

Korea

Waves of Change after "Ten Thousand Sorrows"

(A Korean Cultural Perspective of Sexual Violence)

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I would like to start my paper by first talking about this year's Nobel Peace Prize winner. This year's winner is South Korean president Kim Dae Jung, who has been fighting for human rights and social justice in Korean society for more than 30 years. I, as a person who was born in Korea and raised there up until my mid-20s, was also struggling with these issues throughout my time in Korea, especially during my University period. Thus, the announcement of this year's Nobel Prize is a meaningful one. However, ironically, this announcement shows or even confirms, that the past couple of decades of Korean history were tumultuous and chaotic.

When a society is struggling for social justice and human rights issues in general, it is often the case that gender issues are lagging far behind. Ideally it would be good to see gender issues and other social justice issues go together in parallel. However, in Korea, as other human right issues were so strongly touching people in general, gender issues did not really have a place in discussion. General issues of oppression in areas such as class, capitalism, western imperialism, militarisation, ideological arguments of liberalism and socialism etc. have dominated most intellectuals', students', and the general public's, including women's agendas in Korea in the modern era. Gender related issues, however, were presumably improving by osmosis through the general societal change over the last couple of decades.

This paper aims to examine the changed perception, the changing attitude, and the growing awareness of gender related issues in Korea, especially with reference to sexual violence from historic and cultural perspectives. Here I would like to cover the category of sexual violence, both in domestic terms and sexual abuse. I also want to interpret the term sexual abuse more generally including unwanted touches, sexual harassment, rape in marriage etc, rather than just a narrow technical view of rape by strangers. It is my aim that by looking at some of the issues concerning women in Korea, and Korean women in Australia, we will be better equipped to understand the diversity of women in our society and be better able to apply our understanding to other women from culturally diverse backgrounds.

The status of women in Korea.

Firstly I find it difficult to generalise about women in Korea, or Korean women in Australia. There are always factors that influence women differently such as ethnicity, socio-economic class, age, duration the person has been in Australia, and the sub-culture of their ethnic minority in Australia, in the case of women living here.

According to Devor and Schlensinger (in Gasker, 1999:134), when working with persons whose race or ethnic group identification is different from the clinician's, the professional is best served by considering the "eth-class" concept and mentally working through the " 5 steps of the ecosystem model ". The term " eth-class" as mentioned by Devor and Schlensinger, refers to the intersection of ethnicity and socioeconomic class. The five ecosystems (Morales and Seafor, I n Gasker, 1999: 130) refer to five levels of assessment of the special population. That is as follows

1. Historical
2. Cultural
3. Community
4. Family
5. Individual

Both in defining women in Korea, and Korean women in Australia, it would be ideal to look at all these five factors with consideration of " Eth-Class". However, due to the complex nature of each human being, I will focus mainly on the first 3 aspects of the five part ecosystemic analysis, rather than the familiarial and individual differences. Thus, I urge you take the information I present as only one source for Korean clients or people you come across, in order to avoid any stereotypical analysis, as each individual is unique and has their own frame of reference.

To begin with the historical and cultural aspects of Korean women, I would like to quote the UN's Human Development Report about South Korea. South Korea ranked 31st in the overall index among 174 nations. This index is based on the analysis of income, health care, life expectancy and educational levels. However, in the progress of women, called the ' Gender Empowerment Index", Korea fell to 63rd. If we compare this with Australia, Australia came 4th in the overall index and 11th in the Gender Empowerment Index(United Nations Human Development Report 2000: www.undp.org). This result shows the general picture of Korean society and the backward nature of women's status in Korea, which needs to be improved.

Historically, various forms of sexual violence have occurred in Korea and these have had lifelong implications for the victims. Violence against women has a long history. If we look at the cultural issues within Korea, some proverbs say more than lengthy explanations. As can be evidenced by this brutal Korean Proverb "Women and chickens need to be beaten three times a day" or "If a female chicken (referring to a wife) cries the family will have bad fortune". Another old proverb is about the seven evils which if a woman commits she is irrevocably dishonored: disobeying her in-laws, bearing no son, sexual looseness, being jealous, carrying a hereditary disease, talking too much and stealing.

There is no end to these proverbs controlling women. ' A married daughter is no better than a stranger" is an idea still very prevalent in Korean society. Upon marrying, the daughter is regarded as the property of the husband. Thus, many men view their partner as their possession, but also their responsibility. This societal inequality is shown by the strong preference for male children. This causes the death by abortion of female foetuses; which will ultimately result in an unequal balance of sexes, which might cause serious problems in the future.

Another proverb says " There are three men in a woman's life to follow. First is the father upon birth, a husband upon marriage, and an eldest son when she becomes old ".

Many possible explanations can be given to the backward nature of the status of women in Korea. One of these, I believe, is the hundreds of years of the strong influence of Confucianism. Confucius stressed the harmony of social relationships by suppressing emotions, and the importance of social rules to ensure correct conduct and order (Hur, 1988: 28). Correct social order was clearly delineated between husband and wife, father and son and the elder and younger generations. This structure was accompanied by specified appropriate behavior. Confucius also encompasses notions such as familiar ideas of solidarity, inside/outside distinctions, patriarchal authority, long-termism (sic), family continuity, the group before the individual, conflict avoidance and fear of bringing shame etc (Goodman & Peng, 1997:195). In this cultural environment, sexual violence was regarded as extremely private, which is coupled with the idea of endurance. The culture also values most the women who can endure the most. These women are normally referred to as ideal wives and mothers. These notions, based on hundreds years of the practice of Confucianism and its application to societal values still play powerful roles, but to a lessened degree, in modern Korean society, for better or worse.

Sexual violence in Korean society should also be looked at not only in its internal cultural domain but also in the bigger global scale as well. In modern Korean history, these cultural issues are coupled with the political turmoil of the modern era. It can be said that Korean people in general are victims of the annexation by Japan, World War I and II and the Cold War period which drove the nation's intense ideological debate of communism and capitalism, which eventually caused the Korean War and subsequent division of the country more than 50 years ago. The early and middle of 20th Century have drawn a very sad picture of Korea. However, I must emphasize that it is sadder for women than men. Women had to suffer from inequality. One of the sad stories of Korean history is the story of "Sex Slaves". Some Korean women during World War II were made sex slaves by Japanese soldiers. Several of these women still survive and remind us of the life long implications of brutal sexual violence. The subsequent Korean war produced many unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, one of which is outlined in the book " Ten Thousand Sorrows " (Kim: 2000), which tells the extraordinary experience of a woman who had a child by an American soldier and was killed by her own family. The child, who is the author of the book, was adopted by an American family. The book clearly delineates the dilemmas of unmarried mothers and children who are born outside of marriage in Korea.

There is no excuse for violence, but aspects of Korean society condone it use. Together with hidden inherited cultural issues, I think the strong army culture, has influenced both in individuals and the society. Army is compulsory for men in Korea, and people learn to use violence as a way of dealing with their problems. In addition, the authoritarian government from a military base who was in power for more than 30 years up until early 1990s forms another backdrop for the acceptance of physical violence. I personally think it is quite ironic that many people were opposing the military take over, due to its illegitimate method, but at the same time absorbing the idea that violence is a powerful tool in problem solving in their personal arenas. The

education system, too, used harsh physical punishment in disciplining children until recently, giving the perception that violence is a way of solving problems. All of these elements affect the status of women in Korea.

Ingrained Barriers to Women Opening Up about Sexual Violence

In dealing with women who have been subjected to violence there are some barriers. One of the big barriers is the internalisation process of the sexual violence because of the sense of being humiliated and shamed. It is often the case that although a woman is subjected to rape, she and her family do not report it to the police or take any legal action. In their view the harm has been done, and their role now is to minimize that harm. It is sometimes the case that the victim's family begs the perpetrator not to talk about the incidence. Virginity is so highly prized as a requisite to marriage that victims and their families do not want to risk ruining chances of a good union. The connotations attached to virginity often evaluates a woman's integrity as a whole person. Sometimes the family even rejects the daughter accusing her of lacking moral discipline. Often resistance to discussion comes from women, including victims themselves, and their families. According to KSVRC(Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre), only 2% of actual incidences of sexual violence in Korea are reported (www.sisters.or.kr). There are very few statistics on incest, people chose to believe it does not even occur. It is not talked about. From the little that has been revealed we can infer that the problem is much larger. What has been uncovered is only the tip of the iceberg.

The other serious issue is the ambiguity in identifying sexual violence, especially in relationships. It can be very difficult in engaging with clients when they are lacking the awareness of what sexual assault constitutes. In Australia, "unwanted sex" is called "rape" or 'Sexual assault" even in relationships. However, in Korea, although Special legislation (1993), which will be mentioned soon, covers this category as well, the definition of rape refers normally to rape by strangers or acquaintances with force. In relationships, it is often the case that the perpetrator does not think he is in the wrong. More seriously the victim does not realise she is a victim, but feels uncomfortable and that some issues are not resolve. Both victim and perpetrator are not aware that assault has occurred, as they have no clear frame of reference.

However, an interesting aspect of any society and culture is its changing nature. As mentioned in many books about cross cultural issues, the exciting and intriguing part of culture is its fluid nature, which make it very dynamic. In spite of the political turmoil of Wars and the authoritarian government, Korean society has been gradually changing in many areas. Changes in general human rights issues and changes in women's issues, in fact, did occur, although the journey is still continuing.

Some evidence of seeds of " Hope "

· Legislation

legislative reform in relation to gender. Sexual Violence has slowly been recognized as criminal conduct in Korea. Sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape etc were not appropriately recognized by the legal system in Korea until 1993. In 1993, the

Special Law for Sexual Violence was passed in Parliament after many long years of work by many women since the mid-1980s ([www. sisters.or.kr](http://www.sisters.or.kr)). I value this legislation because of its inclusive nature encompassing various types of sexual violence, covering many aspects including very subtle nature of violence such as sexual violence in relationships. It is interesting to find in the Special Law for sexual violence, a section declaring a woman who has been raped a legal 'virgin'. This is an obvious cultural reflection of the importance of being a virgin in Korean society. Thus, the law tries to protect the strong prevailing social values by including such a clause. As a result of this legislation, 47 counselling centres and an additional six facilities to support victims of sexual violence were established(Soto, 1999 : 2) This reform contributed to the change in perceiving sexual violence as a serious human rights issue. The movement actually came from collaborative work by prominent legal professionals such as feminist female solicitors, together with others from the feminist movement. Along with this reform, other aspects of inequality are also slowly changing through other law reforms. For example, in property settlements upon parental death, the law gave priority to male offspring, now however women are considered equally. The gender related laws are constantly under review to ensure their relevance to women's needs.

· The media's contribution to breaking the conspiracy of silence

Another interesting indicator I noticed is the reflection of societal change by the mass media. One of the programmes, which has swept the nation, is called " Beautiful Sex". The popular TV program has started to talk about the taboo subject of 'sex' and its implications for people's lives. This is done by one of the major channels weekly in Korea, in prime time since 1999. The program has attracted a vast majority of viewers both male and female. It covers such topics as the anatomy of the reproductive organs, methods of contraception, frequency of sexual activity, safe sex, the notion attached to being a virgin, ramifications of sex in relationships and even unwanted sex and its life long implications. After viewing a number of programmes in this series on video, I found that Korean society is changing quite dramatically.

However, this program is not well received by everybody. For instance, my mother in law said, " I do not know what sort of world people have now. The whole world is going to ruin". Older people in general are finding these changes disturbing as for them the issues are regarded as extremely private. This delineates the generation gap in resisting change, coming from women themselves.

Here, I am going to quote an interesting case from the video " Beautiful Sex" in reference to unwanted sex within a relationship. A case presented in the program was about a woman who was being courted by her boy friend. However, before the marriage, he wanted to have sex, and she did not object although she was not happy about it. They married soon after, but throughout the marriage she did not enjoy their sex life. This was revealed through the sessions with a counsellor and it was said that she burst into tears upon realising the origin of her problem. She did not realise that she had been violated but carried the hurt with her without realising its cause. This special vulnerability of women based on unequal power in relationships can not be denied.

I personally value this programme a lot because it has overcome the crime of silence. The lack of encouragement to speak out was the traditional view in Korean culture about sexual violence as mentioned previously. If domestic violence is a very taboo subject, sexual abuse is even more taboo. People simply do not talk. The culture does not encourage people to speak because these issues are seen as intensely private. However, considering sexual violence as a private issue is not a monopoly of Korean society. For instance, according to Mugford(1989: 1), domestic violence and spouse abuse tend to be very private issues in Australia, but these private issues may cause a " social and economic cost" to the community. Sexual violence is regarded as private in many other cultures, but the degree of privacy can be exhibited in many different ways due to the societal factors where the person is located. But I think Korea has already started on its first steps to breaking the silence.

Alongside changes in legislation and media coverage, these sexual violence issues are being dealt with in public seminars, books, journals by concerned academics, health and legal professionals. Through the Internet, educational materials are exhibited such as KSVRC and counselling is offered. These are perceived well due to the anonymity of the activity, which concerns many Korean women. Now people are starting to talk although it is not pleasant for some. They even expand the agenda into the recent phenomena of Internet violence against women, such as abusive messages on screen (Sato, 1999: 3) which is not controlled by law yet. Overall, I think Korea is in process of combating not only obvious discrimination against women, but also diminishing subtle discriminations, which are ingrained so deeply that women are not aware of it. Various forms of public education are contributing to the increasing awareness of the general public of the various facets of sexual violence.

Future directions & Practical implications for Korean women in Australia.

From my personal experience of working in the welfare sector assisting migrants and refugees with various types problems, I have found that lack of knowledge about cultural diversity is a big issue to deal with. I also found the stereotypical images of people of various NESB still obscure individual differences even within the same ethnic community, and indeed differences among ethnic communities themselves. Applying insufficient knowledge to people of NESB can be as dangerous as a lack of understanding of cultural implications.

Although I allowed space for specific cultural norms in Korean society, in considering Korean women, each individual uniqueness should be emphasized. This is especially so for women in Australia and also many other ethnic women as generalisation is so difficult. These women can be holding more traditional views than women in their country of origin, because they still hold to the beliefs of their country of origin 20 or more years ago, due to their lack of integration into the new society. But it is also possible that they have adopted new trends that are prevalent in mainstream Australian Society caused by their economic and social participation. This participation may change the whole family dynamics and override ingrained cultural notions. Thus, in dealing with Korean women in Australia, considering factors such as duration of stay, degree of integration, language, etc play important roles in determining a woman's situation.

Another consideration is that the sub-cultures that these women and their communities create can be very unique. This culture may be different from their own country of origin, and different from main stream Australia. They blend two cultures, and create a different new flavor. We never know the blend until we experience the mysterious configuration. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge each person's own experiences, psychological, socio-economical background as mentioned previously such as the five ecosystem model. Women need to talk from their own social context and position rather than from western 'norms' of practice. Without considering their own specific cultural norms and specific ramifications here in Australia, there can always be a danger of leaving NESB women feeling robbed and hurt. Taking the client's reality as their reality without denying it or imposing other values on that is essential. The experience that the client is going through or has been through needs to be understood as presented by the client whether it is a one-off contact or a continuing case.

Sometimes I found that many main stream welfare and health workers are frustrated in their feelings of inability to respond the NESB clients, due to language and lack of knowledge about the specific culture. But in reality you can not know every culture represented in Australia (apparently it is more than 200 ethnicities and more than 150 languages, DIMA, 2000: 6). It is just practically impossible. I have found that the most helpful response to this is having an attitude of openness, sensitivity, being genuine, and if necessary working together with other special agencies that can respond to these diverse matters.

The term 'attitude' can be regarded as a very simple word. However, attitude and being sensitive are extremely crucial, because many immigrants have a heightened sensitivity to peoples acceptance or non-acceptance of them. Some people disguise their bias with a nice smile and nice words, but clients are more than able to detect the bias and are hurt. Thus, genuine concern of "how" to deal successfully with women from non-Western cultures is essential. It is sometimes the case that clients are best served by referral to, or collaboration with special services, that are better able to deal with these sensitive issues. This can be the case because of the changing nature of welfare provision nowadays. In the welfare sector, due to pressure in the workplace, which is often concerned with effectiveness, efficiency and outcomes in economic terms, there can be a real danger in pushing NESB(Non- English speaking backgrounds) women beyond their comfort zones failing to give due credence to their cultural backgrounds. These are issues welfare workers in general need to consider in responding to the needs of very sensitive and vulnerable victims of sexual violence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to share two Chinese fables with you. First is the story of "The monkey and the fish, and the other is the story of bamboo tree.

Here is the story of "The monkey and the fish".

"Once upon a time, there was huge flood over the land. A monkey was swept into a torrential current of water. He was being washed away. Then he saw a branch up ahead and managed to get close enough to grab it and pull himself out of the water. As he stood beside the torrential stream of water he thought that he should help others to get

out of the flood too. He reached into the water and pulled out a fish. He felt glad that he had saved another creature".

-Adopted from transcultural mental health QLD newsletter (1999) from Dr Marchella-

Here is a story of the Chinese bamboo tree.

"After the seed for this amazing tree is planted, you see nothing, absolutely nothing, for four years except a tiny shoot coming out of a bulb. During those four years, all the growth is underground in the fifth year the Chinese bamboo tree grows up to eighty feet" (Covey: 1997: 22).

I think we can all learn from both stories. The first story, is a good metaphor for the inherent nature of cultural superiority, that is subconsciously held by many. The latter reminds us of the importance of the fact that maybe we will not be able to see results quickly, but the process is happening. It is also very important not to be disappointed and discouraged, as things can actually be changing inside from our 'fertilizers' of attitude, sensitivity and sense of being genuine. I believe we are in a very powerful position to be a fertilizer, or poison, in these women's healing processes. I hope you and I can be the fertilizer for change in women's issues, such as sexual violence, helping them to grow, especially the many ethnic women in our community.

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