

The Role of Autobiographies in Activism: How Former 'Comfort Women' Used Testimonies to Fight for Their Rights

By Kathryn Bathgate

Imagine you are in a room of women from different cultures and backgrounds. You may be inclined to think that these women have nothing in common. However, if you were to ask them if they had experienced sexual harassment, four of out five (81%) would raise their hands (Chatterjee). According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one in five women have also been raped. Sexual violence defines the female experience. Female sexuality has always been centered around and dictated by men, their desires, and their sexual urges. Rebecca Solnit says, “sex is an arena of power” (108) and has long been a way to shame, control, and own women. Men have defined when, with whom, and under what circumstances women are allowed to have sex, and through an emphasis on female virginity, have controlled and regulated women and their bodies (Jung, Soh, and Solnit). Sex is one of the most basic components of human existence, and to exert control over someone’s sexuality is to take away their most basic freedom and their sense of security.

Because of this power dynamic, which prioritizes male sexual desires, sex has evolved into a tool of war to instill fear in and exert dominance over a population. One does not have to delve deep into history to find examples of this violence: The Rape of Nanking during the Sino-Japanese War in which at least 20,000 women were raped (International Military Tribunal 1012); the Red Army after the fall of the Third Reich in Germany, when an estimated two million women were raped by Russian soldiers (Westervelt); and the modern-day example of the Bosnian conflict, where rape became a tool for ethnic cleansing, and an estimated 12,000 to 50,000 women were raped over the course of the three-year war (Crowe 343). And these examples are just the tip of the iceberg.

This tactic of war works well, because women are historically shamed into silence (Henson, O’Herne, and Solnit). They fear judgment and also retaliation against themselves and their families for something



that is out of their control. Because of this induced shame the victims feel, experiences of sexual violence are frequently shut away, never to be discussed again. This silence allows perpetrators to continue their heinous crimes. However, beginning in the 1980s, attitudes toward sexuality, especially sexual assault, were challenged and began to change, particularly in South Korea (Jung 261). On August 14, 1991, a woman named Kim Hak-sun told her story of sexual assault at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Army during the Asian-Pacific War. Kim revealed she was a former 'comfort woman', a victim of forced prostitution within the system Japan implemented during the war. Under this system, between 50,000-200,000 East and Southeast Asian women, with the majority being of Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipino, and Indonesian descent, were procured to work as prostitutes during the war and offer 'comfort' to the soldiers (Yoshimi 21).¹ In many instances, the women were coerced into these positions by recruiters who promised them good jobs and opportunities for a better life. Instead, the women, many of them still young girls, were forced to have intercourse with anywhere from a few men to up to sixty men a day (Yoshimi 139). More than forty-five years after the end of World War II, Kim Hak-sun overcame the stigma placed on her by a patriarchal society that traditionally shamed her for her experiences. She decided to speak up. This action challenged society's attitudes toward sex and sex crimes, Japan and Asia's memory of the war, and the understanding of the region's history.

Kim Hak-sun's courage made it possible for other women to come forward and tell their stories, too. "Until Kim Hak-sun spoke out, the issue of the 'comfort women' had been described as no more than a 'matter-of-fact' incident of wartime, collateral damage so to speak" (Muta 622). By breaking her silence, she empowered hundreds of other former 'comfort women' from Korea, the Philippines, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Netherlands to take a stand against Japan's denial of the military comfort system and demand both a formal apology and retribution from the Japanese government, which the few remaining survivors are still waiting

1. According to the Special Report from the UN Economic Security Council, countries known to have had comfort stations include: China, Taiwan, Borneo, the Philippines, many of the Pacific Islands, Singapore, Malaya, Burma and Indonesia (6). Therefore, it can be argued that local women from these places became victims of the comfort system as well.

and fighting for to this day.

Over the last thirty years, their stories have been told in multiple formats. These include interviews, speeches at protests, testimonies, and autobiographies. Each interview, speech, testimony, and autobiography continues to give the women a platform to raise their voices and fight for the justice they deserve. The testimonies and autobiographies of these women are a form of activism as their stories transcend a mere account of the events to reveal their trauma and the crimes committed against them. Through this activism, they challenge the memory of the comfort system and the patriarchy.

This paper analyzes the role of testimonies and autobiographies in activism through the experiences of two former 'comfort women'. One is Maria Rosa Henson, the first Filipina former 'comfort woman' to come forward and the first Filipina 'comfort woman' to write an autobiography about her experiences after Kim Hak-sun broke her silence. Another is Jan Ruff-O'Herne, a Dutch woman who was born and grew up in the Dutch East Indies, present-day Indonesia. She is the first European former 'comfort woman' to come forward with her story and was inspired to testify after watching Kim Hak-sun's "plea for justice" on television (Son 261).

The Problematic Nature of the Term 'Comfort Women'

One thing that is important to address before delving into the topic is the problematic term 'comfort women'. Former 'comfort woman' Jan Ruff O'Herne explains why using this term is so harmful:

And how dare the Japanese call these poor abused women 'comfort women', I thought, as I watched them on the television. The euphemism 'comfort women' is an insult and I felt it was a pity that the media were also continually using these words. We were never 'comfort women'. Comfort means something warm and soft, safe and friendly. It means tenderness. We were war rape victims, enslaved and conscripted by the Japanese Imperial Army. (165-166)

O'Herne's statement exposes the problematic nature of this term. It implies something more positive and reflects its roots within a patriarchal society that puts men, and male sexual gratification, above women. The term also suggests a certain amount of willingness from the women to participate in the

comfort system, which was not the case. The fact that the survivors oppose this term is enough of an argument against using it. The use of the term acknowledges and affirms “men’s customary sex-right to seek and enjoy heterosexual entertainment and coitus outside matrimony” (Soh 133), while condemning the women who provide such services as whores, or in much more degrading terms such as pi, which would be translated as ‘cunt’, or kyōdō benjo, which translates to ‘public toilet’ (39-40).

Choosing an appropriate term to refer to women abused in this way is very difficult. The terminology poses problems, and there is no consistently-used term among the survivors. However, ‘comfort women’ is the term most commonly used by scholars and will be the term used in this paper.

Autobiographies as Activism

Autobiographies move beyond mere testimony by going into greater, more accurate detail and providing corroborating evidence such as historical documents, photos, drawings, etc. Additionally, they allow victims to contextualize their stories, show how the event altered their life, and grant victims the power to reshape their identity beyond that of their traumatic experiences.

Maria Rosa Henson, who initially told her story publicly in 1992, used this format to relay the events of her life and her experiences in *Comfort Woman: A Filipina’s Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military*. She spent nine months in a comfort station after being abducted by Japanese soldiers. Henson’s autobiography describes her sexual exploitation in detail. The focus on her experiences presents a counter-history to the long-accepted belief held in Japan, as well as in the western world, that the ‘comfort women’ willingly volunteered for the military comfort system (Soh 70). By writing her autobiography, Henson challenges the role of the patriarchy. She exposes atrocities committed toward ‘comfort women’ in the Philippines. She combines the personal and the political. In doing so, Henson is able to fight for justice for herself and other victims of sex crimes. She provides a record of the atrocities committed against women in the comfort

system, with the goal of educating and raising awareness to create change, exerting pressure on Japan to apologize, and demanding accountability for what happened. By telling her story, she calls for structural change that will prevent crimes like these from ever happening again. This constitutes an act of activism. While doing this, Henson is also able to transform her identity from that of a victim to a survivor.

For nearly fifty years, the ‘comfort women’ remained silent. It was not until the 1980s when the feminist movement could truly take shape that the stigma surrounding sexuality began to lessen.

Henson also highlights the role of the patriarchy within the comfort system, albeit subtly. She openly condemns the Japanese, but the influence of the feminist movement on her intentions is only acknowledged through her mentioning the Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women and its role in her coming forward. By seeking justice for her and other women, she challenges established structures of the patriarchy that forced her into silence, shamed her for her experiences, and allowed the men to get away with it for so long.

Jan Ruff O’Herne chose to write about her experiences in the war as both a ‘comfort woman’ and a prisoner-of-war in Indonesia in *Fifty Years of Silence: The Extraordinary Memoir of a War Rape Survivor*. In 1992, she saw Kim Hak-sun and other Korean women on television and was inspired to come forward. “I’ve got to be with those women. I’ve got to back them up. And suddenly, I felt that the story I had carried for all those years in my heart, could now be told. The courage of those Korean women gave me courage” (O’Herne 165). Ultimately, she spent three months at a comfort station before it was abruptly closed by the Japanese. O’Herne’s autobiography takes on a slightly different framework and tone than Henson’s. Because her time in the prisoner-of-war camp was such a defining part of her wartime experience, it becomes a central topic in her autobiography, which provides a counter-history on not just the military comfort system, but also Japanese prisoner-of-war camps.

O’Herne uses her book as a space to record the history of the military comfort system and to provide a voice for the voiceless. She also shares her story with the hope of educating people on the topic and creating change in the legal system. O’Herne focuses almost exclusively on her wartime experiences, and

within these recollections, she continuously weaves in stories of resistance and overcoming. O'Herne conveys that she is a survivor, regardless of what the Japanese did to her. She emphasizes that she fiercely resisted and overcame her suffering. She turns that suffering into activism by speaking out and becoming an emboldened survivor. She used her newfound voice and identity to educate people, seek justice, and make structural change, thereby supporting her personal goals and those of the movement. As a result of her efforts, the 'comfort women' issue gained international attention and led to the passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820, which condemns the use of sexual violence as a tool of war (O'Herne 205). Through this resolution, "rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide" (United Nations Security Council 3).

Like Henson's account, O'Herne's story gives insight into what the women and girls faced at comfort stations and reveals the attitudes the soldiers had toward the encounters. However, O'Herne's account underscores the patriarchal structures and attitudes more than Henson's account. Through her emphasis on consent and resistance, O'Herne reveals the attitudes the men had toward them. They were objects to control and use for their own sexual purposes. Despite hiding, fighting, saying no, the soldiers did everything in their power, including violence, to get their way. If the women had been seen as anything beyond objects for sexual gratification that they felt entitled to, the soldiers would have stopped.

For nearly fifty years, these survivors remained silent. It was not until the 1980s when the feminist movement could truly take shape that the stigma surrounding sexuality began to lessen. With these developments, victims of sexual violence were finally heard and believed. When Kim Hak-sun made the first step toward justice, other former 'comfort women' realized that attitudes were evolving, and now was the time to break their silence. It was still a risk to reveal their pasts, but by sharing their experiences they helped create change and seek justice.

Both Henson and O'Herne played a critical role in bringing about change. Their bravery in coming forward and sharing their experiences publicly was an act of resistance against the power of the

patriarchy that had long kept them silent. Their written accounts took their activism one step further. Through their narratives, the women had greater authority and a public platform. Both women were able to educate a wider audience and challenge the patriarchy with their autobiographies. They were able to raise awareness on the 'comfort women' issue and sex crimes, change attitudes toward the use of rape in war, and alter the discourse around sexuality. The women told their stories so others could learn and their memories would remain alive. Researching and remembering their stories ensures they are not forgotten and that the activism they began continues long after they are gone. It is only through such efforts that crimes like these can be prevented from happening again.

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