Women, gender, and social change in South Korea since 1945

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Introduction

In the decades since the end of the Japanese colonial period, gender has been a central factor in social structure and social change in South Korea. Legacies of colonial gender formations lingered long into the post-liberation period, but gendered social role expectations, images, and daily practices for Korean men and women have also been transformed in dramatic ways. These changes themselves have generated reactions that have sought to reconstitute imagined traditions or which have advocated new gender formations. Any attempt to capture this complexity—and the scholarship of these processes—in a single essay will be no more than an overview, and a partial one at that. We have taken this dynamism as our point of reference; the changes to—and because of—gender are taken as guideposts to the more general issue of transformations in South Korean society and culture.

Our themes include considerations of household structure and the divisions between public and private in terms of gendered expectations, roles, and practices around work and human relationships; feminist activism; and sexuality and gender. We will attend to material as well as discursive and expressive domains in the local production and embodied experience of gender in South Korea. And while the scholarship of gender in South Korea in the twentieth and early twenty-first century exhibits some differences in interpretations, much of the literature points to a consensus regarding the circumstances of and pressures on women (and men), and of the enduring importance of gender in structuring social relations throughout this period.

Gender, labor, education, and home

The Japanese colonial experience left a legacy upon which structures and concepts around gender were formed in the first years of Korean independence. With the sudden departure of the Japanese in 1945 and the simultaneous division of the peninsula, Koreans in the southern zone faced instability in governance, economy, and culture. Displaced Koreans returning from abroad strained the resources and social fabric of the countryside and swelled city neighborhoods. Politics under the American military government in Korea and, from 1948, under the Republic of Korea,
were contentious, and the outbreak of war in June 1950 threw the population into even deeper chaos. Established patterns of housing, work, family relationships, and care were disrupted. This social instability led to improvisations that often undermined existing gendered expectations and roles, and in reaction, gender itself became an explicit discursive domain for the reinforcement of what were thought of as appropriate and “traditional” Korean norms against “modern” aspirations of independence and individualism (H.J. Cho 1995; 2002).

In particular, during the active hostilities between 1950 and 1953 and in the war’s aftermath, when most able-bodied adult men were engaged in the fighting, captured, or in hiding, many women and children had to work outside the home to support their families. Women’s labor force participation rate doubled during the war from less than 30 percent to more than 60 percent, and remained elevated throughout the 1950s (H.S. Kim 2009). Farming was the most common type of paid work women engaged in outside the home, followed by work in small factories, and peddling. Although the work activities of war widows were viewed as a positive adjustment to their unfortunate circumstances, the simultaneous increase in married women’s participation in the labor force was, in contrast, portrayed as a sign of their husbands’ inadequacies and as a perversion of social norms (H.S. Kim 2009). This inconsistency is just one of many discursive conundrums that structured South Korean women’s choices in the mid-twentieth century, generating social dilemmas for women regarding which behaviors were to be considered appropriate in terms of gender as well as other factors such as class, age, and social position.

From the 1950s on, international development consultants and the ROK government agreed that low-cost, skilled labor was the key to South Korea’s economic future. Park Chung-Hee’s industrialization policies in the 1960s coordinated education, infrastructure, finance, and international relations to foster export-led economic development characterized by a partnership between an authoritarian state and powerful conglomerates known as chaebol. Central to this strategy was the recruitment of workers from the countryside to new industrial sites. Backed by government propaganda soliciting “industrial soldiers,” both men and women were increasingly drawn into the net of paid employment, a significant shift from family-based farm work and self-employment (S. Moon 2005; Cho and Koo 1983; Koo 1990). In most cases, the jobs men and women took reflected existing ideas of gender-appropriate role differentiation, although those notions and the specific labor positions associated with men or women changed over time. In the manufacturing sector, women predominated in “light” industry (for example, textiles, wigs, food, clothing, and electronics) while men monopolized jobs in construction and the heavy and chemical industry (particularly after Park’s emphasis on this sector beginning in the 1970s), and men held nearly all supervisorial positions in all factories (Cho and Koo 1983; Koo 1990; K.A. Park 1993). The experience of young women in factory work was shaped by male surveillance of the production floor, and, for rural female migrants, close monitoring of their comings and goings in factory dormitories or dilapidated housing complexes adjacent to the factory (Ogle 1990; Spencer 1988). The conditions in the factories themselves were infamous, including long hours and grueling shiftwork, extremely low wages (legally stratified by gender and, for married men, augmented to recognize men’s role in family support), unsafe work environments, sexual harassment, and abusive management tactics (Chun 2003; H.M. Kim 1997; Ogle 1990; Spencer 1988). The young women factory workers were also haunted by money concerns, family demands for support (often to fund investment in their own brothers’ cultural capital), and the pressure to get married and leave work. While the work of these young women was lauded as a contribution to national development, social anxiety around the perceived independence of these women was reflected in gossip and suspicions regarding their chastity. Nor was their foothold in employment firm: in the 1970s and early 1980s, global pressures on production costs, combined with a strategic shift to a greater emphasis on heavy
industry ("men’s work”) increased the job insecurity and tarnished the status of young women factory workers (H.M. Kim 2005; Y.J. Park 1990). Moreover, not all urban job seekers were able to find work in manufacturing (and manufacturing work was strongly skewed to a younger labor force [Chang 1994]). Many women tried to scrape together a living selling things, serving food, and cleaning houses (along with sexual labor – see below). Economic fits and starts, combined with an ideological preference for men’s job security over women’s, shaped women’s frequently-interrupted work histories in the ROK’s first decades.

Although industry held a privileged place in South Korean economic development, it depended upon the rural sector not only as a source of labor and affordable sustenance, but also as a site of imagination against which the dramatic difference of “modernity” could be contrasted. At its inception, the ROK was essentially an agricultural nation with a small urban population; the targeted recruitment of young workers from South Korean rural communities in the 1960s and 1970s inevitably altered the social fabric of the countryside. Between 1960 and 1985, the portion of South Koreans living outside urban areas fell from 61 to 35 percent, and the remaining rural population was increasingly composed of elderly residents (Korea Statistical Yearbook). Historically, women in the countryside had worked inside the home and alongside men in the fields, producing textiles for tax payments, making food and clothing for the family, and assisting in the raising of crops (Chang 1994). During the period of national industrialization, however, mechanization of some “male” farming tasks and the associated shifting of more manual farming tasks from men to women, along with the androcentric social impacts of Park Chung-Hee’s Saemaul Undong (New Village Movement) affected the gender balance in the countryside, as women were burdened with more responsibilities that were increasingly viewed as less modern than those men held (Shin Gills 1999; O. Cho 1998; Abelmann 1996). The distance (both geographic as well as imaginative) between new urbanites and the villages of their birth fostered nostalgia for an idealized Korean farm home tended by an iconic, hard-working, self-sacrificing mother. This became a standard trope in propaganda, literature, and film from the 1960s through the present, against which the behaviors of (non-fictional) contemporary urban women were often judged (McHugh and Abelmann 2005; Abelmann 2003). Although rural life was materially and socially transformed through this relationship with South Korea’s urbanization, becoming more intensively patriarchal and more impoverished, it was simultaneously presented and cherished as “authentic” Korean culture.

Hidden in this ideal was the fact that farm work was the only sector where women customarily were understood to be engaged in productive labor throughout their lives (H.J. Cho 1988; H.J Cho 2000; Kendall 2002b). While by the mid-1960s, it had become not just accepted but expected that young women would seek work, married women’s participation in the paid workforce continued to generate ambivalence in media and in public opinion through the 1980s. Despite the presentation of young women workers as contributing to the national economy, engaging in paid work after marriage was widely perceived as a sign of a husband’s failure to provide for his family. Most women themselves hoped that their stint as paid workers would be a temporary phase in their lives (S. Moon 2005; S.K. Kim 1997). Indeed, except for those in the agricultural sector, most women exited the paid labor force as soon as they could after marriage. In contrast to men, who were expected to earn a living, women’s employment beyond young adulthood was considered an anomaly. This, however, masked an important truth: despite the ideal of stay-at-home housewives (an ideal already widely embraced in the 1960s), many married women re-entered the labor force (often after their children started school), yielding an employment rate of between 40 and 50 percent for married women throughout this period. The jobs married women took were often contingent or part-time positions (inferior to those available to them before marriage), but perhaps more important to the reinforcement
of the ideology of a strict gender dichotomy of work and home responsibilities was the fact that married women’s work was portrayed as anomalous at least through the 1980s (H. Cho 2005).

The gendered categorical differences in employment expectations and opportunities in South Korea affected men as strongly as they affected women: working (regardless of the type: farm work, manufacturing, intellectual, or professional labor) was seen as constitutive of manhood. It was constructed as a social expectation as well as a patriotic duty of all men (S. Moon 2005; J.J.H. Lee 2002). The recruitment of rural men into the urban labor force in the 1960s paralleled the recruitment of rural women into factories, although men were steered to heavier production tasks and factory supervision, as well as construction, hauling, transport, and professional careers. The shape of masculine work was framed by several factors, including the push factor of widespread poverty and poor job prospects in the 1950s and 1960s. S. Moon (2005) also carefully documents the effect of the military as a dominant institution, particularly during the regime of Park Chung Hee. Conscription was (and remains) universal for young men (with limited exceptions). This male-only domain of activity had multiple effects on the gendering of South Korean society. Young men experienced a harsh environment characterized by hazing, hierarchy, and hard work that shaped ideas of Korean masculinity. At the same time, men reaped a lifetime of economic and social rewards for their service through direct benefits (veteran status accorded hiring preferences or was required of job candidates for many positions) as well as by the indirect benefits of the social connections forged in military units and the belief that their military service demonstrated discipline and patriotism. Military service thus was a key element in the establishment of gendered social and symbolic hierarchy throughout the second half of the twentieth century in South Korea.

The chaebol-dominated export orientation of much of the South Korean economy from the 1960s through the mid-1990s also shaped the culture of employment. While all sectors were highly gender-segregated in hiring and work roles (Chang 1994), chaebol culture reflected military practice in its androcentrism, discipline and emphasis on hierarchy (Janelli with Yim 1993). South Koreans averaged among the world’s highest number of hours worked per week for much of this period (Koo 1990); married men were often away from their homes for much of the day, interacting with their families briefly on their one day of rest. The demand that workers arrive early and stay late was incompatible with two-parent working families, particularly as commercial childcare was poorly developed and urban households rarely included grandparents who might help out with childcare, but complaints that men did not share more domestic responsibilities were blunted by the media’s focus in the 1980s and 1990s on what was deemed an epidemic of stress-related illness among working men, emphasizing the patriotic self-sacrifice of men to the national call to work (J.J.H. Lee 2002). The exclusion of increasingly-educated married women from well-remunerated white-collar employment in the 1970s and 1980s facilitated the channeling of their human capital into childrearing. In these ways, the gendered configuration of employment expectations influenced the gendered dichotomy of domestic roles and vice versa, and together, these fed growing class differences.

Women’s sexual work contributed in another significant way to the symbolic marking of the South Korean gender binary (S.H. Lee 2002): The market for commodified sexual services had expanded in the context of rapid urbanization in the 1960s and 1970s: as individuals left the oversight of their rural families and sought work in the cities, sex work evolved as a significant sector both for women’s employment (particularly in the context of high rates of unemployment and low pay for women) and for men’s consumption. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, South Korean men’s demand escalated for high-end kisaeng entertainment, street prostitution, “room salons,” and sexualized services in coffee shops and barber shops (Lie 1995).
E.H. Kim (1998) documented how the normalization of commodified sexual services reinforced male bonding (in particular, in the context of group visits to room salons) and demarcated class hierarchies; naturalized the superiority of men over women; and reproduced divisions among women according to their ability to fulfill rules of chastity (E.H. Kim 1998). Moreover, men and women accepted married men’s consumption of sexual services as “normal,” but judged female sex providers as lacking virtue and, in the context of the backlash against women’s central roles in consumer culture in the 1980s and 1990s, of excessive materialism. In addition to the domestic sexual services market, South Korean women also worked as prostitutes and sexualized entertainers in “camptowns” established through shady arrangements coordinating ROK government oversight, the US military, and sex industry professionals (K. Moon 1997), and after the 1965 Normalization Treaty with Japan, as prostitutes deployed to draw foreign currency by serving Japanese men visiting South Korea on sex tours facilitated by the ROK (Lie 1995). The fetishization of young women office workers (particularly in the chaebol), while not directly sexual, occurred in the context of—and reinforced—gender allocation of work positions and the normalization of married men’s employment-based sexual entertainment culture (Janelli with Yim 1993; E.H. Kim 1998).

Gendered patterns of employment were closely connected to the course of educational development during the decades under consideration. Formal public education had penetrated Korean society slowly and unevenly during the colonial period, and in 1945, just 22 percent of Koreans were literate, with illiteracy much higher among women than men (Seong 2009). Expanding education became a priority in the first years of independence for political and economic reasons. ROK educational policies accorded with international values embracing broad educational access throughout the society, yet the differential uptake of educational opportunities reveals gender and class differences persisting to the end of the twentieth century. Primary school attendance was mandated for boys and girls in 1950 and was made tuition-free in 1960. After this, rates of educational attainment rose quickly, although gender disparities persisted (particularly in population measures which included all age groups). In 1960, for example, the population of South Korean women (including all ages) averaged only 2.9 years of formal schooling, compared with 4.8 years for men; by 1980 the respective figures were 6.6 years and 8.7 years (Seong 2009). Given the financial and social costs of sending children to school (even without tuition fees and the costs of textbook and equipment, “gifts” to teachers, and charges for extra tutoring added up to serious financial burdens for poor households), family decisions regarding schooling were influenced by assumptions about not just the financial but the moral purpose and effects of literacy and education on boys and girls, as well as persistent gendered differences in the monetary return on educational investment (Seth 2002). Even after primary school attendance had become universal, into the 1970s girls were less likely to attend academic or technical vocational secondary school than were boys. There was also a clear trend for all but the highest-class families to invest more in boys’ education relative to girls’, with farming families investing the least in educating their daughters well into the 1980s (Seong 2009). Over time, as overall education levels rose, gender differentials in primary and secondary graduation rates diminished—although boys were steered to more academic or technical courses of study (Chang 1994).

In contrast to primary and secondary levels of education, college remained a gender-differentiated space into the new millennium. In the first decades of the new republic, South Korean colleges and universities produced a superfluity of (mostly male) college graduates. The high rates of unemployment among degree-holders generated unrest in a key demographic group, and the Park Chung Hee Administration attempted (with only partial success) to reduce college enrollments and shift educational fervor to vocational subjects in the 1960s. One legacy of the
low demand in the labor market for (male) college graduates was the relatively low proportion of women in the population of college students (as late as the 1990s, twice as many men as women were enrolled in higher education), as well as a presumption that women’s college attendance was for personal enrichment rather than professional training. Labor-market demand for university-educated women was weak, particularly in the context of masculinized workplace culture (S. Moon 2005; H.M. Kim 2005). And while many women trained in professional fields such as education, medicine, and business in the period between the 1960s and the 1990s, a significant fraction of women attending universities saw their own education as preparation for marriage and childrearing (M.H. Kim 1995; Cho 1998; Nelson 2000; Park and Abelmann 2004).

Indeed, childrearing and the educational success of her children remained a key measure of a woman’s aptitude throughout the second half of the twentieth century, particularly (although not exclusively) for middle- and upper-middle-class women. Shunted from the employment market, educated middle-class women were structurally and culturally encouraged to dedicate their efforts to fostering their children’s success (H.J. Cho 1995; H.J. Cho 1998). This goal required women to cultivate and mobilize a complex network of family members, friends and acquaintances for information, influence, and, often, financing of investments in the stock or real estate markets. The work of middle-class class reproduction was so multifaceted and time-consuming that women with college and advanced degrees who did pursue professional careers expressed concerns about their inability to fulfill their responsibilities as wives and mothers because of time and role conflicts (Nelson 2000; Y.E. Kim 1998; Lett 1998). Married women were also expected to perform the principle caretaking roles for their husbands’ parents, including frequent telephone contact and visits, preparation of foods, and arranging for health care (M.H. Kim 1996; H.J. Cho 2002). In fact, much of the scholarship on urban life in South Korea during this period indicates that while the specific content of gendered role expectations changed over time, the caring burden did not diminish for women. By the 1970s, women in their prime years of adulthood were encumbered with multiple expectations: to care for their in-laws as well as their own parents; to raise successful children; to support their husbands’ work outside the home by providing a peaceful and rejuvenating environment at home; to present the appropriate image to others through informed and careful consumer choices; and to manage the household budget, often including bringing in money through outside paid work, self-employment, or investment income. These activities – time-intensive and demanding multiple cultural competencies – also drove a wider gulf between wealthier and poorer families, demarcated by class-specific behaviors and yielding significant financial and social returns on investments among families that could afford them (Nelson 2006; H.J. Cho 1995; Park and Abelmann 2004).

This intensive work of domestic and social reproduction was facilitated by a dramatic transformation in fertility and family structure. A post-liberation and post-war baby boom in the 1950s alarmed ROK planners and international aid advisors, and led to the 1962 launch of the far-reaching National Family Planning Program (DiMoia 2008; E.S. Kim 1997). The program quickly exceeded expectations: the average number of lifetime births per woman fell from around six in 1960, to just over four by 1975, to three by the later 1970s, and dropped below replacement levels by the mid-1980s (D.S. Kim 1994). Fewer children at home increased the maternal focus on each child, and the monetary and financial costs of childrearing and the competition for mother-facilitated school success reinforced the expectation for women to invest heavily in their children’s achievements (H.J. Cho 1995). The falling birthrate had other implications. In combination with the cultural preference for sons, the reduction in the ideal number of children led to markedly skewed birth rates in the 1980s and 1990s. Each birth became a high-stakes lottery, and evidence suggests widespread selective abortion of female fetuses. By 1990 the overall
gender ratio at birth was the world’s highest, at 117 boys per 100 girls overall, with more skewed ratios for first-born and later-born children (Park and Cho 1995). In response, in 1991 the government instituted a crackdown against doctors’ illegal use of ultrasound to determine fetal sex. Media spread warnings about boys who would grow up unable to find wives. These factors, combined with strengthened bonds between adult women and their aging parents (themselves related to the political structure of eldercare built upon the expectation that adult women would act as primary caregivers to aging South Korea family members and the proximity of second-generation urban residents to their own parents), increased the value of daughters and helped to shift the birthrates back to near normal range by the later 2000s.

Democratization and increasing prosperity ushered in a decade of optimism about social change in the late 1980s. The passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1988 was a largely symbolic victory, criticized from the beginning as addressing only the most explicit causes of economic inequality. Yet a favorable global economy supported expanding employment opportunities, creating new openings for women to work and to take on higher-profile public positions. In the context of the elimination of restrictions on international travel and the cessation of state media censorship, South Korea grew more cosmopolitan in its outlook. Greater numbers of Seoul-based international corporations hired college-educated South Korean women, setting an example for local businesses. These advances made the misogynist backlash following the Asian Financial Crisis all the harder to bear (Song 2009). In the economic crash, employment contracted and employment security all but disappeared. Media focused on the tragedy of out-of-work and homeless men, emphasizing again the incongruence of masculinity and unemployment; working women were urged to abandon their jobs to allow men to retake their rightful place in society (Song 2009). As in the past (Nelson 2006), South Korean women were held responsible in public discourse for the breakdown of social norms. The falling birthrate, increase in divorce, and rising numbers of unmarried women were once more attributed to women’s inappropriate or selfish choices.11

Taken as a whole, the literature on the incorporation of South Korean women into the workforce shows that beginning in the 1950s, most women participated at some point in their lives in paid employment, and that many of these women worked in some capacity for most of their adult lives. Yet the effect of women’s labor has not been seen to have increased women’s autonomy or rights as much as might be expected; through the twentieth century, South Korean women remained subject to gendered discrimination in the processes of preparation for employment, as well as in expectations for their work, employment opportunities, and in remuneration and security of employment. Moreover, family care work remained a nearly exclusively feminine domain, demanding time and multiple skills, with strong implications for the mutual production of both class and gender. The identification of mothers with their children’s educational, matrimonial, and career success in the context of competitive, compressed development undermined the energy for political critique of patriarchy (H.J. Cho 1998, 2000). Given these ongoing practices, women’s educational achievements and employment success has been seen as having ironically reinforced gendered stereotypes in South Korea (Won 2005; Han and Ling 1998).

Feminist activism and social change

To a great extent, the political struggles undertaken by activists around gender inequality in the first decades after liberation were framed as part of the efforts of national modernization and development, or were subsumed by democratization movements (Hur 2011; Chun 2003; Jones 2006; Kim and Choi 1998; Lee and Chin 2007). In the months immediately following liberation
from Japanese colonial rule, the United States Army military government in Korea viewed Korean political activists in their governance zone with suspicion, and quickly squelched the brief revival of women’s socialist activism, along with other leftist political organizing (Hur 2011), although the American promotion of gender equality under the law is reflected in the 1948 ROK Constitution mandating universal suffrage and equal rights for men and women. Political and cultural suppression of open criticism of society or government continued through the administrations of Lee Sung Man (1948–1960), Park Chung Hee (1961–1979), and Chun Doo Hwan (1980–1988). During these four decades, fundamental criticism of patriarchy in the South Korean economy or political process was subject to state repression, but calls for moderate improvements in the circumstances of women were viewed as both indicators of and tools for the modernization of the nation. Liberal forms of women’s advocacy were generally construed by government leaders (and international donors and advisors) as advancing the national political and economic interests, and as such often were not only tolerated but, in some cases, were fostered or supported by the ROK government itself. Influenced by prevailing international development theories (and the international assistance and resources that came with them), principal reform objectives included opening greater educational and employment opportunities for women as well as – particularly in the 1960s and 1970s – providing effective technologies for and knowledge of family planning (DiMoia 2008).

In the 1950s and 1960s, several institutions, including the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), the Korean Association of University Women, and the Korean Center for Family Law (established in 1922, 1950, and 1954, respectively), provided the dominant framework for women’s reform-oriented activism. Other significant groups in this period included the Korean National Mother’s Association (established 1958) and the Korean Federation of Housewives’ Clubs (established 1963), which focused their efforts on issues of family planning, children’s education, consumer rights, and domestic labor. The Korean National Council of Women (KNCW), founded in 1959, served to coordinate efforts and allocate resources across these women’s interest groups (Palley 1990). KNCW supported, and was supported by, the Park and Chun Administrations and their authoritarian policies (Hur 2011; Suh 2012), contributing to an estrangement of critical social activists from a focus on women’s concerns.

Alongside these government “women’s” programs and sanctioned institutional actors, the more radical political efforts of women were largely subsumed by the broader labor and leftist movements of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s. As discussed above, large numbers of young women were recruited into factory work in the 1960s and 1970s, in part because they were presumed to be temporary workers whose wages supplemented their family income, and so they were expected to make fewer demands for better pay or work circumstances than would men. In fact, however, from the 1960s, women were actively engaged in efforts to form labor unions, and although organized labor’s chief focus was on universal (non-gendered) workers’ rights, women workers often attempted to address gender-specific concerns (such as unequal pay and unequal opportunities, as well as sexual harassment) through union advocacy (Chun 2003; H.M. Kim 2005; S.K. Kim 1997; Ogle 1990). Women workers and women labor activists faced direct repression from male management, however, who aggressively resisted pressures to negotiate with women. The events following the election of a woman as the nation’s first female labor union president at the Tongil Textile Company in 1972 are indicative of the intersecting conflicts over economic and gendered control of workplace politics. Tongil management, uncomfortable with both the gender and politics of the new union leadership, continually harassed the female union leaders and attempted unsuccessfully to undermine the next three union election cycles.12 Management used shop-floor harassment, verbal slurs, and violence in the six-year-long struggle with the union, which ultimately resulted in the disbanding of the Tongil union. Just one year
later, in 1979, the death of a woman worker participating in a strike at the YH Trading company further highlighted the vulnerability of women workers to labor exploitation as well as violent repression; news of this particular tragedy circulated widely and contributed to the agitation that led to the coup d’état against President Park (H.M. Kim 2005; S.K. Kim 1997).

Women’s activism was constrained, however, by the shifting political and economic circumstances of the period. The anti-communist atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s, along with President Park’s embrace of a developmentalist state-business partnership, provided the ideological foundations for the suppression of worker agitation. Moreover, widespread unemployment throughout the 1960s undermined public sympathy for the complaints of employed workers. The decade that followed was particularly difficult for women in industry; the 1971 emergency decree suspended basic rights of collective bargaining and collective action, while overinvestment in heavy and chemical industries in the 1970s squeezed light industries and smaller businesses where most women were employed, resulting in intensified exploitation of women workers (H.M. Kim 2005). The increasingly radical tactics of labor activists in the 1980s reflected both the closer cooperation of student activists and labor activists, as well as a strategic move toward intensified confrontational politics in the context of the Chun Doo Hwan regime. While students, intellectuals, organizers and workers held differing opinions about tactics, strategies, and goals, nevertheless, for most activists, the specific problems workers faced as women were considered secondary to the goal of ending the era of military dictatorship. Women workers and students were drawn into activities that reflected universalist notions of citizens and workers’ issues, without much sustained consideration of gender as a factor in labor oppression. Moreover, men in union leadership positions often marginalized women delegates, and disregarded women’s demands to end wage discrimination and sexual harassment at work (Chun 2003; Ogle 1990).

During this period, women activists’ perspectives were strongly shaped by their class positions. While working-class women were wrestling with exploitation on the factory floor, South Korean women intellectuals were digesting contemporary feminist theories of the operations of an international patriarchy. The process for the development of the first “women’s studies” program in South Korea, established at Ewha Womans University in 1977 as the Korean Women’s Institute (Chang 1996; Yoon 1979), provided a high-status institutional context for intellectuals to think about the contemporary problems of women in South Korea. Initially, women’s studies scholars grappled with the texts of American and European feminists as the intellectual basis for their analysis of South Korean women’s conditions. Yet quite quickly, South Korean feminists began to question the applicability of Western feminist analysis, particularly individualistic psychological theories of women’s dependence on men, as well as the focus on gender and class to the exclusion of kinship and generation. They also identified problems with the embrace of women-in-development economic policies that characterized the state-affiliated women’s movement, and with the tendency to depend on technological and legal innovation to indirectly address poverty and inequality. Other universities soon created their own women’s studies courses, and the Korean Women’s Studies Association was established in 1984 (Chang 1996). These institutional contexts of research, argument, and inquiry enabled new feminist topics to come to the fore. Over time, feminist intellectuals in South Korea developed lines of critique and analysis that reflected the specific character of local and global gender dynamics, taking into account the history of Korean Confucian patriarchal social structures and law while also considering recent historical upheavals, South Korea’s global position and relations to the US and Japan, the influence of popular culture, and class variations in women’s circumstances. Acknowledging the urgency of pressing for an end to authoritarian rule, feminists also drew
attention to the fact that problems of gender and class oppression would not be solved simply through the establishment of democracy. Students and faculty associated with women’s studies programs began to advocate changes in law, employment, education, and culture – particularly the media – to address gender-specific problems.

Many scholars have noted that, following the end of Chun Doo Hwan’s military regime in 1987, activists who had been centripetally drawn into the project of democratization were finally free to identify new goals and form new organizations for social action. This has been portrayed on the one hand as a positive development, facilitating the pursuit of diverse social and cultural objectives, but it has also been criticized as a period in which radical activism was transformed into more tempered, reformist civic engagement (Song 2010; Lee and Chin 2007). The proliferation of social movement groups provided space for feminists to take on a variety of issues (e.g. gender-based violence, eco-feminism, sexual exploitation) that had been deemed of secondary importance to the overarching goal of achieving an end to military authoritarian rule. The establishment in 1987 of Korean Women’s Associations United (KWAU), a more progressive alternative to the state-aligned KNCW, provided an organizational structure for many feminist organizations to meet, argue, and form collaborations around emerging and enduring problems and goals.

Legal reform was a central focus in the post-1987 period. Women’s rights advocates had been engaged in efforts to achieve legal gender equality since the 1950s, with two areas in particular – family law and employment law – receiving sustained attention. Although the 1948 Constitution guaranteed citizens protection from unequal treatment based on gender, for decades this was little more than a paper promise. From the beginning, ROK laws relating to personal and family property, inheritance, authority over children, divorce, and child custody reflected deep material as well as conceptual gender inequalities. One particularly controversial element of the legalized patriarchy was the “family head” system (hoju), which was established by the Japanese colonial authorities and maintained in the ROK Civil Code after independence. Over nearly four decades, the family head system was defended on the one hand by cultural conservatives as the legal establishment of Korean Confucian family tradition, and challenged by feminist critics as inequitable, outdated, and patriarchal. Several scholars have emphasized the role of family law, and its defense as a reflection of Korean “tradition,” in the establishment and maintenance of “androcentric society” and patriarchal culture and practice (Shin 2006; Yang 2008). While efforts to achieve reform were ongoing throughout the years of authoritarian rule, the most significant victories (for example, the 1991 revisions that removed the presumption of exclusive paternal line rights to children of divorced parents and established the principle of spousal property division upon divorce, and the 2005 repeal of the family head system) came in the context of new democratic politics. Analysts differ in their analysis of the drawn-out struggle that resulted in the 2005 repeal of the family head system, but scholars of this legal reform agree that the altered material and political conditions after 1987, as well as the diversification and professionalization of feminist activism, were essential to the process. Yang (2008) draws attention to differences between feminist activists targeting symbolic or material impacts of the law, while Suh (2012) emphasizes the combined effects of “outsider” groups, as well as institutionalized feminist organizations utilizing different tactics to bring about family law revision. This multifaceted approach to legal and political transformation yielded many other significant achievements during the 1990s and 2000s, including the passage of the Equality in Employment Act of 1999; the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001; the Anti-Sexual Traffic Act of 2004; and the rising number of elected women representatives to local and national office (Kim and Kim 2013).
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Sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and commercialized sexuality also rose to prominence as feminist concerns in the 1980s and 1990s. Until the 1980s, sexual assault was interpreted as damage to a woman’s chastity, and husbands had authority over wives’ bodies such that sexual demands and intimate partner violence – sexual or otherwise – was considered a private matter (Jung 2014). The newly established women’s studies courses provided intellectual space, beginning in the 1980s, to confront the existence and extent of sexual violence in South Korean society, and to expose the material and cultural effects of the construction of sexual violence as an act that brings shame upon the victim (Shim 1998). Incidents of sexual assaults of female student activists in that decade (in particular the well-publicized sexual harassment of students arrested in an anti-government demonstration in 1984, and the notorious sexual torture case of a former student factory worker who was arrested in 1987) gave further impetus to calls for bringing the issue of sexual violence to public awareness (Jung 2014). As a result, the first hotline for women to report intimate partner violence was established in 1983, and in 1991, activists opened the first center to support victims of sexual assault.

The sexual commercialization of women’s bodies also became a focal issue for feminist analysis and activism in the 1980s. Initially, feminists addressed issues of patriarchy, neo-colonialism, and state-sanctioned exploitation of South Korean women for commercial and political gain in their criticism of the ROK role in the development of the sex tourism industry (primarily aimed at Japanese visitors) and of sexual service “camptowns” for US military personnel (K. Moon 1997; Cheng 2002; Kim and Fu 2008; J.K. Lee 2010; Yea 2005). These issues received further attention in the 1990s, when the moral and practical claims of the aging “comfort women” survivors became a rallying point for feminist activists in South Korea (Soh 2008). Yet although several scholars have pointed out that the critique of sex tourism, sexual service camps around the US bases, and the colonial era experiences of “comfort women” should be not be viewed as phenomena disconnected from the context of everyday patriarchy in the (South) Korean context (Soh 2008; Lie 1995), the closely-related topic of domestic commercialization of South Korean women’s sexuality has received much less scrutiny (cf. Chang 2005).

The rights of sexual minorities in South Korea gained increasing attention beginning in the late 1990s, with the expansion of political activism around specific communities and interests and the spread of a human-rights based political discourse. Many scholars have argued that the ROK’s mobilization of Confucian principles regarding the complementarity of two distinct genders, male and female, defined same-sex desire and practice as foreign and dangerous to the nation (e.g. Bong 2008). Homophobia in South Korea became more explicit and spread during the 1980s in response to the global fear of AIDS, further tying same-sex sexuality to foreign threats. Until the early 1990s, almost all individuals whose sexuality did not conform to the ideals of heteronormativity were closeted, ignored, harassed, or attacked. Global movements in support of sexual diversity made inroads into South Korean society in the late twentieth century; the first open associations of gay men and lesbians were established, often with the collaboration of Korean and expatriate students who had been educated abroad (Bong 2008; Park-Kim, Lee-Kim, and Kwon-Lee 2007). Celebrity revelations of their same-sex desires and of transsexual histories, along with films presenting sexual minorities in a positive light, helped to expand public awareness and acceptance of non-heteronormative identities in the 1990s (Choo and Ferree 2013). But even into the first decade of the 2000s, the problems and rights of sexual minorities were not adopted as central to feminist activism. According to Park-Kim, Lee-Kim, and Kwon-Lee (2007), the specific needs and issues of lesbians were, to a large extent, ignored or misused by women’s groups and women’s studies programs. Sexual behavior is not always the overt issue: conformity to the expectations of two-partner household formation and family
reproduction is built into the social system in South Korea. Song (2014) has documented the cultural and financial obstacles facing individuals who choose not to marry; J.S.P. Cho’s ethnographic work (2009) discusses the need for “contract marriages” between gay men and lesbian women to avoid harassment. However, since the late 1990s, at the urging of GLBT intellectuals and activists, feminists have been advocating for taking sexuality and gender diversity into account in the analysis of social and cultural issues (Park-Kim, Lee-Kim, and Kwon-Lee 2007).

In sum, “the women’s movement” in South Korea has evolved from its early bifurcation into, on the one hand, state-complicit programs that took middle-class women’s concerns as universal and which assumed modernization and economic development would lead to gender equality, and on the other, labor and pro-democracy activism in which gender-specific issues were seen as secondary to the goal of resolving political catastrophe. Feminist activists with widely diverse goals now engage in tactics ranging from formal politics and legal reform to disruptive agitation, and feminist scholars critique cultural and structural arrangements and assumptions with an eye to the intersectionality of class and gender; global flows of power, people, and ideas; and the mutual influence of discourses and economic and political circumstances.

Contemporary issues in gender studies

In addition to employment, education, and activism, many other social and cultural elements partake in, and contribute to, the shaping of gender in contemporary South Korea. Scholarship of South Korean gender and society in the new millennium has focused heavily on the impacts of neo-liberal politics (Song 2014), consumer culture (Joo 2012; Epstein and Joo 2012; Jun 2010), and the growing visibility of a gay and lesbian community (J.S.P. Cho 2009; Bong 2008; Choo and Ferree 2013). The influx, beginning in the early 2000s, of large numbers of foreign women – some as refugees or sex workers, but mostly as brides for hard-to-marry South Korean men – has been the focus of numerous interesting studies that shed new light on South Korean gender formation (e.g. Freeman 2011; Cheng 2002; Choo 2013; J.H. Kwon 2015). The inability for farmers, as well as urban-dwelling men with low incomes, to find South Korean women willing to marry them – and their success in attracting foreign women to join them – is the result of a number of factors, including the gender-skewed birthrates of the 1980s and 1990s, South Korea’s high “cultural capital” (and relative prosperity) in the Asian continent, increasing acceptance of young South Korean women’s rights to decide whether and whom to marry, and lingering racialized patriarchal attitudes that at once romanticize and commodify foreign women. Government policies supporting the immigration of foreign brides will have long-lasting structural and cultural implications; the mixed-heritage children are triply burdened with poverty, the presumption of a significant “biological” qualitative difference from the dominant population, and the lack of a culturally-competent manager-mother. While public propaganda to support “multicultural” families focus on appreciation of the exotic domestic practices of the wives/mothers, little is yet being done to build opportunities for the growing children to escape a life of poverty. Other topics in the gendering of contemporary society that have attracted scholarly attention include the ways devotion to evangelical church life at once liberates women from oppressive domestic responsibilities and at the same time re-interpellates them into patriarchal structures and practices (Chong 2008) and the role of media and entertainment (in particular, the Korean wave as well as Korean sports) in generating particular gender-binary ideals of masculinity and femininity of body and behavior (Y. Kim 2012; I. Kwon 2014; Joo 2012; Epstein and Joo 2012; Lie 2014; Abelmann 2003; McHugh and Abelmann 2005).
Conclusion

While the experiences of South Koreans have clearly been shaped by a strong gender binary throughout the history of the ROK, scholars have documented shifts in the specific inflections of that binary over time. Initial expectations of inside/outside, private/public divisions of women and men have been transformed over time, adding public/outside responsibilities to the burdens of women in all social classes. Rules of chastity, marriage, and childrearing have loosened for women, although wider social opportunities for escaping the demands of heteronormativity have not been accompanied by financial structures supportive of alternative lifestyle decisions, nor has the expanding population of people living outside the normative expectations freed them from the injuries of prejudice and personal attack. Early scholarship debated whether a focus on defining and identifying Korean Confucianism and Japanese colonialism as roots of South Korean patriarchal structures and culture was more important than examining material economic and political causes of women’s oppression; middle-period scholarship often embraced a goal of describing the specific effects of patriarchy in women’s daily lives; and more recently, scholars focus on integrating analysis of neo-liberalism and globalization into the local experiences and structures of gender and gender diversity. Throughout this period, however, there is scholarly consensus about the enduring importance of placing gender in the center of social and cultural analysis in South Korea.

Notes

1 We take “gender” as a term referencing socially-produced categories that build on a presumed binary distinction between men and women achieved through repetitive performance of gender identities. In this essay we do not delve more deeply into the shaky grounding of this binary distinction. We do, however, wish to recognize the fluidity not only of the content and boundaries of the binary, but of the binary formation itself, despite its enduring authority in South Korean culture.

2 While we take a thematic approach to this topic, four time periods help to structure our analysis: the years immediately following the liberation from Japanese colonial rule through the Korean war and its aftermath (1945–1960); the push to industrialization under the authoritarian administrations of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo Hwan (1961–1988), a period of radical activism as well as increasing middle-class prosperity during which the “housewife” ideal took hold; the early democratic period and blossoming of consumer culture as well as civic activism (1988–1997); and the period ushered in by the IMF crisis and its economic, political, and cultural repercussions (1998–2014). Clearly, these are rough distinctions, characterized by both foreshadowing and inertia across the temporal lines we have drawn. Nevertheless, they will help to locate our discussion of themes in a consistent framework and in a context of wider political and cultural transitions.

3 Between 1945 and 1955, the population of South Korea is estimated to have increased by 2.8 million due to return migration and migration from the north (D.S. Kim 1994).

4 The war is estimated to have generated approximately 300,000 widows and 100,000 orphans.

5 The urban population of southern Korea was estimated at about 15 percent in 1945.

6 Employment analysts comment on South Korea’s pronounced “M-curve” participation pattern for women in the labor force. The M-curve refers to the high initial rates of employment, deep dips during the early motherhood period, and a strong return to employment as children enter school. (Y.J. Park 1990; Palley 1990)

7 While almost 70 percent of Korean school-aged boys and more than 30 percent of school-aged girls were attending some elementary school by the late colonial period, taking Koreans of all ages into consideration, in 1944 only 14 percent of the total Korean population – and only 5 percent of Korean women – had ever attended any formal school (Oh and Kim 2000).

8 The 1980 gap was, ironically, larger than that in 1960, likely reflecting demographic factors, including gender differentials in mortality and longevity.

9 Alongside this process of educational equalization, however, schools themselves played a role in gendering the population, inculcating the normative gender-binary of South Korean culture through textbooks explicitly depicting active roles for men and caring roles for women (Chung 1994: 501).
This is reflected in the fact that many fields of study are highly gendered, including the sciences, law, engineering, and agriculture (all overwhelmingly masculine domains) and home economics, health, and the arts (considered feminine majors) (Chung 1994).

Women’s own understandings of their circumstances often differ from, but also are not isolated from, such mainstream misogynistic discourse. The pace of transformation of (South) Korean culture from 1945 on was dizzying. In the context of “compressed development” (H.J. Cho 2000), women tried to make sense of personal and national history, drawing on shamans (Kendall 1985), melodrama (Abelmann 2003), Confucianism, and evangelical Christianity (Chong 2008).

Two incidents in the six-year-long Tongil struggle are particularly notorious. In the first, management called in riot police to end the occupation of the factory by union members after management, hoping to replace the union leadership with pro-management workers, had arrested the union president; the women removed their own clothes in an attempt to shame the men for their aggression against women and workers, but the police were undeterred. More than a dozen women were sent to the hospital and more than seventy were arrested, but the women were undaunted. Two years later, a union election was disrupted when men painted the hall with human excrement and threw it at union members. Management blamed the union for destruction of company property, and on that excuse they were able to have the union charter rescinded. For details, see Ogle (1990); S.K. Kim (1997).

Although the right to union organization and action is enshrined in 1953 in the Labor Union Act, in practice worker activism was widely suppressed through kidnappings, beatings, arrests, and discursive messaging holding worker activists responsible for political instability and poor economic indicators.

In the context of Chun’s crackdown on student activists, many radical students dropped their studies and took jobs in factories in solidarity with workers. S.K. Kim (1997) documents the experience of female student workers in factories in the 1970s and 1980s, attending to differences between workers and activists around the identification of political issues specific to women workers (see also Song 2009).

References


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