

Adolescent Prostitution in Korea  
: Survey Results and Implications

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## I. Introduction

As a form of child exploitation, adolescent prostitution is an impending problem in every corner of the world. Although child abuse happens more often in developing countries, adolescent prostitution occurs regardless of the economic state of the countries involved. Adolescent prostitution is a particularly serious form of child abuse as adolescents involved in prostitution are normally much weaker in their economical, physical and psychological states than adults. That explains why some countries including Korea prohibit and punish it severely.

One of the reasons I became interested in this issue is that adolescent prostitution has been rapidly increased with the development of information technology and the internet (Lee, 2007; Yun, 2005). More importantly, the average age of the adolescent prostitute has decreased remarkably (Yun, 2007). As an adolescent myself, I feel the urge in finding a solution to protect them, and in fact, I feel that this is a way for me to protect my friends from danger.

After having read many articles written by Korean scholars, I felt it meaningful to conduct a survey on the perception of Korean adolescents in regards to the issue, not from that of adult expert, and find some protective measures based on their ideas. On the other hand, I wanted to verify if adolescent prostitution is a real problem among adolescents as many scholars and survey insist.

The survey was conducted in the middle school where I once was a student. I met with teachers to explain and ask for their help with the survey. Under their permit, I selected two classes in each grade and explained to the students the purpose of the survey and asked their cooperation in filling out the questionnaire. The questionnaire deals with the students' general perception of sex, opinions on prostitution, and finally 'Won-jo-kyo-je', a long-term prostitution relationship mostly between an old man and an adolescent girl. In total, 228 students answered the questionnaire, and 49.8% of them are male. The 1st graders represent 34.9%, and the second and third graders represent 35.8%, and 29.4% respectively.

## II. Results of the survey

### 1. Channels of sex related knowledge

On average, 43.4% of the students picked 'school education' as their main source of knowledge on sex. As we can see from this, school education is the most important source. Its importance, however, decreases as the grade increases. On the other hand, the role of peers and friends increases as the grade does, and takes on more particular importance for the third graders. It's worrying to see that the role of the parents and school in the distribution of sex related knowledge loses ground as students grow old. What is more worrisome is the fact that the students find the sex education class not very useful: with 71% of the respondents claiming that the school education is not useful.

[Table 1] Source of sex related knowledge

Source of sex related knowledge	Percentage (%)			
	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	total
School	51.3	39.5	36.8	43.4
Friends	20.0	31.6	36.8	28.5
Internet	10.0	23.7	23.5	18.9
Books	8.8	3.9	1.5	4.8
Parents	10.0	1.3	1.5	4.4

### 2. Watching pornography

35.7% of the respondents have seen pornography or porno-novels. When we break down the numbers according to the grades, the proportion of students watching pornography increases rapidly from 21.1% for the 1st graders to 55.7% for the third grades. And the proportion of students regularly watching pornography increases with the grades: it represents 12.2% for the first graders and 24.2% for the third graders.

[Table 2] Watching pornography how often

	Percentage (%)			
	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	total
Never	87.8	82.9	75.8	82.4
once a week	5.4	11.8	14.5	10.2
two-three times a week	2.70	3.9	4.8	3.7
Everyday	4.1	1.3	4.8	3.7

### 3. Sexual relationship under marriage

The students were found to be more conservative in their views on sexual relationships. Over half of the total students claimed that sexual intercourse has to be performed only after marriage, and only with the spouse. Also, about 77.3% of students judged sexual performance between friends without marriage to be disparaging.

[Table 3] Sexual relationship with or without marriage

	Percentage (%)			
	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	total
only with married partner	64.3	50.0	60.3	57.5
not necessary	36.7	50.0	39.7	42.5

This data matches the explanation that some female adolescents are less adverse to prostitution after they have been raped, or oddly enough start prostitution themselves because of their conservative opinion about sex; they believe that virginity is sacred, and that losing their virginity lowers their value. After their virginity is taken away in some way, they don't feel that they should protect their body as much as they used to. And it is not only these girls who have this stereotype, but also Korean society itself that enforces it. In Korea, sexual intercourse before marriage is uncommon and it is a general notion that a girl should always maintain her virginity before marriage. However, with men, this stereotype doesn't apply as much. There are two important downfalls to this convention. First in terms of the adolescents involved, it is harder for them to stop the prostitution and start a new life, because they feel as if they have broken a rule. It is the same for girls who have been raped. Second, this strict stereotype has blocked free sexual relationships in some ways, and turned the sexual relationship into a form of purchase that now even involves adolescents.

#### 4. About prostitution

The absolute majority of the respondents(92.7%) think that having sex with an unknown adult is wrong. And 77.4% of them find it a bad thing to have sex for money.

[Table 4] Sex for money

	Percentage (%)
wrong and bad thing	77.4
free choice	22.6

Interestingly, the number of students who considered sex between strangers to be wrong was more than the number of students who considered sex for money to be blamable. It is plausible that the students regarded the two cases much differently. When two strangers have sex, it could mean that their intention is the sexual relationship itself. However, when someone has sex with someone else for money, the intention is for the money and the sex is being used as a route to obtain it. So the students preferred the situation where money was the goal instead of sex, and sex as a tool rather than as an enjoyment. Students might have also felt some kind of sympathy for the situation to have sex for money; someone who needs money so badly, that he/she would have to have sex for it was pitied by the students.

The students who participated in the research were all between 13 to 15 years old. Thus, it was very shocking to realize that 6 of the students surveyed had already had sex with somebody. And the proportion of students has seen their friends having sex for money was 8.6%.

[Table 5] Sexual experience

	Percentage (%)(person)
have a intercourse with somebody	2.7% (6)
have seen friends having sex for money	8.6% (19)
have an offer to prostitute	4.6% (10)

Even worse, 16% of them having such friends responded they would ask about their experience with curiosity, and 2% of them even answered they would propose to go out with them the next time.

Also for the question inquiring the possible reason for engaging in prostitution, 72% answered it would be out of curiosity and 2% answered it would be for spending time. Such reaction would be due to the imperfect knowledge on prostitution and indirect information gained from the internet, which tend to stimulate people's curiosity. As the students do not know much about the prostitution, they feel no different when facing the issue and are curious about it. This is again due to the lack of comprehensive education at school. It seems like only general sexual information and the topic of sexual harassment are taught. To stop students from starting child prostitution out of curiosity, the right kind of information has to be delivered to them through public education. Although it is the adolescents who are involved in the sexual abuse, they don't have a clue to what is going on.

##### 5. About 'Won-jo-kyo-je'

'Won-jo-kyo-je' is a long-term prostitution relationship mostly between an older man and an adolescent girl. It is said that the adolescent feel less guilty under this form of prostitution in that the relationship is not a one time incident, and they receive an allowance (Rho and Kim, 2003; Kim and Kim, 2002). In sum, won-jo-kyo-je feels less like prostitution to adolescents because it feels akin to a relationship.

Some of the students didn't even know the word 'won-jo-kyo-je' . Although they don't know many facts about it itself, many of them were familiar with its existence since 4.6% of the students said they had a friend engaged in the relationship, and 11.9% of the students answered to have not witnessed it themselves but heard about it. This shows that 'Won-jo-kyo-je' is not very popular among middle students, but is not a minor issue we can ignore either.

[Table] Know somebody having 'Won-jo-kyo-je'

	Percentage (%) (person)
Yes	4.6% (10)
No	83.0% (181)
have not seen but heard	11.9% (26)

Interestingly, 50% of the respondents answered that ordinary prostitution is worse than 'Won-jo-kyo-je' while 26.8% of them think that 'Won-jo-kyo-je' is worse than ordinary prostitution. This can be explained by the fact that adolescents find in 'Won-jo-kyo-je', a relationship that involves more than just money, something like an allowance, gift etc. Students think that both the adult and adolescent in 'Won-jo-kyo-je' have to be blamed, showing a certain responsibility from the adolescent's point of view.

Lastly, the most clear statistic gained from the research, was about the solution to this kind of sex abuse. 51% of the students replied that law enforcement would be the most effective solution.

[Table ] Effective measures for protection

	Percentage (%) (person)
legal enforcement	50.7% (110)
financial aid and scholarship	12.9% (28)

conversation partner	23.5% (51)
teachers' care	12.9% (28)

The students rely mostly on the power of law, and think society can give a lot of aid to weak individuals. Unfortunately, there was a new law made in 2000, that was aimed to protect the adolescents. It stated that when convicted of prostitution, only the adult involved will be punished. However, this led to the manipulation of the law by the adolescents and the longer term relationships between the same people afraid of being caught. In this case, the law didn't contribute much to solving the core problem which is the actual care and understanding for these young adults. Other than that, 24% of the students picked communication with the adolescents involved in prostitution, as being the best solution.

### III. Discussion

Upon researching among the students even younger than myself, I tried to represent their point of view from their perspective. Although there was much to learn about this serious problem, students didn't seem to know a lot about it themselves. It was evident that proper education for them is needed as the age of students involved in prostitution is getting lower. The increase in the role of peers and decrease in the role of education in higher grades support this idea. Beside the facts and statistics, more profound analysis explaining how and why such problem result are needed.

Appropriate education in schools about sexual knowledge is significant because the students are some day going to become adults themselves: some of them teachers, parents, and even participants in prostitution including "won-jo-kyo-je." . Thus, it is in

the hands of the students right now to learn correctly about their situation. Although education is such an essential part in solving the problem, it is not incorporated in schools enough because students already exposed to pornographies are not affected by the education much.

The need for right education for the students in Korea can never be emphasized enough. However, there is question that has to be solved first: How much is to be taught, and at what age?

Another important matter that has to be discussed is the increase in the role of peers in regarding this issue. They are not only the source of information for the students, but also the people who exercise a lot of influence. Thus, in accordance with the emphasis on public education, schools should direct this influence in the right direction. For example, friends can naturally become students' counselors and psychological supporters. Actually, the second largest of the possible solutions the students picked was the 'conversational partner' for the adolescent prostitutes. This highlights how much students appreciate someone they can talk to. If there are some clubs or groups formed for the students such as adolescent prostitutes to get comfort from friends and share their hardships, they would easily start a new life.

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