

Gender Equality in North and South Korea: *Continuity and Change*

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Abstract

This study examines the developmental factors and constraints of gender equality that can be derived from the experiences of the respective systems and residents of North and South Korea by comparing the origins, characteristics, and results of “gender equality” and “expansion of women’s rights” formalized in both Koreas during the “period of system establishment” from the mid-1950s to the 1960s. In North Korea, despite the early promulgation of the Gender Equality Law, the abolition of “feudal male superiority,” and the transformation of women into the working class, “socialist male superiority” persisted and women’s social status was not improved significantly. In South Korea, actions to advance women’s rights were driven from below by women activists and campaigners of a nature that did not exist in North Korea, but the ideal of “wise mother and good wife” that had prevailed since before liberation persisted despite economic and social development. In both North and South Korea, the path of economic development during the period of system consolidation was such that patriarchy was maintained and strengthened in a transformed form, rather than weakened. Ultimately, regardless of the differences in systems, the gender culture and order in North and South Korea showed limitations in terms of post-patriarchy. The question of how to overcome this in the future will be a key task in envisioning gender equality for a unified Korea.

Keywords: gender equality, women’s rights advancement, Kim Il-sung, Park Chung-hee, *namjon nyōbi* [male superiority, female inferiority], patriarchy, divorce

Introduction

If we envision a future unified Korea as the result of reforms and innovations for a more humane and peaceful life for all members of both North and South Korea, the current gender order and culture in both regions require a major overhaul for gender equality. Gender equality is an essential task from the perspective of universal human rights, democracy, peace, and sustainable development. Among the many cultural gaps between the North and the South that need to be bridged for unification, gender equality is a particularly contentious and challenging issue. This is due to the very different perspectives and experiences of people in the two systems, caused by historical, social, and political differences. However, in the process of establishing both systems, measures to improve the status of women and to achieve gender equality ultimately led to an emphasis on the family within a divided developmentalism. As a result, patriarchy persisted in both the private and public spheres, forcing women in both the North and the South into domestic confinement. Often, women themselves were unaware of this confinement or lacked the means to escape it even if they were aware of it. In this context, we want to discuss what problems need to be overcome and what should be inherited for future gender equality in the development paths of the North and the South. We will also look at the changes needed to build a gender order and culture in which men and women from both regions can be happy together.

This study examines the origins, characteristics, and outcomes of “gender equality” and “women’s rights promotion” carried out in North Korea and South Korea from the mid-1950s to the 1960s, which is considered the “system establishment period.” Through comparison between the two Koreas, it explores the development factors and constraints of gender equality that can be derived from the experiences of each system and its inhabitants. In North Korea, despite the early promulgation of the Gender Equality Law and the abolition of “feudal male superiority,” “socialist male superiority” persisted and women’s social status did

not improve. In South Korea, the “advancement of women’s rights” was driven from the bottom up by women activists and campaigners of a kind that could not exist in North Korea, but the ideal of “wise mother and good wife” that had prevailed since before liberation persisted despite economic and social development.

In both North and South Korea, the path of economic development during the period of system consolidation was such that patriarchy, in a transformed form, was maintained and strengthened rather than weakened. Thus, despite changes in women’s socioeconomic conditions, the roles of wife and mother were fundamentally seen as crucial factors in the functioning of both the state and the family in both regions. Although terms such as “innovative” or “revolutionary” were attached in the North, both the North and the South essentially imposed and accepted, from above and below, an idealized image in national discourse that ultimately amounted to the “wise mother and good wife” ideal.

Of course, this does not mean that the colonial-era ideal of “wise mother and good wife” was maintained unchanged in both systems after liberation. It is well known that the colonial-era ideal of “wise mother and good wife” became a common target for modern reform in both North and South Korea after liberation. The socialization of women’s work in North Korea and the establishment of democracy in South Korea brought about significant changes in the lives of women in each system. However, under the conditions of post-colonialism and systemic competition, “nation” and “tradition” had a significant influence in defining the ideal image of the modern woman. Even as women’s socioeconomic roles expanded and their educational levels improved after the Korean War, the emphasis on traditional female virtues and motherhood was maintained. In North Korea, the social role of women was emphasized immediately after liberation, and women’s social work became widespread due to the shortage of male labor after the war. In South Korea, full-time housewives constituted the absolute majority, but the influence of democracy and westernization in education became apparent. As a result, North and South Korea defined

the ideal of modern Korean women differently within their respective systems, and their perceptions of women in the opposing system were competitive and exclusive. Nevertheless, they showed similar patterns in promoting the “traditional” woman who “sacrifices” for her family (mainly parents-in-law, husband, and sons) as the ideal value and role of women. In both the North and the South, the promotion of an obedient and sacrificial female image functioned as the logic supporting divided nationalism. This article examines how the “wise mother and good wife” ideal diverged in the process of political, economic, and social modernization in North and South Korea from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, and the impact and consequences of these changes on the improvement of women’s status and gender equality in the context of the time.

Gender Equality for “Chosŏn Women”

Women’s Liberation and Feudal Namjon Nyŏbi

After the establishment of the regime, “Chosŏn (Korean) women,” as named in North Korea, refer to women who, following the implementation of the Gender Equality Law enacted in 1946, had their feudal living conditions completely abolished and enjoyed rights equal to men (C. Kim 2015; H. Pak 2003; Y. Pak 2017). Additionally, “Chosŏn women” also implied that they had social conditions and status distinct from South Korean women, where the ideology of “full-time housewife and wise mother” was still dominant (Ŭ. Kim 2007). According to North Korea’s claims, due to the Gender Equality Law enacted in 1946, “Chosŏn women” enjoyed significantly enhanced political, economic, and social rights compared to women in capitalist South Korea who were still under feudal constraints even after liberation. Especially after the Korean War, as women rapidly became part of the working class (Y. Pak 2017, 283), there emerged “a group of women in the northern half of the republic who became reliable pillars in the struggle for socialist construction, demonstrating creative

passion and patriotic devotion in factories, enterprises, construction sites, transportation sectors, and rural and fishing villages, as well as in academic, scientific, and artistic fields.”¹ “Chosŏn women” now held positions equal to men, such as “management committee chairperson of the Kwangmyŏng Agricultural Cooperative in Kaech’ŏn-gun county, P’yŏngannam-do province,” “shoemaker at Hamhŭng Rubber Factory,” “metallurgical engineer at the Technical Bureau of the Ministry of Metal Industry,” and “teacher at Pyongyang People’s School No. 26.”

Claiming that “women participate in all political, economic, and cultural sectors with rights equal to men,”² North Korea promoted “gender equality” primarily through the proletarianization of women, which led to women’s economic independence. Consequently, “numerous female workers emerging from among working women are working equally with men in state institutions and various fields such as science, culture, arts, health, and education.”³ As claimed, “Chosŏn women” achieved equal status with men in the sense that they were proletarianized equally with men. According to Kim Il-sung, “The purpose of engaging women in labor is also to completely liberate them from all constraints and guarantee them a practically equal social status” (Y. Pak 2017, 353). In line with this trend, by 1961, 7,600 daycare centers and 4,450 kindergartens were established nationwide in the North (O. Kim 1962, 53).

The “gender equality,” which had generally been implemented in socialist countries, was also promoted immediately after the establishment of the communist regime in North Korea. Typically, due to the political characteristics of socialist systems, human liberation and women’s liberation were achieved not through struggles and awakening from below, but through obedience to the vanguard party. However, as North Korea was under the influence of postcolonial nationalism and division at the time of system establishment, women’s liberation was a subtask of national liberation. In the process of competing with South Korean political leaders over who had more legitimacy in liberating the entire nation, including women, “women’s liberation” and “gender equality” were defined as Kim Il-sung’s political assets

¹ “3.8 kukche punyŏjŏl kinyŏm p’yŏngyangshi kyŏngch’uk taehoesŏ han chosŏn minju nyŏsŏng tongmaeng chungang wiwŏnhoe wiwŏnjang pakchŏngae tongji-ŭi pogo” [Report by Comrade Pak Chŏng-ae, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women’s League, at the Pyongyang City Celebration Conference of International Women’s Day on March 8], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 1956.

² “3.8 kukche punyŏjŏl kinyŏm p’yŏngyangshi kyŏngch’uk taehoesŏ han chosŏn minju nyŏsŏng tongmaeng chungang wiwŏnhoe wiwŏnjang pakchŏngae tongji-ŭi pogo” [Report by Comrade Pak Chŏng-ae, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women’s League, at the Pyongyang City Celebration Conference of International Women’s Day on March 8], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 1956.

³ “3.8 kukche punyŏjŏl kinyŏm p’yŏngyangshi kyŏngch’uk taehoesŏ han chosŏn minju nyŏsŏng tongmaeng chungang wiwŏnhoe wiwŏnjang pakchŏngae tongji-ŭi pogo” [Report by Comrade Pak Chŏng-ae, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women’s League, at the Pyongyang City Celebration Conference of International Women’s Day on March 8], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 1956.

and achievements, showcasing the absolute superiority of the North Korean leader and asserting exclusive and unique legitimacy domestically. “Gender equality” was a signature revolutionary task of Kim Il-sung’s “anti-feudal and anti-imperialist democratic reforms” after liberation, and along with the land reform and nationalization of key industries implemented in 1946, it quickly became one of Kim Il-sung’s most important political achievements (S. Kim 2010, 750).

Of course, there are differences in the official descriptions between the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the interpretation of who promoted “gender equality.” Before the 1960s, expressions such as “After the Soviet army, the great liberator, expelled the vicious Japanese colonial rulers from our country, the Korean Workers’ Party and the people’s government . . . ,”⁴ “the socialist system established in our country,” “socialist agricultural collectivization,” “our country’s system of people’s democracy,” “Korean Workers’ Party,” and “the correct policies of our party for women’s happy lives and the wise leadership of the Party Central Committee headed by Comrade Kim Il-sung”⁵ were used. This shows it was not limited to Kim Il-sung as an individual (or his family), and initially, the Soviet contribution was also explicitly mentioned.

However, from the 1960s, a clear assertion emerged that “Comrade Kim Il-sung” as an individual “attached great significance to our country’s women’s movement, organized and guided revolutionary women’s organizations, and nurtured numerous female revolutionary fighters from the earliest period of the anti-Japanese armed struggle,” and that “the most brilliant traditions and valuable experiences of the Korean women’s movement were formed in the flames of the anti-Japanese armed struggle.”⁶ As can be seen from the following report by Kim Ok-sun (1962), vice-chairperson of the Central Committee of the Women’s Union, the inequality at issue in North Korea was on a “social” level, which was attributed to “feudal systems and Japanese imperialist colonial rule” (with no mention of male domination or discrimination), but the “women’s movement” reached a turning point due to “Comrade Kim Il-sung’s anti-Japanese armed struggle. This leads to the logic that when the nation

⁴ Sahoejuŭi kōnsōl-esō nyōsōngdŭl-ŭi yōkhwāl-ŭl nop’igŭ wihaŭn sasang saōp-ŭl kanghwahal te taehaesō: chōn’guk nyōsōng yōlsōngja hoeŭi-esō han chosōn minju nyōsōng tongmaeng chungang wiwōnhoe pakchōngae wiwōnjang-ŭi pogo” [On strengthening ideological work to enhance the role of women in socialist construction: the report by Chairman Pak Chōng-ae of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women’s League at the National Women’s Activist Meeting], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 1956.

⁵ Sahoejuŭi kōnsōl-esō nyōsōngdŭl-ŭi yōkhwāl-ŭl nop’igŭ wihaŭn sasang saōp-ŭl kanghwahal te taehaesō: chōn’guk nyōsōng yōlsōngja hoeŭi-esō han chosōn minju nyōsōng tongmaeng chungang wiwōnhoe pakchōngae wiwōnjang-ŭi pogo” [On strengthening ideological work to enhance the role of women in socialist construction: the report by Chairman Pak Chōng-ae of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women’s League at the National Women’s Activist Meeting], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 1956.

⁶ “Chosōn minju nyōsōng tongmaeng che 3 ch’a taehoe: uri-ŭi yōngungjōk nyōsōngdŭl-ŭi taehoe-rŭl yōlyōhi ch’ukha-handa” [We warmly congratulate the heroic women of our country on the 3rd Congress of the Korean Democratic Women’s League], *Rodong Sinmun*, September 1, 1965.

⁷ “Chosŏn minju nyŏsŏng tongmaeng che 3 ch’a taehoe-esŏ han nyŏmaeng chungang wiwŏnhoe kimoksun che il puwiwŏnjang-ŭi pogo: chosŏn minju nyŏsŏng tongmaeng chungang wiwŏnhoe saŏp ch’onghwa-e taehayŏ” [Report by 1st vice-chairman Kim Ok-sun of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women’s League at the 3rd congress of the Korean Democratic Women’s League: on the summary of the work of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women’s League], *Rodong Sinmun*, September 2, 1965.

was liberated, “women’s liberation” was also achieved.⁷

In our country, the women’s movement developed as women’s national awareness and class consciousness gradually increased amidst all sorts of fetters due to the feudal system and Japanese imperialist colonial rule, and **especially in the 1930s, it began to progress actively along the correct line. The anti-Japanese armed struggle organized and developed by Comrade Kim Il-sung not only advanced our country’s national liberation struggle to a higher stage but also became a turning point in the development of our country’s women’s movement.**

During the anti-Japanese armed struggle period, Comrade Kim Il-sung instructed, “For Korean women to be liberated and achieve true freedom and rights in all areas of political, economic, and social life, **the feudal system and colonial ruling system must be eliminated, and to eliminate these, the Japanese imperialist invaders must be driven out and national liberation and independence must be achieved.** For this, women must actively participate in the anti-Japanese national liberation struggle and fight alongside men.”⁸

⁸ Emphasis by the author.

The Continuation of “Socialist Namjon Nyŏbi”

According to North Korea, the material conditions for women’s liberation improved through post-war socialist construction, and the subordination of women or *namjon nyŏbi* [male superiority, female inferiority], a product of the old era, was overcome through socialist transformation. By 1958, North Korea considered “women’s liberation” and “gender equality” as already achieved because socialist transformation was completed. In this context, the idea of *namjon nyŏbi* in North Korea is defined as “the reactionary ethical and moral view of exploitative societies that respect men and despise women” and is considered a remnant of feudal Confucian thought that must be eradicated.⁹ Since “gender equality” in North Korea is directly linked to Kim Il-sung’s political assets as an already accomplished achievement, “the harmful consequences of *namjon nyŏbi*” are overcome by participating in the socialist

⁹ Contrary to such claims, however, *namjon nyŏbi* remains strong in North Korea (Im 2021, 324–326).

¹⁰ "Sahoejuui kōnsōl-esō nyōsōngdūl-ūi yōkhwal-ūi nop'igi wihan sasang saōp-ūi kanghwahal te taehaesō: chōn'guk nyōsōng yōlsōngja hoeūi-esō han chosōn minju nyōsōng tongmaeng chungang wiwonhoe pakchōng-wiwōnjang-ūi pogo" [On strengthening ideological work to enhance the role of women in socialist construction: the report by Chairman Pak Chōng-ae of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women's League at the National Women's Activist Meeting], *Chosōn nyōsōng*, April 12, 1957.

system and collective labor life.¹⁰ However, the reality of North Korean life is deeply rooted in the stereotypes of *namjon nyōbi* and stereotypical gender roles (Im 2006, 35; Korea Institute for National Unification 2021, 324).

The reason why the reality of *namjon nyōbi* and its discrepancy with "gender equality" are the subject of this study is not to point out the backwardness or underdevelopment of North Korean gender culture or socialist gender culture (compared to South Korea or capitalist systems) (K. Pak 2012; M. Yi 2004). The phenomenon requiring more detailed analysis is why "socialist *namjon nyōbi*" appears after the "feudal *namjon nyōbi*" was abolished by the Gender Equality Law. This study's interpretation that "socialist *namjon nyōbi*" emerged instead of the abolished "feudal *namjon nyōbi*" differs somewhat from existing research that North Korea's women's policy was initially revolutionary and liberating but regressed or diminished from the 1960s (this does not mean opposition to existing research). Existing research views that the liberating nature was "distorted" due to the Korean War and militaristic industrialization (C. Kim 2015, 389–428; H. Pak 1988, 80; Y. Pak 2017, 23).

In this regard, this study argues that "socialist *namjon nyōbi*" appears due to the unique history and politico-economic characteristics of North Korean socialism. This does not mean that it involves an intention to maintain men's superior status and women's inferior status, that men dominate women, or that women are subordinate to men. As North Korean men and women serve Chuch'e socialism together, it is an expression of the public/private status that the state institutionally imposes on each man and woman, and simultaneously the public/private status that men and women have come to accept for themselves. In North Korea, despite the proletarianization of women and the decline of the patriarchal family, exceptionalism is found where women's social status has not improved (Nam 2017, 165–223; O 2001, 72–101; K. Pak 2012, 327–375; M. Yi 2004, 389–419), and socialist *namjon nyōbi* can be seen as one symptom of this. In other words, *namjon nyōbi*, which was reconstructed during the process of socialist construction and deeply rooted in the perception and language of the people, is not a characteristic

of North Korean feudalism, patriarchy, or Confucianism, but a socialist characteristic of North Korea. The reasons why *namjon nyŏbi* can be said to be a socialist characteristic of North Korea are as follows.

First, as described above, given that the origin of the women's movement in North Korea was aligned with Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle and the ideal female image was unified as women who supported Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle, like Kang Pan-sŏk, the existing gender order and stereotypical gender roles gained ideological legitimacy and supported socialist construction. The characteristic of North Korea's women's policy does not lie in the regression of progressive women's discourse due to patriarchy itself, but rather in the fact that the image of "Korean mothers" formed in the history of (Kim Il-sung's) anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle became the only model of revolutionary women, and in this process, women's traditional virtues and stereotypical gender roles were reborn as socialist duties or values. By 1958, North Korea considered "women's liberation" and "gender equality" as already achieved because socialist transformation was completed. The remaining task was to establish a revolutionary female image that could create society-wide consent and support to educate those who couldn't accurately put into practice the already achieved "women's liberation" and "gender equality" to revolutionize women comprehensively and to manage this stably. As this social necessity intertwined with the anti-revisionist struggle, not only were women's fixed gender roles reemphasized, but these traditional roles were redefined as socialist duties.

What made "Chosŏn women" revolutionary, along with social labor, was that they emulated the women who participated in Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle. As Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle was established as the only tradition of revolutionary history, the origin of the women's movement was also unified as "the tradition of the women's movement of the anti-Japanese partisans." Corresponding to the establishment of the Chuch'e ideology in North Korea, women's policy generally followed Marxism-Leninism between 1950–1959, but from 1960 it

departed from Marxism-Leninism and introduced North Korean-style women's discourse and political color. From 1966, women who had "served the leader," like Kang Pan-sŏk and Kim Sŏng-suk, were highlighted, and education and organizational life for women were further strengthened. As a result, the existing gender order and stereotypical gender roles were transformed in a way to support socialist construction with ideological legitimacy.

What's noteworthy here is that descriptions of the women related to the anti-Japanese armed struggle focus not so much on the actual armed struggle experience itself, but on the role of supporting (assisting) husbands or sons participating in the anti-Japanese armed struggle under Kim Il-sung's leadership. That is, they focus on women's role of taking responsibility for livelihood in the absence of their husbands or sons, armed with the communist spirit of self-reliance, educating children, and supporting parents-in-law. Kang Pan-sŏk, the "communist mother" who appeared from 1966, and Kim Chŏng-suk, the "anti-Japanese female hero" and "outstanding leader of the Korean women's movement" highlighted from the 1970s, have always been the model of revolutionary "Chosŏn women" within such narratives. This was not because North Korea was a socialist patriarchal society or Kim Il-sung's dictatorship, but because women who directly engaged in anti-Japanese armed struggle were not the mainstream of the women's movement at that time. That being said, this was not because women were less patriotic or weaker, but because it was generally uncommon for women living in Korea to do anything outside the home.

Kim Il-sung emphasized that revolutionary achievements should be based on traditional foundations by stressing that "the inexhaustible creative power of talented and wise Korean women, which has existed since ancient times, should be fully displayed to contribute to socialist construction" (I. Kim 1962, 81).

Especially in 1930, the excellent daughters of Korea, either directly taking up arms in the partisan ranks led by Comrade Kim Il-sung, crossing the Hamsan mountain ranges, or as members of women's associations, waged an unyielding

struggle against Japanese imperialism underground. Our Korean women not only have such a patriotic tradition but also have a brilliant tradition of raising their children well. Also, since ancient times, Korean women have considered it their virtue to be excellent mothers and wives at home. . . . Historically, patriots who heroically defended their homeland and famous people were all nurtured and raised by their mothers' maternal love.¹¹

¹¹ "Konghwaguk nyōsōngdūl-ūn sahoejuūi kōnsōl-ūi midūmjikhan ryōngnyang-ida" [Women of the DPRK are a reliable force in socialist construction], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 1959.

In a similar context, Kim Ok-sun, chairwoman of the Women's Union, described "women who further develop the good manners and customs that have been passed down from ancient times" as follows: "As modest and polite women, as extremely filial daughters-in-law at home, as virtuous wives, as loving mothers, they receive the love and respect of the people."¹² From the 1960s, as the history of the anti-Japanese armed struggle became the only tradition of the Korean revolution, the most ideal revolutionary model of a communist woman faithfully fulfilling all these roles became fixed as the "mother" who supported the anti-Japanese armed struggle.

¹² "Chosōn minju nyōsōng tongmaeng che 3 ch'a taehoe-esō han nyōmaeng chungang wiwōnhoe kimoksun che il puwiwōnjang-ūi pogo: chosōn minju nyōsōng tongmaeng chungang wiwōnhoe saōp ch'onghwa-e taehayō" [Report by 1st vice-chairman Kim Ok-sun of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women's League at the 3rd congress of the Korean Democratic Women's League: on the summary of the work of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Women's League], *Rodong Sinmun*, September 2, 1965.

Secondly, under North Korea's "family consolidation" principle, the existing gender order and family were strengthened, reconstructing "socialist *namjon nyōbi*." Related to this, the abolition of divorce by mutual consent in 1956 is the signature measure of North Korea's "family consolidation" principle (I. Cho 1958). The year when divorce by mutual consent was abolished in North Korea was a significant turning point in Cold War history, North Korea–Soviet relations, and in the history of North Korean domestic politics and the establishment of its socialist system. Ahead of the declaration of the completion of socialist transformation in 1958, North Korea was able to secure autonomy due to Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, and as a result, could accelerate the anti-revisionist struggle to proceed with the "Koreanization of revolutionary history" and establish Chuch'e while avoiding Soviet obstruction and opposition (Szalontai 2005, 109–111). And as the Korean nation's traditions were emphasized within anti-revisionism, the traditional virtues of "Chosōn women" were defined as

socialist values. This traditional yet socialist revolutionary identity of “Chosŏn women” was established within the family, thus the freedom of divorce was reduced through the abolition of divorce by mutual consent. The reduction of freedom to divorce and the approval of divorce only through court proceedings in North Korea were not, of course, aimed solely at women. However, in North Korea, where the reality of *namjon nyŏbi* persisted despite the emphasis on “women’s liberation” in state discourse, government policy that prioritized the principle of “family consolidation” and encouraged the maintenance of marriage as much as possible inevitably resulted in restricting the liberating nature of the socialist “women’s liberation” policy.

North Korea abolished the system of divorce by mutual consent and made divorce possible only through court decisions, under Cabinet Decision No. 24 on March 8, 1956, with the purpose of preventing rash divorces and protecting the interests of minors. On March 16, 1956, Judicial Rule No. 9 “Regulations on Divorce Case Hearing Procedures” stipulated specific divorce restriction measures, and with the abolition of divorce by mutual consent, it limited the freedom of divorce, adhered to the restrengthening of the family, and sought revolution through the family. Therefore, North Korea states that “divorce is regulated to be resolved only through court procedures” (Ri 2013, 119). What North Korea calls “divorce through court procedures” is “a method of divorce where the court examines the validity and legality of the divorce claim based on the facts claimed by the parties and scientific evidence when the parties file a civil lawsuit with the judicial authority, and makes a decision to approve or reject the divorce claim” (Ri 2013, 119). By adopting Cabinet Decision No. 24 “Regarding Partial Changes to Divorce Registration Procedures” on March 8, 1956, measures were taken to abolish the previous system of divorce by mutual consent and allow divorce only through court decisions (Ri 2013, 120). Regarding the necessity of this change, the explanatory document states, “This is related to the fact that, unlike the period after liberation, the struggle against the wrong tendency of abusing the freedom of divorce has come to the forefront rather than the struggle against the phenomenon of

suppressing the freedom of divorce in the field of marriage and family relations” (Ri 2013, 120).

With the abolition of divorce by mutual consent in 1956, the formation of conditions that could dismantle patriarchy was institutionally blocked. This is not so much because of patriarchy, but because the operating principles and attributes of the construction and maintenance of Chuch’e socialism perpetuated a male-dominated social order and family life. Consequently, family life centered around the head of the household, husbands were called heads of households and exercised absolute authority and decision-making power in all family matters including children’s issues, and despite legal and institutional support, housework and childcare were entirely the responsibility of women in reality (Ministry of Justice 2015, 173).

Why, then, did the groundbreaking measure of granting equal rights to men and women in divorce fail to eradicate feudal family relationships? This is not a question about the 1946 Gender Equality Law being far removed from reality or having a declarative or symbolic meaning as a general characteristic of socialism. The reason why fixed gender roles remained unchanged and “socialist *namjon nyōbi*” was reconstructed despite men and women being equal and women being liberated is that the Gender Equality Law was limited to “feudal *namjon nyōbi*.” In other words, it was about eradicating feudal-era customs like purchased marriages and forced marriages. The Gender Equality Law of July 30, 1946, which contains provisions on marriage and family, states in its preamble that its “purpose is to liberate Korean women from inequality in political, economic, cultural, and family life, who have been oppressed in multiple ways in a state of powerlessness due to long-standing feudal customs and exploitation by Japanese imperialism, and to allow them to enjoy rights equal to men,” and Article 5 stipulates the right to free marriage and divorce (S. Kim 1992, 140).

This can be found in the following explanatory note on “divorce by administrative procedure” (meaning divorce by mutual consent), which was envisioned as an “exceptional case” in the implementation measures for the Gender Equality Law adopted on September 14, 1946 (Ri 2013, 120).

In the case of divorce by administrative procedure, if it is confirmed that the agreement on divorce is the true intention of the parties, no grounds for divorce are required. . . . However, this is related to the circumstances where divorce issues after liberation were mainly raised by women's autonomous demands to break free from the constraints of **old feudal marriages** inherited from the past. The method of divorce by administrative procedure, which presupposes the agreement of the parties on divorce, became an important condition for **liberating working women from old feudal constraints**, who had been despised and scorned in the field of married life¹³. . . . In the case of divorce by mutual consent, divorce was approved regardless of the grounds if there was genuine agreement between the parties. **This system was, of course, very justified at the time. However, in today's environment where forced marriages and purchased marriages have completely disappeared, such conditions for divorce no longer exist.**¹⁴ (Ri 2013, 120)

¹³ North Korea claims that because feudalistic marriage practices such as forced marriages and arranged marriages for monetary gain have permanently disappeared, and the freedom of marriage is guaranteed to all citizens, such conditions no longer exist in regards to divorce (Ministry of Justice 2015, 213; Ri 2013, 119).

¹⁴ Emphasis by the author.

The main meaning of the claim that feudal oppression of women was abolished with the implementation of the Gender Equality Law is that purchased marriages and forced marriages were eliminated. The 1958 family law explanatory book explains as follows:

The basis for the practice of negotiating and forcing marriages based on parental calculations, self-interest, or other material considerations as the essential foundation of marriage has fundamentally disappeared. Today, for us, the overwhelming majority of families are formed based on marriages that are completely free and voluntary. There is no room for anyone's coercion or interference in marriage, and only the completely voluntary union of both parties has become the only legal one. At the same time, circumstances such as having more or less property and high or low family background or status cannot be the basis for marriage, and nothing can substitute the true affection between a man and a woman. Mutual understanding and friendship based on joint labor and joint work, which arise between men

and women who have become masters of their own lives, become the basis for establishing and maintaining their marriage. (Cho 1958, 14–15)¹⁵

¹⁵ Emphasis by the author.

Of course, in the context of the 1950s, it cannot be denied that this alone had a considerable liberating effect for women. However, while the Gender Equality Law broke down feudal customs, measures such as the abolition of divorce by mutual consent based on the principle of family consolidation strengthened the socialist family, resulting in the reconstruction of “socialist *namjon nyöbi*.” Family consolidation for the solidification of the socialist system suppressed the liberating effect on women following the anti-revisionist movement and the establishment of the unitary ideological system that unfolded from the mid-1950s.

The year 1990, when the regulation that “divorce” can only be done by trial was reinforced again, was a time when North Korean socialism entered a decline against the backdrop of the end of the Cold War, the transformation of socialist systems, and long-term economic depression. Therefore, at the time when Article 20 of the Family Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea regulated divorce to be done only by trial on October 24, 1990, it seems that the need for family consolidation was raised even more due to the decline of Chuch’e socialism.¹⁶ Therefore, “the measure to resolve divorce by trial, not leaving it to the will of the parties alone, was intended to prevent rash and unfounded divorces, consolidate families, and make the entire society a harmonious and united socialist great family” (Ri 2013, 120). Such state interference in divorce is in fact a major constraint on the freedom of divorce. Correspondingly, North Korea’s “socialist *namjon nyöbi*” persisted even after the Arduous March.

¹⁶ To prevent divorce, fees are charged when applying for divorce proceedings, and more fees and party sanctions are imposed when a divorce is finalized. According to defector testimonies, common reasons for divorce include infidelity of the spouse, family abuse by the spouse, and requests for divorce due to the spouse’s counter-revolutionary nature. In cases involving issues with the spouse’s social background or counter-revolutionary tendencies, divorce is more easily permitted. However, reasons such as childlessness or conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are not readily accepted (S. Kim et al. 1992, 144).

Korea's Modernization and the Advancement in Women's Rights

Families and “Wise Mothers and Good Wives” as a Foundation of National Reconstruction

Around the year 1956, when divorce by mutual consent was abolished in North Korea, traditional values were gradually being combined with revolutionary spirit through anti-revisionist struggles after Kim Il-sung officially proposed Chuch'e for the first time. In South Korea, the crisis of patriarchy due to the influx of American culture led to the recall of traditional female virtues. From the perspective of women oppressed by patriarchy, the establishment of the Women's Legal Counseling Center on August 25 of the same year within the Women's Issues Institute could be seen as a sign of women's rights advancement. This counseling center, which changed its name to Family Law Counseling Center in 1966 when North Korea began to intensify the idolization of Kang Pan-sök, became the cradle of the family law reform movement that lasted for 37 years until 1989.

In a simple comparison, while “gender equality” was the agenda of the state and party in North Korea, “women's rights advancement” in South Korea was the agenda of civilian women's leaders and intellectuals. Unlike in North Korea, “women's rights advancement” in South Korea was an agenda independently pursued by grass-roots women's activists and intellectuals, rather than being defined as the asset of a specific politician. For example, figures like Yi T'ae-yöng, who led the establishment of the Women's Issues Institute, practiced the belief that “Eve's liberation is the liberation of all” while confessing that the women's movement is a human liberation movement (T. Yi 1987, 2–4). In contrast, in North Korea, as the unitary ideological system was established, an independent women's liberation movement separate from the establishment of Kim Il-sung's political legitimacy was neither theoretically or practically possible. Kang Pan-sök's qualification as a leader of the “Chosön women's” liberation movement primarily derives from her relationship with Kim

Il-sung. As such, because a single ideal type approved within Kim Il-sung's family revolutionization and North Korea's revolutionary history was not forced from the leadership, various female images could, theoretically, grow in South Korea. However, despite the gradual expansion of the civilian women's movement in South Korea, the custom of recognizing women's main duties and position within the home was still dominant. Despite the expansion of women's social advancement and improvement in education levels with economic development, the full-time housewife who aimed to be a wise mother and good wife remained the undisputed ideal female image in South Korea. Women "had to contribute to the nation as "wise mothers and good wives" (*hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ*) once married" (Ŭ. Kim 2007, 137).

After liberation, the U.S. military government expanded the education system for women as part of ensuring equal rights for men and women based on democratic ideals. On September 16, 1946, the Women's Bureau, the first women-related administrative department in South Korea's history, was established. Under the influence of such women's policy institutions, women's school enrollment and advancement rates increased significantly compared to before liberation. Additionally, for the first time in history, women and men were guaranteed equal educational opportunities by the Education Law of 1949 (Y. Kim 2009, 53). Women's leaders like Ko Hwang-gyŏng, who was the director of the Women's Bureau at the time, raised the need to revise the system of wife's incapacity, which denied married women's legal capacity to act and required their husband's permission; revision of the divorce law, which did not recognize concubinage as grounds for divorce; and revision of the unequal adultery law, which only punished women's adultery and not men's (So 2015, 73). After liberation, the state aimed for modern and equal education to achieve democracy, and in this context, feudal norms such as the "three rules of obedience" (*samjong chido*), chastity, and submission, which were emphasized in women's education during the colonial period, disappeared.

However, even in women's education, the image of the "modern" housewife as a rational household planner

was set as a woman embodying various traditional values (Ŭ. Kim 2007). This should be considered in relation to the crisis of patriarchy caused by socioeconomic conditions after the Korean War in the 1950s. In regards to women's rights, the post-war period of the 1950s saw the birth of "the first generation of women who broke away from traditional subordination and passivity, especially through economic activities, escaping fixed gender roles to take responsibility for family support and act subjectively and actively for the future" (H. Yi 2016, 76). As women's economic conditions and roles changed after the war, women took on various roles such as wealthy madams, working women, *yanggonju* (literally, "Western princesses"; women involved with foreign soldiers), and female college students. These women with new status different from the existing traditional female image were collectively called "après-girls" in the post-war 1950s, a term that carried more negative connotations of morally corrupt women blindly following Western culture rather than the neutral meaning of modern women exposed to American culture after liberation (H. Yi 2016, 76).

The existence of women who aspired to or enjoyed Westernized lifestyles such as Western-style beauty and free love and who became new drivers of consumption—along with issues like prostitution and mixed-race children—was perceived as a threat to patriarchy. In response, conservative men advocated for "moral reconstruction" to restore and perpetuate the threatened patriarchy (H. Yi 2016, 76). As women's economic activities increased and American culture rapidly became popular in the post-war 1950s, physical and direct coercion by individual patriarchs was not as easy as before. In this situation, for patriarchy to be maintained, there had to be an emphasis on Confucian ethics and spirit as the internal discipline for women (Ŭ. Kim 2007). South Korea under male-centered patriarchy had to salvage "tradition" from Westernization, and for this, women's proper role was again set within the family and home (Ŭ. Kim 2006, 18).

As male-centered South Korean society faced a crisis of patriarchy in the post-war 1950s, the ideology of *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* was emphasized as a model for women's enlightenment. Women's magazines like *Yŏwŏn* [Women's

Garden] contained many articles about women immersed in Western and American culture, and the *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* ideology was an enlightening ideal that demanded these women to awaken and recover traditional female virtues (H. Kim 2007, 387). In the post-war 1950s, the *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* ideology was strengthened, emphasized, and reproduced on a national level through various sociocultural devices. Figures like Shin Saimdang, Nongae, and Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn were set as models for modern women, and “virtuous women” or “filial daughters-in-law” were commended on occasions such as President Syngman Rhee’s birthday, Confucius Memorial Day, and National Foundation Day. Even the president himself emphasized, “women should maintain graceful behavior to preserve the beautiful customs inherited from our ancestors” (Ŭ. Kim 2006, 23). On the surface, this is not different from North Korea telling all women to follow Kang Pan-sŏk’s example in serving their husbands, children, and parents-in-law. The difference is that Shin Saimdang has no political symbolism, while Kang Pan-sŏk was set as a model of “women’s liberation” precisely because of her political symbolism. The 1950s saw the consolidation of the sanctification of the home while exclusively hierarchizing groups that did not belong to the *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* ideology (integration and exclusion of, for example, working women, après-girls, prostitutes, war widows, housemaids, and female bus conductors) (H. Kim 2007, 412).

Wise Mothers and Good Wives as Assistants to Economic Development

The Park Chung-hee regime pursued a strong state-led economic development policy, starting with the First Five-Year Economic Development Plan in 1962, under the banner of “Construction First, Unification Later.” Additionally, it implemented the so-called “Modernization of the Fatherland” project by adding ideological transformation that emphasized national resurgence and the spiritual modernization

movement to the economic development theory centered on economic growth. To justify this, the regime emphasized the priority of subjectivity, stating that “political independence through economic self-reliance and national self-consciousness should be established first, and on that foundation, liberal democracy should be rebuilt” (H. Yi 1985, 297). Just as the emphasis on Chuch’e and anti-revisionist struggle in North Korea during the same period redefined tradition as revolution, reordered “socialist *namjon nyōbi*,” and gave birth to the “revolutionary *hyōnmo yangch’ō*,” Park Chung-hee’s Modernization of the Fatherland project also positioned women as assistants in the drive for “Construction First, Unification Later.”

However, this did not mean that men dominated women or that women were subordinate to men; rather, it meant that the Modernization of the Fatherland project was based on the idea that the state should be rebuilt on the foundation of the home and that the ideal woman can achieve “reconstruction of the home as an assistant in national reconstruction” (Ch’oe 2012, 403). In particular, the discourse of *naejo* (literally, “domestic assistance,” but meaning “helping one’s husband”) was emphasized, which was focused on encouraging women to assist their husbands in working devotedly as “industrial soldiers,” and as such, the distinction of absolute gender roles was emphasized and reproduced. For example, there were claims such as: “women’s sacrifice is beautiful if it’s for a smooth and peaceful marital life like a tranquil area without disasters”; “an ideal stable and peaceful home is where men are responsible for the household economy and women devote themselves to housekeeping”; and “women’s social advancement is possible only to the extent that it does not interfere with the duties of wife and mother” (Ch’oe 2012, 403). The mindset of wives helping their husbands “succeed” through their support was actively encouraged (S. Yi 2017, 71). The commemoration of Shin Saimdang as an ideal role model who internalized nationalism began in earnest from the mid-1960s (O 2016, 80).

However, even though the modern *hyōnmo yangch’ō* ideology optimized for Cold War developmentalism was dominant in South Korea, the reordering of patriarchy due

to the modernization project faced challenges and criticism from women's groups. These groups consistently raised the issue of democratization of family law. As Yi Hyo-jae (1985, 297) pointed out, women themselves recognized and tried to change the fact that "the household head inheritance system enslaves women by forcing them to give birth to their husband's sons without allowing adoption from other families, and forces them to endure men's infidelity and sexual violence as a virtue." The expansion of education for women and their entry into the economy gave birth to women's human rights movements, and through their autonomous efforts, the framework for women's rights advancement began to take shape. The Women's Legal Office, established on August 25, 1956, was Korea's first private legal aid corporation. As evident in its founding statement, which declared that it would "respond to various legal issues of women" and "strive for the enactment of the Civil Code" so that "women can enjoy rights as complete individuals," it was founded with the women's movement in mind from the beginning and, for a significant period of time, stood at the center of legal aid and the movement for enactment and revision of family law to make it equal for women (So 2015, 73). Six women's organizations, including Korean Association of University Women, Korean Mothers' Association, Korean Home Economics Association, YWCA Federation, Korea Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and Women's Issues Institute, proposed and requested the revision and deletion of several legal provisions that violated women's rights to the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction ahead of the revision of the Civil Code in late August 1962.¹⁷

¹⁷ "Chinjŏnghan namnyŏ p'yŏngdŭnggwŏn-ŭl" [For true gender equality], *Chosun Ilbo*, August 7, 1962.

In the rapid social changes that occurred before and after the Korean War, the family's appearance was changing dramatically to the extent that the term "destruction of the family" was being used in South Korea. The family breakdown and discord that appeared in the post-war confusion had a greater impact on women who were in a relatively vulnerable position (So 2015, 76). When Yi T'ae-yŏng moved legal counseling to the Family Court premises in 1964, the number of clients rose dramatically, and male clients also increased. The number of consultations, which was about 150–400 cases

a year in the early days, surged to about 3,000 cases in 1964, 5,200 cases in 1965, and 6,500 cases in 1966, and exceeded 9,000 cases in the late 1970s. Male clients, who were originally only 2–3% of the counseling center’s clientele, also increased from 1964, reaching 28% in 1967–68 (So 2015, 76).

According to a 1966 *Chosŏn Ilbo* report, in family legal counseling, where women were considered to be all of the clients, male clients showed an increasing trend every year. According to the 10-year statistics of the Family Legal Counseling Office (Director: Lawyer Yi T’ae-yŏng), which celebrated its 10th anniversary in August of that year, female clients, who had made up over 97% of the clientele for the first eight years, decreased to 75% in the last two years. Male clients, who were only 2% of the clientele for the first eight years, exceeded 24%. Among women clients, elementary school graduates were the most common (30.9%), while for their male counterparts, university graduates were the most common (52.5%).¹⁸ Among male clients, high-school graduates were the most common (21.9%), while for their female counterparts, elementary school graduates were the most common at 45.4%. In other words, this indicates that many family breakdowns were caused by educational differences, and the victims of these marital relationships were often high school graduates for men and elementary school graduates for women. The article pointed out that it was interesting that among the husbands of female clients, most were unemployed, followed by those working for companies. Meanwhile, among female clients, most were unemployed, followed by those running businesses. The article reported that “from these statistics, we could glimpse that women’s rights, which were bound to suffer in various ways at home, have improved slightly over the past 10 years.”¹⁹ Here, it is noteworthy that the paper points to the increase in divorce-related consultations as an “improvement in women’s rights.”

Another interesting aspect of the article is that it laments that the main cause of the increase in divorces at that time was “infidelity” due to “breaking free from the shackles of tradition,” and that women’s infidelity, not men’s, was increasing, and “even cases where women, not men, were being prosecuted for the crime of seduction under promise

¹⁸ “Namja sonnīm-i manajin kajŏng pŏpnyul sangdamso” [Family law counseling center with more male clients], *Chosun Ilbo*, August 28, 1966.

¹⁹ “Namja sonnīm-i manajin kajŏng pŏpnyul sangdamso” [Family law counseling center with more male clients], *Chosun Ilbo*, August 28, 1966.

²⁰ “Chǒnt’ong-ŭi kullae pōsǒ ihon sagŏn chung pujōng wonin-i ūttūm” [Divorce cases most often caused by infidelity after breaking the shackles of tradition], *Chosun Ilbo*, August 15, 1965.

²¹ “Chǒnt’ong-ŭi kullae pōsǒ ihon sagŏn chung pujōng wonin-i ūttūm” [Divorce cases most often caused by infidelity after breaking the shackles of tradition], *Chosun Ilbo*, August 15, 1965.

of marriage.”²⁰ According to statistics from January to March 1965, women’s adultery and sex crimes equaled just 508 cases, only 2% of all crimes, yet the article criticized “the laxity of some women who misunderstood women’s liberation, or the change to a corrupted view of chastity.”²¹

To summarize all of this, “women’s rights advancement” was not a political asset associated with a specific politician in South Korea but expanded under the leadership of women’s groups in civil society. Cold War developmentalism had a repressive effect on women’s rights advancement, but at the same time, it enabled social changes and material foundations that allowed some women to resist patriarchy and the *hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ* ideology. Notable examples include the Women’s Issues Institute established in 1952 and the Family Legal Counseling Office in 1966, where figures like Yi T’ae-yŏng, Yi Hyo-jae, and Yi Hŭi-ho were active. The expansion of higher education for women and their social advancement after liberation, accelerated by economic growth in the 1960s, promoted the women’s rights movement, and above all, there was social, philosophical, and religious space within the democratization movement where awareness of women’s rights advancement and gender equality could grow. They worked to raise social awareness about the problems of the *hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ* ideology and patriarchy, which dominated national discourse and were accepted by the public without much resistance, and to correct these issues. However, under the influence of the *hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ* ideology that even women leaders could not overcome, most ordinary women were forced to find success as assistants in modernization, industrialization, and reconstruction as full-time housewives, and could not separate their husband’s support and children’s education from their own lives.

Conclusion

In the context of post-liberation system consolidation and competition, significant changes for “gender equality” and “women’s rights advancement” occurred in both North

and South Korea. However, because both North Korea's socialist construction and South Korea's modernization of the fatherland commonly set the family as the basic unit and redefined women's role of caring for and taking responsibility for the family as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law as revolutionary (in North Korea's case) or modern (in South Korea's case), absolute gender roles and gender hierarchies became fixed in both North and South Korea. In South Korea's case, as Yi Hyo-jae (1985, 296) pointed out, "conservative forces trying to maintain division suppressed the development towards a democratic society where women could enjoy personal equality by legalizing the traditional ideology of *namjon yōbi* and the status subordinated to patrilineal families." In North Korea's case, the general socialist principle of women's liberation was appropriated as Kim Il-sung's "gender equality," taking on characteristics of "socialist *namjon nyōbi*."

Ultimately, regardless of the differences in systems, the gender culture and order in North and South Korea showed limitations in terms of post-patriarchy. The question of how to overcome this in the future will be a key task in envisioning gender equality for a unified Korea. Regardless of the system, for both women and men to enjoy happy lives, they must break free from the rigidity and pressure of roles within marriage and family. To achieve this, both women and men need to cultivate sufficient economic independence and receive a certain level of education. Despite ideological confrontation, dialogue and exchange between North and South Korea should be continuously promoted to bring about discussions on post-patriarchy and gender equality with a view to seeking wisdom collectively.

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