

KOREA: Women's Reality of

1) IDENTITY OF WOMEN

Korean women have been under the heavy yoke of sexual discrimination since the Yi dynasty with enforced male lordship. The monarchist society, based on ethical precepts demanding loyalty to the king and filial piety to parents in a hierarchical social structure supporting the system, was combined with a family system which subjugated women, and an economic system that enslaved the people. The institutionalized ethics of Confucianism put women into straitjackets embroidered with an image of the ideal woman as one of obeying parents in girlhood, husband in marriage and sons in old age. Remarriage for widows was taboo. Women's activities were confined to the four walls of the house and within a small circle of close blood relatives. Therefore, women's self-identity was anathema.

When the Gospel was introduced in Korea, Christianity was regarded as enlightening and liberating "good news" but soon froze into an ideology oppressing women's self and experiences by colonial theologies of missionaries. The Korean Church was silent about liberating traditions for women in the Bible and simply collected oppressive verses and stories about women and used them to control women. Here, the so-called "good news" becomes a thicket of thorns that pierces and persecutes women.

Korean woman's inferiority was again reinforced through science and modern education. Biological determinism represented by Sigmund Freud supported an ideology of "Scientific" hence, justified, male chauvinism. It asserted that different structures of the human body result in fixed differences in personality, capabilities, roles, social status and the destiny of sexes. Males are positive, dependent, obedient, and non-intellectual. Therefore, males are adequate for social roles, females for domestic ones. Such sex

role division has been regarded as "natural".

However recent research in neurophysiology and anatomy, feminist research into social structures, hermeneutics and the emergence of feminist theologies are disclosing that such theories and attitudes are products of a false consciousness in a male-dominant society and merely act as devices for justifying male domination of women.



Kim Chung-Ho. (Turong)

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Broken Community

2) REALITY OF SUFFERING WOMEN

Prof. Lee Hyo-Jai pointed out that the sacrifice of women doubled as the heritage of the patriarchy expanded and was enforced in modern industrial society, both being used to maintain a divided society. The conservative ruling power preserves the patriarchy legally in the name of "family law (system)" to maintain power.

In this patriarchal structure, women at home are valued as an instrument of the male, bearing sons to maintain the patriarchal line and as the sexual object of their husbands. Women who have no economic base despite their domestic labor are dependent on their husbands even as they suffer from sexual abuse, beatings, or the husband's extramarital relationships. Economically, women are possessed by their husbands and no better than slaves.

Sex-role division in a patriarchal, industrial society also results in low wages, bad working conditions, premature retirement and sexual violence among poor women workers and even professionals.



The ruling power of this divided nation (North and South Korea) uses patriarchal traditions to make women's labor a means of acquiring foreign capital during the 1960's eventually drew farmers from the farmland; and children were recruited into the labor force in urban settings. Alienated farmers, rural women laborers, factory workers, urban poor working women and their children are still the most harshly victimized. They suffer from the lowest wages, longest working hours and the worst conditions with no job security. They also have to wrestle with domestic work at home.

The double standard of sex morals created a male culture of extra-marital relationships, turning poor women into prostitutes in a society where, publically, prostitution is prohibited. The ruling elite commercialized women's bodies as a means of acquiring more foreign capital and so increased sex-tourism and pleasure industries, and anesthetized a nascent political consciousness in order to preserve its power. The presence of American troops on the Korean peninsula has greatly contributed to enrich the prostitution industry. It has been estimated that there are around 200 thousand to one million professional prostitutes for the entertainment of domestic as well as foreign tourists. Women prostitutes are double victims of contradictions in sex and class, who take responsibility for the survival of their parents, brothers and sisters. Today the high risk of AIDS is yet another burden women bear.

The ruling powers also use national division to oppress the women laborer's struggle for subsistence. The government accused unionization of the workers as a socialist protest, for instance, and employed police to prevent workers from organizing. Violence and sex torture were two additional means used to preserve power.

National division now also becomes an obstacle preventing a social welfare system for poor women and children, sacrificed in the name of economic growth.



3) REALITY OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Women in the early church of Korea saw themselves as thoroughly sinful

and thought they had sinned against God much more than had men.

"You women should give more offerings to God than men, because it was a woman not a man who first violated God's word in the beginning"

Therefore, the churches insisted that women must not only contribute more of themselves but also donate more money than men.

The story of the original sin has been used consistently to justify the idea of women's inferiority in the Orient as well as in the West.

In the Orient, the early Church working with a Confucianist ideology has fused the psychology of women's obedience with patriarchal Christian doctrine. Accordingly, women's role in the church was limited to cooking, cleaning, and church chores, a simple extension of domestic labor. The hierarchal superstructure of men and substructure of women was enforced and justified by the Church as God-given.



This phenomenon continues unabated in the modern church. Even though women are the majority in the church (around 70 % of the Christian population in Korea), and are the main source for the church's wealth, they are not allowed to participate in policy making bodies of the church, ecumenical organizations or in theological schools in proportion to their numbers. Except for the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) and Methodist Churches, the ordination of women is prohibited.

The discriminatory attitude of the church is even more blatant in the

lower status of professional women workers. In the early stage of the Church women were pioneers. Their efforts and sacrificial contribution could well be the foundation of today's miracle-church growth.



Nevertheless, as churches became state institutions women leaders were systematically replaced by men. Men seized the right of preaching, blessing, and making decisions while church chores and subordinate functions were relegated to women. Women called themselves "kollae" (floorcloth). Now, as then, women worker's status is comparatively low. Their salary is around 20-50 % that of male ministers on the average. The salary of 29.2 % of women church workers is below that of the lowest living costs in urban areas, even though most women are the family's and church's bread winners. Terms of service are insecure. Churchwomen's employment period is one year, and they have to resign whenever the minister resigns. Qualified women are not sought, so that generally non-qualified, docile, obedient women are chosen by the minister. Their main job is visiting church families, and they know best the difficulties and hopes of these families. However, they are excluded from the decision-making body dealing with ministry and witness. Accordingly, their work is denied authority.

In the case of women ministers, core discrimination remains. The common belief in the pre-eminence of men over women results in a preference for male ministers. So it is very rare for a church to invite a woman to be their minister. In the Methodist Church a woman must resign if she marries. So not only is the

system discriminating, but the attitude of the laity toward women leaders is also a problem. Generally the latter regards women leaders as another figure, an image of sacrifice and service.

Today Korean Christian women (...) hope that men will participate in the journey as true partners so that women and men might be reborn as a holistic humanity as seen in Jesus.

(Excerpted from Community of Women and M by Hyun Sook Lee in Reformed World Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec. 1988)

4) Women begin to restore Christian Community

In 1933 the women's suffrage movement began in the church with a request for women elders. A Rev. Kim, Choon Bae supported this movement. However, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church decided to defrock Rev. Kim and denied women's right to participate in church ministries and politics. Appealing to 1 Cor. 14: 34-35, 1 Tim. 2: 11-14 and Gen. 3: 16, Rev. Kim nevertheless had to withdraw his support. The Church divided men from women.

Since national independence, the Korean Church has split into some 50 denominations. The women's movement, which had begun in the early 20th century, continued to grow. In the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK). Women elders were accepted in 1956 and women ministers in 1974. Unfortunately, women's struggles in the Presbyterian Church in Korea for ordination are continuing. Male leader and ministers monopolize church ministry and decision-making bodies. They still deny women's intellectual gifts, trivialize hopes and their place as human beings. Women in the PCK are experiencing both social and religious oppression. They have submitted petitions 17 times, but the General Assembly has refused to enact the Christian Community of Gal. 3: 28.

The women's struggle must be recognized as a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit advancing the realization of an eschatological human community, serving others by healing the wounds of the divided church and transforming authoritative structures into egalitarian ones.



Lee Ki-Yon (Turong)

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