

Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Issue of Sexual Violence and the Women's Movement

This paper explores feminist practice in South Korea on the basis of a case study on a feminist-run sexual assault centre (SAC). Feminism has been regarded as 'Western culture' in most parts of Asia. Feminists in Asian countries have been criticised in relation to the introduction of feminism into their countries and the application of 'Western thought' to their local contexts. However, some Asian countries such as Korea have developed their own feminist practice rooted in their specific socio-political and cultural context. Through an analysis of development of the first SAC in Korea, this paper shows how the Korean activists have operated SAC as a site of a broader feminist movement even though the idea of the SAC was introduced from Western countries. This paper concludes that feminist practices can be a dynamic process, constituted by social contexts and feminist activists in their local situation.

Introduction

This paper traces how sexual violence became an issue for the women's movement in the midst of the political and social transformation of Korean society from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. First, the paper investigates how approaches to the issue of sexual violence have shifted as the direction of the women's movement has been modified according to the political context. Second, significant sexual violence cases, and the role of feminist scholars and of women's studies, which contributed to the emergence of the anti-sexual violence movement, are examined. Last, this paper is also concerned with feminist practice as discursive politics. Thus, the ways in which the SAC has challenged traditional values and raised awareness of sexual violence issues among Korean women are explored. This examination is based on interviews with women's movement activists involved in the anti-sexual assault movement in Korea (June-July 1998, December 1999-January 2000), along with other documents and publications.

Although the vigorous activities of the Korean women's movement over the past twenty years have been regarded as exemplary in terms of women's activism in both Western and

non-Western countries,¹ research on the Korean women's movement has been scarce, both nationally and internationally. This movement has evolved in relation to the political and social context in Korea, as with women's movements elsewhere. The historical context that includes the partition of the Korean peninsula after the Korean War (1950-1953), state-led rapid economic growth and industrialisation, and political insecurity has contributed to the specific nature of the women's movement in Korea, which has participated in the movement for national liberation, and the modernisation, re-unification, and democratisation of Korean society.²

Following political turmoil from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the women's movement experienced a dramatic change in its direction and strategy. A typical example of developments was the women's movement against sexual violence. In the 1990s, sexual assault issues appeared as a focus of public debate, and the women's movement's fight to raise awareness of these has played a vital role in bringing women's issues onto the public agenda in Korean society for the first time. Considering the seriousness of sexual assault issues in Korean women's lives, the anti-sexual violence movement in Korea has been claimed as the kernel of the women's movement.³ This has also resulted from the emergence of the first SAC which has been credited with raising awareness of sexual assault issues, and making them more visible and public. Through media presentations and counselling services, these exploded onto Korea's socio-political scene in the early 90s.⁴ In addition, women's movement organisations such as the SAC have become one of the leading social forces in Korea since the early 1990s.⁵

The Socio-political Context in Korea

In 1950, the Korean War broke out between domestic forces in the north and the south.⁶ An initial period of highly centralised but democratic rule ended with a military coup in 1961, led by Major General Park Chung-Hee and the institution of martial law. The Park regime, which lasted until his assassination in 1979, was a period of severe repression. After a brief spell of democracy, when labour and student unrest and other political activities increased, the military again intervened in 1980.⁷

Although the economy continued to grow well under another general-turned-president, Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988), suppression of demonstrators in Kwangju in May 1980 and his

authoritarian rule caused increasing resentment among the people. In 1987, as a result of the continuous protests, the government issued the June 29 Declaration which provided a constitutional amendment for direct presidential elections.⁸ After the June 10 uprising of 1987, political freedom, characterised by free elections and the consequent strengthening of civil society, not only brought about a dramatic change in public opinion toward democratic government, but also necessitated considerable transformation of the democracy movement and the women's movement.

In 1993, a peaceful transfer of power to a duly elected civilian president, Kim Young Sam, took place for the first time in 32 years.⁹ In 1997, Kim Dae-jung was elected the president of the country, as South Korea's first successful opposition candidate. South Korea has experienced transition from state-led economic development to a more open market economy; from authoritarian populism to participatory or corporatist democracy; and from confrontation with North Korea to reconciliation.¹⁰

The Women's Movement in Korea from the 1910s to the 1990s

The first wave of the Korean women's movement, emerging in the late 19th century, was linked to a strong sense of nationalism because it emerged under Japanese colonial rule. The initial experience of Korean women in politics evolved from the national liberation movement, not from a suffrage movement as in most Western countries.¹¹ Liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945 was followed by the division of Korea at the 38th Parallel which marked the occupation of the North by the Soviet Union and the South by the United States.

In the period from 1946 to 1961, there was a vacuum in women's movement politics in Korea. The establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 introduced a new constitution which prohibited discrimination against women with regard to basic rights, access to employment and education, and in marriage. After the Korean War, 1950-1953, the women's movement became mainly a movement for improving middle-class women's rights. One of the activities of the women's rights movements was to focus on family law reform. Other women's groups remained as organisations of middle class women for mutual friendship or leisure time, rather than focusing on

women's rights issues or women's liberation.¹² A few women pioneers took part in politics without necessarily seeing themselves as representing women.¹³

During the 1960s and 1970s, South Korean society underwent an unprecedented period of rapid social and economic change. The national partition strengthened the ideology of 'all-out national security' and suppressed freedom of speech and criticism of state policies and society. In the process of pursuing a rapid economic development policy, women were first mobilised into the labour market as a cheap labour force; second, women continued to be the main target for the family planning project which had been implemented for the purpose of raising the per capita income. They were also mobilised to propagate and reinforce the ideology of 'all-out national security',¹⁴ for instance, through the Saemaulundong (New Village Movement). It is evident that this movement during this period forced women to sacrifice themselves for the purpose of national development.¹⁵

In the 1970s, a struggle to reform family law combined with occasional labour strikes of female factory workers were major activities of the women's movement. In the early 1970s, women's groups were not particularly concerned with issues regarding women's rights and equality. At that time, there were 57 women's groups, but the vast majority focused on mutual friendship and occupational interests. Only five groups worked for the improvement of women's status. The majority of the women's groups were affiliated with the Council of Korean Women's Organisations (CKWO), a government-sanctioned umbrella organisation of women's groups. The activities of CKWO during this period tended to support and vindicate the authoritarian and patriarchal state policies rather than to work for women's interests.¹⁶

A small number of well-educated middle class women supported and addressed a limited range of women's issues such as family law reform, women factory workers' survival rights, retirement upon marriage, and tourist prostitution. However, their efforts in mobilising a broad spectrum of women were not successful because there was no actual body to articulate women's demands. Stimulated by women workers' struggles, middle-class women attempted to support the issue of female factory workers. The Christian Academy and the Women's Association of Korean Churches founded in 1973 were allies in

organising a boycott of the companies where strikes by female workers occurred. The Christian Academy, led by the distinguished church leader, Rev. Kang Won-yong, established the education of middle-level leaders in the industrial, agricultural, women, and church sectors of society in the mid 1970s. The 'Social Education for Women' program provided by the Christian Academy played an important role in raising the consciousness of women and producing women activists and intellectuals who have been keenly involved with the progressive women's movement from the 1980s to the present.

In the late 1970s, the women's movement in Korea was influenced by the global tide of women's action, including the United Nations proclamation of International Women's Year in 1975, which boosted women's issues around the world.¹⁷ The Korean government declared 1975 the national year of women and sent five delegates to the International Women's conference in Mexico. However, government concern was largely limited to formal matters.¹⁸ From the late 1970s, Western theories on women's issues were introduced into Korea by academics who studied overseas and this furthered discussion. However, there was concern that uncritical acceptance of Western feminism increased confusion, and negative images of feminists were represented in the mass media (Kim Kyung-hee 1998). In 1977, the first Department of women's studies in Korea was established at Ewha Women's University, and this has become a major site of feminist theory and activism.

It was not until the late 1970s that discussions regarding the orientation and aim of the Korean women's movement started. The direction of the women's movement and the relationship of the women's movement to other social movements, especially the Democracy Movement, were raised as key concerns. The Korean women's movement was seen to participate in the aims of the Democracy Movement, with women's issues being explained in the context of Korea's division into two nations. Overall, the 1970s was the period when working-class movements were activated along with the Democracy Movements. Although the majority of the Labour Movement activists were young female factory workers, they did not raise women-specific issues.

During the period 1980-1986, characterised by harsh repression by the military regime, the regime's appeasement policy after 1983 provided single-issue women's groups with an

opportunity to organise publicly.¹⁹ The organisational base of the progressive Korean women's movement consisted of a network which included activists from the student movement and labour movement, alumni of some universities, and graduates from social education programs of the Christian Academy in the 1970s. Among the new progressive feminist groups, the Women's Society for Justice and Equality (WSJE) was founded in 1983 but disbanded in 1986 due to an ideological split.²⁰ The WSJE dealt with working class women's issues and social democratisation.²¹ The broader women's movement adopted the Minjung ideology, which was the dominant paradigm of the 1980s' Korean social movement. The authoritarian nature of the Korean military regime and the centrality of class in the distribution of power, accounted in part for the women's movement's orientation that general struggles needed to be waged prior to specific struggles for women's liberation.

According to Kim Kyoung-hee (1998), Korean feminism in the 1980s was different from the second wave women's movement in Western countries where, having criticised the male-centred and patriarchal nature of the Left, the women's movement sought to create an autonomous, gender-specific movement. By comparison, the Korean women's movement rejected separation from the broader political struggle and identified itself as a part of the Democracy movement. Rather than emphasising its autonomy and independence, the women's movement gave priority to the issues of democracy and nationalism (*minjok minju*).²²

Another characteristic of the women's movement in the 1980s was its ideological conflict concerning the social transformation debate which resulted in dissension and finally the dissolution of the progressive women's movement. The social transformation debate never actually raised women's issues. Even women's activists were very cautious about raising gender-specific issues within the general social movement community. As a result, the Minjung ideology provided ideological base for the progressive women's movement.²³

During the transition to democracy, 1987-1992, women from the progressive women's movement overcame prior ideological splits and formed a united national coalition of the progressive women's movement to oppose the military regime in more effective ways. State repression ironically stimulated the

organisation of coalitions among diverse women's groups. After the 1987 June mass people's struggle, greater political freedom afforded women opportunities to raise gender-specific issues and to question the legitimacy of the Minjung ideology.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the women's movement tried to mobilise as many women as possible in the social democratisation movement and thus contributed to it.²⁴ However, in the 90s, the progressive women's movement kept a distance from the national social movement and sought separatism, in a sense because it began to recognise that women's interests and gender equality could only be effectively achieved by women's autonomous and united organisational efforts.²⁵ In the 1990s, 'By securing motherhood protection, let's get lifelong equal employment rights' and 'Open politics, everyday life politics' were slogans of the progressive women's movement. Use of a gender-specific framework enabled women's voices to be heard. These frameworks became translated into public policy and into the slogans and symbols of the general culture.

The 1990s manifested the era of the 'politics of engagement' of the progressive Korean women's movement with several new features: legitimisation of progressive women's movement organisations; expansion of alliances between progressive women's organisations and mainstream women's organisations; internationalisation of domestic women's issues; and involvement in electoral politics.²⁶ The transition to a civilian regime made both the state and the women's movement seek legitimacy. The state began to be widely perceived as an arena for the achievement of gender equality. Major women's issues, such as the lifelong equal right to work, motherhood protection, sexual violence, 'comfort women,' and political empowerment of women are all interpreted within the framework of an intersection between gender, class, and nation.

However, some women activists were concerned that engaging with the state was a risky and unacceptable strategy because the engagement might threaten movement solidarity and weaken its radicalism. Outsiders from the women's movement, such as the media, pointed out that the blurring of the boundaries between movement and mainstream institutions could make the ideological ground on which the progressive women's movement stood shaky.²⁷ Therefore, in a situation of shift from opposition politics to democratic politics, women's movement

organisations need to adjust their structure, agendas, and strategies to the new political circumstances.²⁸

Sexual Violence in the 1980s

In the 1980s, sexual violence was conceptualised as a means of suppressing democracy struggles and the labour movement in Korea. The progressive women's movement drew on the Minjung ideology to frame women's issues during the 80s.²⁹ Sexual torture or sexual assault cases by public forces such as the police were presented as serious matters. The sexual harassment of female university students at the Chungriangri Police Station was the first such case publicised in Korea. In November 1984, the Chungriangri police arrested dozens of female university students involved in a street demonstration. The police officers intimidated and threatened the students so that they would not wish to join the demonstrations.³⁰

Through the courage of several students, this incident became known to the public. It was the first time in Korea that the hidden issue of sexual violence was revealed, and women's groups began to fight directly against the authoritarian government. Although this campaign failed to achieve successful results due to unthinkable threats by the police and the loss of confidence of the victimised students themselves, it was the first time in South Korea that the public became aware that the institutions working for the maintenance of the dictatorial regimes were directly involved in violence against women.³¹

Sexual torture at the Puchun Police Station

In a similar vein, the torture incident at the Puchun Police Station in 1986 clearly revealed sexual violence perpetrated by the police. In June 1986, Kwon Insook, a former student activist, was arrested by the Puchun police when she was working in a factory. At the time, many former student movement activists were on a police blacklist for this. This made it impossible for them to have an ordinary job, so they would borrow the ID cards of their family members or friends in order to obtain employment. Kwon was in this situation. When arrested, Kwon was brought to Moon Guidong, a police detective notorious for torture. Kwon refused to reveal the names of her colleagues and then Moon took Kwon's clothes off and committed sexual violence described as 'unimaginable cruelty'.³²

Few women, especially at the time, had the courage to speak out about the sexual violence they experienced. However, Kwon, imprisoned for using a false ID card, told her lawyer. This was how her story reached the mass media and women's groups. Korean women's organisations formed a joint committee to bring Moon to court and organised campaigns and street rallies, demanding the investigation and the punishment of Moon. The first response of the government was to announce that the radical groups were fabricating a sexual violence story as a means of furthering their revolutionary aims. This provoked greater anger from the women's groups as well as from the general public.

Women's organisations jointly formed the Women's Council against Sexual Violence and also set up the Joint Committee against the Puchun Sexual Violence, in co-operation with other religious and civic organisations. These two joint organisations demanded the release of Kwon and the arrest and punishment of Moon. Support from the general public made possible almost daily rallies and demonstrations. 166 lawyers worked together to defend Kwon in court and they demanded an open trial. All this would have been unthinkable under authoritarian rule.³³

Finally, Kwon was released, and Moon sentenced to five years' imprisonment. This incident clearly revealed the brutality and inhumanity of dictatorial regimes and became one of the igniting factors of the 1987 democratic struggles. Female activists involved in the Democratisation Movement and the Student Movement were not concerned about the sexual assault issue alone:

The [Kwon] incident was viewed as a symbolic example of government suppression of activists and political dissidents rather than an individual case of sexual assault.³⁴ Even Kwon herself approached it as a 'democratic' issue not as a women's issue:

I [Kwon] would like to point out one important thing. I hope that this sexual torture case shouldn't be approached as my personal issue or a chastity issue. The most important thing is the fact that sexual assault was done to a female worker, as a means of oppressing the labour movement.³⁵

As noted, until the late 1980s, women's problems such as sexual violence were regarded as minor compared to those of class or nationalism. Gender-specific issues related to the female body and sexuality, such as sexual violence, tended to be

overshadowed by nationalist and interclass struggles.³⁶ Thus, the issue of sexual violence was approached as a problem caused by class conflict, rather than gender conflict. At that time, therefore, the women's movement focused on not only women's problems but also on class issues, along with labour issues, and reunification and democracy issues. Even women's movement activists thought that women's problems should be solved within the macro-master framework of the Korean Social Movement, Minjok, Minju and Minjung (Nationalism, Democracy and People). The social movement in the eighties aimed at 'a class liberation movement to transform capitalist structure, a revolutionary movement to overthrow the military authoritarian regime, and establish a democratic Minjung government, a national liberation movement to eliminate dependence on external foreign powers and a unification movement to end the division of the nation'.³⁷ In this context, the women's movement failed to see sexual violence as a feminist issue,³⁸ and women's issues, including sexual violence, were ignored by most women activists.

Park, a church minister and feminist activist who was deeply involved with the initial stages of the anti-sexual violence movement reflects this approach:

No group had any idea about sexual assault issues. I guess that they hadn't thought of solving this issue through the movement.³⁹

As one of the major figures contributing to the anti-sexual violence movement, Park was closely connected with various groups such as the Christian group, the Democracy Movement and the Feminist movement. Park said that she also did not think that sexual assault was a women's issue. This response arose out of both a lack of feminist consciousness among the social movement circle and the nature of the women's movement in this period. Thus, it is debatable whether the women's movement in the 80s truly represented women's voices.⁴⁰

On the other hand, sexual violence issues such as the Kwon incident, gave impetus to the democracy movement.⁴¹ According to Nam, the Kwon incident triggered the mobilisation of diverse opposition groups against the military rule and provided an opportunity to raise the question of the legitimacy of the ruling power. Furthermore, the Kwon incident enabled women's movement groups to form coalitions with other democratic

movement organisations and this alliance encouraged the active participation of the women's movement in the democratic struggles during the late 1980s.⁴²

Sexual Assault Issues and the Women's Movement in the 1990s

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the issue of sexual assault began to be taken up from a feminist perspective. The political shift from a military regime to a civilian one also affected the women's movement and led to self-criticism within the women's movement, especially the Korean Women's Association United (KWAU). The KWAU which was established in 1987, as an umbrella organisation uniting 23 progressive women's movement organisations, changed the direction of the movement. The founding members of the KWAU had been involved in the Minjung movement and maintained close connection to the Minjung movement organisations. The members consisted of female labour activists, female union leaders, female intellectuals and women's church organisation members who had advocated for political prisoners in the 1970s.⁴³ The early activities of the KWAU were framed in the context of the national struggles for democracy.

Their concern explicitly evolved into the question of how best to carry forward gender-specific activities and propose general political issues through a feminist perspective.⁴⁴ Their political agenda shifted to include gender-specific issues such as maternity protection, guarantees of maternity leave, family planning, childcare problems, equal pay for equal work and sexual violence.

In fact, there were ideological conflicts between Socialist feminists and Marxist feminists in terms of the social formation debate.⁴⁵ In Korea, women academics, including professors in the Department of Women's Studies at Ewha Women's University and Alternative Culture (ToHanaei Munwha) often favoured Socialist feminism, while the activists of the progressive women's movement organisations, centring around KWAU in the 80s, preferred Marxist feminism.⁴⁶ Marxist feminist circles believed that the elimination of women's oppression and gender discrimination in Korean society could be achieved by women's participation in the social transformation movement for national independence and democratisation. The priority of the progressive women's

movement was, therefore, to solve the issues which stemmed from class conflicts.

On the other hand, Socialist feminism assumed that two systems – patriarchy and capitalism – oppressed women in Korea. This position placed stronger emphasis on patriarchy and the broad spectrum of gender issues facing women across class lines and was also supported by the majority of the women's studies community.⁴⁷ Their emphasis on the autonomy of women's issues seems to have had a crucial role in changing the direction of the women's movement in the middle of the process of social transformation, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s.

In this context, the women's movement in the early 1990s needed a new agenda to unite the divided feminist groups and to mobilise women in general into the women's movement:

There seemed to be an agreement that women had experienced discrimination in our society. Violence on women's bodies was seen as one of the most serious issues that had to be approached by the women's movement. They [the women's movement circle] thought that any other social movement was not able to solve this sexual violence problem.⁴⁸

The issue of sexual violence seemed to be the most appropriate focus for this purpose due to the nature of sexual violence. Thus, the anti-sexual violence movement contributed to the unity of the different women's movement groups.

The high incidence of significant sexual assault cases such as the Kim Bunam case and the Kim Boeun case⁴⁹ in the early 1990s helped to mobilise more people, including women and men, in particular male university students. The Kim Bunam case was regarded as an historic case which resulted in sexual assault becoming the major agenda item and a turning point for the women's movement.

The Kim Boeun case resulted in sexual assault becoming an important issue for the Student Movement. Kim,⁵⁰ who had been a Student Movement activist and subsequently became involved in the women's movement, believed this case paved the way for the Student Movement including male students, to participate in the women's movement. Fifty-six citizen organisations, women's organisations and university student associations set up the Committee for Kim Boeun and Kim Jinkwan all over the nation to campaign for their acquittal.

In the 1990s, the issue of sexual violence was successful in mobilising many people, including men and other movement groups. This issue illustrates the slogan, 'the personal is the political'. Subsequently, female sexuality and the body, as the most private sphere, previously neglected in the women's movement, came to be an issue in it in the 1990s.

Feminist Practice as a Site of the Politics of Meaning-Making

Freedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of self-understanding and modes of domination, and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses.⁵¹

The emergence of the first SAC provided a special momentum and a physical site for tackling sexual violence through collective action on a large scale. The SAC established in 1991 was the first of its kind in Korea. It was founded by young intellectuals and professionals who had mainly majored in Women's Studies at Ewha Women's University. Activists were mobilised from both the women's movement and the student movement in a concerted effort against sexual violence. Some female activists of the student movement joined the Korean Sexual Violence Relief Centre (KSVRC) and this created a good opportunity for the student movement to work in alliance with the women's movement.⁵² At the same time, the SAC has played a pivotal role in leading discursive politics. As Sawicki states above, the SAC has created a new discourse to resist all that was previously taken for granted.

The KSVRC challenged deeply rooted beliefs such as Confucianism through 'discursive politics', producing new discourses surrounding sexual violence and the body, and creating new identities for women. In this process, various strategies were used, such as the publication of booklets, seminar materials and videos. The academic background of the activists of the centre was a great advantage. The high regard for educational qualifications in Korean society,⁵³ and the fact that most of the founding members and executives were academics, enabled these discourses to circulate and influence the people more effectively. Moreover, the media and press were well utilised for this purpose (Interview 1998 July). Frequent media presentations by members on sexual violence issues, along with public lecture programmes, contributed to the spread of

feminist discourses on sexual violence and, ultimately, women's issues.

Korean Women and Confucianism

Korean society has been deeply infused with Confucianism and this is still maintained and embraced in Korean culture, even though changes have occurred due to economic development and Western influence.⁵⁴ An understanding of the experience of Korean women in relation to sexual violence is not possible without reference to Confucian ideology. This was selected as the state ideology in the Chosun dynasty (1393-1910) and widely accepted from the later period of the dynasty in the 17th century.⁵⁵ Confucianism can be defined as 'a system of norms and values concerning the hierarchical relationship between people, concentrating on the problem of how to establish moral rights and harmonious relationships'.⁵⁶

Korean traditional society was characterised by a royal monarch, strong class-consciousness and a patriarchal, extended family system.⁵⁷ Women's subordination and separation from men was stressed in order to uphold this system. Thus, women were confined inside the home and assigned to domestic work. The segregation of women from men was also to ensure that female chastity was preserved.⁵⁸ The emphasis on a woman's sexual fidelity to her husband in Confucian ideology was implemented in Korean society by coercion through law, inducement by various means of state compensation, and socialisation by local community educational institutions and family.⁵⁹ At the same time, rewards were given by the state to the kin and family of the yeol-yeo – the women who did not remarry, and were chaste, even though widowed at a very young age, or who had committed suicide to keep their chastity.⁶⁰ Owing to both coercion and encouragement from the state, the sexuality of women became a matter of great concern to the whole family and kin as it had implications for their prosperity. Women's behaviour was watched by all family members, and women were taught that if they were raped, suicide was the only way to restore the family honour. During the invasion by Japan in 1502, which lasted for seven years, *The Book of Virtuous Conduct* of the Chosun dynasty recorded 556 cases of women who killed themselves, either when threatened with rape or after it.⁶¹

Despite changes associated with industrialisation and modernisation in Korea, a fundamental change in social norms seems not to have occurred in Korea. Traditional Confucian ideology is still retained as the predominant one regulating the female body and sexuality, and is used as the justification for women's inferior position in Korea. In this situation, it is rape victims who suffer most from Confucian ideology.

From Silence to Speaking Out: Naming the Unspeakable Experience

In Korea, sexual violence is said to be the greatest threat to women's lives.⁶² Despite being raped against their will, rape victims blame themselves for having had sexual relations and lost their virginity. In Korea, rape victims endure stigmatisation instead of seeking appropriate help. Such situations have made sexual violence an unspeakable experience. The metaphor of glassware is often used to explain the female body and sexuality. Thus when a woman has been sexually assaulted, she usually says, 'my body was destroyed, or my virginity was broken'. Therefore, the first task of the KSVRC is to challenge dominant discourses such as Confucian ideology. The discursive politics started by naming the unspeakable experience.

Rape existed before a discourse of rape emerged in Korea. There was no word to express or refer to 'that experience'. In fact, this word only existed in a dictionary and was seldom used in public. Even in newspapers, rape was normally described simply as 'violence' or 'violation of chastity'. Previously, if rape occurred in the home, the euphemism 'home breaker' was used to express the rapist's identity. Discourses about rape have not yet been established in public arenas such as the school, the church, the family, and the workplace.

When we decided to establish this centre and we chose the name of the centre, there was a dispute among the founding members. Some of them argued strongly that SAC was the best name to express our centre's objective. But others argued that the expression "rape" or "sexual assault" was too radical in Korean Society. Even after opening the centre, when we asked people to donate to the SAC fund their response was very critical. One of the donors commented that a women's centre was OK but the title "SAC" was too shameful.⁶³

Discourses concerning sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault, have appeared only in public discussion in Korea

since the late 1980s.⁶⁴ The first SAC and feminist groups gave 'the unspeakable experience' a name – sexual violence; a new term created by this feminist group. The centre claimed that sexual violence includes rape, sexual assault, verbal harassment, exposing of genitals, gang rape, spouse rape, and obscene phone calls. It also includes 'all forms of physical, verbal and mental violence'.⁶⁵ However, there was still considerable resistance from the public. When the activists in the Centre distributed the flyers and free ball-point pens with the phone number of the Centre in the streets, most people tended to avoid them and discarded the pens as if they were dangerous.⁶⁶ Because of the attitude to sexual violence, unusual events occurred. In 1991, the Centre opened a bank account with the name 'sexual violence'. One day, a worker went to the bank and had to wait to be called by a bankteller. The name of the Centre was not called until she asked why. The bankteller told her that she could not utter this name in public.

Despite difficulties at the initial stage, the naming of sexual violence encouraged and enabled women to speak out about their experiences. Previously women did not have words to refer to the experience of rape; it had been expressed in the form of silence, an ellipsis. Most women who had suffered from some form of rape, sexual assault or harassment, couldn't/wouldn't/didn't speak about this experience to others. They had no words to express it, and it was not a climate in which women could speak about their experience.

The next stage of the discursive political strategy was to reinterpret the experience from a new feminist perspective. The process included consciousness-raising and re-education for SAC members, volunteers and more widely. Before opening the Centre, there was a series of workshops and gatherings in order to decide on its objectives and mission. Furthermore, the process of counselling was similar to the process of consciousness-raising. Their counselling often started from absolving the victim of blame. The Centre helped the victims to reinterpret their experience and to reject the existing interpretations. In addition, a small booklet, a report on the counselling cases, public lectures and a video, challenged myths about sexual violence in Korea and contributed to the spread of feminist values. Sexual violence was presented, not as a private but a public matter, as one of the slogans at KSVRC implied: 'Sexual violence is not only your problem but also our problem'.

This issue was presented as a problem firmly related to basic human rights and to the more specific area of sexual autonomy. This challenged the prevailing values and dominant ideologies regarding sexual violence, and disrupted male dominance which historically depended on women's silence.

Finally, in the discourses of the women's movement, the need for collective action was stressed and the active participation of all women, regardless of class, age, and job was encouraged. Their message reiterated the fact that sexual violence, or the fear of sexual violence, function to reinforce male power and ensure social control over women's independence. A large number of people joined the activities of the SAC, including former student activists, housewives, university students and professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and academics. They played a vital role in spreading feminist values in their own workplace and in the streets. Whenever significant cases have occurred, the SAC, along with other organisations, has organised the committee to support the cases through legal advocacy, petitions, strikes and citywide demonstration. These tactics also provided a valuable opportunity to publicise feminist values and to showcase the empowerment of women including the survivors.⁶⁷

The Role of the Feminist Scholars and Women's Studies

In the process of the development of the anti-sexual assault movement in Korea and, in particular, the establishment of the first SAC (KSVRC) in Korea, the commitment of Women's Studies and feminist scholars must be acknowledged. One of the major tasks of the women's movement against sexual violence was to transform the ways in which people viewed women, sexuality and violence. Colebatch reminds us that:

The emergence of policy on the environment was not simply the result of policy participants acquiring new knowledge, but also of a shift in the way people valued things.⁶⁸

Similarly, an ideologised shift in relation to sexual violence required feminist scholars who acquired new knowledge and perspectives on sexual violence.

Women's studies as an academic discipline in Korea came into being in 1975.⁶⁹ In the course of the last nearly thirty years, remarkable progress has been achieved in terms of theory and practice. The first Masters and PhD courses in women's studies in Asia have been developed, and more than one hundred

universities and colleges in Korea have come to include various women's studies courses for female and male students in their general curricula.⁷⁰ The growth of women's studies in Korea has been recognised as a good model in both Non-Western and Western countries.⁷¹

In the late 1980s, enthusiasm for introducing women's studies courses was high and these courses were overwhelmingly popular in Korea. Women's studies, challenged the existing academism at the University of Korea, and spread like wildfire due to the collective demands of female students and the passion for research on women's issues. Through these courses, women's issues were raised and reviewed on a more theoretical basis, and the number of researchers on women's issues rapidly increased. Many of these courses have been also offered by women's organisations as a result of widespread interest by women in general.⁷² Women's studies contributed to the consciousness-raising of both male and female university students, and of women more widely. Various studies on women's issues such as labour, family, and sexuality were generated through women's studies courses. This research provided the groundwork for the women's movement.

One of the remarkable achievements of women's studies is that it has produced many prominent feminist activists including the leaders in the women's movements. The rapid spread of women's studies across the nation is partly attributable to the availability of specialists who have been equipped with feminist perspectives and theory. This has contributed to encouraging new women's movement organisations to develop and produced practical results for Korean society, such as a women's weekly newspaper, a women's hotline, and a sexual violence relief centre.⁷³

In terms of sexual assault issues in particular, research in women's studies is responsible for raising the issue of sexual violence as a social issue and for providing a theoretical framework for legislating a special amendment in relation to sexual violence:

This [sexual violence] was a minor agenda before. There were a few significant cases to attract public attention. In the late eighties, discourses on sexuality were brought to the surface for the first time in Korea. There were people [the feminist scholars] who tried to translate sexual issues into practice. ... Without feminist scholars who studied women's studies at the Ewha Women's Uni., it would have taken longer to

establish the SAC. Most people, even activists have not regarded the sexual assault issue as an important women's issue.⁷⁴

Three research projects on rape⁷⁵ were published as MA theses in the Department of Women's Studies at Ewha Women's University in 1989. This was the first time that rape had been researched within an academic discipline, revealing the reality of sexual assault victims in Korea that had previously been suppressed. The initial response to this research in women's studies and the women's movement was negative. Some senior colleagues in women's studies and the women's movement questioned the contribution that the research on rape could make to the women's movement in Korea.⁷⁶ However, the research attracted the general public's attention, including media, and such coverage allowed the discourse on rape from a feminist perspective to appear and circulate throughout the public sphere.

More importantly, women's studies and feminist scholars provided the perspective that sexual assault issues could be addressed through the women's movement. Ms Choi who was one of the major figures to found the KSVRC, and who has worked there since 1991, recollected:

When I was preparing for the set-up of the centre, I went to a meeting; there were many people who had been involved in the Student Movement and Minjuhwa Undong. They criticised me, why don't you open a centre for women workers? But feminist scholars made this issue come to the fore.⁷⁷

The KSVRC emerged as a result of the actions of academics in women's studies. Professor Son Duksoo who had completed her study in Germany, suggested the establishment of a RCC to Professor Chang Philwha who was then the head of the Department of Women's Studies at Ewha Women's University. After that, Professor Chang suggested to one of the graduates of Women's Studies that she, along with other graduates, open a RCC.⁷⁸ At the initial stage of the establishment of the Centre, nearly all professors and graduates of women's studies participated as founding members.⁷⁹ Feminist academics have played a vital role in providing feminist perspectives on sexual violence and in establishing the first SAC.

Conclusion

What triggered the emergence of the anti-sexual violence movement in Korea? First, there was a dramatic shift in the political climate. Sexual violence was identified as a means of oppression of the citizen by the military regime in the eighties and was not regarded as a gender issue. At that time, the women's movement in Korea had a dual focus: the military regime and patriarchy. Initially the women's movement in Korea was part of the Democracy Movement, and only after political reform did the women's movement achieve autonomy from it. Sexual violence was then interpreted as a gender issue and became a major agenda of the women's movement. This process is quite similar to that in other Third World countries, where feminist practices such as an anti-sexual violence movement have been influenced by fundamental changes in the regime of the state or political turmoil and other social movements as Ray and Korteweg argue.⁸⁰

Second, there was a network of feminist academics and other pre-existing networks such as the alumni of the department of women's studies of Ewha Women's University, as well as female activists in the Democracy Movement and student movement activists. They provided the feminist framework on sexual violence and played an important role in creating the first SAC.

Third, there were significant cases which revealed how seriously sexual violence affected women's lives. Had no organisation such as the SAC existed, however, it would have been impossible to deploy feminist struggles on sexual violence. An examination of the anti-sexual violence movement as discursive politics demonstrates that the active role of the feminist scholars, of women's studies and of the first SAC, created new subversive discourses. The subversive discourses confronted Confucian ideology and resulted in significant transformations in Korean society.

Kyungja Jung

Notes

¹Hyesu Shin, 'Introduction' in Korean Women's Hotline ed. *A History of the Korean Women's Rights Movement*, Seoul: Dongduk University Press 1999 (in Korean). Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, 'Minjung Feminism: Korean Women's Movement of Gender and Class Liberation; *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol.18, No.4, pp. 417-430 1995.

- ² Soon-kyoung Cho, 'The Limits and Possibilities of the Women's Movement in Korea' in *Gender Division of Labour in Korea*, Cho Hyung and Hang Pilwa eds, Seoul Ewha Women's University Press, 1994 pp. 275-91.
- ³ Kyungja Min, 'A History of the Women's Movement Against Sexual Violence' in KWH ed. *A History of the Korean Women's Rights Movement* Seoul, Hanul Academy 1999. ; Kyunghye Kim, *Gender Politics in South Korea: The Contemporary Women's Movement and Gender Policies, 1980-1996*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, PhD. Dissertation 1998; Hyseu Shin, 'Women's Human Right Movement' in KWAU ed *Open Hope: A History of the KWAU*, Seoul, Dongduk University Press, 1998 (in Korean).
- ⁴ Lisa Kim Davis, 'Korean Women's Groups Organize', in Gelb and Marian Lief Palley (eds) *Women of Japan and Korea* Temple University, 1994; Marian Lief Palley, 'Feminism in a Confucian Society: The Women's Movement in Korea' in Gelb and Marian Lief Palley (eds) *Women of Japan and Korea* Temple University, 1994.
- ⁵ Kyungja Min, 'A History of the Women's Movement Against Sexual Violence' in KWH ed. *A History of the Korean Women's Rights Movement* Seoul, Hanul Academy 1999.
- ⁶ Bong-Scuk Sohn, 'Women's Political Engagement and Participation in the Republic of Korea' in Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury eds. *Women and Politics Worldwide*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ John Kie-Chang Oh, 'Political Tradition and Contemporary Politics and Government' in John H. Koo and Andrew C. Nahm eds. *An Introduction to Korean Culture*, Seoul, Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1997.
- ⁹ Ibid.
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- ¹¹ Yung-Chung Kim, *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*, Seoul: Ewha Women's University Press, 1976.
- ¹² Hyochae Lee, *Korean Women's Movement: Its Past And Present*, Seoul: Jungwoosa (in Korean) 1994, Eunhee Ghi and Isoo Kang, 'Introspective Evaluation of Korean Women's Studies', in the Korean Academic Organisation's Association ed. *The Present and the Future of Humanities and Social Science in the 1980's*, Seoul: Historical Critics (in Korean) 1988.
- ¹³ Bong-Scuk Sohn, 'Women's Political Engagement and Participation in the Republic of Korea' in Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury eds. *Women and Politics Worldwide*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994.
- ¹⁴ Myoungsun Suh, 'The State and Women's Organizations During Yu-Shin Period', *Yeosunghak Nonjip* No.6. Ewha Women's University Press, 1989.
- ¹⁵ Kyuonghye Kim, *Gender Politics in South Korea: The Contemporary Women's Movement and Gender Policies, 1980-1996*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, PhD. Dissertation 1998.
- ¹⁶ Myoungsun Suh, 'The State and Women's Organizations During Yu-Shin Period', *Yeosunghak Nonjip* No.6 Ewha Women's University Press, 1989.
- ¹⁷ Bong-Scuk Sohn, 'Women's Political Engagement and Participation in the Republic of Korea' in Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury eds. *Women and Politics Worldwide*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994.
- ¹⁸ Hyochae Lee, *Korean Women's Movement: Its Past And Present*, Seoul: Jungwoosa (in Korean) 1994

¹⁹ The Women's Hot Line, dealing with the issue of violence against women, was established in June 1983; Alternative Culture, organised by four female sociology and anthropology professors, was established December in 1984.

²⁰ There were heated debates about the goal of the women's movement in relation to the Minjung Movement. One group claimed that the WSJE should help to establish a united front of the Minjung Movement and mobilise working class women for this. The other group argued that the women's movement could join other social movements including the Minjung Movement only when dealing with issues of mutual interest. The debates remained unresolved and resulted in the dissolution of the WSJE because a majority of the members left the organisation (Seunghee Lee 1988).

²¹ Kyounghee Kim, 'Gender Politics' PhD, 1998: 106

²² Soon-kyoung Cho, 'Limits and Possibilities' 1994.

²³ Kyounghee Kim has claimed that this stunted the development of Korean feminism.

²⁴ Kyounghee Kim, 'Gender Politics', PhD, 1998.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Nam 2000.

²⁹ Kyounghee Kim, 'Gender Politics', PhD, 1998.

³⁰ KWAU 1998.

³¹ Seunghee Lee, 'The History of the Contemporary Korean Women's Movement', Seoul, Baksan Press (in Korean) 1994; KWAU 1998.

³² Juhyun Cho, 'Gender Identity Politics: The Case of Women's Liberation Movement in Korea in the 80s and 90s', *Korean Women's Studies*, Vol 12. No.1 pp.138-179, 1996; KWAU 1998 Details of sexual torture could not be identified in most documents. This could reflect the strong taboo on sexuality in Korea.

³³ KWAU 1998.

³⁴ Nam 2000: 96.

³⁵ Juhyun Cho, *Gender Identity Politics: From Reading a Network of Sexuality Knowledge and Power Towards a Search for a New Identity*, Seoul, To-Hanui Munhwa (in Korean) 2000.

³⁶ Lisa Kim Davis, 'Korean Women's Groups Organize' 1994.

³⁷ Heeyon Cho, cited in Kyunghee Kim, *A Study on the Relationship between Women's Movement and the State*, Unpublished Masters Thesis, Ewha Women's University (in Korean) 1998.

³⁸ Kyounghee Kim, 'Gender Politics' PhD, 1998, Kyungja Min 'A History' 1999, Hyunjung Kim, 'A Study', 2000.

³⁹ Interview, July 1998.

⁴⁰ Kyounghee Kim, 'Gender Politics' PhD, 1998, Juhyun Cho, 'Gender Identity Politics', Kyungja Min 'A History' 1999.

⁴¹ Nam 2000

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Kyounghee Kim, 'Gender Politics' PhD, 1998; Hyunjung Kim, 'A Study', 2000, Mikyung Lee, 'Women's Movement and Democracy Movement: History of the KWAU', *Open Hope: A History of the KWAU*, Seoul, Dongduk University Press, 1998 (in Korean).

⁴⁵ Kyounghee Kim, 'Gender Politics' PhD, 1998; Kyungja Min 'A History' 1999; Mikyung Lee, 'Women's Movement', 1998; Hyunjung Kim, 'A Study', 2000.

⁴⁶ Mikung Jang, ed. *Contemporary Feminism, Women's Movement*, Seoul, Munwon (in Korean) 1996, Seunghee Lee, 'The History of the Contemporary Korean Women's Movement', 1994.

⁴⁷ Mikung Jang, ed. *Contemporary Feminism* 1996, Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, 'Minjung Feminism' 1995.

⁴⁸ Interview, July 1998.

⁴⁹ There were a few significant cases attracting the public's attention.

The Kim Bunam case: child abuse

On 30th of January 1991, Kim killed her neighbour who had sexually assaulted her 21 years previously at the age of 9. This made child abuse, including child sexual assault, a public issue. In fact, the issue had not appeared in public discourse before then. As a result of this case, social awareness about sexual assault increased and the media showed interest in sexual assault issues. Further, as she did not speak in court, her mental condition was checked by a psychiatrist and she received treatment at the correction centre. However, in the first trial, she said, 'I killed a beast not a human'. This statement became famous at that time, making people realise how serious the effects of sexual assault were. People could feel how much pain she had experienced in the past twenty years.

The Kim Boeun case: a stepdaughter raped by a stepfather

On the 17th of January 1992, the Kim Boeun case took place. This case exposed sexual assault between family members as one of the serious issues which had been hidden for a long time in Korean society. Kim Boeun, after having been raped by her stepfather for 13 years, killed her stepfather with her boyfriend, Kim Junkman's assistance. There seemed to be no way but to kill the offender in order to get out of that situation. This case attracted public attention, particularly from university students, regardless of gender, because Kim Boeun and her boyfriend were both university students.

⁵⁰ Interview, July 1998.

⁵¹ Jana Sawicki, 'Identity Politics and Sexual Freedom' in L. Diamond and L. Quinby eds. *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, Northeastern University Press, 1988.

⁵² Interview, 1998 July.

⁵³ Pilwa Chang, 'Women's Studies in Korea', *Korean Women's Studies*, Vol 12. No.1 pp.138-179 (in Korean), 1996.

⁵⁴ Kyung Ai Kim, 'Nationalism: An Advocate of, or a Barrier to, Feminism in South Korea', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19 (1/2): 65-74, 1994
Marian Lief Palley, 'Feminism in a Confucian Society', 1994.

⁵⁵ Kyung Ai Kim, 'Nationalism', 1994.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Marian Lief Palley, 'Feminism in a Confucian Society', 1994.

⁵⁸ Kyung Ai Kim, 'Nationalism', 1994.

⁵⁹ Ock-kyung Lee, *A Study on Formation and Settlement Mechanism of Jeongjeol Ideology of Yi Dynasty*, unpublished Masters Thesis, Seoul, Jungwoosa, (in Korean) 1985.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kyung Ai Kim, 'Nationalism', 1994.

⁶² KSVRC 1992.

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- 63 Interview, July 1998.
- 64 Cho Juhyun 1996, Byun 1999.
- 65 KSVRC 1992: 8.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Hal Colebatch, *Policy: Concepts in the Social Science*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1998.
- 69 Hyojaee Lee, *Korean Women's Movement: Its Past and Present*, Seoul, Jungwoosa (in Korean), 1994.
- 70 Pilwa Chang, 'Women's Studies in Korea' 1996.
- 71 Pilwa Chang, 'Women's Studies in Korea', Hyesu Shin, 'Introduction', 1999.
- 72 KWDI 1994:24-25.
- 73 Pilwa Chang, 'Women's Studies in Korea', 1996.
- 74 Interview, July 1998.
- 75 At the beginning, the term rape was still used instead of sexual violence.
- 76 Interview, 1998 July.
- 77 Interview, July 1998.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 R. Ray and A.C. Korteweg, 'Women's Movement in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy', *Annual Review Sociology* 25, pp.47-71, 1999.