place where citizens across the world can empathize with the women’s experiences, learn, and heal. She ends by stating that changing the structure and format of the demonstrations is not something the Korean Council can do by itself but rather it must do so in conversation with the citizens who have participated in and supported this movement. Thus, Yi Na-yŏng neither addresses Yi Yong-su’s criticism nor offers suggestions as to how to improve the demonstrations in the ways suggested by Yi Yong-su. Instead, she emphasizes how the movement has moved beyond the former comfort women to include women’s rights in general and citizens from across the globe whose opinions apparently matter more than Yi Yong-su’s in relation to changing the format of the demonstrations. Additionally, in the Introspection and Vision Committee Statement written to outline the Korean Council’s concrete responses and actions to Yi Yong-su’s criticisms, two of the five goals included in the statement refer to improving opportunities for citizens and other groups to communicate and participate in the movement. They state that they “will improve the structure of sponsorship for all citizens to

⁵⁷ Hong, “Villains who Sold Us like Aengbŏris.”

⁵⁸ KBS News, “Press Conference about the Korean Council Donation Controversy.”

participate” and “run to wherever [they] call, listen to [their] words, and make a direction for improvement of the Korean Council together.”⁵⁹

Thus, to the Korean Council, the movement no longer simply encompasses the former comfort women and their needs and voices but also the voices of citizens across the globe as an international women’s and human rights movement. In seeking to maintain and foster this status as an international women’s and human rights movement, the Korean Council ends up disregarding and silencing Yi Yong-su’s opinions and criticisms as the movement is no longer about her and the former comfort women but about women and people across the world. The Korean Council uses the former comfort women’s stories as the avenue through which they frame the movement as an international women’s and human rights movement. This framing of the movement has not only resulted in the failure to reflect the former comfort women’s opinions and goals but also effectively silenced and removed their voices from the very movement that is supposed to represent them. In the name of women’s and human rights, the voices of the former comfort women are once again disregarded and silenced.

Conclusion

In this essay, I attempted to critically evaluate the Korean Council’s role as advocate and support network for the former comfort women in light of the May 2020 controversy. First, I explored how the Korean Council is not representing the former comfort women but rather disregarding and silencing their voices. Second, I examined how the Korean Council’s focus on framing and maintaining the movement as an international women’s and human rights movement has resulted in the loss of the survivors’ voices from the movement. As a result, the Korean Council perpetuates the silence of the former comfort women and prevents them from once again obtaining closure and resolution. The human rights movement and discourse has drawn immense global attention to the formerly forgotten and silenced former comfort women. However, in the Korean Council’s attempts to frame the former comfort women’s voices and experiences within the larger global human rights discourse and movement, the survivors’ voices have been appropriated for its own agenda, resulting in a truly tragic irony in which the victims are revictimized by their very own advocate.

My study compels us to reexamine how human rights advocates and organizations can avoid becoming the very perpetrators they condemn. How do we recognize victims’ wounds and experiences without exploiting them, and how do we prioritize victims’ personal desires and opinions? A victim-centered framework should prioritize the personal healing and closure of the former comfort women, and such an approach should be separate from the success or failure of the movement. A question posed by Chungmoo Choi, who has written extensively on the comfort women issue, illuminates the kind of victim-centered framework that the comfort women redress movement in South Korea is lacking: “Is it not necessary to reformulate our question of ‘how much apology (or how much reparation) is enough,’ and redirect our energy by asking how to heal the wound?”⁶⁰ Perhaps in doing so, the former comfort women can finally be at peace, especially given Japan’s apparent silence and immovability on the issue. Ultimately, we must re-establish a comfort women redress movement with the former comfort women’s voices

⁵⁹ Korean Council, *A to Z Guide*, 177.

⁶⁰ Chungmoo Choi, “The Politics of War Memories toward Healing,” in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 395-409.

as its foundation and guide, especially given that, in the very near future, there will no longer be survivors to speak up for themselves and let their voices be heard.

Timeline of Events

May 7, 2020: Yi Yong-su holds first press conference

May 8, 2020: Korean Council releases a statement in response to Yi's press conference

May 11, 2020: Korean Council holds press conference

May 12, 2020: Korean Council releases another statement concerning the current situation

May 25, 2020: Yi Yong-su holds second press conference

May 29, 2020: Yun Mi-hyang holds press conference

July 3, 2020: Representatives of the Korean Council and other organizations meet with Yi Yong-su at teahouse

August 12, 2020: Korean Council releases a statement at the Japanese Military "Comfort Women" International Solidarity Demonstration

September 14, 2020: Investigation results released and charges against the Korean Council revealed to be groundless

September 14, 2020: Yun Mi-hyang charged on multiple accounts

November 10, 2020: Judge in charge of Yun Mi-hyang trial passes away, putting trial on hold

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