

Korean Minjung Women's Liberative Hermeneutics of Praxis

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Introduction

It is impossible for me to do justice to the Korean Minjung Women's perspective and their praxis in this limited space and with my little knowledge. However, this paper attempts to provide a brief (yet a clear, hopefully) picture of Korean Christian Minjung women's praxis in terms of their contextualizing (action) and theologizing efforts (faith). Since there are not much literature on Christian Minjung women, this paper heavily depends upon the publications of the Korean Association of Women Christian for Women Minjung (KAWCWOM). To review this most recent literature, I believe, is an important task for understanding the liberative hermeneutics of Korean Christian Minjung Women. It can be said that KAWCWOM has contributed to constructing Korean feminist theology from Minjung women's perspectives from a range of various denominations.

While introducing KAWCWOM's work as interpreted by some feminist theologians I will elaborate the doubled identities of Minjung women and draw insights for liberative hermeneutics for this group's praxis in the concluding section.

Identity of Minjung as Minjung Women

KAWCWOM began its journey as a women's Christian organization in 1986 in response to the Korean democracy liberation movement. Its first members were also the members of the social committee within the Korean Association of Women Theologians (KAWT) which was particularly concerned about democracy and economic injustice at that time. From its beginning, KAWCWOM had its identity expressed in its logo, Jesus, Women, Minjung. Although there were many debates and disagreements surrounding what to call themselves, KAWCWOM emphasized Minjung Women, according to Han Kook-Yom.¹ To emphasize Minjung means that the organization

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1 Han Kook-Yom, Like the women around Jesus, in *The History of Life Written by Their Feet, 20 Years of Korean Association of Women Christian For Women Minjung (KAWCWOM)*,

places those women who are economically marginalized (e.g. women workers), and socially marginalized (e.g. single mothers) as theological subjects. By enhancing this disadvantaged group as theological subjects KAWCWOM fundamentally challenges the traditional way of doing theology, initiated by the upper-middle class (mostly male) elites. Park Kyung-Mi points out this as she claims that the ethos of the Jesus movement is **not to make Minjung as the recipients of social well-fare but to foster them as the Subjects of their life** as they voluntarily help one another and share what they have.² Furthermore, this organization is aware that the Minjung (as a theological subject) is neither a unitary group nor an exclusion of certain women. The praxis of the KAWCWOM, in other words, extends to embrace those of who are from broken families, delinquent teen-age youth, disabled, abused victims, foreign migrant workers, to name just few. Lee Eun-Sun shares her experience of meeting so many different people who are involved in and benefited from KAWCWOM's work as she reviews materials and interviews people from KAWCWOM for the last 20 years.³ It is no wonder, then, to discover KAWCWOM leaders and members practicing their faith in the context of shelters for delinquent teenagers and homeless women, and in centres for disabled. These women leaders, while moving beyond their gender-oriented perspective, have embraced those who are powerless so that they could be empowered.

Moreover, being centred in Minjung Women means that dealing with poverty and class issues, or in other words economic injustice issues, is KAWCWOM's major mission. The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor (Isaiah 61:1). KAWCWOM interpreted this passage as the one that paved the way of Jesus' first ministry after his 40 day-wilderness experience and decided to work for proclaiming good news to the poor as its priority mission.⁴ We can draw an insight here of their principle of biblical hermeneutics that is praxis-oriented for the poor. With this biblical foundation, KAWCWOM proposes an alternative, voluntary spirituality of poverty and sustainable life of Minjung women, while challenging current neo-colonial globalization.⁵

Such liberative and alternative hermeneutics, however, requires a deeper understanding of the current economic order often referred to as

KAWCWOM, ed. (Seoul: Korean Christian Literature Society, 2007), 27. Having acknowledged its difference, that is, MinJung Women emphasizes MinJung, class issue and Women MingJung, focusing on gender issue, this paper will use both terms interchangeably.

2 Park Kyung-Mi, The Ethos of Jesus Movement and KAWCWOM, in *The History*, 72. Emphasis mine.

3 Lee Eun-Sun, Experiencing the Coming of Korean Women Christ, in *The History*, 78.

4 Bae Young-Mi, The Process of Making the Journal, 'Good News,' in *Good News* (Winter 2002): 38-42. Bae points out the fact that the changing of the name of the journal over the first 10 years implies a quest for this group's identity. To decide on Good News as its name indicates their mission to focus on the poor as per Jesus' reading of Isaiah.

5 Lee, Experiencing, 89. In 2002 the group decided to study the meaning of voluntary poverty, questioning whether poverty is not just an economic matter but also a spiritual matter.

globalization. Park notes that the current situation of globalization and its effect is actually similar to the Hellenistic globalization which swept through Palestine in the 1st century.⁶ Therefore, efforts need to be made to analyze the context of the Jesus movement and to interpret it in the context of KAWCWOM's vision for the 21st Century in order for us to fight against current imperialism and to propose a more just approach based upon the volunteer community movement. Her analysis of the 1st century globalization context in comparison with the 21st century context which drew on the work of Karl Polanyi and Richard Horsley, however informative it is, was not easy to understand for Minjung women. At the meeting with the authors (feminist theologians) and the leaders who were involved in publishing this project, some confessed that it was difficult to read and to understand.⁷ This comment challenges us, then, **to develop an educational project that may draw insights from both ancient and contemporary world economic orders in such a way as to be accessible to ordinary (possibly not well-educated) Minjung women.** The pedagogy of Paulo Freire may be useful to consider and employ here.⁸ This does not mean, however, that the academic research is unnecessary. While continuing to theologize and theorize complicated and multi-layered contexts in an academic manner we also need to make special efforts to find channels and methods that can communicate with groups of women in a more everyday language.⁹ **The work of searching for such channels and developing educational methods, I believe, is the work of liberative hermeneutics and praxis, itself.**

The Identity of Women as MinJung Women.

Although KAWCWOM underlined the importance of the Minjung identity, their gender identity as women was also critical from its very beginning. Choi Young-Sil claims that the birth of KAWCWOM resulted from the fact that the progressive movement of Korean male leaders in the 1980s did not pay attention to the reality of Minjung women who were the Minjung of the Minjungs.¹⁰ While looking at the reality of Korean women who have suffered from colonialism, division of the peninsula, militarism, and patriarchy in society as well as discrimination against women in churches, we can easily see why these women are called as such. To

6 Park, *The Ethos*, 37.

7 The Epilogue Meeting, *The Place Where Life and Literature Meets*, in *The History*, 199.

8 Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1985).

9 Musa W. Dube, "Divining Ruth for International Relations," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta/Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature/WCC Publications, 2001), 179-95. Dora R. Mbuwayesango, "How Local Divine Power Were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of the Shona," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta/Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature/WCC Publications, 2001), 63-77. Both Dube and Mbuwayesango attempt to use a method that is derived from ordinary people (Botswana and Zimbabwe's) daily life and language in order for the ordinary to interpret the Bible.

10 Choi Young-Sil, *With Minjung Women, being Minjung Women*, in *The History*, 157.

enhance gender identity in the process of forming the Minjung women identity has enabled many women to work together in solidarity. This solidarity is a fragile reality with many challenges. Park No-Sook, the president of this organization, shares her story of listening to one of the members' stories who had to leave the organization because she could not find a cheap place to live nearby.¹¹ Her poverty prevented her from participating in KAWCWOM. As the leader of this group, Park felt helpless and faced the distrust or even resentment from the members towards those who have more than themselves.

Kim Eun-Hye warns of the danger of homogenizing women's gender identity as if it only comes from biological difference. In order to be free from such danger, she claims, we need to re-discover women's spirituality (including feminist spirituality) embedded in life-centred spirituality enhancing care, nurture, and relationship.¹² To some extent, however, women's spirituality, although it does not belong to women exclusively, contains such features of femininity as giving birth, being mothers, and being responsible for SahlLim (a Korean word meaning house managing, a typical role of women for the most part even in this day). Kim further ponders the Korean meaning of SahlLim and its connotation for giving life or keeping life alive.¹³ SahlLim, in other words, is more than house cleaning, cooking, washing, and raising children. **It is a work encompassing all the activities of valuing life, caring for life, nurturing life, and connecting with life. However invisible or tribal it is considered, however undervalued or humiliating it may be, the work of SahlLim is sacred work because it values life the foremost and serves the Divine, the Creator in a most fundamental way.** Kim attempts here to develop a liberative hermeneutics, reflecting on the Jesus movement as a work of doing trivial and humble jobs, jobs which many Minjung women do. While doing such humble work as playing with kids, cooking rice, doing dishes, feeding mouths, putting children to bed, and washing the floor all day long, these women realize that this ordinary work is a holy work because it sustains, renews, and recreates life.

Conclusion: Insights for Liberative Hermeneutics from Minjung Women

We have thus far introduced the work of KAWCWOM and their identification with Minjung women. We learned that to emphasize the socio-religio-economic identity of Minjung is equally to underline gender identity. An insight drawn from this finding is, therefore, that their theology, their theological reflection and practice, cannot be fully understood without considering the multiple identities that are pertinent to the complicated

11 Park No-Sook, Do You Know My Life? in *Women Who Are Plowing the Bottom Place*, (KAWCWOM ed., 2001), 124.

12 Kim Eun-Hye, The 21st century women spirituality and the spirituality of life, in *The History*, 141.

13 Ibid., 143.

contexts of Korea. The task of articulating the differences among Minjung women and coping with challenges that arise because of these differences, as briefly mentioned above, is critical in envisioning KAWCWOM's future tasks.

The second insight that can be drawn from this Minjung women's work is that a future direction for liberative hermeneutics lies ahead, leading them into the promised land as subjects who can assert their identity with confidence and self-esteem. Choi Young-Sil sums up this point well, the ultimate goal of KAWCWOM is not simply helping those Minjung women but empowering them as subjects of their life rather than being powerless, as they together fight for justice.¹⁴ This future task of fostering self-confidence and self-esteem against the stereo-typing of Minjung women as inferior and hopeless is important.

Finally, the insight drawn from the work of KAWCWOM is a spirituality of suffering and life. This spirituality is a spirituality leading them to move around lower places for lower people. Kim Eun-Hye calls it a nomadic spirituality as they keep moving to find the needy people and places.¹⁵ As Jesus movement went down towards the lower people, those from KAWCWOM, went down to be with Korean Minjung women and children. The journey of finding lower people led KAWCWOM to encounter those foreign immigrant workers, who are becoming Minjung of the Minjungs in this day and age in Korea. Here we can identify that Korean liberative hermeneutics of Minjung women goes beyond nation, class, and gender. It extends across divisions of race and ethnicity. KAWCWOM provides a profound insight to us here by asserting, Bordering, dividing countries, is a human-made hypocritical reality, the place where we live is, in fact, one co-living sharing place.¹⁶

In conclusion, liberative hermeneutics of Minjung women's praxis is enriched as those of us who are in solidarity with Minjung women's struggles for full humanity raise awareness of multiple identities and their differences within Minjung women, empower them as theological subjects, and explore their spirituality of life that overcomes national barriers and sustains all creation.

Abstract

Much Christian feminist work has been carried out in Korea over the last three decades. This contributed to empowering Korean Christian women and enhancing their self-esteem. However, not much work has been done for Korean Christian women who are Minjung, identified as women who are socially, economically, and politically marginalized. This paper attempts to draw attention to these women as it examines one of the most updated

¹⁴ Choi, *With Minjung Women*, 162.

¹⁵ Kim, *The 21st century women spirituality*, 125

¹⁶ <http://www.kosian.co.kr>

publications of the Korean Association of Women Christian for Women Minjung (KAWCWOM). KAWCWOM, an ecumenical and long-standing organization, has contributed to constructing Korean feminist theology from Minjung women's perspectives, while participating in the action of bringing democracy, peace and justice. One of the purposes this article is to describe what Korean Christian Minjung women do and say to make sense of their faith from where they stand, or in other words, how they contextualize their theology. This is an important task for understanding the liberative hermeneutics of Korean Christian Minjung Women. As a way of framing KAWCWOM's work this paper will elaborate the doubled identities of Minjung women and draw insights in hopes of contributing to the liberation of Minjung women. Finally, this paper argues that the liberating meaning of Minjung women's lives comes from their struggles for full humanity. This struggle occurs in the context of multiple identities, the differences between Minjung women. Raising awareness of these differences and multiple identities empowers these women as theological subjects to explore their life-centered spirituality. Most importantly, liberative hermeneutics of Minjung women's praxis is not limited to one nation or gender but overcomes all barriers so that it sustains all creation.

Key words

Minjung women, praxis, hermeneutics, voluntary spirituality of poverty, life-centred spirituality, multiple identities, Korean feminist theology