

# **Feminist Theory Workshop Fall 2009**

**Tuesday, November 24<sup>th</sup> 4:20-6:10  
Case Lounge, Room 701**

**Sealing Cheng, Wellesley College**

*Sexual Victimhood, Citizenship and Nationhood in  
South Korea*

Fall Schedule:

December 1st: Afsaneh Najmabadi, Harvard University, *The State of Science and Sin*  
December 8th: Janie Chuang, Washington College of Law, *Rescuing Trafficking from  
Ideological Capture: How Prostitution Reform Debates Have Shaped U.S.  
Anti-Trafficking Policy*

For more information: [http://www2.law.columbia.edu/faculty\\_franke/FTW2009.html](http://www2.law.columbia.edu/faculty_franke/FTW2009.html)

## **Sexual Protection, Citizenship, and Nationhood: Prostituted Women and Migrant Wives in South Korea**

This article examines the making of two distinct groups of women into citizen-subjects in South Korea at the turn of the twenty first century: ‘prostituted women’ and migrant wives. Though the lives of these women hardly intersect, they become visible in the public sphere as women in urgent need of state protection from violence. The South Korean state and civil society rallied around the cause of human rights and globalization in a highly selective manner, drawing up two sets of policies that give South Korea global stature: anti-trafficking and multiculturalism policies. While the universal ideal of human rights is hailed as a core value to both the South Korean state and civil society (as well as their global interlocutors), the appropriation of these global initiatives is heavily embedded in local struggles over the meanings of globalisation and anxieties about the national body. The article suggests that through the language of protection, state and civil society seek to redefine moral order and national borders through the regulation of women’s body and sexuality. For prostituted women, leaving prostitution restores them to the embrace of the nation as good Korean daughters. For immigrant wives, reproduction is their gendered path to citizenship as good Korean mothers. It further argues that ‘women’s human rights’ is a discourse that operates within two distinct though related projects of the nation-state: articulating the parameters of citizenship on one hand, and re-imagining the nation within a new world order of ‘global modernities’ (Featherstone and Lash 1995:3) on the other.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the gendering of citizenship and nationhood and its tensions with the universalist ideals of gender equality and human rights in the modernizing project in South Korea. The analysis focuses on the protection measures introduced for two distinct populations: prostituted women and migrant brides. It discusses how global anti-trafficking initiatives help reconceptualise women in prostitution as the new gendered subjects of ‘victims of prostitution’ whose need for protection is circumscribed by gendered ideals of domesticity. It then looks at policies and services for the protection and integration of marriage migrant women into Korean society conditional upon their assimilation into dutiful wives and mothers. Finally, through an analysis of their disciplinary and exclusionary effects, I discuss how they reproduce the gendered and ethnicised logic of Korean nationhood at this moment of globalization.

Fundamentally, this article raises two sets of questions. First, who become legitimate subjects of women’s human rights discourse and policy? How do some become worthy of protection and others of exclusion if not punishment? Who are the ‘women’ in women’s human rights? Second, to what extent do human rights discourse challenge state sovereignty, patriarchal structures, and ethnic discrimination? How are human rights deployed in the multiple modernity and globalization projects of the nation-state? This article suggests that who become visible in women’s human rights discourse is not only contingent upon the conditions in which women find themselves, but also upon dominant global discourses as well as local preoccupations and debates about gender, sexuality and nationalism.

The research for this study was mainly carried out between June 2008 and January 2009 through a number of methods: ethnographic research and oral history interviews with women working in a red-light district in Seoul through collaboration with Magdalena House, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO); participation in a dozen policy forums organised by NGOs and state agencies; as well as a regular network of meetings with feminist scholars, social justice activists, and sex worker activists. In addition, eighteen interviews were conducted with a number of stake-holders in the policy-making and enforcement arenas, activists mainly involved in the anti-prostitution movement but also in the migrant women's rights movement, and officials from the Ministries of Gender Equality, Health and Welfare Services, and National Police Agency. The study also draws on textual material including legislation, government reports, and media reports, as well as educational and publicity material from the Ministry of Gender Equality – the key ministry for both anti-prostitution and migrant women's policies.

### **Women's Sexuality, Gender, and Nationhood**

Feminist theorists and historians have shown that women's bodies are essential in the construction of the nation – symbolically as embodiments of its boundaries, culture and traditions, and physically and socially as agents of reproduction through childbirth and nurturance (Yuval-Davis 1997). The control of women's sexuality thus has implications for the past, present, and future of the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1985).

Foucault (1978) has shown how the sovereign state disciplines individual bodies through the governance of life (biopower). Giorgio Agamben (1998) further theorises that

sovereignty is, in essence, the power to make exceptions through the creation of ‘bare life’ and let die – a conscious effort to exclude a particular mode of life to delimit the life that matters. For the modern nation-state, it is an exercise of sovereign power to normalize, pathologize, and criminalize particular bodies: from institutions such as the law, prison system, education, bureaucracy, and social welfare, to everyday life practices such as comportment, language, diet, and sexuality. These are the techniques of power through which the state defines what kind of bodies are included into or excluded from the citizenry, and how they are organised. Sexual control – through languages of respectability, morality, eugenics, danger and degeneracy – has been deployed in the maintenance of political domination and hierarchies within and between nation-states, as well as between colonizers and the colonized (Stoler 1995; Mosse 1985). Sexual relations, marriage, and reproduction come under the purview of the state. Such regulation defines both the essence of nationhood and the borders of the national body.

Citizen subjects are therefore produced through such techniques of power. In this sense, citizenship is a process rather than a status with a fixed set of rights and privileges attached. It is also an experience of differential access to these privileges dependent on the relative social location of individuals according to their gender, ethnicity, class, and personal biographies. These differentials mark the external borders and internal divisions of the nation-state.

The regime of citizenship involves both regulation of gender and sexuality and policing of the national body. Linzi Manicom (1992: 444) has argued that, ‘the very fundamental categories of state and politics – like citizen, worker, the modern state itself – are shot through with gender; they were in fact historically constructed and reproduced

as masculine categories,' and that men and women are constituted within the particular discourses and practices of ruling. The production of citizens, partial citizens, and non-citizens are therefore a gendered and gendering process.

Scholarship of gender and migration (Ball 2000; Lister 1998; Satterthwaite 2004) has shown in particular the ways migrant women's labor and reproductive powers are incorporated while their rights and entitlements are selectively excluded – as Rhacel Parreñas's idea of 'partial citizenship' suggests (Parreñas 2001). The focus of migration studies has largely been on how citizenship has gender effects on migrants, but has rarely examined how regulation of gender and sexuality shapes citizenship and thus the negotiation of national boundaries.

However, the partiality and differentials of citizenship affect not only migrants, but also citizens. This study suggests that a comparison of Koreans' and non-Koreans' relationships to the South Korean nation-state may shed light on the gendered dynamics of exclusion or limited inclusion. While economic and demographic needs for migrant (productive and reproductive) labor compels the South Korean state and society to gradually move away from the national myth of ethnic homogeneity, the reactionary impulse of Korean nationhood could be better observed in the realm of sexual politics. I argue that the South Korean nation-state has renegotiated the boundary of the national body by maintaining the gendered imperatives of domesticity and reproduction. With the universalistic language of women's human rights, legislations and policy initiatives for Korean 'prostituted women' and 'migrant wives' in fact reaffirm the domesticity of women's roles as wives, mothers, and reproducers of the Korean nation.

## **Women's Human Rights and Sexual Protection**

State policies on prostitution and migrant wives may seem disparate entities at first glance. However, considering them together provides insight into the gendered construction of nationhood as South Korea tackles some of the challenges of globalization: namely, the influx of migrants and the growth of a global human rights discourse. Both cross-border mobility and human rights discourse pose a challenge to state sovereignty, and are necessarily debated and resisted at the local level. In his examination of international norms and sex laws in Japan, David Leheny (2006: 12) suggests that '(p)eople contest even the norms that they accept, and recast them as components in local debates over justice, rights, and morality.' Circulating as a universalistic set of ideals, human rights discourse are often appropriated by both the state and civil society for their own agenda. Martti Koskeniemi (1991: 406) suggests that 'by establishing and consenting to human rights limitations on their own sovereignty, states actually define, delimit, and contain those rights, thereby domesticating their use and affirming the authority of the state as the source from which such rights spring.'

Feminist analyses of the transnational women's human rights movement have warned against delimiting the scope of women's rights and reproducing state powers by looking to the state as protector. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have shown that the transnational movement rallied around the cause of violence against women since the late 1980s with a focus on protection against violations of bodily integrity rather than a broader perspective on gender inequalities and empowerment (1998). As human rights scholar Alice Miller (2004) suggests in her article 'Ladies Get Protection and Women Make Demands,' the emphasis on women as objects of protection from sexual violence

prevents their recognition as autonomous subjects. In fact, Wendy Brown (2003: 189) argues that the politics of sexual protection manifest in anti-pornography legislation and criminalization of prostitution distinguish ‘those women constructed as violable and hence protectable from other women who *are* their own violation, who are logically inviolable because marked *as* sexual available without sexual agency.’

International migration of women has inspired widespread concerns about sexual violence – particularly as a result of trafficking into forced prostitution and in their position as ‘mail-order brides.’ Drawing on lessons from the white slavery panic at the turn of the twentieth century, feminist scholars have exposed how anti-trafficking solutions such as border control, raids and rescues have undermined women’s autonomy and reinstated the neoliberal and masculinist agendas of the state (Agustín 2007; Bernstein 2007; Chapkis 2003; Saunders and Soderlund 2003; Sharma 2005; Soderlund 2005). The protection of women’s sexuality has justified fortification of border control as restrictive immigration policies allege to protect vulnerable Third World women from being trafficked or safeguard women and children at home in the name of security. Further, the conflation of prostitution with trafficking into forced prostitution facilitates the rise of an anti-prostitution movement that dismisses women’s agency and reinstates middle-class ideals about sexuality and domesticity.

Following Miriam Titkin’s (2008) suggestion that ‘sexual violence is the language of border control,’<sup>1</sup> I suggest that ‘sexual protection is the language of nationhood.’ In

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<sup>1</sup> According to Miriam Titkin, the rising tide of discourses about violence against women in France at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – around rape, prostitution, trafficking in women, and headscarf – is an expression of anxieties about immigration, especially from Arab countries. These discourses allow the state to deport and include in the name of protecting women on one hand, and render immigrant women inaudible other than as victims of sexual violence on the other (2008).

order to do so, in the following sections, I show how state protection extended to selected groups of Korean citizens (prostitutes) and migrant women reproduce certain feminine ideals embedded in Korean nationalist discourse. Therefore, while this language of protection is articulated in terms of universalist ideals of women's human rights, it operates to maintain the gendered boundaries of the national body.

### **Gendered Korean Citizenship and Women's Human Rights**

The gendering of modern citizen-subjects in South Korea takes shape within the master narrative of nationalism rooted in the idea of *minjok* (the ethnic-nation) (Pai and Tangherlini 1998). Historian Henry Em (1999: 315) suggests that *minjok*, 'defined as a unified Self, inevitably acquired a totalizing tendency as it sought to subordinate or even suppress heterogeneity and "internal" conflict so as to oppose the external, foreign Other'. This collective identity has dominated the political imaginary of Korean nationalism – a central theme of which is the fate of a people united by blood and constantly threatened by foreign aggressions (Shin 2006). The strength of this historiography is evident as late as 2007 in the South Korean report to the Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination at the United Nations (Geneva) that used the terms 'pure blood' to describe Koreans and 'mixed blood' with reference to non-Korean people. The South Korean delegate's response to questions about these terms further illuminate on this ethno-nationalism in the making of modern Korea:

Historically, Koreans had not differentiated between ethnicity and race. Faced with imperialist aggression in the first half of the twentieth century, the Republic of Korea had constructed its own concept of unitary identity. After liberation from the Japanese imperialists in 1945, the unity of the Korean nation was generally taken for granted. *The strong sense of ethnic unity and nationalism had been a crucial source of*

*inspiration during the transition to modernity in the Republic of Korea.* Being sandwiched between great world powers, the development of a sense of cultural homogeneity had not been done as a means of aggression, but rather as a defence system to ward off the imposition of ideas of superiority by others. (My emphasis)<sup>2</sup>

Distinct gender roles and hierarchy are constitutive of this nationalist imagination (Choi 1998; Jager 2003; Kim and Choi 1998). Cultural and normative processes have shaped women as ‘dutiful patriarchal subjects – daughters, wives, and mothers’ in the Korean nation (Kim 2001: 50). Focusing her analysis on gendered citizenship in the post-World War II era in South Korea, Moon Seungsook (2005) highlights the ways militarised modernity - through universal conscription and an industrializing economy - produced the ideal Korean men as soldiers and breadwinners, and their female counterparts as dutiful mothers and rational household managers to ensure healthy families. Even with the ideals of egalitarianism of the democratic movements in the 1980s, Moon found that men’s search for citizenship and rights had centered around the labor movements, while women struggled for their modern citizenship in autonomous women’s associations.

Women’s human rights have always been part of the project of modernity. Even though the Constitution of South Korea since the First Republic (1948-1959) had clauses to prevent gender discrimination, provide equal rights for men and women in marriage, as well as protection for women in employment, these remained formal rights under the military dictatorships. A women’s human rights movement did not take significant shape until the 1980s, when democratization and internationalization opened the political space for activism, and women’s status became a valuable index of modern statehood in the

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<sup>2</sup>[http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news\\_media.nsf/\(httpNewsByYear\\_en\)/383FB64FCAAAA5EAC12573330045B8E4?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpNewsByYear_en)/383FB64FCAAAA5EAC12573330045B8E4?OpenDocument) (accessed March 8, 2008).

global community (Moon 2000; Jones 2006). The South Korean state ratified the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1985, and became a member of the United Nations in 1991. In the 1990s, the women's movement actively lobbied for legislation on issues of violence against women, women's employment, childcare, as well as political participation (Kim 2002).

This period also witnessed the shift in Korean women's organizations' relationship with the state – antagonism was increasingly replaced by collaboration, and women activists were increasingly recruited into the state (Moon 2002). This was particularly the case when Kim Dae-jung took office in 1998. The Ministry of Gender Equality and National Human Rights Commission were both founded in 2001 during his presidency. These political and economic processes in the last three decades, as Laurel Kendall (2002) observes, have brought about changing contexts for 'refashioning new definitions of home and family, work and leisure, husband and wife.'

The institutionalization and formalization of gender equality and human rights do not translate automatically into everyday beliefs and practices. Cultural and social transformations take place within the paradox of gender in the modernizing project of the nation-state: the persistence of an ethno-nationalism that idealises essentialized gender roles, and the global aspiration for gender equality and human rights.<sup>3</sup>

The next two sections will explore how this paradox plays out in the ways Korean state and civil society grapple with the challenges posed by 'prostituted women' and migrant wives.

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<sup>3</sup> In her study of North Korean refugees' struggle to be deserving citizens in South Korea, Choo found that South Korea was portrayed as a nation of gender equality in relation to North Korea, which is supposed to be backward and underdeveloped (Choo 2006: 577).

## **Prostituted Women and the Global Anti-trafficking Discourse**

‘Prostituted women’ (*seongmaemae-doen-yeoseong*) or ‘women victims of sex trade’ (*seongmaemae-bihae-yeoseong*) are newly coined terms that are part of the anti-prostitution movement that has developed in South Korea since 2000. The 2004 anti-prostitution laws – the Punishment Act and the Protection Act – were introduced with the explicit goals of protecting women’s human rights and combating trafficking in women into prostitution.<sup>4</sup> South Korea has criminalized prostitution since 1961 but the new laws recognise for the first time the concepts of ‘victims of prostitution’ and trafficking for the purpose of prostitution (*seongmaemae weehan insinmaemae*). The Protection Act provides welfare and rehabilitation services for the victims. The Punishment Act increases penalties and broadens the scope of behaviours to be prosecuted to include mediating, procuring, and engaging in sex for money. A Center for Women’s Human Rights was set up in 2005 with Ministry of Gender Equality funding for the sole purpose of coordinating nongovernmental organizations’ efforts to implement the new laws. Police crackdowns on prostitution take place as operations against ‘venues of prostitution and human rights violations’ since 2005 (Yoon 2008:67). Prostitution was the definitive women’s human rights issue in South Korea in the early twenty-first century.

These South Korean laws took shape as international concerns about human trafficking and domestic movement for women’s human rights found common platform in prostitution. Concerns about human trafficking brought about by cross-border movement of populations vulnerable to criminal violence and human rights abuse have

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<sup>4</sup> Article 1 of the Punishment Act states that ‘The purpose of this Act is to eradicate sex trade, intermediating in sex trade and associated acts, and human trafficking for the purpose of sex trade and protect the human rights of victims of sex trade.’

led to the adoption of the United Nations Optional Protocol for the Prevention, Suppression, and Punishment of Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children in 2000. The United States passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in the same year and took it upon itself to police other countries' efforts to combat trafficking through the annual publication of the Trafficking in Persons Report that ranks countries according to the US State Department's evaluation. Both of these documents recognise trafficking into *all* forms of labor, not just forced prostitution.

The South Korean laws have been recognised by both the US government and some international anti-trafficking organizations as a model in combating trafficking in persons – understood here solely as an issue of prostitution, and addressed through the introduction of anti-prostitution laws only. The US Department of State endorsed in its 2005 Trafficking in Persons report the narrow focus of South Korea's anti-trafficking measures with enthusiasm, hailing it as a country of International Best Practices in combating trafficking (US Department of State 2005:33). At an Expert Meeting on Prostitution Prevention and Victim Protection Strategy hosted by the Center for Women's Human Rights on September 18, 2008, a co-founder of the international organization Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) proclaimed, 'As countries debate their prostitution and trafficking legislation, Korea serves as an international beacon.'<sup>5</sup> Domestically, the Ministry of Gender Equality, the Ministry of Justice, and National Police Agency all claim success of the laws as reported in figures on arrests made and rehabilitation accomplished. Between the implementation of the laws in September 2004 to May 2007, the number of individuals arrested increased annually from 2,475 in 2004,

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<sup>5</sup> Janice Raymond, speech at Expert Meeting on Prostitution Prevention and Victim Protection Strategy, September 18, 2008.

to 13,093 in 2005, and 26,631 in 2006 (Yoon 2008: 52). Advocates applaud these efforts but demand greater government support and stronger law enforcement to arrest business owners of commercial sex venues and ‘buyers of sex’ (*seong gumaaja*) – the culprits for victimizing women in prostitution.

Identifying women in prostitution as victims who have been coerced into prostitution emphasises their ‘original’ innocence that could be recovered. Just as their state-funded rehabilitation programs are named ‘self-sufficiency’ (*jawal*), it is assumed that they could neither be independent nor self-sufficient in prostitution. Yet the ideals that underlie such policies echo with the patriarchal imagination of the nation-family. As Sheila Miyoshi Jager (2003: 73) argues from her study of recurring gender motifs in narratives of modern nation-building in Korea, new forms of masculinity and femininity are produced in the old language of family and kinship: ‘Out of the nationalist obsession with a changeless Korean essence came an idealised version of the entire history of Korean culture as a seamless narrative of regenerative fatherhood and ethnic cohesion, preserved intact through the ages by the vigilant virtues of the Korean female.’ In September 2004, the Ministry of Gender Equality published a booklet titled *A Beautiful Collective Journey towards a World Without Prostitution* to educate the public about the new anti-prostitution laws. The following excerpt is the last two stanzas from the poem *Daughters, Let’s Pour Out Our Dreams Again* that opens the booklet, illustrated with a drawing of a young woman with long black hair in a white dress standing in an idyllic country landscape:

*Mother has fed you, like a young branch, with her milk carefully,  
Father has carried you on his back, bouncing and dancing with you.*

*Remember that day,  
And be born again and sing,  
No one can stop your dream.  
Face the world clenching both your fists,  
Raising your head to the sky.*

The theme of rebirth illuminates the social death for women who could only be resurrected by leaving prostitution. The sense of belonging as ‘daughters’ that it invokes reinforces that of non-belonging for those who fail to leave prostitution. The same booklet goes on to explain in simple language the objectives, significance and details of the new laws with ten pages of Questions and Answers. One of the questions asks, ‘I live by selling my body, why is the government intervening?’ The answer: ‘... Any behaviour for survival needs to have social propriety ...’ (Ministry of Gender Equality 2004). The new laws are thus a project to instil ‘social propriety’ in society, by guiding women to become good ‘daughters’ of the nation. What is more indicative of the new laws being part of a larger state-sponsored restoration of a conservative gender regime is expressed in the following discussion of ‘protection and guidance facilities,’

. . . the laws target not only at women in prostitution but women who need protection such as women who have run away from home, unwed mothers, homeless women. (Ministry of Gender Equality 2004:33)

This statement consolidates a heteronormative gender regime by grouping together women in prostitution with women who deviate from their prescribed domains of the family and marriage as women in need of ‘protection.’ Concurrent with the proclamation of the recognition of the human rights of women in prostitution, the ministry promotes a familial rhetoric of the nation and the restoration of these women

into its midst as ‘daughters.’ The themes of daughters lost, purity violated, and hope to be restored persist.

In spite of the jubilation and benevolence of these discourses of protecting ‘victims of prostitution’ and combating trafficking, women who stay in prostitution for one reason or another find it more difficult than ever. First of all, women who do not qualify as victims – such as women without debts who work in brothels, or independently outside of brothels, or women who manage other sex workers and sell sex at the same time – continue to be criminalized. Meanwhile, even though the laws were introduced to tackle the problem of trafficking into prostitution (Article 18.3.3), a 2007 report by the Korea Women’s Development Institute has found that *not a single case* of prosecution took place under this provision. The majority of the cases (91.7 per cent) were prosecuted for mediating prostitution, with only 1.9 per cent prosecuted for coercion into prostitution (Yoon 2008). Secondly, because the fines for prostitution have been increased significantly to a maximum of three million won, the women have to shoulder a heavier financial burden as part of their job. Women who have trouble with clients now choose to return their payments and send them away rather than going to the police since their fines have significantly increased (from 100,000 won before to over 300,000 won after 2004). In addition, women working in red-light districts charge an average of 70,000 won per client – often shared between the sex worker, brothel owner, and tout (if any). In an interview, a prosecutor suggests that levying a 600,000 won fine is in general being lenient on the women, given the maximum penalty amount of 3 million won. Meanwhile, some police officers call for harsher penalties because their hard work in arresting people is not complemented by the penalty handed out by the prosecutors and judges. Thirdly,

both police and service-providers report, occasionally with surprise or resignation, that many women refused to join the rehabilitation and training programs. In conversations with women in prostitution, most scorn the small sum of \$450,000 won a month of living allowance in offered in 2008. Finally, ‘sex workers’ groups emerged in 2005 after mass protests in 2004 against the anti-prostitution laws by women in prostitution yielded no response from the government.<sup>6</sup> The following slogan on a banner during the protests illuminates how they identify as subjects rather than passive victims in relation to the state:

*We are also **citizens**, recognise our dignity and value, and our right to pursue happiness.  
Rather than the promotion of useless **women’s human rights**,  
Recognise first our right to live on an everyday basis (emphasis original).  
(Hangyurae Sinmun, 1 October 2004).*

‘Women’s human rights’ are localised in specific ways in the drive to eliminate prostitution in South Korea. Whether in nongovernmental organizations’ or Ministry of Gender Equality discourses, the emphasis is on women’s victimhood in prostitution, the juxtaposition of ‘prostitution’ with ‘sex trafficking,’ and the construction of prostitution as incompatible with women’s human rights. The human rights that are claimed on behalf

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<sup>6</sup> The National Solidarity for Sex Workers, or *Hanyeoyeon*, was officially founded on June 29, 2005 at a Sex Workers’ Day Festival held at the Seoul Olympic Park. The protestors demanded recognition as irregular workers, respect for their human rights, and recognition of the problems they face as labor rights issues rather than forced prostitution. On 27 August, 2005, the sex workers in the city of Pyeongtaek set up their own organization Democratic Sex Workers Solidarity (*Minseongnoryeon*). Minseongnoryeon wanted to mark themselves as focused on the interest of sex workers rather than those of sex trade business owners, as well as their objection to urban renewal projects that seek to demolish red-light districts to make space for corporate expansion. It has remained active in protesting against the anti-prostitution laws as well as urban renewal projects, and has in 2008 found allies with National Coalition of Citizens Affected by Forced Evictions (*Jeongukcheolgukminyondae*).

of women as ‘victims of prostitution’ is a negative right of removal from harm (protection), rather than a positive right of self-assertion (autonomy).

‘Right of sexual self-determination’ (*seongjok jagikyeoljeong-gwon*) – a concept frequently used in the Korean women’s movement against domestic violence and sexual violence<sup>7</sup> - is completely absent in the anti-prostitution movement. The ex-director of the Center for Women’s Human Rights, Cho Young-sook, and a main lobbyist for the anti-prostitution laws, explicitly stated in an interview that the concept was not useful to the movement. When asked, she offered no explanation. To shun the idea of self-determination in a human rights movement may seem odd. Yet this may make sense when considered together with anti-prostitution activists’ reactions to the emergence of sex workers’ groups and protests from the supposed ‘victims’ against the anti-prostitution laws, demanding recognition of their rights as workers and citizens. Women activists responded to these actions with dismissal – saying that they were ‘not even worth discussion,’ and that these women were mere spokespersons for the pimps.<sup>8</sup> Some also suggested that ‘sex workers’ is a western concept inapplicable to the Korean context. Indeed, in these mainstream activists’ paradigm of women’s human rights, women who

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<sup>7</sup> One of the most prominent use of the idea of ‘sexual self-determination’ was in the judgment by a court in the city of Busan in January 2009 that found a Korean man guilty of raping his Filipina wife. This was a landmark case in which marital rape was first recognized by a Korean court – ‘sexual assault’ was commonly used before. The judgment says the man ‘violated the right of sexual self-determination’ of his wife.

<sup>8</sup> When asked to comment on the Sex Workers’ Festival, Cho Young-sook, then Secretary-General of KWAU, said,

I could not even begin to understand the concept that prostitutes autonomously organized an open gathering. The women have only been mobilized by employers – the pimps - who have been pushed into a predicament by the Special Laws on Prostitution.

Kim Hyunsun, director of Saewumtoh, ‘flatly dismissed the suggestions of ‘sex worker’ from some of the women in red-light districts as ‘not even worth discussion’ in the same report (Choi 1998).

demand a recognition of their right to work in prostitution are *persona non grata* who blatantly defy the victim subject endorsed by the women's movement and the new laws.

To recapitulate, the international legal definition of human trafficking not only comes to be localised as prostitution in South Korea, it further provides the rhetorical devices and sense of urgency for the launch of anti-prostitution policies supported by the US government, the Korean state, and the Korean women's movement.<sup>9</sup> The new laws usher South Korea into a global community committed to the cause of combating trafficking. As the new laws recognise and pledge to restore the rights of 'victims in prostitution,' they further marginalise those who fail to conform to the gender ideals of domesticity. Identifying prostitution as inherently a form of violence against women, the state crackdown on prostitution aims to protect women from harm – inflicted by others or by themselves. Both the state and civil society have adopted the stance of the male protector – 'one of loving self-sacrifice, with those in the feminine position as the objects of love and guardianship' (Young 2003: 230). The modern discourse of women's human rights as translated into the South Korean anti-prostitution policies comes to reproduce the patriarchal nationalist vision of women's sexuality and female virtues. State protection is only for 'prostituted women,' or 'victims of prostitution,' while criminalization and penalization is all that prostitutes and 'sex workers' are entitled to.

Sexual purity rather than autonomy thus defines who are legitimate female citizen subjects in South Korea in the twenty-first century. This intersection of the regulation of

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<sup>9</sup> There is a dearth of valid data on prostitution or trafficking, not to mention the link between the two. UNESCO, Bangkok office, maintains a Trafficking Statistics Project that traces how numerical estimates circulate between governments, intergovernmental organisations and nongovernmental organisations. <http://www.unescobkk.org/index.php?id=1022>, last accessed June 2, 2007.

gender and sexuality with that of the national body can be observed in a different manner in recent policies for migrant wives.

### **The Reproductive Crisis and Migrant Wives in South Korea**

Migrant wives, or ‘marriage migrant women,’ who come mostly from China and Southeast Asia and marry South Korean men mainly in rural areas, have been arriving in South Korea since the late 1980s.<sup>10</sup> They became a subject of intense policy scrutiny, however, only a decade later. With the emergence of international marriage brokers in the late 1990s, the numbers of such marriages increased significantly.<sup>11</sup> This rise is also a reflection of changing demographics, as well as of state incentives introduced to address the reproductive crisis. The country became an ‘aging society’ in 2000, when the ratio of the population aged 65 or older exceeded 7 percent; the fertility rate fell from 4.53 in 1970 to below replacement rate in 1984, and then to a record low at 1.08 in 2005.<sup>12</sup> The Basic Act on Healthy Family<sup>13</sup> was passed in 2004 – stating that ‘all citizens should

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<sup>10</sup> See Caren Freeman for her nuanced study of the complexity of marriages between Korean men and Korean-Chinese women in the late 1990s (Freeman 2005).

<sup>11</sup> The numbers of F-2 spousal visas increased from 43,422 in 1995 to 88,391 in 2005. These figures become more telling of the ‘international marriage’ phenomenon considered here when only the numbers for female recipients are counted: 17,527 (40.4 per cent) in 1995 to 67,441 (76.3 per cent) in 2005. National Statistics Office (<http://kosis.nso.go.kr>) (last accessed November 5, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> ‘South Korean fertility rate fell to record low in 2005,’ The Hankyoreh, August 24, 2006. [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/151725.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/151725.html) (last accessed May 29, 2009).

The preference for son contributed to abnormal sex ratio at birth even though it has decreased from over 116 in 1990 to 107.7 in 2005 (‘Birth and Death of Women,’ The National Atlas of Korea, The National Geographic Institute, [http://atlas.ngii.go.kr/english/explanation/social\\_3\\_1.jsp](http://atlas.ngii.go.kr/english/explanation/social_3_1.jsp) (last accessed Jun 1, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> The Act (Law 7166) has a definition of family as a basic unit of society created by marriage or blood-ties or legal adoption. Some feminists, social work researchers, and women’s organizations have been lobbying for a revision of this legislation with the Basic Act on Family Support – one of their main concerns being the reinforcement of women’s traditional role and the ideology of the nuclear family.

recognise the importance of marriage and reproduction’ – with a five-year plan for 2006-2010. In 2005, the Act on Aging and Low-Birth Rate was passed with the goal ‘to maintain proper population composition and to improve its quality in view of maintaining the state’s growth’ (Article 2). In 2006, a Presidential committee on Aging Society and Population Policy was organised based on the Act.

This reproductive crisis and its implication on the entry of migrants are also found in other parts of East Asia. Pei-chia Lan observes in Taiwan that a ‘care deficit’ and ‘spouse deficit’ have been bringing in foreign domestic workers and marriage migrant women respectively (Lan 2008). Yet Lan is careful to point out that the two categories are not mutually exclusive – as migrant wives also perform care work such as taking care of the elderly in the home and other housework.<sup>14</sup>

In South Korea, 12,819 marriages, or 3.7 per cent of the total number of marriages in 2000 were between a Korean national and non-national. Of the total marriages with foreigners, 7,804 were between foreign women and Korean men. Most of the international marriages are by Korean men in rural areas or lower economic strata in urban areas (Seol et al. 2006). In 2006, 11.9 per cent (39,690) of all marriages were international marriages - with 30,208 of those marriages being between foreign women and Korean men. Migrant wives are mostly from China, Vietnam and the Philippines (48.4 per cent, 33.6 per cent and 3.8 per cent, respectively) (Soh 2008). These numbers are bound to increase since local governments began the ‘Farmers and Fishermen Bachelors Marriage Project’ in 2005. Also, in June 2007, a total of 60 local governments

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<sup>14</sup> Nicola Piper and Mina Roces also examine the phenomenon of the specificity of such feminized migration of Asian women in their edited volume *Wife or Worker?* highlighting that migrant women move between categories of migrant identity. See also (Burgess 2004).

implemented a policy to offer financial support for these rural bachelors' pursuit of international marriage (Soh 2008).

Yet stories of fraud within the marriage brokerage system, as well as cases of domestic and sexual violence,<sup>15</sup> and in extreme circumstances, tragic deaths,<sup>16</sup> of migrant women married to Korean men began to proliferate in the press and in NGO reports. Women, ill-informed of their Korean spouses' profession, family background, financial status, or drinking habits, often arrived in households and communities which were alienating to them as they lacked the language or social skills or a network for survival. They were isolated and sometimes liable to various forms of abuse, but yet were dependent on their husbands in terms of their residence status in South Korea - a marriage migrant could only be naturalised with the help of their spouses after two years of marriage, according to the Nationality Act.<sup>17</sup>

In addressing the problems that marriage migrant women face, the language of 'human trafficking' was gradually replaced by that of human rights and domestic

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<sup>15</sup> The Busan District Court convicted a 42-year-old Korean man of raping his 25-year-old Filipina wife in the first such case in the nation's legal history in January 2009. The 42-year-old man was sentenced to a 30-month prison term suspended for three years on charges of forcibly having sex with his Filipino wife at knifepoint. 'The defendant should have treated his wife with affection, because she has difficulties in speaking Korean and feels lonely in this remote foreign country. His behavior cannot be acceptable as he threatened his wife with a gas gun and knife to have sex against her will,' the Busan court was quoted as saying in its verdict. The court said it suspended his sentence for three years as he expressed remorse for his misconduct. It also noted the victim was held responsible for failing to make efforts to communicate with her husband and to adjust to Korean culture. 'Korean Convicted of Raping Filipino Wife,' [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/01/113\\_37965.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/01/113_37965.html)

<sup>16</sup> In March 2007, a Korean man was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment for murdering his Vietnamese wife, Huynh Mai. Another Vietnamese woman, Le Thi Kim Dong, committed suicide while she was pregnant, in April 30, 2007. In February 6, 2008, Tran Thanh Lan, a 22-year-old bride, committed suicide in South Korea. 'Another desperate Vietnamese housewife in South Korea,' Vietnews. <http://www.vietnews.vn/News/Society/5239/Another-desperate-Vietnamese-housewife-in-South-Korea.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> This is relatively easier than the normal naturalization procedure for non-marriage migrants who have to have 5 years of residence in South Korea, together with fluent Korean language skills.

violence. This reframing from a transnational criminal issue to a domestic gender and rights issue was partly due to opposition from migrant wives. Initially, NGOs were eager to identify these marriage migrants as victims of ‘*maemaehon* (literally, buy-and-sell marriage)’ – translated into the English term ‘human trafficking in international marriage.’<sup>18</sup> This is similar to the anti-prostitution campaigns in which trafficking – or *insinmaemae* – was considered an important issue for women. Activists from within the international marriage community strongly protested against the use of ‘trafficking’ as a blanket description of themselves. Jung Hae-sil, representative of the Multicultural Family Association based in Incheon, one of the cities with the largest migrant population, argued that media and feminists’ assumption of international marriage as ‘human trafficking’ was stigmatizing and denied the agency of migrant women in choosing to migrate and making a future for themselves. She criticised the binary of ‘trade marriage’ and ‘love marriage,’ arguing that problems faced by migrant women are often similar to those of Korean women married into patriarchal families.<sup>19</sup> This sentiment was reflected in my interview with a representative of the Korea Public Interest Lawyers’ group *Gong-gam*. She explained how their efforts since 2005 to introduce the concept of ‘human trafficking’ into the issue of international marriage was strongly resisted by the marriage migrants themselves for its victimizing overtone, dismissal of their decisions to migrate, and feelings that such representation makes their lives even

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the Women Migrants’ Human Rights Center hosted a 3-day workshop on ‘Asian Women Migrants’ Strategy Discussion for Protection and Prevention of **Human Trafficking** in International Marriage’ on November 21-24, 2006. ‘Marriage trafficking’ was explicitly discussed. But in December 2008, a regular symposium of the Center was titled ‘Between Adjustment and Violence: Where do Migrant Women’s Human Rights Reside?’ The language of trafficking was dropped completely in the presentations.

<sup>19</sup> One of her most poignant criticisms is that the voice of migrant women themselves are often subsumed within the narrative of victimhood of the narrator (Jung 2008) (Interview with Jun Hae-sil December 2, 2008).

more difficult.<sup>20</sup> As a result, '(im)migrant women's human rights' become the cause for initiatives by both NGOs and the government for marriage migrants.

At about the same time, 'multiculturalism' suddenly became the general banner under which the government promoted initiatives that assist marriage migrants and their families. In 2006, the South Korean government announced the Plan for Promoting the Social Integration for Migrant Women, Biracial people, and Immigrants. In 2008, the Act on Regulations of International Marriage Brokerage was adopted. After much NGO and media discussion of families with migrant spouses as 'multicultural families,' the Act for the Support of Multicultural Families in 2008 was passed in 2008. Led by the Ministry of Gender Equality (and Family), but implemented by a broad range of government agencies, the Act focuses on cultural assimilation of women marriage migrants and their children with the provision of Korean language training, cultural education including homemaking and childrearing practices, and counselling. 'Multicultural family' has become a keyword in local and central government-supported programs for migrant women married into Korean families (for example, the name Marriage Migrants Centers were soon changed to Multicultural Families Support Centers). According to Kim Hyun Mee (2008), under the Social Integration Completion Policy that will be administered by the Ministry of Justice, Korean language proficiency and 'Understanding Multiculturalism,' a course on sensitivity to Korean culture and society, are being proposed as requirements in addition to two years of residence in Korea for attaining Korean citizenship. In spite of the language of multiculturalism, these services and proposals are designed to 'Koreanise' marriage migrants (who constitute the

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Soh Rami, attorney, Korea Public Interest Lawyers' Group *Gongam*, January 13, 2009.

‘multicultural’ element of the otherwise stable, authentic, Korean families and society). This may be one reading of the statement in the Support Act: ‘The purpose of the Act is to prepare an institutional framework to support *multicultural* families so they become full-fledged members of *Korean* society and lead more stable lives (my emphasis)’ (Act 8937, ‘Reasons for adopting the law’).

In terms of welfare, migrant women could become the beneficiary of the Natural Basic Livelihood Security Law (revised December 2005) only as mothers of children with Korean fathers. This law was revised in 1999 to incorporate a ‘workfare’ element under the Self-Sufficiency (*jawal*) Policy – the 2005 revision to include migrant mothers sets up a ‘birthfare’ approach that makes these welfare services conditional on migrant women fulfilling their reproductive role. The Nationality Act of 2004 was revised to allow migrant spouses to be naturalised before the two-year residence requirement due either to the death or disappearance of the Korean spouse, or if children born of the marriage were minors who need to be cared for. For a marriage migrant woman, giving birth to a child with her Korean husband is clearly the best citizenship strategy.

Anthropologist Kim Hyun Mee argues that the ‘multicultural family’ policy is part of the South Korean government’s nationalist efforts to boost the population by creating specific type of migrant women subjects (Kim 2007:103-5). This circumscribed form of multiculturalism policy silences those who do not fulfil the reproductive goal of the nation-state. No equivalent support is available to migrant men married to Korean nationals, nor to migrant workers and refugees. Beyond the practical need of bodies, these pro-natalist policies are also a site of gendering the nation for which immigration has become a reality. By making Korean mothers out of migrant women, they reinstate

the boundaries of the nation not by keeping out ethnically different women, but by disciplining them into a gendered sameness.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the multicultural policy has focused on assimilating migrant women into the Korean family and harnessing their reproductive capacity for the Korean nation.

Echoing with the citizenship regime that we observed in the anti-prostitution legislation, the multicultural family policy in South Korea enforces demands of domesticity and reproduction for women as a condition of membership in the Korean nation, buttressing a gendered citizenship regime that effectively excludes and penalises women who fail to conform.<sup>22</sup>

Feminist scholar Kim Youngok suggests that these services are ‘coercive assimilation’ rather than recognition of differences – a premise of multiculturalism (Kim 2007:109). Others also observe that these policies reinforce the belief in the superiority and distinctiveness of Korean culture, thus justifying discriminatory attitudes and practices against migrant workers and brides (Han 2007). In fact, the extraordinary amount of attention paid to marriage migrants in these multicultural policies raises questions about the much larger migrant population in South Korea. As of 2006, marriage migrants constituted only 10.3 per cent of the total population of foreign residents (910,149) in South Korea in 2006. The majority of foreigners are migrant workers (43.5 per cent) and undocumented migrant workers (20.5 per cent)(Seol Undated:6).The human rights violations of these two groups of less-skilled workers by both employers and the

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<sup>21</sup> Pertinent questions about the limits of multicultural policy have been raised in the 2007 winter issue of *Korea Journal*, ‘Towards a Multicultural Society?’

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that migrant women are passive recipients of such ‘state effects.’ The agency of women marriage migrants in negotiating these disciplinary effects has been examined by Kim Hyun Mee (2007) (Kim 2007) in South Korea, and by Nicole Constable (2003) (Constable 2003) on women in ‘correspondence marriages’ and Nobue Suzuki and Leiba Faier on Filipinas married to Japanese men. (Faier 2007; Suzuki 2004)

state (in the form of raids and deportations as well as physical violence) have been well documented (Amnesty International 2006) yet largely silenced.

The claims of ‘multiculturalism’ currently expressed in South Korea may better be considered a reflection of the country’s global ambition. As Nancy Abelmann and Hyunhee Kimp (2005) suggest from their careful analysis of a Korean mother’s failed attempt to secure a wife from the Philippines for her son with a physical disability, the middle class and transnational nature of getting a foreign bride allowed the woman from rural South Korea to affirm her ‘maternal citizenship’ and feel an enhanced sense of belonging in the increasingly prosperous and global nation-state. Similarly, embracing the idea of multiculturalism allows the South Korean nation-state to assert its membership in the ranks of ethnically-diverse and cosmopolitan global societies, implying that it has moved beyond the homogeneity and closed borders of the ‘hermit kingdom’ of yesteryears.

This fantasy of a ‘new Korea’ may be well illustrated by the musical ‘Love in Asia.’ In Spring 2009, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism sponsored a two-month run of the musical ‘Love in Asia’ by a Korean art theatre group, performed with traditional Korean music (*gugak*). It was a story of a big Korean family in the rural areas of Jeollanam-do (province) where wives from the Philippines, Vietnam, Mongolia and northeast China gather together with their Korean in-laws to meet a sister-in-law's boyfriend who has dark skin and has an African background. According to the Korean Culture and Information Service, a state agency, it is a ‘celebration of love of multicultural family’ and shows ‘both old and new concepts of family in (South)

Korea.’<sup>23</sup> As long as ‘multicultural society’ is narrowly celebrated as one of families with foreign spouses who are fluent in the Korean language, adept at Korean customs, and active in reproducing Korean children, the human rights and well-being of migrants who are not integrated into Korean families will always remain outside the proper concerns of ‘multicultural’ Korea.

### **Conclusion**

This article analyzed the intersection of the regime of gender and sexuality with that of citizenship in South Korea through the emergence of ‘prostituted women’ and (im)migrant wives in the policy arena. By examining the gender ideals about sexuality and reproduction underlying these initiatives, the analysis suggests that policies proclaiming the protection of women’s human rights could effectively become technologies for gendering the nation. Gender normativity comes to homogenise the differences and dilute the challenges that migration and the global regime of rights pose to the nation-state. And sexual protection comes to defend and redefine the nation in the midst of global challengers and strangers.

The politics of protection – of who is worthy of protection and who becomes the protector – raises issues of state power as well as gendered agency. South Korean state and civil society have constructed prostituted women and migrant wives as objects of power. They are defined as women in need of protection, and such need is articulated in terms of women’s human rights (and multiculturalism for migrant wives). The gender essentialism underlying these policies undermines any real entitlement to equality or rights that they promise (Kapur 2005:125). While human rights may constitute a

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.korea.net/news/news/newsView.asp?serial\\_no=20090212001](http://www.korea.net/news/news/newsView.asp?serial_no=20090212001)

challenge to state sovereignty, we observe that actual legal and political practice construe a narrow perspective of women's roles in the nation-state and reinstates certain forms of 'femininity,' effectively reworking rather than challenging the masculinism of the state. State protection is offered selectively only to those who are deemed innocent, while it 'prosecutes, criminalises, or ignores those who are seen as complicit in their victimization' (Soderlund 2005:82). Certain women and men (prostitutes, migrant workers, migrant entertainers) are therefore muted as subjects of rights, and subordinated if not excluded from the nation.

The policies examined here demonstrate how the South Korean state has been able to keep residents unequal under the law while gaining global stature. This article suggests that by looking beyond the migrant-citizen divide, we may well see the parallels, linkages, and continuities between migrants and citizens, and the constructedness of ethnicity, nationhood and citizenship. The fissures that demarcate access to resources along gender, sexuality, class, rural and urban divide shift but are not erased. Multiple borders are being drawn and reinforced. Whether it is to make good women out of formerly 'fallen' women, or to make good Korean mothers out of migrant wives, the nation's need for moral and physical reproduction comes to define the parameters of female citizenship in South Korea in the twenty-first century. Donna Guy (2008: 84) has suggested from her study of women and citizenship in twentieth century Latin America that 'wives and prostitutes formed the objects of a series of prescriptive measures designed to limit the civil rights of women not only outside, but also within the nation.' While reproduction allows migrant women to access various social services and privileges that previously only Korean citizens are entitled to; engagement in prostitution

renders Korean women illegitimate subjects of rights and citizenship. The protection of women's human rights translates into the protection of feminine virtues that continue to be linked with the well-being of the family and the nation, defining South Korean nationhood in the midst of globalization. As such, the boundaries of citizenship appear to be more negotiable than those on female sexual agency in South Korea.

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