

Intersectionality Revealed: Sexual Politics In Post-IMF Korea

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Introduction: IMF Crisis and Sexual Politics

The IMF crisis (1997-2001) shocked Korea with widespread unemployment and vast economic uncertainty, permanently altering the rather rosy presumptions that South Koreans had about their economy. [It has held down the class mobility of many who had considered themselves as the middle class, and considerable class anxiety and class divide resulted, creating one of important features of the post-IMF Korean society \(Shin K. 2004\).](#) The crisis also precipitated other social and cultural shifts, including transformations of women's sexuality which is the main topic of this paper.

[As Foucault pointed out](#), sexuality is a social construct, "a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power." (Foucault 1978, 105) Here, sexuality is regarded as a system of domination rather than as a personal attribute. Though Foucault's conception of sexuality was a powerful one, it failed to properly take into account gender differences in sexuality and the fact that the discourse of sexuality has been monopolized by men; women's relation to sexuality has been very different from men's. In other words, women have been tacit on [the sexual](#) (Snitow 1981, 10).

One insightful way to incorporate these new dimensions into this concept of sexuality was suggested in an analysis of black women's sexuality by Patricia Hill Collins. In her analysis, Collins (2000, 125) claims that black women protect their own safe space for self-definition by keeping silent in public regarding their sexuality. Under the overdetermined oppression of systems of race, class, and gender, this secrecy was the only way to salvage their space in the system of sexuality that accused black women of being sexually immoral and promiscuous. However, though choosing to stay tacit may serve as a useful strategy to secure a self-determined identity, it cannot provide a political space from which they can initiate subversion of their oppressed state, as Foucault pointed out (1978, 101). Collins, who reintroduced black women's sexuality into a political space, initiates discourse on their sexuality by utilizing the concept of intersectionality.

According to Collins, sexuality is not only a distinct system of oppression but a site over which systems of class, race, gender, and nation-state intersect each other. She goes beyond acknowledging that gender, sexuality, race, and class are linked systems to the more difficult task of specifying how sexuality intersects and interacts with other systems of domination. For instance, Collins explains how black sexuality becomes "constructed as an abnormal or pathologized heterosexuality" through racist images of black men and women, such as the female jezebel, and subjected to "sexualized racism" that justifies segregation and racial containment (2000, 129-130). Collins also examines how black women's specific experiences with pornography, prostitution, and rape illustrate how intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and race rely on sexuality to mutually construct one another" (2000, 135). Her approach will prove to be useful and revealing in this work.

In Korean society in the early 1990s, women changed their strategy of sexual politics from staying tacit in public to producing diverse sexual discourses, led by feminist scholars and activists. Relying on the perspective of gender, they organized movements opposing violence against women and, as a consequence, emphasized the image of women as victims of family violence and sexual violence (Cho 1998; Min 1999). Furthermore, prior to the IMF crisis, in the early 1990s, the sexual politics of Korean women assumed a system of sexuality that classified women into those who were purely heterosexual and those who were not, with the former being seen as normal and the latter

as abnormal. Therefore, by emphasizing the victimhood of purely heterosexual women, women's power could be mobilized to gain strong political voices, which were urgently needed to demand and enforce reforms to women's rights. After the IMF crisis, however, the deployment of sexuality assumed multifarious faces under the intersecting systems of domination, such as class, gender, sexuality, and nation-state. Sexual discourses were constructed in various forms depending on where women situate themselves or are situated in a network of intersecting systems of domination.

This work will attempt to understand the characteristics of women's sexuality that has unfolded in post-IMF Korean society from the aspect of its sexual politics. In particular, it will show that the previous practice of sexual politics, which were based on the identity of "pure heterosexual women defenselessly suffering male violence," reveals lacunae in terms of both heterosexism and sexual violence. These lacunae emerge as the flourishing of discourses on fun/pleasure on the one hand and as a deepening intersectionality of sexuality on the other. A discussion of each realm will proceed by focusing on a specific event that occurred or an issue that was raised and the discourses generated by it recently in Korean society.

First, a discussion of heterosexism will focus on the challenges raised recently by the Korean lesbian rights movement to the feminist movement. These will include discussion of the characteristics of heterosexism that the lesbian rights movement tries to disrupt and what implications the tendency of this movement has for the sexual politics of womanhood. Second, regarding the discussion of sexual violence, Collins' concept of intersectionality will be utilized to analyze ways in which experiences of pornography, prostitution, and rape, that had been traditionally recognized as violence against women, were organized to take a form of overdetermined oppressions by the intersections of class, gender, family, sexuality and nation-state policies. It will further be shown that new discourses and terrains are formed around them. Focusing on various discourses generated by cyberporn, the legislative processes for the new prostitution laws in 2004, and the Miryang group rape case in 2004, changes in sexual politics will be examined. These issues and cases caused enormous repercussions in Korean society and created discourses reflecting diverse positions, hence they will provide many suggestions that will help draw a detailed contour of sexual politics. References will not be limited to previous research works only, but will also include soft materials that appeared in

newspapers, including columns and investigative articles, statements from government organizations and NGOs, and diverse remarks by netizens that appeared in BBSs of the press and other organizations, thus enabling diverse viewpoints to reveal themselves.

Lesbian Rights Movement: Challenges to Feminist Gender Politics

Beginning with efforts to amend family law, the women's movement in Korea has incessantly criticized and tried to revise the Korean patriarchal family system. In particular, the *hoju* (family-head) system¹ was regarded as one of its main bastions and was consequently criticized for producing and maintaining the gender hierarchy which positions women as dependents of men (Yang 2000). The movement to abolish the *hoju* system was driven by 111 women's and civil organizations² collectively since the year 2000, and its eventual abolishment in the 2005 is considered one of cornerstones on which the Korean family system can now be reorganized to become gender-equal in the near future (KWAU 2005).

However, in Korean society, the critique of gender hierarchy in patriarchal families has been proceeding independently of a critique of heterosexuality as an institution, drawing a distinct line from the latter. Gender politics in Korean society could gain a political voice only in so far as heterosexism was accepted as the norm. Equality for mothers, wives, and daughters within the family could only be claimed on the premise of their pure heterosexuality. By accepting the system of sexuality that categorizes both "impure" hyper-sexuality and sexuality without heterosexual desire as abnormal or pathological, women with a "pure sexuality" could secure their rights as the representatives of women in the gender system.

If feminism in Korea is sincere in its desire to represent "women," it should also accommodate lesbians as "women" in its gender politics. However, by doing so, it could risk its own hard-earned political voice. It seems like it would be asking too much of

¹ The *hoju* (family-head) system is one of the primary family institutions in Korea and was formalized in family law. As part of the colonial legacy (1910-1945), the system had until recently contained strict patriarchal rules, such as patrilineal succession of the family, patrilocal marriage, and patriarchal headship. The part of the Civil Code containing the *hoju* system was finally repealed by the National Assembly in March 2005.

² http://kin.naver.com/browse/db_detail.php?d1id=6&dir_id=605&docid=421470

heterosexual women, for whom heterosexism might be their only resource for power. Conflicts and discords between the lesbian rights movement that emerged in the late 1990s and the women's movement have their origins in this predicament.

In 1994, the first lesbian organization in Korea, called *Kkiri kkiri* (English translation), was formed. *Kkiri kkiri* tried to join the Korea Women's Associations United (KWAU), a main alliance of progressive women's movement organizations in Korea, in 1997 but was rejected (albeit politely). In 2001, a paper criticizing lesbian feminism that lesbians are biologically determined and persistent in adhering to [man and woman relationship](#) was presented in Hanguk Yeoseong Hakhoe (Korean Association of Women's Studies), leading to rebuttals by lesbian rights organizations (Park 2005; *Women's News*, December 7 and 21, 2001). Gender politics that attempted to exclude lesbians from the category of "women" persisted, and in 2004, the Busan Women's Center, a center operated by Busan city which has a population of nearly four million, did not allow lesbian activists to participate in its program for activists from women's organizations. This rejection was purportedly "because lesbian movement organizations do not belong to women's movement organizations" (Kei 2004).³ Though the Korean lesbian movement has a decade-long history, it has not yet been able to form an alliance with women's movement organizations and has been forced to continue along its own lonely way (Kei 2004).⁴

In November 2004, the Korean Association of Women's Studies invited lesbian rights activists to a session on "sexual minorities and the politics of difference" in the conference, "The Sexual Politics of Difference." This was the starting point for the politics of inclusion for feminists and lesbian activists. A lesbian activist, Suyeon, who participated in this session, described her experiences of meeting feminists.

We spoke of our experiences with "discrimination" to describe our differences at the Korean Association of Women's Studies to which we were invited. The first thing we had to do was urge them, the feminists and feminist scholars who invited us, to properly recognize our "differences."

³ However, in March 2005, the [National Human Rights Commission of Korea](#) ruled that "it is a discriminatory act to exclude organizations for sexual minorities from women's organizations" and recommended that the Mayor of Busan and the head of the Busan Women's Center prevent further such recurrences (LIL 2005a).

⁴ <http://kirikiri.org/index.php>.

“Differences” cannot be explained in terms of “diversity” only; it also means “discrimination.”. . . We tried to explain that for heterosexual women “difference” is an experience of “othering the other,” that is, lesbians. Whereas for lesbians “difference” is just experiencing “discrimination.” However, the responses from the feminists there were not what we had expected. “Since when did we enjoy vested rights?” “It seems to me that the discrimination you are talking about is lacking in substance.” “Why are you so aggressive?” “Do you have to be so upset? After all, we invited you and were willing to listen.” They treated us as if we were pigheadedly aggressive toward feminists and indulging in self-victimization (Suyeon 2005a).

Lesbian activists must have wished to persuade feminists that “difference” between homosexual and heterosexual women does not necessarily mean diversity but can mean the hierarchical relation between them. That is, heterosexuals and homosexuals belong to oppressive and oppressed groups, respectively, in the system of sexuality; this hierarchy applies to heterosexual and homosexual women as well (Han 2004; Kei 2004; Park 2004). But feminists failed to offer any reconciliatory ground for lesbians by steadfastly holding onto the unitary concept of gender. The remark, “Since when did we enjoy vested rights?” is a response suitable for “women” as a singular oppressed group in a gender system, not for “heterosexuals” as an oppressive group in a system of sexuality.

In gender politics, operating under the premise of heterosexism, lesbian feminists are compelled to assimilate into the identity of heterosexual feminists and to keep silent on their homosexual identity. As a consequence, while there is a space where discourses on lesbian identity are allowed to exist in the human rights movement, there is no such space in the feminist movement. Kim Hye-jeong, an activist with the Busan Center for Women and Sexual Minority Rights, describes the current political status of the Korean lesbian rights movement:

There is a certain atmosphere that makes it difficult for lesbians to express their sexual identity freely within women’s movement organizations. Due to the homophobic behavior of women’s movement activists, lesbians are discouraged from even coming out in women's organizations, hence a

significant number of lesbian activists in women's movement organizations are closeted. Many feminist scholars and activists seem to believe that they know enough about homosexuality and don't need to expend any further attention, at least for the present. Naturally, many lesbian rights activists confess that they feel more comfortable in forming alliances with other human rights organizations than with women's organizations. Since human rights activists believe that they do not know much about issues related homosexuality and therefore should start by learning about it, they are willing to ask seemingly stupid questions and share concerns (Kim H. 2004, quoted from Jeong 2004).⁵

Lesbian activists explain that they tried to deploy their sexual politics by first forming an alliance with the gay rights movement and the feminist movement (Park 2005). But "after being isolated between the patriarchal character and arrogance of the gay rights movement and the exclusion of lesbians by the feminist movement" (Park 2004, 2), they finally declared separation from both in May 2005. The purpose of the Korea Lesbian Rights Movement United, which is an alliance of four lesbian rights movement organizations, is "to protest against the heterosexism and patriarchy of Korean society and pursue an independent movement for lesbian rights based on the reality facing Korean lesbians" (LIL 2005b).

In fact, the "campaign for the prevention of outing" and the "campaign against sexual violence" that they organized show the characteristics of the movement, which is "based on the reality facing Korean lesbians," most saliently (Suyeon 2005b). The purpose of the "campaign for the prevention of outing" is to protect lesbians from **having their identities revealed** by punishing those who, without permission, disclose or attempt to disclose the homosexual identity of a lesbian in her workplace or to her acquaintances. They criticize feminists who encourage lesbians to come out, saying, "these feminists are just playing conceptual games based on theories, thus ignoring the reality of Korean lesbians and betraying their arrogance" (Suyeon 2005b). Han Chae-yoon (2004) describes the "conceptual games" of feminists who pressure lesbians to come out as follows:

⁵ <http://www.ildaro.com/Scripts/news/index.php?menu=ART&sub=View&idx=2004103100014>.

They would say, excitedly, “I met many lesbians when I lived in a foreign country. When they confidently revealed their sexual identity, I was surprised at first but then felt envious. It should be like that in Korea, too. There should be more brave homosexuals coming out.” [However] when asked their opinions on homosexuality, they answer, “I don't know much about homosexuality, since I have not met any homosexuals. But I don't think they are immoral in any way” (Han 2004, 7).

Lesbians drew a line between themselves and those feminists who insist that they come out without realizing the dangers and sacrifices lesbians face by doing so in this utterly homophobic Korean society by calling themselves “a small minority of peculiar political lesbians” (Park T. 2004, 6). Along with this campaign, they made efforts to solve the problem of sexual violence and prevent it within the lesbian community. Their campaign focused on issues such as “how to avoid becoming a sexual offender” and “how to recover from sexual violence” (QAN 2004).

It appears that the Korean lesbian rights movement, which has just emerged from a long silence, has been focused on establishing its identity first, then gaining approval from civil society, and finally being included among its members. However, the politics of identity is accompanied by exclusion, isolation, and hierarchy (Gamson 1995). In other words, to be included in a civil society, they have to reconstruct themselves according to dominant, normalized cultural constructions (even if they are evolving ones) within communities, and legitimate their own position as an integral part of universally applicable moral codes. To achieve this, the hierarchy that can exclude internal differences and normalize them into one identity is essential (Meeks 2001, 335). Thus, the politics of lesbian identity constructs “different but normal” lesbian citizens by eliminating differences and “threatening” elements within the lesbian community through the “campaign for the prevention of outing” and the “campaign against sexual violence.”

Their sexual politics bear some features that are distinct from queer politics. Queer politics questions the exclusion and hierarchy that accompanies politics of identity and seeks to destabilize the moral codes of civil society that separate citizen from enemy.

Thus, queer politics finds its purpose in resisting the cultural oppression of exclusion and hierarchy. However, considering that political power can only be won with an established identity, and resistance against institutional oppression is only possible with political power (Gamson 1995), and further noting that “the reality of Korean society” endeavors to build a civil society with multiple identities, it seems inevitable that they will choose lesbian identity politics in order to be accepted as members of civil society. Yet, by the same reasoning, identities that were excluded by normalizing lesbian identity lead to the expectation of other, distinct lesbian identities.

The beginning of lesbian identity politics by lesbians, who were previously excluded from the process of normalizing the identity of “women,” led to the redefinition of feminist gender politics as sexual politics, focusing mainly on heterosexual women. Now, feminist gender politics has reached a point of having to face the problem of incorporating differences in sexual politics into the discourses of feminist gender politics. Enabling a space where the coexistence of diverse identities is provided and the modes of their coexistence are repeatedly contested can destabilize existing gender politics, but it can also open the road to actively politicize the various positions of women in post-IMF Korean society. The starting point will be recognizing the boundary of feminist sexual politics as fluid.

Cyberporn and Women’s Bodies

In post-IMF Korean society, pornography became **more prevalent** on the Internet. Kim Hyeon-mi (2004) explains the rapid rise of cyberporn by arguing that its specific characteristics of immediate satisfaction, easy access, and possibility for manifold sexual practices fits perfectly with the unpredictable and discontinuous postmodern conditions of life. She also argues that the favorable social opinion towards producers of cyberporn, which resulted from the elevated general image of Internet gurus, including hackers, giving them a sense of pride and achievement and, moreover, earning them a lot of money, played a role in the phenomenon. On the other hand, according to Choe Jeong Eun-jeong (2003), the spirit of sharing, which is one of the important characteristics of cyberculture, contributes to turning pornography into everyday cultural consumables. “It is because, in cyberspace, a cultural atmosphere is formed that encourages one to gather one’s utmost

efforts to share items, whether it is a bizarre flash animation or a nude picture album of a favorite actress (2003, 12).” Thus cyberporn could increase production, circulation, and consumption of pornography by leaps and bounds, mainly due to the characteristics of “cyber” rather than those of “porn.” The technical and cultural characteristics of cyberspace expanded the terrain and discourses of pornography so much as to render feminist gender politics claiming pornography to be violence against women ineffective.⁶

Cyberporn also acquired the status of a “cultural industry,” as a new profit model on the Internet (Kim H. 2004, 336). When cyberporn becomes a cultural industry, consumption, rather than violence, becomes a key concept in understanding the terrain of cyberporn. Namely, due to its cyber characteristic, the cyberporn cultural industry provides an exit for even hardcore pornography to justify itself in the name of consumption. According to de Grazia (1996, 4), “consumption is processes of commodification, spectatorship, commercial exchanges, and social welfare reforms, processes that involve the desire for and sale, purchase, and use of durable and nondurable goods, collective services, and images.” Therefore, in order to consume pornography, it is necessary to first transform a woman’s body into a commodity, then induce desire for that commodity.

Hardcore cyberporn, which fills the computer screen with “sexual acts” in the instant of network access and commodifies women into “three holes,” solicits “consumers” to engage in sexual practice, such as [the “fastest sexual satisfaction”](#) or masturbation (Kim H. 2004, 339). Furthermore, hardcore cyberporn, in contrast to traditional offline porno, excludes stories, thus relieving consumers from the burden of forming emotional relations with women on the computer screen and allowing them to enjoy the consumption of women as commodities. But it is impossible to induce desire for a woman who is reduced to “three holes” by relying on the technological characteristics of cyberspace only. Hardcore cyberporn makes the consumption of women’s bodies enjoyable by intersecting offline systems of sexuality and class. Namely, a low-income woman who converts her body into a commodity for economic reasons in the system of class is transformed into an unchaste woman in the system of sexuality.

⁶ At present, cyberporn takes diverse forms of existence such as adult sites that store various types of pictures and video clips, digital theaters specializing in adult movies, adult Internet TV stations, nude video chat sites, internet sex shops, yaseol-lovers’ societies (text-based porn sites), and amateur nude sites operated by individuals (Choe Jeong 2003, 4).

Unchaste women in the system of sexuality are located outside the moral code and are excluded and separated from chaste women. Since they are located outside the moral code, those who gaze upon their bodies as objects of desire are allowed to enjoy pornography exempt from moral burdens. Consequently, blame is always laid upon women who permit the commodification of their bodies, leaving their consumers safeguarded.

Meanwhile, diverse types of cyberporn, in combination with changed offline social conditions for women, made it feasible for women to become consumers of cyberporn.⁷ The appearance of female subjects yearning for sex as pleasure originated from changes in the social environment that allowed sexuality to no longer be subordinated to marriage and reproduction, causing woman's sexuality to rapidly evolve from the sphere governed by ethics and morals to the one governed by fun and pleasure. Even though the quest for fun and pleasure and the blossoming discourses on them intersect with capitalistic norms of contracts and exchange values, they also encourage a construction of women's subjectivity that could destabilize the pure/impure dichotomy within the system of sexuality. The subversive potential of fun and pleasure in sexual politics critically depends on its capacity to construct a female subjectivity that pursues fun and pleasure without inviting the commercialization of women's bodies.

Consumption of cyberporn by women shares a similar characteristic with the concern over the body itself that forms the mainstream of offline sexual culture. The recent fads, such as the *eoljjang* and *momjjang*⁸ syndromes, a craze for nude pictures of favorite actresses,⁹ and a fascination with pretty-faced male idols with well-sculpted bodies all point to the fact that the body has become a form of cultural capital that creates power, and there exists an increasing desire for the body. In a society of image consumers, this interest in the body opens an easy door for women to access pornography. In cyberporn, this characteristic presents itself in the form of interest in nudes. Adult internet

⁷ Mainstream hardcore pornography sites, such as adult sites showing graphic "sexual acts" and nude video chat sites where, using person-to-person chatting, women are paid to take off their clothes and perform requested sexual acts are mainly targeted to men, whereas sites for women's nude images and those with "stories" such as *yaseol*-lovers' societies attract mainly women.

⁸ Abbreviations of *eolgul* (face) *jjang* (best) and *mom* (body) *jjang* (best), respectively. These fads started as an Internet subculture by adolescents who posted photos of themselves online, using a cellular phone camera or digital camera, which other members then perused and judged for the "cutest" among them. This culture of *eoljjang* and *momjjang*, in which having a pretty face or nice body means possessing cultural power, spread offline into mainstream culture and brought into vogue cosmetic surgery, diet programs, and weight training.

TV stations that broadcasted live sex shows had over a million subscribers in 2001, with the percentage of women subscribers reaching 42.7 percent. According to a report in 2003 by a company that provided nude pictures of a famous female entertainer via mobile phones, the percentage of women who downloaded the images was 60 percent, far above the percentage of men (Choe Jeong 2003, 9).

Another characteristic of the cyberporn consumed by women is that it introduces “stories” into pornography. *Fan fic*¹⁰ and *yaoi*,¹¹ operated mainly by women between the ages of 15 and 20, belong to a genre of pornography designed for women. The content mostly consists of fictitious love stories about young gay couples and their indulgence in sensual pleasure, ranging from “high-teen romance” (teen romance novels) to SM (somasochism) in their levels of description. This genre causes somewhat novel changes in the male-centered terrain of pornography in the sense that it encourages women no longer to remain passive sexual objects of men but to show their interest in men’s bodies and create their own stories. However, it confines its principal characters to gay couples, rendering it ineffectual in moving women’s bodies and desires to the forefront. As an arena for encouraging and fostering women’s discourses on sexual experiences, stimulation, and satisfaction, only adult webzines for women seem to successfully fill the niche.¹² One of them, Foxylove, has over a hundred thousand subscribers, 60 percent of whom are women. This pornographic webzine for women claims to provide a space for women to share sex stories with other women under the slogan of acting as “the headquarters of a movement to recover orgasms for Korean women” and a “true sisterhood offering support and helping each other to move forward.”

Diversification of the types of cyberporn has allowed women, who are intent on gaining knowledge of, enjoying, and monopolizing sex from their own perspective, to form groups and bring themselves to the foreground; it has also brought about an unexpected effect of shaking up the system of sexuality that has differentiated women into chaste and unchaste. Moreover, by finding a way to incorporate stories into pornography from a woman’s perspective, it provides a space where women are not

⁹ Providing nude pictures of a famous female celebrity for mobile content.

¹⁰ A compound of “fan” and “fiction.” Each member writes their own fiction story about young gay men, using a popular male teen idol as a principal character.

¹¹ Pornographic fiction or comic books about gay love by women writers for women readers. Started in Japan, they became popular among a small group of devotees in Korea, too.

¹² namrodang.com; foxylove.net; 3exdom.co.kr; cultizen.co.kr/sex (Choe Jeong 2003).

separated from their bodies and where the inherent characteristics of their bodies are preserved. But only a small number of sites like these exist, and most other pornographic sites reproduce the image of women as segregated and fragmented bodies. Due to the incessant and overwhelming barrage of material, the latter sites may appear to be reproducing diverse forms of women's bodies according to their professions, ages, sizes, races, nations, and sexualities. However, this diversity is merely a diversity of commodities to suit the tastes of consumers and fails to prevent the eventual reduction of women into a single commodity bearing "three holes" (Moore and Adele 2001, 86). It is requisite for feminist sexual politics to expose the ways that cyberporn intersects offline systems of class, sexuality, and nation-state policies and, on the other hand, politicize the process, turning the consumption of cyberporn into [women's discourses](#).

Prostitution and the Issue of Women's Agency

Since the "Act on the Punishment of Procuring Prostitution and Associated Acts" and the "Act on the Prevention of Prostitution and Protections of Victims Thereof"¹³ went into force in September 2004, diverse viewpoints on prostitution that were once latent have begun to emerge. These laws replaced the "Prevention of Prostitution Act" that was legislated in 1961 and had since been enforced. Though both the new acts and old act shared the same basic principle of penalizing sex trafficking, feminist scholars estimate the legislation of the new acts to have the following three significances. First, by changing the legal term for prostitution from *yullak* (ruining one's body by degrading oneself) to *seong maemae* (buying and selling of sex), the whole context involving buyers and sellers of sex, mediating agents like pimps, the sex industry, and so on, can be scrutinized and questioned rather than merely morally stigmatizing women who sell sex as had been done in the past. Second, by introducing the concept of "victims of sex trafficking," it allowed women who were forced to sell sex to be exempt from prosecution. Third, by defining the act of sex trafficking as involving three persons, including mediating agents, rather than two persons buying and selling sex, it made it possible to mete out much tougher punishments to mediating agents (Lee N. 2005; Yang 2004).

The passing of this bill was the result of efforts by the Ministry of Gender

¹³ To be henceforth abbreviated as "new prostitution laws."

Equality that had prepared it with the participation of Saeumteo¹⁴ and Hansorihoe,¹⁵ two women's organizations who were leading the movement against prostitution and had worked with those actually involved in the sex industry for the past twenty years, and the Korea Women's Associations United, an alliance of progressive women's movement organizations in Korea (Bul-ui domabaem 2001). It was also the fruits of the efforts of the Korean women's movements that, in a similar spirit, had been striving to prevent sexual violence for the past fifteen years. Movements against sexual violence locate women as victims of the sexual double standards in society and the sexual powers of men, and they endeavor to protect women and their rights. In the context of these movements, prostitutes are not just regarded as the worst victims of double standards and the sexual powers of men, but also as "poor *eonnis*,"¹⁶ namely, "poor sisters" or victims of the sex industry (Lee N. 2005). This shift in identity from *yullangnyeo* (prostitutes) to "poor *eonnis*" could be considered the most significant contribution made by these movements. Starting from this paradigm shift, the feminist sexual politics of prostitution could adopt as its main policy the eradication of prostitution, calling for the penalization of men and pimps as culprits and the protection of human rights of prostitutes. Accordingly, they concentrated their efforts on legislating the bill that would help realize this aim.

Behind the efforts by Korean feminist sexual politics for the legislation of the bill for the new laws on prostitution lie the post-IMF social changes that caused the abnormal growth of the sex industry. After the start of the IMF crisis, a huge amount of capital unable to find profitable investments flowed into a nonproductive service industry, which offered high returns with relatively small risks, and bloated the entertainment service industry, including service agencies for prostitution. Scarcer job opportunities and harsher working environments for women, and increasing financial responsibility, were important factors that furthered their entry into prostitution (Lee Y. 2004, 186). **Unless the policy for eradication of prostitution that regards prostitution as a crime was firmly held on, it certainly would have lead further and, perhaps, uncontrollable expansion of the prostitution industry.**

However, less than a month after the new laws came into effect, over

¹⁴ Saeumteo: a shelter for victims of prostitution.

¹⁵ Hansorihoe: United Voice (*hansori*) for the Eradication of Prostitution in Korea.

¹⁶ The term *eonni*, meaning elder sister, is usually used to convey amicable and friendly feelings towards a woman.

twenty-five hundred prostitutes were demonstrating in the streets. Gathering and shouting, “Guarantee us the right to live,” they demanded that the laws penalizing buyers and sellers of sex be repealed and called on the government to keep its promise of delaying enforcement of the laws (*Hankyoreh*, October 19, 2004). Their demonstrations, hunger strikes, and suicides brought on by economic difficulties were highlighted by the media, lending support to the stronger voice of men who opposed the prohibition of prostitution.¹⁷

Despite their varied political backgrounds, these men shared the common opinion of trying to justify men’s sexual desires as biological instinct, the result of human evolution, and shift the point of issue from problems of pimps and men to those between women. Depending on their political standpoints, they attempted to classify women into prostitutes and “other women.” Here, “other women” included “mothers,” who believe that prostitution must be abolished to preserve the normal family under crisis, “normal women,” who insist that prostitution should be allowed because normal women would otherwise face increased risks of sexual violence if men’s sexual desires were blocked, and “bourgeois women,” who believe that prostitution should be allowed in order to protect working class women’s rights to live. Although “other women” were classified in these multifarious ways according to systems of family, nation-state, sexuality, and class, respectively, each of these classifications served in turn to sustain the hierarchical gender system.

The reason feminist scholars are wary of making explicit statements acknowledging the agency of prostitutes is because it is so easy for the diverse voices of women to be reduced to conflicts among women, thus serving to maintain the hierarchical gender system. This would be the worst possible consequence that must be avoided at all costs. Therefore, the response of women’s movement organizations and the Ministry of Gender Equality, in order to explain away the demonstrations and hunger strikes by

¹⁷ The president of the Korean Council for Men, Yi Gyeong-su, filed a complaint to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, claiming “These acts violate not only the human rights of men but also deprive them of the right to live and the right to a happy life.” Congressman Kim Chung-hwan of the Grand National Party also criticized the law, saying “Men of marriageable age, from 18 to 30 years will be deprived of the means to satisfy their sexual desires for as long as 12 years.” The president of the Korean Economic Research Institute, Jwa Sung-Hee (Jwa Seung-hui), commented that the laws were based on “the leftist policy that tries to prohibit human sexual desires, thus violating human rights, just to uphold moral values.” On the other hand, leftist men of the People’s Solidarity for Social Progress also criticized the law, claiming that “bourgeois women robbed prostitutes of their rights to live,” and designating the Ministry of Gender Equality and women’s movement organizations as those controlled by bourgeois women

claiming that the prostitutes “must be confidantes and cronies of pimps or simply so ignorant as to misinterpret the new acts” (Morae 2005), was more or less inevitable considering the strategy of gender politics that tries to mobilize women as victims to resist the hierarchical gender system. In fact, Yi Seon-hui, a representative of the *Hanteo* Women Workers Association that led the demonstrations and hunger strikes, explained that they had asked pimps and merchants for monetary support for the demonstrations (Morae 2004).

But the fact that they asked pimps for support and protection in and of itself does not prove that the pimps forced them to demonstrate. Without any families, relatives, or even boyfriends to help and support them, and considering the fact that they regarded ‘women’s movement organizations’ as “groups of immature and inexperienced aunties” or “mouthpieces of the well-to-do,” they had no other place to turn (Won 2004). Won Mi-hye (2004) interprets their demonstrations as implications of their increased negotiating power in the sex industry. The original purpose of the new prostitution laws was to free prostitutes from the sex industry, hence restoring their “human rights,” but their enforcement also resulted in endowing prostitutes with stronger negotiating power in dealing with customers and pimps. This stronger negotiating power of prostitutes encourages recognition of them as beings with agency rather than mere victims, or in other words, as “sex sellers” or “sex workers” who are simply doing a different kind of “work” (Lee N. 2005).

Yi Seon-hui, mentioned above, explains their work as prostitutes in the following way.

You reporters also earn a salary, make a living, and save money for a rainy day. It’s the same with us. Asking us to give it all up leaves us completely at loss as to how to make a living. Some people say, “What have you got to lose that makes you complain so?” But wouldn’t you reporters demonstrate, too, if one day you were suddenly asked to drop your cameras and pens and leave your offices? You would be robbed of your means to make a living. Of course you would demonstrate! It’s the same with us. We are using different parts of our body, I admit, but it’s still a job. I don’t want to make any further

(Peipeomun 2005).

excuses, as it would only make me look miserable. This is our job. We have been making a living with it, so leave us alone so we can earn money and make our livings. Yes, just allow us to make a living lest we go hungry. It's simple as that (Morae 2004).

By situating prostitution in the context of “work,” “making a living,” and “the right to live,” they want to keep their distance from sexual politics that regard prostitution as sexual violence. Namely, they are contrasting the right to live against the concept of prostitution as violence against women's human rights. Therefore, the main agenda for sexual politics should be figuring out what led them to see their right to live and their human rights as being in conflict, and what measures should be employed to bring about the harmonious reconciliation of the two. The dichotomy of classifying prostitutes into those who regard it as a job and those who were coerced into it as criminals and victims, respectively, will result in separating prostitutes according to volition and coercion, thus admitting the incompatibility of their right to live and their human rights. A gender politics based on exclusion and hierarchy among women will not only limit its own supporting ground, which is dearly needed to resist gender hierarchy, but also weaken its voices of resistance in the intersectional realm of systems of class, sexuality, and nation-state policies.

Helping prostitutes gain stronger negotiating power in the sex industry, on the one hand, and fostering environments and conditions favorable for prostitutes to leave this industry “without much difficulty” on the other hand (Lee N. 2005), is the correct path for reconciling their right to live and their human rights. Also, allowing the differences among women to come to the fore offers a way to expand gender politics, without reducing it to conflicts between women, by making the intersectionality of diverse systems of domination prominent. In order to not turn differences into exclusion but to instead foster alliances, it will first be necessary to let their diverse voices be heard unfettered (Won 2004). Then, the characteristics of the overdetermined oppression under which all women are subjected must be comprehended in order to understand the modes of separation and interconnection between them.

Rape: The Miryang Case

Recently, an incident of gang rape that occurred in the city of Miryang shocked all of Korean society, causing serious and diverse repercussions.¹⁸ In the Miryang gang rape case (2004.12.7-2005.4.13), “44 high school students in the city of Miryang raped two sisters who were middle school students, repeatedly over one year, each time in groups ranging from 4 to 10 in number, using various sexual instruments and extorting money.”¹⁹ The enormity of the shock and perplexity felt by Koreans, including those already battle-hardened by a recent series of gruesome crimes, was partly due to the fact that both the victims and the offenders were teenage students, and due to the fact that this had occurred repeatedly over a year. However, despite the outcries raised by a great number of netizens and efforts by women’s movement organizations and human rights lawyers to enforce strong punishments for the offenders, the case ended with some of the accused students being sent to juvenile court and the rest being released.

This case, its police investigation, and the legal processes that followed clearly reveal that, in Korean society, woman’s sexuality serves the maintenance of not only the gender system but systems of locality, class, family, and sexuality, and the intersection of these systems provides the site for woman’s sexuality. The fact that the terrain of sexuality is no longer constructed only by the gender system but by the intersection of diverse systems means that the terrain of sexual politics has become more elaborate and cannot be coped with by gender politics alone.

Above all, this case is closely connected with the identity of the region of Miryang. This medium-sized city with a population of 150 thousand had identified itself as “the city of morality and decorum with a proud tradition handed down over centuries” (*Hankyoreh*, December 19, 2004). The fact that this kind of hideous rape had occurred in this city was therefore detrimental and shook the whole foundation of its very identity. To

¹⁸ <http://cafe.daum.net/wpqkfehdhkwj> (Problems and their Solutions raised by the Miryang united case) This site started its operation after the Miryang rape case appeared in the press, “to prevent lenient sentencing, for the reason that the accused is a minority, and to urge strict punishments for them.” The materials used in this work are related writings that appeared in “Case Briefings,” “Free Bulletin Boards (BBS),” and “Press Briefings” on this site.

¹⁹ Prosecutors sent all of the accused to Juvenile Court or dropped accusations, except for ten offenders who were accused of group sexual assault (special rape and sexual assault). For those ten, prosecutors demanded two to four years of imprisonment with a three-year stay of execution. However, the judges decided to send them to Juvenile Court instead, citing such reasons as the fact that they were still high school students and, hence, under age and still held the potential for non-violent lives, and because they had already been

preserve the honor of Miryang, it was essential to stress that the rape victims were sexually abnormal, and therefore, they could not possibly be from Miryang. As long as it was accepted that the victims who hailed from other regions were sexually abnormal, Miryang could clear itself of any stigma as a “city of rape,” or so goes the logic. The remarks by a police officer investigating the case, who said, “young wenches like you, barely off your mother’s milk, going around and seducing boys, have brought disgrace to my hometown, Miryang!” (Case Briefings No. 20, December 16, 2004), typifies such logic.

In cyberspace, remarks by netizens from outside Miryang condemning the case began appearing all over various BBSs. Most were vulgar comments that relied on shallow (and typical of cyberspace) images of small towns as uncivilized and backward, such as “Miryang, town of country bumpkins,” “Miryang, home of rapists,” and so on. Here, the image of “Miryang rapists” was utilized as a sign normalizing the hierarchical distinction between Seoul and non-Seoul regions. In other words, from a “town” like Miryang, to a province like “Gyeongsangnam-do,” then to “towns and villages” in general, the target expanded, each time serving as a signifier of non-Seoul regions as inferior and backward. “Miryang rapists” was used symbolically to show that “rural towns” no longer resembled the traditional image of simple and honest people and instead betrayed the backwardness of non-Seoul regions, thus justifying the hierarchy between Seoul and non-Seoul regions.

Hierarchy was manifest in the investigation process, too. First, the police revealed the last name and addresses of the one of the victims, which, combined with several articles based on unconfirmed rumors that appeared in the press, made the lives of the victim and her family miserable. Second, during the investigation, “after lining up forty-one accused offenders, a policeman asked the victim to point out the named offender each time the officer called out the offender’s name.” As if this were not traumatic enough,” he asked, “Did he insert [it] or not?” after telling the victim to confront each offender face to face. Because of these shocking experiences, the victim had to be hospitalized for psychiatric treatment (Press Briefings no. 249, January 7, 2005).

Because the press and the police could reduce victims to mere material for

admitted to colleges or hired for jobs (Press Briefings No. 356, April 12, 2005).

“information,” “press briefings,” or “scoops,” they could also conveniently ignore the victim’s human rights and privacy. The victim’s sexuality thus reduced could be circulated in forms vested with commodity values of exclusive reports and promotions. The ease with which the police and the press could objectify and turn the victims into commodities reflects the fact that the human rights and privacies of low-income people were not objects of protection but of police and press intervention. Categorizing them into “unchaste” women also helped accelerate this process. When rural identity relies mainly on a sense of moral superiority relative to central, urban areas, and when this is made possible by the chastity of rural women, patriarchy is practiced in a stricter form in order to maintain its identity, enabling the oppression of “unchaste” women to be approved and tolerated.

The gender system also sustains itself by classifying women into “chaste” and “unchaste.” The girlfriends of the Miryang rapists defended their boyfriends and tried to draw a clear distinction between their sexuality and the victims’ sexuality by slurring the victims as “bitches,” “dirty sluts.” The existence of “unchaste” women guarantees chastity for those women who distinguish themselves from them. On the basis of this chastity, chaste women, together with the men who protect them, construct the gender system.

The hierarchy of the family system consists of normal and abnormal families. The family system based on the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family maintains itself on the premise of the chastity of the mother and daughter. When the mother and daughter are not “chaste,” the family is classified as abnormal and hierarchical treatment is justified. Parents of the Miryang rapists, in interviews with television reporters (Press Briefings No. 125, December 14, 2004), said “Why should we feel sorry for the victim’s family? Why don’t you consider our suffering? Who can resist temptation when girls are trying to seduce boys? They should have taught their daughters how to behave in order to avoid this kind of accident.” They were claiming that, because of abnormal families with “unchaste” daughters, the existence of “normal families” like theirs was threatened.

On the other hand, the main reason the judges were able to pass such lenient sentences was because the father of the victims reached an agreement with six of the offenders to plead leniency for them. The father, an alcoholic, was divorced by the mother three years prior due to family violence and had been drunk frequently and been violent to

his children. However, he was also the one with parental rights over the daughter, the victim and a middle school student. Even though it was the mother and aunt who first brought forth the accusation, the father, after promising that he would stop drinking and refrain from violence from then on, persuaded the victim to reach agreements with the offenders after receiving a great sum of money from them (*Ohmynews*, April 13, 2005).²⁰

This father, who did not even know what his daughter had gone through the previous year until the accusation was brought up, was called upon to assume his patriarchal authority and take control of daughter's sexuality; thus, patriarchy was once again magically saved. Depending on the intersectional modes of the systems of locality, class, gender, sexuality, and family, this family was classified as an abnormal family on the one hand and a normal, patriarchal family on the other. Thanks to the "unchaste" daughter/woman's sexuality, traditional systems of class, locality, gender, family, and sexuality were given a new lease on life.

Conclusion: Sexual Politics in Intersecting Systems of Domination

Sexual politics led by the Korean women's movement cannot properly deal with the new social problems raised after the IMF crisis, such as the complexity of inequality issues and differences among women. Due to increased class divides, changes in the family structure, and widespread consumer capitalism, the realm of sexuality has shifted to one of intersectionality of multiple social systems. However, sexual politics still relies on promoting gender politics based on the identity of women as victims. The cases and issues discussed in this work clearly show that the embodied experiences of women have already moved from the sphere of gender inequality to one of intersectionality with other systems of domination.

Traditionally, the sexual differentiation of woman's sexuality into normal and abnormal ones was based on the concept of heterosexual chastity. However, after the IMF crisis, the appearance of lesbians pursuing homosexual desires on the one hand and a thriving sexual culture that allows and encourages the deployment of women's desire and sexual curiosity on the other turned the sexuality into a contested zone. The processes of

²⁰http://news.naver.com/hotissue/daily_read.php?section_id=102&office_id=047&article_id=0000061837

channeling the lesbian rights movement into discourse and the creation of a cyberporn space for women where their fun and pleasure can flourish into their own discourse are two obvious examples threatening the system of sexuality that stipulates “chaste heterosexual woman” as normal. Until now, sexual politics in Korea relied on gender politics, which tried to represent “women” by adopting the sexuality of “chaste heterosexism” as its main model. Thus, politicizing system of sexuality threatens gender politics too since it implies that the realm of gender politics is restricted to the one specific group of women only, instead of comprising the whole spectra of women.

The intersectionality of sexuality also revealed itself conspicuously in the cases of consumption of cyberporn, prostitution, and rape. Through the intersectionality of class, gender, nation-state policies, and sexuality, the violent character of pornography metamorphosed into one more natural to the concept of consumption, and the agency of prostitutes became manifest. The Miryang group rape case revealed how the system of sexuality that differentiates between chaste and unchaste intersects systems of family, class, locality, nation-state policies, and gender to guarantee the sustenance of each reinforcing some.

The concept of gender that played a dominant role in the analysis of sexuality and loomed large in sexual politics in the pre-IMF era lost much of its explanatory power and luster, facing these new characteristics of post-IMF Korean society.

New social problems require new language and theoretical tools that can take sufficient care of their complexities. In sexual politics, this means focusing on the female subject that has been a neglected category in the existent system and revealing the complexity of women’s embodied experiences. Thus, “the point is not to deny the importance—both material and discursive—of categories but to focus on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life” (McCall 2005, 1783). For example, according to Kim Eun-Shil (2003), for teenage women engaged in *wonjo gyoje*,²¹ sexuality is no longer a core element that accounts for their identities, but is just one of many everyday elements that are practiced and understood in diverse ways according to social situations they are in. To them, sex is regarded merely as

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²¹ *Weonjo gyoje* (friendship for support), a term which originated in Japan, is an euphemism for prostitution by teenage girls with older men, typically over thirty years of age, with whom they contact each other via internet chat rooms and cell phones. This practice spread more widely after the IMF crisis, causing great alarm and worry in Korean society.

a resource for the exchange needed to make friends, find protection and places to stay, escape loneliness, and earn money for material needs. Here, sexual politics, rather than being entangled in a moralizing debate about whether they should be considered casualties of consumer capitalist society or rebels trying to overthrow the present system of sexuality, would better turn its attention to the process that reveals how intersections of diverse social systems continuously reconstruct their sexual identities.

There might be apprehensions that locating sexual politics in intersecting systems of domination might lead to the weakening or undermining of hard-won gender identities. However, maintaining gender politics under circumstances where the gender system is already involved in a tight network with other systems, and new spaces and groups of women that freely cross over its border emerge from these intersections, means to deny the differences and inequalities among women and to essentialize women, eventually restricting the realm of sexual politics. Sexual politics that helps women understand the space in which they are situated so that each can realize her own agency in her location, rather than sexual politics that tries to subject each woman to a unilinear identity, is long overdue.

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