

Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950

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Women today are struggling with all their passion and all their strength day and night for the creation of a new history of a democratic country. Today in the streets, men, women, the old, the young, everyone stops to listen to the women.

—————Nam Hyŏn-sŏ, “Women of a New Country,” January 1947

In Korea from ancient times, the master of the home was thought to refer to the husband ... we now realize that the master of the home must be the woman, that is, the wife or mother.

—————Chang Chŏng-suk, “The New Home and Housewife,” October 1947

All social revolutions in modern history, from the Russian Revolution of 1917 to the Cuban one of 1959, have attempted to address the status of women as a critical element of social change.¹ North Korea was no different. With Japan’s defeat in World War II, Korea was liberated from its thirty-five-year colonial rule, and as in many postcolonial nations after the war, revolution was in the air.² When the Cold War came early to the peninsula, Korea took two divergent paths. Divided at the 38th parallel into separate occupation zones, with the

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¹ Here I adopt Theda Skocpol’s definition, which states that a social revolution is a “combination of thoroughgoing structural transformation and massive class upheavals.” *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

² For a full account of this history, see Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, 1990), and for the revolution in North Korea, see Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). All primary sources I use in this article come from the “Records Seized by the US Military Forces in Korea” during the Korean War (1950–1953), which was declassified in 1977 and is now held in the National Archives, in College Park, Maryland, under Record Group 242.

United States in the south and the USSR in the north, social reforms were carried out swiftly in the north, aided and abetted by the Soviets, while in the south, the American occupiers saw most Korean political movements as too radical and suppressed them. In what follows, I focus on the formative years of early North Korean history, the five-year period between the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and the start of the Korean War in 1950. I show how North Korea from the outset attempted to meld the old and the new through the figure of the revolutionary mother as a uniquely feminine revolutionary subjectivity. This sets the North Korean case apart from other historical examples of social revolutions and their handling of “the woman question.”

To begin unraveling this history, let me begin with a paradox. Women in North Korea during this period began to participate in the public arena as never before, and yet women’s agency was cast within the framework of the home, reinforcing what seem to be traditional roles as wives and mothers. How are we to understand this development in North Korea? How were “traditional” values incorporated into a revolutionary regime that purported to overthrow the old way of life? A clue can be found in the titles of the two articles from which I took the opening epigraphs. Women were to have an active role in the *new* country as *new* housewives in a *new* home. The significance of the new can hardly be overemphasized, and the key to understanding the role of women in the North Korean Revolution is to grasp what was meant by “new.”

Novel to North Korea was the way in which it dealt with traditional practices from the past. On 24 January 1947, the Law to Eradicate Remnants of Feudal Practices was announced, consisting of four articles which all dealt with so-called “feudal” marriage practices.³ Article 1 stipulated up to a year of forced labor for those who gave money, animals, valuables, or labor to the parents or relatives of either party in a marriage, outlawing practices of dowry exchange. Even if no criminal penalty was imposed, those who exchanged dowry might have to pay a substantial fine. Article 2 specified up to two years in prison for those who forced a woman into a marriage or into maintaining a marriage, as well as anyone who tempted or deceived a woman into marriage. Article 3 imposed forced labor on those who married a person not yet of legal marriageable age, under seventeen for women and eighteen for men. Finally, Article 4 stipulated a fine of up to 2,000 *won* (about U.S.\$50, or \$500 in 2010 dollars) or forced labor for up to a year for those who practiced polygamy. Although these stipulations had been included in the Gender Equality Law passed six months before, in July 1946, traditional

³ Pak Hyōn-sōn, “Policy on women during the anti-imperialist anti-feudal democratic revolution,” in Kim Nam-sik, ed., *Haebang chōnhusa ūi insik* [Understanding pre- and post-liberation history] (Seoul: Han’gilsa, 1989), 425.

marriage practices had proved tenacious, requiring further legislation specifically targeting polygamy, dowry exchange, and early and forced marriages.

One such case, brought to court in 1947, involved a forty-one-year-old man (Ahn Sŭng-un) with a son of fourteen (Chŏng-mo) and a forty-seven-year-old woman (Yi Yŏng-sun) with a daughter of eighteen (Kŭm-ok). They were charged with violating the Gender Equality Law by marrying their children under the legal age.⁴ When the prosecutor questioned Mr. Ahn as to whether he knew about the Gender Equality Law, he responded that he did, but that he had not known it was such a serious offense. When asked why he had arranged the marriage, he stated that he himself had been married at seventeen and sent off to his bride's house (*ch'ŏgasari*) for ten years before he was able to set up his own household, and thus he wanted to give his son the opportunity to marry "normally." Poor families with sons were at times obliged to send them to the bride's house rather than bringing her home to their own, as was the Korean custom. Mr. Ahn seems to have resented this. He went on to explain that he had also consented to the marriage because Mrs. Yi's family was having difficulty and had nothing to eat, and she had come to him to propose the marriage. When questioned about whether he forced his son into the marriage, his answer reflected the traditional parent-child relationship in which the child simply does what s/he is told: "He was not forced to get married. Chŏng-mo just married because I married him off, and he didn't say that he didn't want to get married."

When Mrs. Yi was questioned she said that she, too, knew that the marriage violated the Gender Equality Law, but she explained that three years before, in February 1944, when colonial authorities had come to recruit unmarried girls (possibly as "comfort women"), she had arranged with her neighbor Mr. Ahn to have their children engaged so as to prevent her daughter being taken away. When her harvest the previous year had failed because of floods, she had gone to Mr. Ahn twice and asked for the marriage to take place, to which he agreed. She reasoned that since her daughter would eventually have to be married off and was thus already "someone else's person" (*nam ũi saram in manch'i dŏ dulgŏt ŏpta*), there was no point in keeping her further. Through the marriage, she had hoped to have her daughter fed and perhaps secure some help for herself. When asked whether she had asked her daughter if she wanted the marriage, she replied, "When I asked my daughter, she said that she will marry perhaps because there was nothing to eat, and so I married her off." Since going to court, the children had been separated and the daughter had returned to live with her mother. The prosecution asked for six months imprisonment for both Ahn and Yi for having violated Article 2, but

⁴ "Hwanghae Province P'yŏngsan County Prosecution Statement," 18 Mar. 1947, G 242, SA 2010, box 5, item 4.

the judge suspended the sentences because “the defendants seem to have realized their mistakes.”

This case and others like it illustrate how certain practices were condemned as “feudal.” But no legislation or political campaign in North Korea ever denounced tradition or Confucianism per se, as occurred during the Chinese Revolution when the family was configured as the source of women’s oppression, a position that aligned nationalism, feminism, and Marxism against a common enemy.⁵ In North Korea, rather than the family being faulted for women’s oppression, the family and the home came to symbolize the Korean nation in the North Korean Revolution. As postcolonial studies have shown, women and the home in colonial contexts were privileged sites, whether as less politicized and thus “safe” havens with greater potential for subversion, or as embodiments of the nation itself, with traditional gender roles appropriated as distinctly national in the construction of national identities.⁶ Thus, North Korea’s relationship to the past was deeply ambivalent at a time when the revolution aimed to overcome the past. The resulting compromise allowed North Korea’s official language, adopting Marxist historiography, to target “feudal and colonial remnants” and “feudal relations” between men and women, but not tradition in total. The Gender Equality Law outlawed concubinage, early marriage, and prostitution as feudal and colonial practices, but nowhere was there any reference to Confucian tradition or the family as a source of social ills. The family and the state did not “wither away” under communism, as Engels had prescribed, but instead the state maintained and built upon the importance of the family as a building block of North Korean communism.

While many studies on the status of women in social revolutions begin by questioning the extent to which women were liberated, the prominence of Foucault’s theory of discipline and governmentality has shifted the focus of investigation to the historical mechanisms by which subjectivities are created and shaped rather than assuming that there is an authentic subject to be liberated at all. In North Korea, motherhood became the primary trope by which to construct not only women’s revolutionary subjectivity but all North Koreans, as everyone was extolled to emulate mothers as the most sacrificial model citizen. Thus, the singularity of the process through which North Korean

⁵ Christina Kelley Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 4–5.

⁶ Kyeong-hee Choi argues that women managed to gain greater visibility in publications during the colonial period as male writers were subjected to harsher surveillance and censorship, in “Chendō yōngu wa kōmyōl yōngu ūi kyoch’ajōm esō [At the intersection of gender research and censorship research],” in *Ilchae sikminji siki saero ilki* [Re-reading of the colonial period in Korea], Yonsei University Korean Studies Center (Seoul: Hae-an, 2007); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

women's subjectivity was newly crafted lies in the contradictory deployment of tradition, shifting the meaning of "motherhood" and thereby the overall gender scheme as both women and men were to identify as mothers. This is entirely different from the masculine representations of revolutionary brotherhood in images of the worker or peasant in the Bolshevik and Chinese Revolutions. What requires explanation is the precise ways in which motherhood was able to embody a revolutionary potential. The figure of the revolutionary mother became the quintessential icon of North Korean female subjectivity, melding the old and the new, and incorporating both Japanese and Soviet legacies along the way. Thus, untangling the woman question in North Korea is enormously complicated by its position, lying as it does at the intersection of Japanese colonial rule and Soviet occupation, while bordering China's brewing revolution.

I begin with an examination of earlier references to motherhood to illustrate how North Korean uses effectively forged a link between old and new. I then detail just how North Korean women were mobilized as revolutionary mothers by looking at *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Korean woman), the only women's journal published in North Korea in the immediate post-liberation period.⁷ It is clear from its earliest issues in 1946 that motherhood was being made to symbolize revolutionary subjectivity, not only for women but also for the rest of North Korean society, as the most unconditional form of sacrifice. This remaking of motherhood as a public persona would not have been possible without the Korean colonial experience, which served to privilege women and the domestic sphere in unprecedented ways and laid the groundwork for Soviet influences to take root in ways different from other revolutions, including that of the Soviet Union itself.

WISE MOTHER GOOD WIFE

While Korea's long tradition of Confucianism is often touted as the main reason for the seeming persistence of traditional gender roles in the country, those arguing this provide little explanation of why this should be the case in revolutionary North Korea at a time of social upheaval aimed at discarding the past.⁸

⁷ Copies of *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* from the post-Korean War period of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s have been the primary source for past studies of North Korean women. This has led to arguments that the construction of North Korean women as mothers began in the postwar period with the cult of leadership and the exaltation of Kim Jŏng-suk (Kim Il Sung's wife) as the "Mother of the Revolution," and Kang Ban-sŏk (Kim Il Sung's mother) as the "Mother of Korea." See Sonia Ryang, "Gender in Oblivion: Women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 35, 3 (2000): 323–49.

⁸ Past studies of North Korean women can be roughly divided into three broad camps. One sees the breakdown of the traditional patriarchal family through communist policies as having had a negative effect on the uniquely Korean sense of morality and virtue. Another group is critical of North Korea's policies on women for its maintenance of patriarchal relations, exacerbated by what they call "totalitarian state patriarchy" through women's mobilization as workers as well as

The most recent English language work to look at North Korean women, by Sonia Ryang, thus argues that it is not the legacy of Confucianism that is at the heart of the construction of women primarily as mothers, but rather the distinct cult of leadership and patriarchal discourses surrounding this phenomenon that replaces the category of “woman” with “motherhood,” in which femininity is equated with maternity, “effacing the notion of gender altogether from the surface of the state politics.”⁹ While the relevance of Ryang’s analysis for contemporary North Korea cannot be discounted, North Korea was not alone in its use of motherhood; it was a pervasive trope in the construction of women’s identities throughout the world in the first half of the twentieth century, as motherhood became increasingly subjected to state policy as part of the modernizing project.

Throughout the nineteenth century, foundations were progressively laid upon which the state could build its capacity for governmentality through various mechanisms, among them the compilation of censuses. With the effects of industrialization and mass warfare, particularly in the interwar period, states throughout the world began to associate national power with a large and disciplined population at the same time that fertility was declining due to urbanization and women’s entry into industrial jobs. The result was a marked interest in state management of family life and reproduction, with heightened emphasis on motherhood and domesticity as ways to increase the population.¹⁰ In Britain, for example, as the modernizing project came to be adopted by upper-class women in the construction of the ideal woman, motherhood became “mothercraft,” by which lower-class women were trained to be modern wives and mothers with the appropriate scientific knowledge to set up a proper modern home.¹¹

Likewise, Japan had embarked upon full-scale industrialization beginning in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration, so that by the time it colonized Korea in 1910,

housewives, increasing the double burden on women. The third camp attempts to understand the North Korean gender policies through the standards set by the government itself, and thereby tries to maintain a critical stance while giving credit for some improvements in women’s lives. For a representative example of this last position, see Kyung Ae Park, “Women and Revolution in North Korea,” *Pacific Affairs* 65, 4 (Winter 1992–1993): 527–45. For a full bibliographic list, see Suzy Kim, “Politics of Empowerment: Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950,” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2005, ch. 4.

⁹ Ryang, “Gender in Oblivion”: 323. Ryang claims that “debate on the ‘woman question’ was almost non-existent,” and that the legal measures for gender equality were pushed top-down without participation from North Korean women. But when the question became a source of heated debate in North Korea in the post-liberation period it involved North Korean women from all strata, as shown here. This often revealed the enormous challenges faced by reforms in gender relations.

¹⁰ See David L. Hoffmann, “Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in Its Pan-European Context,” *Journal of Social History* 34, 1 (Fall 2000): 35–54.

¹¹ Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” *History Workshop Journal* 5, 1 (1978): 9–66.

the traditional extended family was fast becoming a thing of the past with the rise of the nuclear middle-class family in its place.¹² The need to create modern national subjects, disciplined and ready to answer the call of the state, whether as workers or soldiers, prompted ideologues to see women's education as integral to the training of proper mothers for the new generation. The construction of this foundation for a strong modern nation-state was to begin by exposing women to the "wise mother good wife" (賢母良妻) ideology. Thus, contrary to the commonly held belief that this East Asian idea derived from Confucianism, the role of "wise mother good wife" was a modern ideological construct for the education and mobilization of women in the period of modern state formation.¹³ It was, in effect, a critical element in the making of a modern gendered citizenship that inscribed women as at once mothers who nurture their children to become national subjects and wives who, by taking care of the domestic hearth, enable men to participate as citizens of the nation-state. Women's reproductive roles made them eligible for national citizenship, fusing duties of the household to the nation-state.

By the mid-1930s, not only had the Soviet Union started to reign in the liberal policies on marriage and divorce implemented after the Bolshevik Revolution, but the Chinese Communist Party was also beginning to change its policies, from viewing women as "new liberated women" to seeing them as "true revolutionary women," defined by filial piety, chastity, and motherhood.¹⁴ However, for Korea under colonial rule, the attempted fusion of family with national identity was tenuous at best precisely because of the contradiction between nationality and citizenship for the colonial subject. One's family membership, represented through the Korean surname, resulted in second-class status within the imperial order. By contrast, in Japan, wartime mobilization of women as sacrificing mothers provided opportunities for Japanese women to become imperial citizens like men, enlarging their scope of participation in the economic and political arenas with greater voting rights and maternity benefits.¹⁵ "More women participated actively in public life during World War II than at any time before or since..." as almost sixteen million women

¹² Kawamoto Aya, "Ideology of Good Wife Wise Mother and the Theory of 'Women's Emancipation' in Japan," *Yoksa Pip'yong* [History criticism] 52 (Fall 2000): 353–63.

¹³ Hong Yang-hŭi, "Theory of Wise Mother Good Wife in Korea and the Making of the Colonial 'Citizen,'" *Yoksa Pip'yong* [History criticism] 52 (Fall 2000): 364–74. Japan was also a source of Western feminist ideas; works by Henrik Ibsen, Ellen Key, August Bebel, and Alexandra Kollontai were often translated first into Japanese, leading to the rise of the New Woman in Korea, as elsewhere. But the brief period in the 1920s of radical alternatives to traditional married life, as practiced by New Women, is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁴ Hyun Ok Park, "Ideals of Liberation: Korean Women in Manchuria," in Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, eds., *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 229–48.

¹⁵ Ueno Chizuko, *Nationalism and Gender* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004).

joined the Great Japan Women's Association.¹⁶ But in colonial Korea, women became increasingly vulnerable to imperial demands as the household was exposed to the expropriation of foodstuffs and the forced conscription of household members as workers, soldiers, or "comfort women."

In order to bring Korean women into the imperial fold, the colonial government launched massive propaganda campaigns to switch the allegiance of Korean mothers from their families to the Japanese Empire. Countless Korean novelists were mobilized to write stories of motherly sacrifice. Nonetheless, Ch'oe Ch'ong-hee's 1942 short story *Yagukch'o* (Notes on wild chrysanthemums) betrays the difficulties the empire faced in recruiting voluntary Korean military conscripts because "always the mother's opposition is the greatest." This led to bad behavior or desertion by the few that made it into the volunteer corps. The story urges mothers to look beyond immediate family interests and the "blind love" of their sons toward a "larger and brilliant future" for the empire.¹⁷ But Korean mothers could not be made to emulate Japanese mothers because their colonial subjection had by the 1940s become apparent through hated policies such as the forcible changing of Korean names into Japanese ones, regulations against using Korean language, and mandatory worship at Shinto shrines venerating Japanese ancestors. Nothing more clearly reveals the difference between colonial and postcolonial mobilization than the difficulties faced by the colonial government in harnessing motherly duties as part of women's nationality.

Such difficulties notwithstanding, women were organized into women's associations and encouraged to join women's work groups.¹⁸ In order to facilitate women's entry into the labor force, domestic work was collectivized by organizing childcare centers and group cooking, and to reduce laundry dark work clothes replaced the traditional white peasant attire. As in Japan, Patriotic Women's Associations (*aeguk puinhoe*, 愛國婦人會) were organized across the peninsula and placed in charge of the home front: they provided medical care to soldiers, publicized the war effort, protected pregnant women, managed educational and correctional facilities, rescued destitute children, prevented fires, organized mass rallies, distributed daily necessities, and collected "patriotic" donations, among other tasks.¹⁹ The absence of men due to

¹⁶ Gregory Kasza, *The Conscription Society: Administered Mass Organizations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 93.

¹⁷ Yi Sang-kyōng, "A Study of the Korean Women Mobilization and the Image of 'Militaristic Mother' under National General Mobilization System by Japanese Imperialism," *P'eminjūm Yōngu* [Feminism research] 2 (Dec. 2002): 206–7.

¹⁸ Lee Kyoung-ran, "Rural Society and Peasants' Life in Choson during the Japanese Wartime Regime: With the Village-Society Network as the Central Figure," in, Pang Kie-chung, ed., *Japanese Fascist Policy in Korea and Korean Life* (Seoul: Haeon, 2004), 396–98.

¹⁹ Kwon Myoung-A, "The Gender Politics of the Wartime Mobilization Regime in Korea," in Pang Kie-chung, ed., *Japanese Fascist Policy in Korea and Korean Life*, (Seoul: Haeon, 2004), 304–5.

mandatory conscription and the increasing shortage of labor freed women from former patriarchal constraints, which enabled them to enter the public arena and laid the foundation for the mobilization of women in the post-liberation period. The mass mobilization of women thus began under colonial rule. Wartime mobilization provided many women with their first experiences of being engaged by the modern state, however reluctantly. This colonial legacy was appropriated and redeployed after liberation for the mobilization of women, this time not as colonial subjects but national subjects, in both North and South Korea. That North Korea was able to successfully fuse women's domestic duties with their roles as modern national subjects had much to do with the extension of the family as a form of national identity, giving credence to the pervasive imagery of the family in North Korean politics. Its leader, Kim Il-sung, was soon to be referred to as *ôbô'i suryông*, or "parently leader." North Korea, then, built on the colonial experience, when women were the first to be organized into a mass organization, before either the peasants or the workers.

NATIONAL LIBERATION AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

With the Japanese Emperor Hirohito's capitulation on 15 August 1945, Korea saw a burst of political activity and mobilization at all levels, from the smallest villages to the cities. Apart from local governments under the People's Committees, separate mass organizations were organized in North Korea to mobilize different segments of society. Women were the first to be organized, into the North Korean Democratic Women's League (*Pukchosôn minju yôsông tongmaeng* 北朝鮮民主女性同盟), on 18 November 1945. Much like the People's Committees that had spontaneously formed at the village level before being centralized, women's groups had also been organized in scattered form throughout the country until they were brought together under the structure of the Women's League.²⁰ By the time they held their first congress on 10 May 1946, they had branches in twelve cities, eighty-nine counties, and 616 townships, with a total of some eight hundred thousand members throughout the North.²¹ North Korea in 1946 had a population of approximately thirteen million, with women making up about half, at six million.²² By the end of 1946, the League's membership had expanded to 1,030,000, almost 20 percent of the female population. If we take into account that the organization's

²⁰ Pak Hyôn-sôn, "Policy on women," 427.

²¹ Hô Chông-suk, "Statement to the Democratic Women of the World," *Chosôn Yôsông* (Feb. 1947): 9–15. All *Chosôn Yôsông* citations are from the National Archives, Record Group 242, Shipping Advice no. 2005, box 2, item 34.

²² The population figure for women is from Hô Chông-suk, *Saegae Minju Yôsông Undong kwa Chosôn Minju Yôsông Undong* [World democratic women's movement and the Korean democratic women's movement] (Pyôngyang: Kongyangsa, 1947), cited in Pak Hyôn-sôn, "Policy on women," 434–35. *Chosôn Yôsông's* June 1947 issue gives the June 1946 North Korean population as thirteen million.

membership consisted of women between ages eighteen and sixty-one, the percentage of adult women in the organization would be even higher. By the end of 1947, the League had 1.5 million members of whom peasant women made up the overwhelming majority at 73 percent. Workers made up 5.3 percent, and *samuwŏn* (a catch-all category of professionals and intellectuals) 0.97 percent, and the remaining 20 percent were categorized as “others,” most likely referring to housewives.²³

Members of the League made concerted efforts to implement the new legislations targeting women. Rather than lobbying for issues specific to women, women’s interests were framed in terms of founding a “wealthy and strong country.” The platform adopted during the League’s first congress in May 1946 called on members to focus on national construction by concentrating all their capacities on the establishment of a democratic republic in Korea by supporting the political program of the North Korean People’s Committee. This included “struggling against the Japanese fascist elements and national traitors” as obstacles to the democratic construction; cultivating Korean culture, politics, and economy; actively working to eradicate women’s illiteracy to improve their quality of life; and endeavoring to “overthrow feudal customs and superstition.”²⁴ Activities of the League reflected this focus on national construction as women were mobilized for construction projects and education campaigns, helping with tax collection, collecting gifts for orphanages, working with homes for the elderly and the peace preservation corps, organizing musical tours to the countryside, and whatever else might be required in the building of a new country. The increasing role of women in national construction was formalized by two critical legislations that dealt specifically with the woman question.

The Labor Law, and the Law of Equal Rights for Men and Women (hereafter, the “Gender Equality Law”), laid out the basic framework by which women’s roles would be defined in North Korean society as workers and mothers. The Labor Law, promulgated on 24 June 1946, included special stipulations for the protection of children and mothers, in addition to basic clauses for an eight-hour workday, paid vacations, equal pay for equal work, and improvements in working conditions including health insurance. The clauses specific to women provided paid maternity leave for thirty-five days before and forty-two days after delivery, lighter work for expecting women beginning in the sixth month of pregnancy, and nursing breaks for thirty minutes twice a day for women with children under a year old. They prohibited pregnant and

²³ Pak Chŏng-ae, “1947 Nyŏndo Pukchosŏn Minju Yŏsŏng Tongmaeng Sa’ŏp Ch’ongkyŏl [North Korean Democratic Women’s League overview of work for 1947],” *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Jan. 1948): 4–7.

²⁴ *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Sept. 1946, inaugural issue). In the copy of the platform in the January 1947 issue, another item was added: “Urge women to protect the nation.”

nursing women from working overtime at night.²⁵ Maternity was carefully protected since women were expected to work while also embracing motherhood.

The same emphasis on the importance of family can be seen in the Gender Equality Law, passed a month after the Labor Law, on 30 July 1946.²⁶ The full text of the law reads:

Article 1: Women have equal rights to men economically, culturally, socially, and politically in all areas of life of the nation.

Article 2: Women have the same rights as men to vote and be elected in the regional as well as the highest national organs.

Article 3: Women have the same rights as men to workers' rights, equal wages, social insurance, and education.

Article 4: Women, like men, have the right to free marriage. Unfree and forced marriage without the consent of those marrying is prohibited.

Article 5: When it becomes difficult to continue the married relationship, women have the same rights as men to free divorce. The right to litigation to demand child support payments from the ex-husband is acknowledged, and such cases shall be processed at the People's Court.

Article 6: The legal marriageable age shall begin at seventeen for women and eighteen for men.

Article 7: Polygamy is a feudal practice from the Middle Ages and sales of women as wives or concubines are hereby prohibited as evil practices that violate women's rights. Licensed prostitution, private prostitution, and the *kisaeng* [female entertainer] system—*kisaeng* licenses and schools—are prohibited.

Article 8: Women have the same rights as men to inherit property and land, and women have the right to be given their share of property and land in cases of divorce.

Article 9: All Japanese imperial laws and regulations pertaining to Korean women's rights are null and void as of the promulgation of this law. This law takes effect as of the day of promulgation.

Articles 4 through 8 all had to do with family law, regulating marriage and divorce, attesting to the centrality of the family in the North Korean woman question.

More telling than the Gender Equality Law was the Regulations on the Implementation of the Gender Equality Law issued six weeks later, on 14 September 1946. Article 8 of that Regulation stipulated that all marriages be registered by submitting a marriage certificate to the appropriate local People's Committee. Although the Gender Equality Law called for free marriage, marriages had to be registered, and non-registered marriages, including common law ones, were not recognized. This is in sharp contrast with the Soviet Union in the decades after the revolution, between 1918 and 1944, when

²⁵ These articles are 14 through 17 of the Labor Law. Pak Hyŏn-sŏn, "Policy on women," 416–18.

²⁶ Kim Yun-dong, "The Law on the Equality of the Sexes in North Korea," *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (July, 1947): 18–24.

common law marriage was accorded the same status as registered marriage and children born out of wedlock were granted the same legal rights as “legitimate” children.²⁷ Also during this period in the Soviet Union, couples could divorce easily without the consent of both parties by simply registering the divorce with local authorities, henceforth called “postcard” divorces.

By contrast, in North Korea, articles 10 through 22 of the Regulation contained detailed procedures for divorce.²⁸ Although the right to divorce was acknowledged, various hurdles were imposed. In cases of consent by both parties, divorce papers could be filed with the local People’s Committee, but if either party disagreed, the couple had to file for legal divorce proceedings with the appropriate People’s Court. If the court concluded that continued married life was impossible, divorce would be granted. However, a financial burden was applied to repeat divorces with a fine of 5,000 *won* for those filing for divorce more than twice, though this could be waved at a court’s discretion. By March 1956, divorce required legal proceedings even in cases of mutual consent.²⁹

By comparing North Korea’s policies on marriage and divorce against those of the Soviet Union, it is clear that North Korea foresaw the ramifications of the more radical policies that were initially instituted by the Soviets. After describing the status of women in the Soviet Union in glowing terms, an article in *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* warns in a cautionary tone:

Lastly, let us look at the relationship between women and men in the Soviet Union. In order to eradicate the corrupt feudal practices, immediately after the revolution marriage and divorce were made simple, permitting freedom. This does not guarantee women’s freedom but rather forces on women great physical blows such as abortion, or they have to take [their baby] to the orphanage, or if they cannot do that then they must raise it on their own. At the same time, such licentious free marriage and divorce not only brings disorder upon a healthy society but is also a great obstacle in increasing the population. Thus, gradually conditions for divorce were strictly regulated, and even after divorce, men bore a great burden, thereby protecting women’s interests.... Freedom without responsibility is nothing but indulgence. Since the family is the unit of composition and family relations have great influence on a country and a society, it is extremely necessary to establish a healthy family with relations between husband and wife. It is absolutely necessary to establish a bright yet pure, solemn yet free family of one husband and one wife. This we should learn from the Soviet Union.³⁰

It so happened that the victims of the Soviet liberal divorce policy were often women because men left their older wives for younger, “new” women,

²⁷ Wendy Zeva Goldman, “Women, the Family, and the New Revolutionary Order in the Soviet Union,” in Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), 59–81.

²⁸ Pak Hyŏn-sŏn, “Policy on women,” 422.

²⁹ Yun Mi-ryang, *North Korea’s Policy on Women* (Seoul: Han’ul Publishing Co., 1991), 75.

³⁰ Hong Ch’i-ok, “Ssoryŏn Yŏsŏng ūi Sahoejŏk Chiwi [Social status of Russian women],” *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Sept. 1946): 50–54.

something common in the 1920s at the height of the discussion on free marriage and divorce. Such policies ended up hurting rather than liberating women, as one working-class Russian woman noted: “Women in the majority of cases are more backward, less skilled, and therefore less independent than men.... To marry, to bear children, to be enslaved by the kitchen, and then to be thrown aside by your husband—this is very painful for women. This is why I am against easy divorce.”³¹

As a result, the Soviet Union introduced a new Family Edict in 1944 that restricted divorce by requiring court adjudication, and no longer recognized *de facto* marriages.³² This lesson had been taken to heart by the time of North Korea’s reforms in 1946, which never recognized *de facto* marriages or “postcard divorces.” Without a debate like those conducted in China or the Soviet Union about getting rid of the family as a feudal or bourgeois unit of production, North Korea brought together women’s roles, as both mothers and workers, through two legislations—the Labor Law and the Gender Equality Law—that held the family to be the basic unit of society. And unlike the Soviet Union, where the existence of ethnic minorities would have precluded an emphasis on nationality, North Korean women were mobilized specifically around the idea of the nation as an extension of the family. True to Marxist internationalism, the first women’s journal published by the Bolsheviks was the *Rabotnitsa* (Woman worker), prepared on the occasion of International Women’s Day in 1914.³³ North Korea, by contrast, rather than focusing on women as workers described its women first and foremost as Koreans, as indicated in the title of its first women’s journal, *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng*.

REVOLUTIONARY MOTHERHOOD IN *CHOSŎN YŎSŎNG*

As the publishing house within the North Korean Democratic Women’s League, *Chosŏn Yŏsŏngsa* was in charge of printing all materials for the education of women in post-liberation North Korea. One of its primary tasks was to produce the League’s organ, *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng*, which published its first issue in September 1946. The second did not appear until November, but from January 1947 the journal was published monthly until August 1982, after which it became bimonthly. Some twenty thousand copies were printed in 1946, increasing to ninety thousand by the next year.³⁴ It is not entirely clear how the journal was distributed and to what extent North Korean women were exposed to its contents. In light of people’s limited resources and high rates

³¹ Goldman, “Women, the Family, and the New Revolutionary Order,” 74.

³² Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 340.

³³ Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910–1939* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 30.

³⁴ Kim Un-chuk, “Chosŏn Yŏsŏngsa Saŏpe Taehan Poko [Report on the work of the Chosŏn Publishing Company],” *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Nov. 1947): 40–42.

of illiteracy, women were likely introduced to it through Women's League meetings and study sessions, through local government and cultural institutions rather than personal copies.³⁵ Analyzing the journal's content during the previous year, a November 1947 report said that the editorial section comprised 16.4 percent, the home column 15.6 percent, educational materials 19.7 percent, literature and arts 21.5 percent, local news 11.2 percent, and miscellaneous items up to 12.5 percent. The report was critical of the fact that literary materials took up the most space, more than educational materials. It also observed that the journal lacked a clear target audience and failed to reach out to the majority of women who were workers and peasants. Another deficiency was said to be in the coverage of local news, due to a shortage of reporters.

Despite such criticisms, the journal covered a wide range of topics from reports on the pace of economic development to tips on tending to various household chores, all written by staff writers and contributed by readers. Most issues were about eighty to one hundred pages long, and included an editorial section, a column on homemaking, educational materials, a small section on news about the Soviet Union, and an arts and literature section. The editorial sections were comprised of official government pronouncements on national policies, and always came first, revealing the official nature of the publication. The homemaking columns included cooking recipes, tips on child-rearing and tailoring, and basic medical knowledge, especially about women's reproductive and children's health, nutrition, and first aid. Educational materials varied from examples of model Soviet women to reading lessons, and introductory articles about politics. The literature sections had short stories, plays, essays, and poems. Depending on the issue, special sections celebrated anniversaries of liberation day, land reform, gender equality law, and other momentous occasions, and provided updates on local situations and international news. By April 1948, the formal section on the Soviet Union was dropped except for occasional articles, anticipating the end of the Soviet occupation and the official establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea the following September.

Topics addressed by enlightenment reformers during the colonial period were reproduced in *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng*, including home economics, kitchen management and nutrition, health and hygiene, and child rearing practices. These had been popular topics in women's journals throughout the world in the first half of the twentieth century, in the construction of modern domesticity. For example, during the 1920s and 1930s, each of the daily newspapers in

³⁵ In North Korea immediately after liberation, 2,300,000 people were illiterate, and 65 percent of them were women, comprising 90 percent of all women. See Ri Kyŏng-hae, *Nyŏsŏng Munje Haekyŏl Kyŏnghŏm* [Experience of solving the woman question], (Pyongyang: Sahoekwahak Ch'ulpansa, 1990), 33.

Korea carried a column devoted to the family and the home.³⁶ *Chosŏn Ilbo* seems to have had the most interest in the topic, beginning with a column called “Housewife” (*kajŏng puin*) in November 1924, serialized until July 1935. Another column called “Home” (*kajŏng*) was added in October 1931 and continued until the newspaper closed its doors in August 1940.³⁷ Other newspapers included such columns as “Home Memo” (*kajŏng memo*), “Home Common Sense” (*kajŏng sangsik*), and “Home Trend” (*kajŏng siron*). However, what emerges as a new theme in *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* in post-liberation North Korea is the blending of women’s family duties as wives and mothers in the home with their new positions as workers outside the home.

As we saw earlier, motherhood was protected by law through both the Labor Law and the Gender Equality Law. As women’s labor was mobilized in the construction of a new society, women were called upon to do it all. Table 1 is an example of the daily schedule recommended for a wife and mother of a family of four that included the husband, a son of kindergarten age, and a one-year-old daughter.

Not only was the woman in charge of all housework—cooking, cleaning, and childcare—but with this tight schedule, she was advised also to take care of grocery shopping on the way home from work. Her only free time was from 9:00–10:30 PM. Although the article acknowledged the difficulties that women faced in working, especially if their families were not appreciative of their new responsibilities, the burden of running the household still lay with them: “In whatever period, housework has been the responsibility of women. As long as everyone understands that women’s liberation does not mean that women should abandon the home, this is also the responsibility of working women.... Children need the strength of their mothers the most.... In order to complete the economic plan for the democratic development of a wealthy and strong Korea, I ask the many mothers with families to take an active part within possible means or make the impossible possible through one’s zeal.”

So, how did women react to this? For all the official prodding, the difficulty of combining family duties with work and life outside the home continued to surface throughout articles that recorded the voices of average women in forums organized by the Women’s League.³⁸ Their uniform complaint was

³⁶ Kim Kyoung-il, “Tradition and Modernity in the Formation of Modern Korean Society: On the Ideas of Family and Women,” *Sahoe wa Yŏksa* [Society and history] 54 (Dec. 1998): 31, n. 32.

³⁷ The term *kajŏng* (家庭) was a neologism that began to be used at the beginning of the twentieth century to denote the modern home. It incorporates the Sino-character for household (family lineage) with one denoting garden or courtyard. The term can be translated to mean both “home” and “family,” but I have used “home” uniformly as being closer to the original meaning. The issues involved in this change from the family conceived of as a household to being based on the physical space inhabited by the nuclear family are too complex to discuss here.

³⁸ *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Feb. and Apr. 1947).

TABLE 1.
 “Recommended daily schedule for a wife with two small children”.

5:00 AM	Rise
5:00–7:00 AM	Prepare breakfast; clean; eat breakfast
7:00–7:30 AM	Clean up around the house; get ready for work; get son ready for school
7:30 AM	Leave for work
12:00–2:00 PM	Feeding time (for daughter)
5:00 PM	Off work
5:30–7:00 PM	Prepare dinner; organize; simple laundry; eat dinner
7:00–9:00 PM	Tend to children; sort out and mend clothes
9:00–10:30 PM	Private time (study)
10:30 PM	Sleep

Source: Chu Chông-sun, “Chikjang’ul Kajin Chupu ũi Saenghwal Sôlgae (Daily plan for housewives with jobs),” *Chosôn Yôsông* (Sept. 1947): 29–32.

that they lacked enough time to do everything. During a discussion about working women, on 25 December 1946, attended by a journalist, a teacher, a sales clerk, a hairdresser, and a representative of the Women’s League, the women were asked what their motives were in working outside the home, and what challenges they faced in balancing the two tasks.³⁹ They replied that they wanted to contribute to the economy and be trailblazers for future career-minded women, and felt it necessary to be economically independent in order to achieve gender equality. They all agreed that the situation of women had indeed improved after liberation due to government support and enactment of the Gender Equality Law. They appreciated that there were so many more schools and that distribution of basic necessities was carried out equally, even if insufficiently. The biggest problem, however, was the lack of time, as expressed in the following comments:

I never have enough time. Even if I do my best to work from early in the morning until late at night, I don’t have enough time. I wish I had some time to spare.... To be honest, I think that at this stage working women sacrifice a part of their family.

Because there is no spare time, everything naturally becomes simplified. Meals are eaten with only one dish, and clothing too, there is just one outfit. Most problematic is laundry. Not to mention washing, and there is no time to mend the socks.

Asked whether husbands were understanding toward women when they got home from work late, women commented with laughter: “They understand, but they nonetheless seem to feel some kind of unspeakable displeasure.... Not displeasure, but perhaps anxiety is what they feel.... It is a big problem. Husband and wife both go to work, so why do I feel sorry and he doesn’t;

³⁹ “Round-table Discussion of Working Women,” *Chosôn Yôsông* (Feb. 1947): 54–60.

how do you solve this state of mind...?” Women were also upset about the lack of help their husbands gave them in doing housework, and pointed out their stubbornness, and the ingrained idea that men were the sole breadwinners and had nothing to do with housework: “It would be nice if they could help women a little more. Like when we were newlyweds, the husband would help the wife without being asked.... But, the average man’s pride doesn’t seem to allow him to do this.... They think that it is a great disgrace for men to help their wives in the home, but this harms the children. Boys have to be taught to help around the house when they are young. We must absolutely stop educating girls and boys in different ways, as has been done until now.”

More than anything, women wanted help with housework as a way of resolving the woman question. Some, like the woman just quoted, went so far as to advocate the equal socialization of boys and girls as a way to dissolve gender roles for future generations, in striking similarity to contemporary feminists. In a column entitled “A Word to the Gentlemen,” one female factory worker reiterated the importance of actual practices over legal reforms, and urged women to step up: “We should henceforth work hard and study diligently so as not to fall behind men in the least bit. Finally, if I were to say what I demanded of men, there are many things, but more than anything, in terms of home life, instead of just making laws, they should think of women as equals, in their hearts, and it would be great if we could help each other with the housework.”⁴⁰

The mobilization of women into the workforce required a rethinking of women’s roles as wives and mothers, since they were now called upon to juggle both work and family. An article entitled “The Status of Women in History and Its Lessons” presented a forceful plea for men to adapt to women’s changing roles, and to shape up:

First, men themselves must greatly reflect upon themselves and change their understanding of women. Hoping for men’s awakening, the following questions are put forth.

- I. Are past customs of respecting men and debasing women liquidated?
 1. Are you happy when a son is born and disappointed when a daughter is born?
 2. Do you discriminate between sons and daughters in sending them to school?
 3. Do you demand too much labor from women in the house?
 4. Do you want to be served by women?
 5. Do you discriminate between men and women during meals?
- II. Do men retain a sense of superiority?
 1. Do you believe too much in the power of the fist?
 2. Do you scorn the positive characteristics of women?
 3. Do you respect your daughter’s opinions on marriage?
 4. Generally, do you scorn the increase in women’s roles?
 5. Do you complain when women and men receive the same wage?
- III. Do you take an interest in women’s liberation?
 1. Do you feel that the number of girls’ schools is insufficient?

⁴⁰ Ahn Ok-rae, “Namsŏngeke Tŭrinŭn Malsŭm [A word to the gentlemen],” *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Sept. 1946): 95.

2. Do you agree with the rise in women's status?
3. Do you help with the work of the Women's League?

With the slogan "Those who have made women weak are the men of the privileged class," men should always ask themselves the above questions and try to rectify themselves while actively helping the women's movement, thereby negating the great English writer Shakespeare's insult to women, "Weak, thy name is woman," and sweeping such thoughts from men's heads.⁴¹

It is a remarkably radical manifesto, particularly in the context of a largely illiterate agrarian society. Women reacted to all the challenges they faced in combining work and family by insisting that men take up their share of responsibility. Rather than being simply mobilized from the top-down, women were taking the initiative in demanding that men make the necessary changes in themselves to resolve the woman question. While women contested notions about their "natural" place in the home and the division of domestic labor, such challenges were not always without ambiguity or a certain sense of guilt. Many women still believed that mothers held a crucial role in the home in taking care of children.

During another roundtable discussion, on 13 August 1947, various women took part from the university, the prosecutor's office, and the Women's League. They included a factory worker, a journalist, a middle school teacher, and a homemaker. After reviewing the progress that had been made in the various sectors over the previous year, the journalist pointed out:

In the past, living was not really living, so even though we knew we shouldn't, we took it out on the children, and so the children were naturally not happy and just kept watch [so as not to get yelled at]. But, now we are so busy that there is no time for husbands and wives to fight or time to drink, and we read whenever there is a spare moment, so the children also naturally read more. From now on, children in Korea will also be quite happy and bright. But, because many mothers go out to work, children's health and care are neglected. Such aspects are many, but children try to be very understanding and also try to help out on their own. But, no matter what, it is probably not as good for the children as having their mothers always by their side.⁴²

Since the family remained an important social unit, women's roles as mothers and wives had never come under fire, and the woman question centered around how women's identities as mothers and wives had to be reconfigured now that they were working. How could women combine work and family most effectively?

Between competing claims for women's labor power and women's complaints about the lack of time and cooperation from men, the resolution of the woman question came to reside in the role of motherhood as a uniquely feminine characteristic that could fuse the old with the new. Rather than

⁴¹ Yang Pyŏng-ji, "Yŏksasang Yŏsŏng ūi Chiwiwa kŭ ūi Kwaŏp [The status of women in history and its lessons]," *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Jan. 1947): 17–20.

⁴² "8.15 Haebang i Chunyŏn Kinyŏm Yŏsŏng Chwatamhoe [Roundtable discussion for the second-year anniversary of the 15 August liberation]," *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Aug. 1947): 24–30.

breaking down traditional gender roles, a sphere was carved out for women in which they reined supreme as “master of the home” (*kajöng üi chuin*). The “new” home and “new” housewife was to be defined by her mastery over the domestic realm, as advocated in the quote with which I began this article. I quote it here in full:

In Korea from ancient times, the master of the home was thought to refer to the husband, and women did nothing but help as demanded by the head of household as the master of the home. However, that is an ideology born by a male-centric family system, and in reality, we now realize that the master of the home must be the woman, that is, the wife or mother... There should be no trace left of the rotten idea of the past that “all a woman needs to do is bear children and do housework well.” Today, even housewives should have great interest in society and politics, taking joy and sadness at national and world peace and freedom, and contributing to them.⁴³

Along with the powers of running the household, the article described the most important areas of women’s housework as being the household economy, domestic harmony, and the education of children. Motherhood, which under Confucian patriarchy had been understood as the duty to pass on the family name by producing sons, was reformulated to be a form of social management that included the household economy and her children’s education. Pak Chöng-ae, chairwoman of the Women’s League, emphasized the important social duty that women performed as mothers by equating the “duty of motherhood” as “not only the basic nature of human beings but also an indispensable social duty.”⁴⁴

In the end, motherhood was defined as the most exemplary form of selfless public service, which not just women but everyone should strive to emulate. Selfless, motherly sacrifice was extolled as a model virtue: “I discover a model of such great sacrificing public service within the lives of women, and highly value such sacrificing public service from women... [E]veryone mobilized for national foundation should learn a great deal from and take as a model pure motherly sacrifice that is unconditional without earthly ambition or desire. Like the woman who gladly endures and overcomes the greatest hardship for the joy of creating new life, our people should also fight and overcome all hardship and persecution for the joy and hope of establishing our homeland.”⁴⁵

The article went on to explain that people should not pursue selfish interests and their own well being, but rather struggle for the good of all of society. It urged women to gain economic independence not only for themselves but for the nation, since without a self-reliant economy there could be no national

⁴³ Chang Chöng-suk, “Saero`un Kajöngkwa Chupu [The new home and housewife],” *Chosön Yösöng* (Oct. 1947): 33–36.

⁴⁴ Pak Chöng-ae, “The Labor Law and Women,” *Chosön Yösöng* (Sept. 1946): 33–34.

⁴⁵ Ahn Ham-kwang, “Hüisaengchögin Pongkongsim: T`ükhü Yösöngke Chunün Malül Kyömhayö [Sacrificial public service: Especially a word to women],” *Chosön Yösöng* (Mar. 1947): 14–18.

independence. Before identifying themselves as women, women were to identify with the nation, as the woman question was equated with the national question. The woman question in the aftermath of colonial rule in post-liberation North Korea was framed by the urgency of national construction, and also by the ambiguity of what tradition was supposed to mean in this revolutionary, post-colonial context—was it something to be overthrown or embraced? The dilemma was resolved through the deployment of motherhood as the vehicle that encompassed both traditional gender roles and the modern revolutionary subject, as the ideal, selfless public servant, a model for everyone in the North Korean nation to follow in performing their social duties as citizens of a new country.

In fact, North Korea's emphasis on motherhood was consistent with global trends in the first half of the twentieth century. The International Democratic Women's League, which the Korean Women's League joined in October 1946, had been founded in November 1945 and represented women's organizations from forty countries. In addition to the general pursuit of equal rights and equal pay for women, the organization called for improvements in children's healthcare and the protection of motherhood in factories through the special treatment of pregnant and nursing women.⁴⁶ Likewise, in July 1946 the Soviet Union passed legislation protecting mothers, which gave aid to single mothers and women with many children. Women with more than ten were honored as "Heroic Mothers," those with seven to nine were decorated as "Honorable Mothers," and mothers of five or six were awarded "Motherhood Medals."⁴⁷ Nursing women were also given work breaks to feed their children, and there was paid maternity leave for twenty-five days before and forty-six days after delivery. While the masculine industrial worker had been portrayed as the original hero of the Bolshevik Revolution throughout the first decade after, this male hegemony was challenged during the increasing hardships of the first Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) because the state needed more workers and a sense of stability. It was at that time that Soviet political iconographers adopted motherhood for the "sense of continuity offered by the maternal image, its suggestion of intimacy and solace.... [for an] iconic conflation of mother and motherland, family and state serv[ing] to humanise and legitimise the party."⁴⁸ Such conflations of family and state, and motherhood and nation became commonplace during the World War II period.

As we have seen, Korean women had also been mobilized for the war effort during the last years of colonial rule through strikingly similar discourses of the

⁴⁶ Pak Hyŏn-sŏn, "Policy on women," 437–38.

⁴⁷ "Mosŏnge Taehan Ssobaet'ŭ Chŏngbu ŭi Koryŏ [Considerations of the Soviet Government on mothers]," *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Oct. 1947): 21–22.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Waters, "The Modernisation of Russian Motherhood, 1917–1937," *Soviet Studies* 44, 1 (1992), 123–36.

sacrificing mother, including the “wise mother good wife” ideology employed in the construction of modern gendered subjects. How, then, was the North Korean use of motherhood in any way new? The technique in and of itself may not have been all that different, but circumstances had changed in ways that made motherhood a powerfully receptive icon, and allowed a traditional role to become a revolutionary subject. What was different this time around was precisely the experience of the colonial period, which enabled the North Korean state to inscribe metaphors of the family in reference to the nation-state such that the state effectively became the family writ large, and the privileged domain became not the public but the domestic sphere. Who better to represent the primary figure of revolutionary change in this domestic space than women and mothers as the quintessential icon of both domestic power and national identity?

Lest there be any doubt about the changes in women’s status, an essay from the April 1948 issue of *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* poignantly detailed the kinds of changes that were perceived to be new and far-reaching at the time. Upon visiting the small village of Omokdong, which consisted of only forty-four poor families, the writer describes the ways in which people’s habits were changing: “When I entered this village, the chairwoman of the Women’s League greeted me, readily putting forth her hand first. When had shaking hands without awkwardness become a habit for women in their forties in such an isolated village? I was moved, firmly holding the heavy farm-worked hand.” She went on to comment on how, “The discord between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the grievance of not bearing a son, the sighs of having a husband with a concubine, had all disappeared two years ago, and [now] mother-in-law and daughter-in-law go to adult school arm-in-arm, and husbands and wives go to the market together.”⁴⁹ Women standing up and speaking in public, shaking hands, and going to school were radical changes by the standards of the time, which seemed to deal with the woman question in comprehensive ways. The woman question was an arena of competing interests and ideas, and the North Korean program, moderate as it may seem today, called for a liberation of women that was still thought too radical by some. In order to alleviate fears that the breakdown in traditional customs would result in chaos and societal collapse, another article tried to explain women’s new, expanded roles as part of what was necessary for national construction: “These days there are many women out and about in the streets day and night. But some people who do not understand may think that women these days are crazy or that this is a state of anarchy, looking on with suspicious eyes. But that is untrue. Women these days are not like the women of the past who sold their bodies.... Women today are struggling with all their passion and all of their

⁴⁹ Ku Po-hae, “Nongch’ŏn Purak Omokdong [Rural village Omokdong],” *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Apr. 1948): 28–31.

strength day and night for the creation of a new history of a democratic country. Today in the streets, men, women, the old, the young, everyone stops to listen to the women.⁵⁰

In step with such changes taking place in the everyday lives of women, the *hojök*—the household registry system that required a male head of household—was eliminated with the introduction of the citizen registration card on 9 August 1946, which broke down kinship ties that followed patriarchal lines.⁵¹ South Korea did not take such steps until 2005. Nonetheless, the family was still considered central, as Article 23 of the North Korean Constitution enacted in 1948 declared: “Marriage and the family are under the protection of the state.”⁵² Still, the concept of the family was liberalized as parents were given equal rights and responsibilities over their children born out of wedlock, as legitimate children. The abolition of private ownership of the means of production also nullified the import of inheritance, further weakening the patriarchal household. In lieu of the patriarchal family, the nuclear family became the basic “cell” (*sep’o*) of North Korean society, and practices that jeopardized this family unit, including sexual freedom and divorce, were discouraged.⁵³

In the late 1940s, as North Korea grappled with the woman question, women in the Soviet Union were well on the way to being socially and economically integrated—they made up 40 percent of the labor force, 42 percent of technicians, and 43 percent of university students. Although the Soviet Union had by this time been industrializing for several decades, motherhood continued to be an important part of women’s identities and the state “guaranteed the conditions able to fulfill women’s unique responsibility and pride as mothers.”⁵⁴ By contrast, in this same period a quarter of North Korean women were barely working outside of their homes. It would be another four decades before North Korean women made up half of the labor force. Appropriating the different ways in which motherhood had been employed throughout the first half of the century, North Korea began from its inception

⁵⁰ Nam Hyön-sö, “Saenara üi Yöindül [Women of a new country],” *Chosön Yösöng* (Jan. 1947): 33.

⁵¹ Yun Mi-ryang, *North Korea’s Policy on Women*, 76.

⁵² The revised Socialist Constitution was enacted on 27 December 1972. Its Article 63 states, “Marriage and family are protected by the State. The State pays great attention to consolidating the family, the cell of society,” Yun Mi-ryang, *North Korea’s Policy on Women*, 81, 102.

⁵³ Kim Il Sung says, “Our ideal is . . . a society where all people live united in harmony as one big family.” In “The Duty of Mothers in the Education of Children (Speech at the National Meeting of Mothers, 16 November 1961),” in *On the Work of the Women’s Union* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971), 4, quoted in Jon Halliday, “Women in North Korea: An Interview with the Korean Democratic Women’s Union,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 17, 3 (1985): 46–56, 52 (n. 28).

⁵⁴ Chang Kil-söng, “Ssoryön Saehwajuüi 10wöl Hyökmyöngkwa Ssoryön Yösöng üi Chiwi [The Soviet Socialist October Revolution and the status of Soviet women],” *Chosön Yösöng* (Nov. 1947): 10–14.

to rely on women to hold together the very fabric of society; sacrificing mothers would reproduce and educate future generations as model communist citizens, while contributing to the developing economy as dedicated workers and citizens of the new revolutionary regime. What was new was not so much the way in which the woman question was handled, but rather the extent to which such efforts resonated not only with women but also with men embarking on nation-building in which the state was equated with the family, with every member of society called upon to make sacrifices as a mother should, and would.

MOTHERS AS IDEAL CITIZENS IN THE HOMELAND

Friedrich Engels provided a class analysis of women's oppression in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.⁵⁵ He attributed the oppression of women to the family when it became a unit of capital accumulation rather than self-subsistence, as women became producers of heirs for men to pass down their wealth to. Adopting this perspective, many communist regimes attempted to solve the woman question by dissolving households as units of property ownership, production, and accumulation. No longer bound to the biological and social role of reproduction in the household, women could now join the public sphere as political and economic agents equal to men. But this left open the question of who was to take care of the housework previously done by women. The answer lay in the socialization of housework through public canteens, public laundries, and childcare facilities. The assumption was that these institutions freed women to pursue socially meaningful lives outside the home.

North Korea was no exception, since it attempted to decrease the burden of housework on women. Childcare centers were set up for infants between the ages of one month to three years. The limited resources of the newly formed state did not allow for many of these. In 1946, there was just one childcare center, and 3,918 children in sixty-four kindergartens.⁵⁶ By 1948, the 3.8 Childcare Center in Pyöngyang, named after the March 8 International Women's Day, had a capacity for fifty infants between ages eight months to three years, was outfitted with a playroom, bedroom, cafeteria, and bathroom, and provided meals and snacks throughout the day. Regardless of how many children a mother left at the center, she paid 10 percent of her wages for the service.⁵⁷ By 1970, there were 8,600 childcare centers and 6,800 kindergartens.

For all that, North Korea never employed the concept of "socialization of housework," and instead made use of such expressions as "liberation of

⁵⁵ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

⁵⁶ Pak Hyö'n-sön, "Policy on women," 450.

⁵⁷ Advertisement in *Chosön Yösöng* (Apr. 1948), inside front cover.

women from the burden of housework,” or “liberation from the burden of kitchen work,” and “raising children socially.” The family and the home were maintained as a social unit in which women were the “master of the home.”⁵⁸ While gender roles were preserved, women also began to enter the labor force and the political arena. “Beautiful stories” (美譚) about election day abounded, about women campaigning for voter turnout with babies on their backs, or going to the polls despite being nine-months pregnant, or postponing their wedding day in order to participate fully in the electoral process.⁵⁹ As a result, according to the 1949 North Korea Yearbook, 9,522 women were People’s Committee members and thirty-four were Supreme People’s Assembly members (14 percent of the total). There were 13 women judges, 4 were prosecutors, 532 jurors, 1,300 doctors and nurses, 25,685 workers, 2,128 skilled workers, 10 school principals, 2,586 school teachers, 940 workers union officials, and 6,101 peasant union officials.⁶⁰ Housewives were also active members of the agricultural workforce during planting and harvesting, and labored in road reconstruction, land reclamation projects, and similar endeavors requiring mass mobilization. No doubt some of these descriptions reflected “life as it should be” rather than how it actually was, but they nonetheless reveal a great deal about what was in fact expected of women in North Korea as revolutionary mothers and masters of the home.

Despite major strides toward enabling women to be economically independent and politically active, examples from *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* show that childcare and housework remained largely the duties of women. Even with the socialization of childcare there were few real changes in the sexual division of labor, because gender roles within the family were simply reproduced in public institutions. For example, orphanages and childcare centers were run by women and the caretakers were often referred to as “mothers.”⁶¹ Moreover, gender segregation in labor sectors annulled the principle of equal pay for equal work, since women usually worked in occupations with lower pay, in the service and light industries, or in charge of primary school teaching and nursing. Men dominated the higher-paid jobs in mining and heavy industries, and took those with the highest status, as managers, university professors, and doctors.⁶² While it is true that wages in North Korea do not have the same impact on the quality of people’s lives as in capitalist societies—housing,

⁵⁸ Pak Hyŏn-sŏn, “Policy on women,” 461, n. 72.

⁵⁹ Shin Ko-song, “Myŏn ri imminwiwŏn sŏnkŏ e issŏsŏdo yŏsŏngdŭlŭn ssaunda [Women fight for the elections of the township and village People’s Committees],” *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Feb. 1947): 24–26.

⁶⁰ Pak Hyŏn-sŏn, “Policy on women,” 421–24; *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (July 1947 and Jan. 1948).

⁶¹ Kim Sŏk-yang, “Yukawŏn Pangmunki [Visit to an orphanage],” *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Oct. 1947): 55–57.

⁶² Yun Mi-ryang, *North Korea’s Policy on Women*, 203.

education, healthcare, and food are free or heavily subsidized—such job segregation results in not just unequal pay, but also unequal status.

Ironically, Marxists have had to rely on ideology to explain the continued problem of the woman question in communist societies, because women's equal entry into the work force has not solved it. With the majority of the peasant population still uneducated, it is clear that liberating policies have not always had liberating effects, as one North Korean official, Ch'oe Yong-kŏn, declared: "When Korea became independent, North Korea's democratic government liberated the women, but women did not know the true meaning of independence and democratic politics.... The problem of women's liberation in North Korea today is not with the sociopolitical system, but lies with the efforts of women themselves."⁶³ So, are we left in the incorrigible position of blaming women for their own oppression? Surely not; women, after all, have repeatedly questioned whether housework is to be their burden alone, and have challenged men to change the way they think about women and their own sense of superiority. But, this challenge has had limits.

In post-colonial North Korea, women in the home were embodiments of the Korean nation to be preserved as what was most Korean. Once seen as the hallmark of a traditional society that had to be eradicated for progress, women's roles as mothers came to be seen as something distinctly Korean to be fostered. Although the colonial period ended long ago, the division of the peninsula, the legacies of the Korean War, and the ensuing Cold War have all perpetuated a state of war, demanding continued sacrifice and the maintenance of women's ideal role as sacrificial mothers. In North Korea, being a good mother was and still is equated with being a patriot and public servant. Faced with the necessity of having to survive economically and politically, North Korea mobilized its people, including women, to work harder, sacrifice more, and unite as one people. In response to this call to give all to one's country, women and men gave what they could, empowered by their newfound country and proud of their membership in it. Motherhood, in this context, became the quintessential symbol of the ideal sacrificing citizen, not only for women, but for everyone. Within this newly configured motherhood, expanded now to signify more than the rearing of one's own children to include the public and social domain as caretakers of society, women were both empowered and challenged to become part of the political process in the foundation of a new country.

Women were not without ambivalence regarding this role. As I have shown via women's reactions to the demands made upon them, they often felt overburdened, and guilty for their lack of attention to their families, while at the same

⁶³ Ch'oe Yong-kŏn, "Chosŏn yŏsŏngdŭlege chŏngch'i munhwa kyoyang ŭl kanghwahara [Strengthen the political and cultural education of Korean women]," *Chosŏn Yŏsŏng* (Sept. 1946): 9.

time they questioned whether in fact they had to be defined by their place in the home. To the extent that women as mothers were elevated to the status of ideal citizens, they took center stage as revolutionary heroines. But insofar as women's identities were tied to motherhood, they did not have the power to define themselves outside of this very framework that gave them a place and a voice in North Korean society. Agency, as Joan Scott has eloquently stated, is in all cases a negotiated outcome. Agents have always been circumscribed and "are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them."⁶⁴ In North Korea, women's agency was created through their status as Mothers situated in the Home, a role that became an allegory for the ideal citizen in the homeland.

⁶⁴ Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 773–97, quote p. 793.