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# Modern-Day Comfort Women: The U.S Military, Transnational Crime, and the Trafficking of Women

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# Modern-Day Comfort Women

## The U.S. Military, Transnational Crime, and the Trafficking of Women

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The trafficking of women has been a lucrative moneymaker for transnational organized crime networks, ranking third, behind drugs and arms, in criminal earnings. The U.S. military bases in South Korea were found to form a hub for the transnational trafficking of women from the Asia Pacific and Eurasia to South Korea and the United States. This study, conducted in 2002, examined three types of trafficking that were connected to U.S. military bases in South Korea: domestic trafficking of Korean women to clubs around the military bases in South Korea, transnational trafficking of women to clubs around military bases in South Korea, and transnational trafficking of women from South Korea to massage parlors in the United States.

The trafficking of women is a lucrative moneymaker for transnational organized crime networks, ranking third, behind drugs and arms, in criminal earnings. The present study provides evidence that as of the year 2002, U.S. military bases in the Republic of Korea (commonly known as South Korea) formed an international hub for trafficking of women for prostitution and related forms of sexual exploitation. The traffickers recruited and transported women to meet the demand largely created by U.S. military personnel and civilian men in South Korea and the United States. In some cases, the U.S. servicemen themselves were traffickers, working with Asian organized crime networks.

This study, conducted in 2002, examined three types of trafficking that were connected to U.S. military bases in South Korea: domestic trafficking of Korean women to clubs around the military bases in South Korea, transnational trafficking of women to clubs around military bases in South Korea, and transnational trafficking of women from South Korea to massage parlors in the United States. Although the three types of trafficking will be discussed separately, in reality they

sometimes overlap. For example, in one case, a Korean woman was the victim of multiple acts of trafficking: She was abducted at age 14 from her village in South Korea and was repeatedly raped and exploited by soldiers of the South Korean army. An American soldier brought her to the United States through a sham marriage, where she was then trafficked within the United States on a massage parlor circuit (Gallagher, 1995).

## Method

### Terms and Definitions

For the purpose of this article, the definition of "trafficking" is based on the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. "Sex trafficking means the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act." A commercial sex act is defined as "any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person." For criminal charges to be brought against perpetrators, their activities must meet the criteria of "severe form of trafficking in persons," which is "sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age." Coercion is defined as "(A) Threats of serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; (B) any scheme, plan, or pattern intended to cause a person to believe that failure to perform an act would result in serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; or (C) the abuse or threatened abuse of the legal process." "Transnational trafficking" is used to mean sex trafficking of women that involves the crossing of an international border. "Domestic trafficking" is used to mean sex trafficking within the borders of a country in recognition that the tactics used by procurers and pimps are the same when women are recruited and transported within the same country. Often, as in the case of massage parlors, the women are used on regional and national circuits, which should be recognized as a form of domestic trafficking.

In discussing the sites of prostitution in the United States, the term "massage parlor" is used, although the establishments are also known by other euphemisms such as "spas," "modeling studios," and "hostess bars."

### Sources of Data

Prior to the initiation of this research, no studies on the trafficking of women to Korea had been conducted or completed. Similarly, there were no research studies on the trafficking of women from Korea, or trafficking of Korean women that involved U.S. servicemen. There have been several studies on the use of Korean women for prostitution by U.S. servicemen, but the focus was not on trafficking. Korean and other Asian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have documented

the transnational and domestic trafficking of women associated with U.S. military personnel, but they were not research reports. Because of the lack of previous research, this article relied on NGO reports and media stories from the United States, South Korea, and the Philippines.

For this research, the authors conducted 36 interviews using open-ended questions with social service providers, activist organizations, law enforcement officials, reporters, and a researcher in the United States and South Korea. The interviews included 19 law enforcement officials, 10 social service providers and/or activist organizations, six reporters, and one researcher. All interviews were conducted by telephone in August, September, and October, 2002.

## Results

### U.S. Military in the Republic of Korea and Violence Against Women

The United States has had troops in South Korea for almost six decades, starting in 1945 following World War II. Today, there are 100 U.S. military bases throughout South Korea with 37,000 troops.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the United States Forces in Korea (USFK) and the Republic of Korea cooperatively agreed to set up "rest and relaxation" centers for U.S. troops. The purpose was to provide entertainment and improve the morale of the troops. The *kijichon* (military camp towns) around the U.S. military bases that resulted from this policy are closed to South Korean citizens and allowed only U.S. troops and those who provide services to enter. Although prostitution is officially illegal in South Korea, at the time of this study in 2002, the sex industry around the U.S. military bases was thriving with an estimated 20,000 women in the *kijichon* (Kim, 1997). Most of the clubs or bars in the *kijichon* had rooms upstairs for prostitution (McMichael, 2002a; Moon, 1997).

The abuse and exploitation of Korean women for "rest and relaxation" by soldiers preceded the arrival of U.S. troops. The Japanese army used Korean women for sexual slavery during World War II (Hicks, 1995; Howard, 1995). At the time, the women were euphemistically referred to as "comfort women," and although that term is no longer used, a number of Asian women's NGOs characterized the ongoing trafficking and sexual exploitation of Korean and Philippine women by U.S. military troops as a continuation of the same practice. In fact, several sources say that some of the original "comfort women" used by the Japanese army were in turn used by U.S. troops following the defeat of Japan (Kim, 1997). The experiences of the women are similar except now, the U.S. troops refer to them by other euphemistic and derogatory terms, such as "guest relations officers," "bar girls," "hostesses," "entertainers," and "juicy girls" (Demick, 2002; Donato, 2002; Kim, 1997).

During the almost six decades that U.S. troops have been stationed in South Korea they have committed many crimes in the Korean communities (Ahn, n.d.). One group, the National Campaign for the Eradication of Crime by U.S. Troops in South Korea, gathered crime reports and claimed in an unpublished report that from 1945 to 1999 U.S. servicemen committed over 10,000 crimes. In 1992, the brutal rape and murder of Yoon Keum Yi, a prostitute, by a U.S. serviceman generated public outrage about crimes committed by U.S. troops (Kim, 1997; Kirk, Cornwell, & Okazawa-Rey, 2000). More recent crimes include the stabbing murder of Si-Sun Li near a U.S. military base in 1998 and the beating death of a 31-year-old bar waitress by two American soldiers in 2000. In both cases, the men said they got angry because the women refused to have sex with them (Associated Press, 1998, 2000).

The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), a security treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea, has made it difficult for Koreans to take legal action against U.S. troops, even when they have committed crimes (Moon, 1997). Created during the Cold War era, the United States was able to "negotiate separate and often unequal security treaties with each of its Asian allies," providing few favorable provisions for countries like the Republic of Korea (Cornwell & Wells, 1999). While the Republic of Korea has some legal jurisdiction over crimes committed by U.S. troops, a clause in SOFA's article 22 states that South Korea must give "sympathetic consideration" for any request made by the United States to waive its rights unless the case is considered of "particular importance" ("Activists intensify SOFA," 2002; Moon, 1997). According to the National Campaign for the Eradication of Crime by U.S. troops in Korea, the U.S. military was responsible for disciplining their troops, but frequently, when crimes were committed, the men were just moved to another post (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, n.d.). In 1999, only 3.6% of all crimes committed by U.S. servicemen were brought to trial by the South Korean government (Young Koreans United of USA, 2000). In the climate of tolerance for crimes committed by U.S. troops, prostitution and trafficking for prostitution were among the most tolerated.

## Domestic Trafficking of Korean Women for U.S. Military Personnel

According to one estimate, over one million Korean women have been used in prostitution by U.S. troops since the end of World War II (Moon, 1997). One man, formerly stationed at the Osan Air Base, described the contemporary kijichon locale and prostitution in the following way:

Outside the front gate of our air base is a town called song-tan [*sic*]. There is a strip of bars along this street . . . about 25 bars. Men go to these bars to see the "juicy girls." . . . When a man see [*sic*] a girl that he likes, he calls her over, or sometimes one of the old ladies that work at the bar just bring a girl to the man. He then buys her a "juicy" (a small glass of juice or alcohol) for about \$10. Sometimes they just talk, or sometimes

he gropes her, but many times the talk negotiate [*sic*] a “barfine” . . . money paid to the owner of the bar so that the girl can go out for the evening “bar hopping,” or to a hotel to have sex. (Anonymous, e-mail, May 2001)

Korean girls and women become vulnerable to recruiters after they have been abandoned by families or have run away from home because of abuse. They usually have limited job skills and few options for work. At the time of this study, they were domestically trafficked from various regions of South Korea for kijichon prostitution outside U.S. bases. Korean women were recruited into prostitution by employment agencies that played a central role in domestic trafficking (Yu, n.d.). Young women who ran away from home were often searched for by employment agencies. When the girl or woman was found, the cost to trace her was charged to her as a debt that she then had to repay (Yu, n.d.).

Also, Korean women enter prostitution as a way to pay off credit card debt without knowing the conditions and violence they will face. In an interview conducted in September 2000, a representative from the International Organization for Migration in Seoul (IOM-Seoul) said, “We hear many cases of those who started out making quick money to pay off credit card debts, but ended up in situations they didn’t know existed.”

Once Korean women are in prostitution, they quickly accumulate more debt. Pimps manipulate the women into incurring debts, so that they will not be able to leave. Women are charged for rent, food, furniture, clothes, and medical expenses; often, the longer the woman is in prostitution, the larger her debt. One former bar woman said her debt accrued for 25 years while she was being used in the kijichon. Over this period of time, she had to pay for 25 abortions because she said she could not “bring another life into this world if he/she has a life like mine.” According to the representative of United Voice for the Eradication of Prostitution in Korea (Hansori):

Every day a woman has to pay her pimp the money from three customers. If she fails to pay, it is added to her debt. A woman is sold from one place to another every one to two months, and the agency fee that the employer pays the employment agency is added to her debt. [One woman] started with no debts, but at the end of eight years in prostitution, her debt increased to over 20 million won (over US\$20,000). (Yu, n.d.)

The pervasive tactic for recruiting and coercing Korean women into prostitution is through the creation and manipulation of debts. These debts are then used to control the women and keep them in prostitution, often for years.

## **Transnational Trafficking of Women to South Korea**

In the decade from 1992 to 2002, economic conditions improved for South Korea, offering women more opportunities than in the past. Consequently, foreign women were increasingly replacing the Korean women in prostitution around the U.S. bases.

Women from the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Bolivia, Peru, Mongolia, China, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan were trafficked into South Korea (Jhoyt, 2001; Lhagvasuren, 2001; McMichael, 2002a). According to the IOM-Seoul, 5,000 women had been trafficked into South Korea, mostly Russians and Filipinas, who were replacing the Koreans (Capdevila, 2002a). For example, in one kijichon area with 40 clubs, of the 301 women in prostitution, 107 were Korean, 149 were Philippine, and 45 were Russian (Union of Women's Social Organizations in the Kyonggi-do Province, n.d.).

For decades, Filipina women have been used in prostitution by U.S. troops around the large military bases in the Philippines, but those bases closed in the 1990s. The closing of the U.S. military bases, as well as the Asian economic crisis led to high unemployment, especially among women in the Philippines where only 46.8% of women are employed compared to 85.7% of men (Enriquez, n.d.). The Philippine government supported and facilitated the overseas employment of Filipinos because it helped solve their unemployment problem, and the workers abroad were able to send home money to support families, helping to alleviate poverty (Enriquez, n.d.). Because the Philippines is a source of unskilled workers for South Korea, there are a number of agencies and schemes that recruit and facilitate the travel and work of Filipinos in South Korea (Enriquez, n.d.). Traffickers work within this system. Recruiters who work for foreign employers travel around the countryside offering poor young women opportunities for work abroad, often giving parents advance payments on their daughters' wages (Cruz, 2002). As thousands of Filipinas went abroad expecting to find work, many ended up in circumstances of sexual exploitation by U.S. troops in South Korea similar to those they were in when the U.S. military bases were in the Philippines.

The presence of Filipinas around the U.S. bases in South Korea was noted as early as 1987, but in recent years, the numbers have been increasing (Enriquez, n.d.). In 1994, there were approximately 250 Filipinas in prostitution around the U.S. military bases in South Korea. By 1997, the number increased to 1,365, and by 2002, the number rose to 3,000 (Donato, 2002). Traffickers targeted particular communities for recruiting women for prostitution abroad, such as those displaced in Central Luzon because of the eruption of the Mt. Pinatubo volcano and closure of the U.S. bases (Enriquez, n.d.). The women were mostly young, with high school or less education, coming from the rural areas and from poor families (Enriquez, n.d.). Many Filipinas were recruited by agencies that required the women to pay placement fees to secure good jobs for them (Donato, 2002). Instead of the jobs promised, the women were met at the airport and taken to bars or clubs around U.S. military bases (Donato, 2002).

In other cases, according to IOM-Seoul, many Filipina women arrived in South Korea on E-6 entertainer visas and/or false documents. They were recruited as overseas performing artists (OPA), for which they were required to prove they had entertainer skills before they were granted authorized entry into other countries to work in the entertainment industry ("Filipino Women Hired," 2002). There were indications that the

Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), which supervised the training and testing centers that determine if the women sent abroad were qualified as performing artists, was involved in bribery and deception with the issuance of E-6 visas (Cruz, 2002). Recruiters either bribed the authorities at the testing centers or sent in skilled doubles to perform in order to get the needed certification for the woman to be able to go abroad on an entertainer visa (Cruz, 2002). When the woman arrived at the destination abroad, she was in the country legally as an entertainer with heavy debts owed to her employer, but with no true artistic skills. She was then forced into prostitution.

According to the Korean Immigration Bureau of the Ministry of Justice, the number of people entering South Korea on E-6 entertainment visas has climbed steadily: 2,150 in 1998, 4,486 in 1999, and 7,044 in 2000 (Jhoty, 2001). According to one report, the Korea Special Tourism Association, an association made up of 189 club owners near the kijichon areas, was the chief contractor for holders of the E-6 visas (Capdevila, 2002b). The association began lobbying the government to bring in foreign women to work in the nightclubs in 1996. The president of the association claimed that their organization plays an important role in preventing GI harassment of Korean women and in strengthening United States–South Korea relations: “If it hadn’t been for us, there would be sexual violations, maybe rapes. We are contributing to United States and Korean relations in our own way, and nobody appreciates it” (Demick, 2002). This claim is the same one used by the Japanese during World War II: Providing “comfort women” to the Japanese troops would prevent them from raping or harassing the local women.

Many women overstay the E-6 visas or work illegally on 90-day visitor visas, known as C-3 visas (Jhoty, 2001). According to a spokesperson at the Ministry for Gender Equality, more women were trafficked through C-3 visas than E-6 visas. For example, in 2001, 1,500 Filipina and 3,518 Russian women entered on E-6 visas, while 6,675 Filipinas and 11,633 Russian entered on C-3 visas (Sung, 2001). A ministry spokesperson said it is difficult to locate the holders of the C-3 visas after the visas expire because they are issued without strict passport inspection (Sung, 2001). If the women escaped from the traffickers or pimps, they were considered illegal immigrants, sent to immigrant detention centers, and deported (Jhoty, 2001).

The collapse of the Soviet Union has created conditions in which tens of thousands of women from former Soviet countries are going abroad looking for work (Hughes, 2005). Many of the Russian women held professional jobs at home before going to South Korea with false passports (Capdevila, 2002b). Between January 2000 and March 2001, approximately 6,000 Russian women entered Korea through Busan port and Gimpo airport (Jhoty, 2001). In 2000, 3,064 Russians entered South Korea on E-6 visas, 2,927 of them women (Jhoty, 2001). Less is known about the Russian or Russian-speaking women who have been used in prostitution around the bases. The lack of information is because of fewer NGOs collecting information and documenting the women’s experiences. Russian officials

have repeatedly refused to comment on the situation (Jhoyt, 2001). According to an IOM-Seoul representative, there were more Russian women in prostitution in South Korea than Philippine women, but there were more Filipinas in kijichon prostitution because they spoke English, which was in demand around the U.S. bases.

Organized crime groups have taken advantage of the economic difficulties faced by women. In January 2000, a network involving Russian organized crime and Koreans was broken up in Seoul. The Russian group supplied the women and received \$1,000 per month for each woman they supplied. The Koreans operated a job placement agency, through which they had trafficked over 50 Russian women into South Korea during the previous year ("10 arrested," 2000).

There is evidence that although the Philippines and countries of the former Soviet Union are geographically, linguistically, and culturally distant, the same traffickers are at work in the recruitment and enslavement of women. Several years ago, Kim Kyong-Su was investigated by the Yong-San District police for "importing 1,093 foreign women, from the Philippines and Russia, to work as entertainers near the U.S. military camp." He was suspected of being paid recruiting fees by 234 club-bar owners to provide women for their use. He and two accomplices were charged with illegal recruitment and forging documents (Enriquez, n.d.).

After women arrive in South Korea, some are forced into prostitution right away; others are worn down by pressure and inability to pay their debts unless they engaged in prostitution. In the beginning, the women are only required to sit with men and push drinks, but they make no money. They soon discover that the only way to make money and pay their debts is through prostitution (McMichael, 2002a).

Recent investigations found that the women "are all indentured servants, modern-day sexual slaves. . . . These Filipino girls say they're locked in the bar every night" (Merriman & Van Susteren, 2002). Another investigative report found that every woman interviewed inside and outside the clubs, with the exception of some in Seoul, said they were trafficked (McMichael, 2002a). The journal of a 22-year-old Filipina detailed how she and other trafficking victims were locked in their rooms, had their passports and travel documents confiscated, were threatened with violence, were prohibited from making phone calls, and were given less than \$10 a week for food (Demick, 2002). In some housing for the women, video cameras were mounted over the doors to monitor their movement. Women were usually allotted only a short period of freedom, such as a half hour per day (McMichael, 2002a). One reporter found that the women were "[s]ometimes packed into one room with six or more women, they often survive on little more than ramyeon (noodles) and are forced to work, even when ill" (Jhoyt, 2001).

These detainment conditions led to five foreign women dying in a fire in a Gunsan brothel in 2000. In early 2002, a similar fire broke out in a Gunsan pub, and 12 women died because they were prevented from escaping by barred exits (Lee, 2002). According to a member of the U.S. Air Force who was stationed at Osan Air Base:

[M]ost have a contract for one year. They supposedly get paid \$300-\$350 per month. But their wages are held by their owners for 3 to 4 months to pay for the airline ticket and other expenses. They usually work from 7 p.m. to 1 or 2 a.m. 7 days a week. They are usually confined to their quarters from 2 a.m. to noon the next day. This is to make sure the girl is not prostituting herself without the owner getting his cut. Because of the long nights that these girls put in, they often turn to shabu (that is the name for the drug speed here in the orient) to keep themselves awake and looking happy. (Anonymous, e-mail, May 2001)

In an exposé, TV reporter Merriman filmed U.S. military police patrolling and protecting the bars and brothels where U.S. servicemen use trafficked women for prostitution. The military officers acknowledged on camera that they knew the women were trafficked, but that it was their job to protect the bars and brothels to ensure the safety of U.S. servicemen (Merriman, 2002). One soldier stationed at Camp Casey remarked, "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" (Demick, 2002). A different report documented the good relations between the bar owners, pimps, and military police (McMichael, 2002a). U.S. soldiers said that the club-bar owners buy the women at auctions and must earn large sums of money before they are given their passports and freedom (Merriman, 2002).

When the women come to the attention of the Korean government, the most usual response is deportation. The Korean government defends its treatment of women as illegal aliens, not as victims, because the women allegedly voluntarily engage in prostitution and make money (Jhoyt, 2001). In 2001, in an international assessment of countries' efforts to combat trafficking, the U.S. State Department ranked South Korea on Tier 3 (the lowest rating) because South Korea did not comply with minimum standards and had made no efforts to comply. The Trafficking in Persons Report stated that Korea was a country of origin and transit for trafficked persons. Teresa Oh from the Korean NGO Saewoomtuh criticized the report because it failed to recognize that South Korea was also a destination country for trafficked women and children (Jhoyt, 2001). Other Korean NGOs demanded that the "U.S. share the blame for Korea's problem of prostitution and human trafficking," referring to the significant role the U.S. military played in creating the demand for trafficked women (Kim, n.d.).

## **Trafficking of Korean Women to the United States**

Asian and Asian American organized crime networks operate transnationally within and between South Korea and the United States. One of their activities is operating massage parlors throughout the United States that use Korean women for prostitution. The trafficking networks use some of the same methods migrant smugglers use to get women into the United States, including uninspected entry, meaning the women are smuggled into the United States across the borders with Mexico or Canada without passing through immigration control points; the use of counterfeit

documents; and entry on student or tourist visas. A route that was routinely used by traffickers at the time of this study involved marriage to U.S. military personnel. In some cases, traffickers paid servicemen to bring Korean women into the United States through sham marriages. In other cases, traffickers and pimps targeted Korean women who were abandoned or divorced by U.S. military personnel.

Korean American gangs that are known to have been involved in prostitution are the Korean Fuk Ching, the Green Dragons, the Korean Killers, and Korean Power. The gangs have also engaged in international drug trafficking, extortion, home invasions of Korean immigrants, and gambling (McGarvey, 2002).

Law enforcement officials describe the nationwide network of massage parlors as having a “layered business structure” (Doucette, 2002a), and “hierarchy.” According to one network that was headquartered in Houston with links to Seoul, “The mamasans in the massage parlors [in the network around the country] send the money to Houston and Dallas, and they send it back to Korea. . . . Someone is running these rings. They are routing the women. . . . Someone is keeping track. . . . There is a hierarchy” (interview, August 30, 2002). An indication of a well-organized network is the efficiency and quickness with which massage parlors reopened after a raid. Interviews with law enforcement officers from New York and Dallas revealed that the massage parlors usually reopened within days or weeks of a police raid (see also Doucette, 2002b). In some cases, if the climate became too hostile, the pimps moved to another location before reopening.

## **U.S. Military Personnel as Traffickers**

A significant proportion of the Korean women used in the massage parlors in the United States were originally married to U.S. servicemen. According to one INS agent, “I don’t recall ever having interviewed a Korean prostitute in this country that was not in the country as a result of being married to an American serviceman” (Goldman, 2002). According to a representative from the Rainbow Center, a social service provider in New York City, the majority of women from massage parlors that she saw were previously married to U.S. military servicemen.

For women in prostitution around the military bases in South Korea, it is difficult to escape the stigmatization of society. Their only hope of getting out of prostitution and immigrating to the United States is to marry a U.S. serviceman (Moon, 1997, p. 4). Even the trafficked women from the Philippines said their dream was to marry an American man who would buy their freedom (Merriman, 2002). In some cases, U.S. men paid off the women’s debt to the pimp to free them (Kim, 1997). In one case, a U.S. serviceman helped a trafficked woman escape by contacting a known antitrafficking activist in Seoul (McMichael, 2002b).

In the 1980s, Army statisticians reported that the decade produced 25,000 marriages between Korean women and U.S. soldiers, at a rate of about 3,500 a year (Henican,

1989). Although many of these marriages may have started off with good intentions, according to one estimate, 80% of marriages between Korean women and U.S. servicemen ended in divorce (Moon, 1997, p. 35). The Rainbow Center representative claimed that the women had poor job or language skills, and were often victims of domestic violence or abandoned by their American husbands. Isolated from both Korean and American communities, they had few options but to return to prostitution (Kim, 1997; Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez, 2001). Traffickers or pimps often targeted women who were married or recently divorced from U.S. servicemen with attractive job offers. Korean women owners or recruiters for massage parlors were familiar with cultural practices and family obligations that could be used to pressure women into earning money. For example, the madams looked for Korean women who were formerly married to U.S. servicemen and were trying to survive economically on three to four part-time jobs. She would tell them they could make more money working part-time in the massage parlor. According to a former law enforcement officer in New York who worked on prostitution and massage parlor cases for 10 years, "There were Korean women who were predators, recruiting other women into the business . . . they knew where to push the buttons" (interview, October 15, 2002).

In some cases, the marriages between Korean women and U.S. servicemen were never intended to be legitimate; they were a way to bring the women into the United States. The woman may have cooperated in a sham marriage in order to get into the United States in the hope of finding a better life. In other cases, her new husband served as a trafficker, working with an Asian crime network in deceiving the woman. Victims often said that their "husbands" sold them to massage parlors after their arrival in the United States (Goldman, 2002; Kim, 1997). According to a former law enforcement official in New York City, women might have been coerced into the sham marriages by Korean/Korean American gangs to repay a debt. Korean American gangs obtain young women for prostitution through connections to organized crime groups in South Korea, and use sham marriages to American military servicemen to get the women into the United States; they are then turned over to the Korean American gangs that run massage parlors. Some of the young women may have been abducted from villages in South Korea and forced into sham marriages (McGarvey, 2002).

After gathering information from numerous massage parlor raids around the country, law enforcement officials named "sham marriages with GIs" as one of the primary methods that traffickers were using to get women into the United States (Doucette, 2002c). According to an officer from the Vice Division of the Houston Police Department in Houston, police who issued licenses to work in "sexually oriented businesses" identified two general groups of Korean women in the area massage parlors. The women in one group spoke no English and needed an interpreter to assist them with the application. These women had Korean family names on their passports, but the passports were not stamped as they should have been if they had

passed through official immigration control points when leaving Korea or entering the United States. There was another group of Korean women who could speak more English and had American last names, indicating that they had been married to an American man.

According to a police officer who was involved in raids on Korean massage parlors in the Midwest, the network that operated in his area was run by a Korean organized crime network based in Seoul, and relied on U.S. military personnel to bring Korean women into the United States. The women were usually young and attractive: Some were as young as 18, most were in their early 20s, but a few are in their 50s.

The men are paid by the Korean mob that is based in Seoul. They are paid \$1,500 to marry the Korean woman. In San Francisco, the divorce is already arranged as soon as he gets her into the country. Then he gets another \$1,500. . . . Black military personnel are involved. . . . Don't know why that is, but 90% of the men are black. A few white guys, and never a Hispanic man. (interview, August 30, 2002)

According to another officer who was involved in closing Korean massage parlors in Farmington Hills, Michigan, in the mid-1980s,

We learned servicemen had married some of the defendants in the case and brought them over here for a certain amount of money—\$5,000 to \$10,000. . . . It was a slavery thing. They divorced once they were here and [the women] went to work for a Korean crime cartel that had them actually living inside these places. (Martindale, 2000)

According to a representative of the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, "soldiers are seldom punished even when sham marriages are suspected" (Henican, 1989). Other police sources indicate that this pattern continued through the 1990s (Gillerman & Goodrich, 1997). In 1993, police obtained specific information on a member of the U.S. Navy who delivered a Korean woman to a massage parlor in Oakland County, Michigan. One of the women, who had just been delivered to the brothel 2 weeks before the raid, was willing to talk to the police and tell them that her "husband" had taken her to the brothel and then left her there. According to the Oakland County prosecutor, "She was his wife, officially. He was paid to bring her here. He was in town less than 24 hours. He then left for Norfolk, Virginia" (interview, August 30, 2002).

Marriage certificates to American men enable women to obtain additional pieces of identification, which make it more difficult to detect the activity of the traffickers. According to one officer involved in the raid of a club with Korean women in Rhode Island,

They were Korean women, with Americanized names. We checked on their legal status with INS—and they all cleared. . . . They had IDs, driver's licenses . . . what happens is they would marry American servicemen and then get divorced. (Raymond et al., 2001)

Transnational trafficking networks have had several ways to get women into the United States for use in massage parlors, one of which has been to use U.S. military personnel. According to one law enforcement officer, "The military is the key! I've never seen it any other way." Different transnational crime groups may use different methods, which probably change over time as other opportunities for supplying women arise, but at least some of them have made heavy use of U.S. military personnel as couriers, making them traffickers by law.

### **Massage Parlor Circuit**

A former New York law enforcement officer noted that crime groups usually managed a string of massage parlors around the country. Sometimes Korean women who were formerly prostitutes owned the individual massage parlors. Women were rotated from place to place, in order to supply "fresh faces" for the men (Merriman, 2002). According to a police officer from the Vice Unit of the Dallas Police Department, "The women are there just a short time and then move on to the next location. . . . They move from one big city to the next" (interview, September 5, 2002).

In keeping with their close association with U.S. military personnel, many massage parlors with Korean women are located around military bases in the United States. For example, according to representatives from the Polaris Project, there is a heavy concentration of Korean massage parlors in Waldorf, Maryland, close to the large military populations of Andrews Air Force Base, Bolling Air Force Base, the Naval Research Center, and the Pentagon.

One network of Korean massage parlors had a circuit around the Midwest and Southeast. The string of massage parlors ran across the southern seaboard, up the eastern seaboard, and across the Midwest. According to a law enforcement officer who has tracked the massage parlor circuit,

They start the women off in Houston and Dallas. Then they take them east along the southern seaboard. Then they go on to Florida, Georgia, from there, to Ohio, Michigan. We have 3 to 4 towns they are in here: Grand Rapids, Flint, Waterford, and Saginaw. They move them around in vehicles; they never fly. The women spend one month in each place, then on to the next. They want fresh faces. (interview, August 30, 2002)

What happens to women in the massage parlors was described as "horrible, unbelievably terrible" by an NGO representative from the Paul and Lisa Program, interviewed September 5, 2002. Throughout the country, sources reported that women live under similar conditions in most locations. The women have few possessions and live in the massage parlors, usually sleeping on the floor (Merriman, 2002). According to one law enforcement official who was involved in several raids,

When we raided the spa, we found that the women's sleeping quarters upstairs . . . this apartment . . . was not furnished at all . . . there were blankets and sleeping bags all over the place. Almost like a communal type living. Next to the sleeping bag, was a cosmetic bag, handbag. The women slept there, made a small space for themselves next to their sleeping bags. . . . I think they get moved on a lot. So this is a temporary living situation. How they were living was definitely made for ease of mobility. If they closed overnight, they could just pack up and throw everything into a van and just go. (Raymond et al., 2001)

The women seldom left the premises and were required to work all the time:

They don't have access to a vehicle. We've never seen cars parked in the vicinity to indicate that these women are independent to drive out when they please. We've also never observed these women ever venture outside of the premises. I believe that the managers feed, clothe them as they see fit. If they do go out, it is probably an organized outing in the company van. . . . These women were not just walking out the door. (Raymond et al., 2001)

Women were required to work to pay off debts. Even daily expenses for travel and living expenses, referred to as *papkap* or "rice money," were added to the women's debt. In one case in Royal Oak, Michigan, the prosecutor said that in Korea the women's family members were living under threat or she was being used to pay off a family debt. In another case in Rhode Island, the women had to work 16 to 18 hours per day to repay their \$10,000 debt for travel to the United States. A police officer noted that one of the women had cigarette burns on her arm. The club owner provided housing and food for the women, but did not pay them. Any money they made came from tips, which required the women to engage in prostitution (Rockoff, 1998).

Some women in the massage parlors were subjected to high rates of violence. In one case, according to a press release on July 17, 2001, from the United States Attorney's Office in Washington, DC, a man killed a woman by stabbing her 23 times in the face, neck, chest, arms, and hands. A researcher who has done studies on massage parlors in connection with AIDS commented on the level of violence and coercion to which the women are subjected:

I'm aware that many of these women are abused by clients and by their employers. They are required to have sex with several men on a daily basis, and are indebted to their employers. Some are required to pay off debts. Some are under contract for their work, and must work a certain amount of time and [earn] money to meet the requirements of their contract. (Tooru Nemoto, Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, University of California-San Francisco, interview, October 11, 2002)

The crime networks have many ways of preventing the women from leaving. The women believe that if they can make enough money to pay their debt, they will be able to leave and look for other opportunities. This keeps them compliant. According

to an officer in the Houston Vice Division, "They save their money to pay their debt. Then just about the time their debt is paid, someone breaks into the massage parlor and steals their money." The women were told they have to continue working to pay their debt.

In other situations, drugs are used to control the women. A former law enforcement officer in New York commented,

The prevalence of crack and cocaine was a device that a lot of madams used to create some level of obligation. Girls would get addicted to the stuff. Even if there was no original debt going into the situation, debt was incurred by purchasing narcotics. It would be done informally, while they were waiting for customers. They did it because others did it. (interview, October 15, 2002)

A representative from the Rainbow Center who provides assistance for women from massage parlors in New York City said that many women had been physically and verbally abused and had problems with substance abuse.

## **Official Corruption and Trafficking of Women**

There has been widespread official complicity and corruption in the trafficking of women for prostitution. Traditionally, organized crime groups strove to corrupt officials in order to conduct their activities. Transnational trafficking of women is dependent on crossing borders and obtaining the necessary travel and identity documents, so involvement of corrupt officials, who take bribes or assist in providing authentic documents, has been crucial to successful operations. Because prostitution is often viewed as a "victimless crime," police and other officials have been more willing to cooperate with the pimps and traffickers.

In South Korea, police were often complicit in the control of the women by returning escaping women to the bar owners (McMichael, 2002a). Teresa Oh, a social worker who assists women in prostitution reported, "If a Russian or Filipina girl runs away, and the club owner calls the police, the police will go get her—and she will be abused when she's brought back" (McMichael, 2002a). Senior Superintendent Kim Kang-ja, director of the Women and Juvenile Division of the Korean National Police Agency, cited widespread corruption or tolerance of prostitution in clubs around the U.S. bases. She said that "almost all" of the South Korean police and officials responsible for enforcing prostitution laws accept bribes (McMichael, 2002a). She added that if the South Korean law banning consorting with prostitutes was tightly enforced, then "almost all U.S. soldiers would be arrested. Korean police should arrest them, or hand them to the American officers. But it's not actually taking place. Nobody is controlling them" (McMichael, 2002a).

In the United States, a nationwide investigation into Asian American organized crime exposed how corrupt police officers protect and assist the operation of Korean prostitution rings. In 2002, as part of a nationwide crackdown on Asian American

organized crime involving Korean massage parlors, a Sunnyvale, California police officer stood accused of accepting gifts, cash, and sex in exchange for police information and protection for two Korean "hostess bars." In addition, he helped the owners of the club track down women who escaped before paying their debt. On one occasion, he traveled with the owner of the club to Hawaii to threaten a woman with jail or deportation if she did not pay the owner money (Stites, Cronk, & Pittman, 2002).

Several law enforcement officials who were interviewed noted suspicious patterns in the identity documents that the Korean women in the massage parlors had when a raid took place. One officer from the Vice Division of the Houston Police Department noticed that although the women had what appeared to be authentic passports, they were not stamped, which would be required if the women had passed through immigration control. Another official from Oakland County, Michigan, noted that most of the women had driver's licenses issued for the same place. These irregularities or suspicious patterns seemed to indicate that corrupt officials might have been involved in assisting the traffickers or massage parlor crime groups in getting identity documents for the women.

### **U.S. Military, Government, and Federal Law Enforcement Response**

At the time of this study in 2002, when confronted with evidence of U.S. troops using women for prostitution and women being trafficked for prostitution in South Korea, the Department of Defense had two standard responses. The first was to say that engaging in prostitution is a violation of U.S. Military Code of Conduct, thereby stating that they had an official policy against it and that men who engaged in prostitution were in violation of the rules. The Department of Defense's second response was to say it was prevented from taking action in South Korean civilian criminal activity because it would violate South Korea's sovereignty (McMichael, 2002a).

According to a man formerly stationed at the Osan Air Base, South Korea,

I also believe that the Korean government and the United States Forces Korea (USFK) know what is going on and do very little to stop it. The USFK has the military authority to make these places "off-limits" but doesn't unless they find out that prostitution is going on in an establishment. Then they usually make that establishment "off-limits" for a while then it gets taken off their list of "off-limit establishments" and they're back in business again. Prostitution is prohibited to military personnel by the military uniform code of justice but it goes on. (Anonymous, e-mail, May 2001)

The U.S. State Department was on record as saying that U.S. soldiers should not engage in prostitution. Nancy Ely-Raphel, former head of the Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons said, "There's a zero-tolerance policy on the part of our military toward prostitution and towards frequenting brothels. So the military can do a lot about it" (McMichael, 2002c). Yet, in a report released by Saewoomtuh, a South

Korean NGO providing services to military base prostitutes, 84% of male U.S. military personnel admitted to being with a prostitute (Kim, 2000).

In the spring and summer of 2002, exposés on the exploitation of trafficked women around U.S. military bases in South Korea were aired by several news agencies. The reports showed that military police were aware of the activities and patrolled the bars. In response, a number of U.S. Congressmen wrote a letter to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld requesting an investigation. Army Secretary Thomas E. White responded that military police "do not regulate, protect, or support Korean businesses or enterprises in any way" (McMichael, 2002a).

The trafficking of Korean women for prostitution in the United States is not a new phenomenon, and in the past has received periodic federal attention. In 1986, the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations reported on U.S. servicemen's involvement in bringing Korean women into the United States for use in massage parlor prostitution circuits. They identified a pattern of Asian/Asian American organized crime groups using sham marriages to get women into the United States. According to Dan Rinzel, the chief Republican counsel to the subcommittee, nearly all the women entered the United States "by visas obtained through fraudulent marriages to American GIs stationed in Korea" (Yeager, 1994).

In summer 2002, a crackdown by federal agents on Asian organized crime in the United States revealed both the scope of the massage parlor networks and the progress that needs to be made by U.S. authorities in effectively countering trafficking. Eighty-seven warrants were served in California, Michigan, Kentucky, Nevada, Tennessee, Connecticut, Ohio, North Carolina, Texas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Virginia (Associated Press, 2002a). The investigation was initiated 5 years earlier, when one of the massage parlor operators tried to bribe public officials, including a judge (Associated Press, 2002b). This series of cases was investigated from the framework of organized crime, which focused on the crimes of money laundering and bribery, not trafficking in women. Initial comments by FBI and local police that appeared in newspaper stories indicated these women were in classic trafficking conditions: The women were recruited in South Korea and were provided visas by brokers; if visas could not be arranged, the women were flown into Mexico and smuggled across the border; the women were brought to the United States under false pretenses; the women were obligated to repay debts for travel and living expenses by engaging in prostitution; and the women lived in the massage parlors and were only allowed to leave for short periods of time (Associated Press, 2002a, 2002b; Mickle & Palmer, 2002).

While initial investigations by the FBI did not find any evidence of trafficking, screening for trafficking may have failed due to intimidation of the victims by organized crime groups, cultural barriers in communication, and lack of follow-up by law enforcement. One FBI official from Michigan involved with the case believes that trafficking was probably present, and cited lack of prioritization by the FBI as the reason why the screening may have failed and no follow-up was planned. According to a reporter from the *Flint Journal*, calls to newspaper reporters in the towns where

arrests were made indicated that just days after the raids and arrests, the massage parlors were open again (interview, August 7, 2002).

## **Local Law Enforcement Response**

Although a few smaller municipalities have worked vigorously to close massage parlors because of their unpopularity in the community, in larger cities, at the time of this study, there had been little enforcement of laws concerning massage parlors or the establishments reopened within a few days of a raid according to an official from the Dallas Police Department Vice Unit interviewed September 5, 2002. Reasons given by officials from Michigan, Los Angeles, and Houston for lack of enforcement ranged from massage parlors being a lower priority than other types of prostitution or organized crime, lack of personnel and resources because of decreases in the size of vice units, and legal challenges to ordinances regulating massage parlors.

Law enforcement personnel in the United States were generally unaware that Korean women in massage parlors were potential victims of trafficking. The women were usually treated as criminals, as in Flushing, New York, where the women were arrested or in Providence, Rhode Island, where one victim with cigarette burns was arrested and deported. Many police recognized the slavery-like conditions under which the women work, but were unaware of the concept of trafficking in persons as a human rights violation and the legal status of a trafficking victim. Women's possession of U.S. driver's licenses or other documents made victimization harder to recognize. Prosecution of the victims further victimized the women and shielded the traffickers from being held accountable under U.S. antitrafficking law.

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. military bases in South Korea form a hub for the transnational trafficking of women from the Asia Pacific and Eurasia to South Korea and the United States. Over the past six decades, U.S. troops have used an estimated 1 million Korean women in prostitution. During the 1990s, increasing numbers of women from the Asian Pacific and Eurasia, particularly the Philippines and Russia, were trafficked into bars and brothels around the military bases in South Korea. From South Korea, women were trafficked, frequently by U.S. servicemen, to the United States where they were used in prostitution on massage parlor circuits. Asian, Russian, and Korean American organized crime groups cooperated with each other to run the trafficking networks. The number of different groups or gangs that were involved, how they were interlinked, or how they cooperated is unknown. They existed to make money by supplying women to meet the demand for prostitution by U.S. military personnel in South Korea and men in the United States.

A significant number of Korean women in massage parlors in the United States were former wives of U.S. servicemen. Some of the marriages were legitimate, but after being abandoned or divorced, Korean women were vulnerable to being recruited for the massage parlor circuit. In other cases, the marriage was a sham arranged by organized crime networks as a method to get Korean women into the United States.

The widespread tolerance of prostitution in bars around the U.S. bases in South Korea and the massage parlors around the United States fuel the demand for women, resulting in increased trafficking of women. In South Korea, if there were too many negative incidents relating to prostitution in the bars, they were listed as off-limits to the troops for a certain period of time; later, the ban would be lifted. In the United States, a few smaller communities permanently closed massage parlors, but in most large cities, there was little investigation or effective enforcement of laws. Most of the massage parlors reopened within days of police raids.

In both South Korea and the United States, some members of the military, police, and social service agencies recognize the abusive, exploitative, and often slavery-like conditions under which the women live. Yet, the women were still usually treated as criminals instead of victims. In South Korea, the foreign women were deported. In the United States, with a few exceptions, most police raids on massage parlors focused on arresting the women.

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