



From Colonial Evil to Individual Choice: *Prostitution, Gendered Citizenship, and the Making of Democratic South Korea, 1945–1950*

Minji JO

Abstract

This article examines the post-liberation abolition of the licensed prostitution system (Kōshōsei 公娼制) in South Korea. Drawing on archival materials and discourse analysis, it explores how US military authorities (1945–1948) and Korean political actors in the American zone mobilized the language of moral reform, liberation, and freedom to restructure the governance of women's sexuality in the emerging South Korean. While the abolition of the Kōshōsei was publicly framed as a necessary step toward decolonization and gender equality, the institutional and rhetorical frameworks often reproduced older patriarchal forms and state control. In particular, the emergence of the category eoptaebu 業態婦 marked a shift in which prostitution was no longer seen as a structural issue but was reconfigured as a matter of individual choice and morality. This liberal reframing displaced the violence of institutionalized prostitution onto the presumed voluntariness of sex workers themselves. This article argues that the binary of voluntary versus coerced sex work, rooted in this postcolonial liberal discourse, has constrained abolitionist activism and impeded more structural approaches to justice. This study offers a deeper understanding of the persistent logics of gendered exclusion and offers a critical lens for reimagining anti-prostitution politics beyond carceral and moral frameworks.

Keywords: licensed prostitution, US military government, postcolonial democracy, gendered citizenship, anti-prostitution movement

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Minji JO is an assistant professor in the Department of Korean History, The Catholic University of Korea. E-mail: joyminji2020@gmail.com.

Introduction

Following Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, discussions on dismantling the colonial legacy quickly became central to Korean politics and society. Among various institutional remnants of empire, the licensed prostitution system—also known as *Kōshōsei* 公娼制—emerged as a critical target for reform. Abolitionist activism had already taken root during the colonial period and gained renewed momentum in the post-liberation era, forming a rare point of convergence between left- and right-wing political actors (Yang 2001; Yoon 2007). In this context, prostitution became a symbolic arena for negotiating the moral and political boundaries of a “liberated” nation-state.

Despite the general lack of gender-sensitive perspectives in modern Korean historiography, the issue of licensed prostitution has garnered sustained scholarly attention. The institutionalized exploitation of women's sexuality through the licensed prostitution system, known as *Kōshōsei* under the Japanese Empire, is essential to understanding the notorious “Comfort Women” issue. In fact, political conflict over the “Comfort Women” issue has often proceeded in relation to contrasting analyses of the licensed prostitution system (Song 1998; Jung-ae Park 2009; Jeong-mi Park 2011).¹ In terms of Koreans' movements to abolish prostitution, they were initiated during the colonial period, and became a primary agenda of postcolonial women's activism, laying the foundation for South Korea's enduring anti-prostitution movement (Yang 2001; Yoon 2007; N. Lee 2009; Jang 2021).

Under these circumstances, feminist scholars have examined how prostitution persisted across the colonial and postcolonial divide, how Koreans sought to abolish this unjust system as part of a broader postcolonial mission (Yang 2001; N. Lee 2009), and how the democratic rhetoric of both the US military and the Republic of Korea masked underlying continuities in gendered governance (Jeong-mi Park 2011; N. Lee 2007a, 2007b). Building on these insights, this article seeks to extend the discussion by moving beyond the conventional dichotomy of colonial policies and postcolonial

1. For the updated debates on *Kōshōsei*, see Park Jung-ae (2024a).

activism—particularly in light of the fact that both state-centered regulation and abolitionist agendas often shared an underlying premise: the exclusion of prostitutes from full citizenship in the process of nation-state building.

To pursue this inquiry, this study focuses on the transitional period from 1945 to 1950—after liberation but before the Korean War—when the *Kōshōsei* system was formally abolished but a new regulatory order had not yet taken shape south of the 38th parallel. Previous scholarship has largely analyzed distinct historical phases: the colonial management of prostitution, wartime mobilizations, the return to state regulation during the Korean War, and Cold War-era criminalization under the Park Chung-hee regime. By contrast, this study explores the immediate post-liberation years as a moment of discursive and institutional flux, when diverse political, religious, and occupation authorities struggled to define the boundaries of legitimate womanhood, public morality, and national sovereignty.

This article thus asks: How did the figure of the prostitute become a symbolic site for legitimating new political orders? Why did both the US Army Military Government in Korea and Korean abolitionist actors treat prostitution not merely as a social phenomenon, but as a key terrain of moral and political authority? What rhetorical and legal frameworks were deployed to govern women's sexuality in the name of democracy, freedom, and decolonization? In answering these questions, the article examines how concepts such as “voluntariness,” “public hygiene,” and “moral citizenship” were mobilized to produce new exclusions—particularly through the emergent, pejorative designation of *eoptaebu* 業態婦 (women who work in establishments that cater to men)—and reflects on how such discursive shifts and legacies continue to inform feminist and abolitionist politics in contemporary South Korea.

Decolonization, Liberalism, and Democracy: The Logic of Abolishing Licensed Prostitution

On March 6, 1946, the Joseon Women's General Federation (Joseon bunyeo chongdongmaeng), a prominent leftist women's organization, submitted a

resolution to General John Hodge, commanding general of United States Army Forces in Korea, calling for the abolition of both licensed and private brothels. Appealing to the United States as a democratic nation and the Allied Powers as “goddesses of liberation,” the Federation emphasized that tolerating prostitution contradicted the principles of liberation and democracy. The resolution declared: “Authorizing licensed and private brothels, trafficking in human bodies, and establishing a human flesh market—living hells in front of the citizens—commercializing human beings like machines, is an insult to our Korean women, hinders their liberation, and is the greatest sin of a democratic nation.”² In this statement, licensed and private brothels are equated with human trafficking, and the issue is framed as a matter of both women’s emancipation and democratic principle. Moreover, we can also observe that leftist wordings to approach this agenda hardly seemed distinguishable from the existing moral rhetoric.

Why, then, was the abolition of licensed prostitution such a salient agenda item in early post-liberation politics in both the Soviet and American occupation zones, particularly compared to other gender-related concerns? In the American zone, the text of the 1948 US Military Government Ordinance No. 7 on the abolition of the licensed prostitution system offers some insight:

Military Government Ordinance No. 7 (Effective February 12, 1948)

Article 1. This Ordinance aims to eliminate the evil customs of the past and to create humanity by abolishing the licensed prostitution system and prohibiting all prostitution from the democratic standpoint of gender equality.

Article 2. The Police Commissioner’s Ordinance No. 4 of March 1916 is invalidated.

2. “Joseon bunyeo chongdongmaeng, haji-ege gong-sachangje pyeji gyeoluian jechul” (Joseon Women’s General Federation submits a Resolution to Hodge to Abolish the Public and Private Prostitution System), *Seoul Shinmun*, March 9, 1946.

The licenses for brothel and prostitution-related business, and establishment of such cooperatives previously obtained under the same Ordinance shall lose their effect.

Article 3. A person who falls under any of the following items shall be subject to imprisonment for not more than two years or a fine not exceeding 50,000 *won*, or both.

A. A person who continues to operate a business under the system abolished by this Ordinance and is a mediator or provider of a place for prostitution

B. A person who implemented prostitution or mediated such or provided a place

C. A person involved with a person in the preceding paragraph

D. A person who has transmitted a sexually transmitted disease to another person

제1조 본령은 일정 아래의 악습을 배제하고 인도를 창명하기 위하여 남녀평등의 민주주의적 견지에서 공창제도를 폐지하고 일체의 매춘행위를 금지함으로써 목적함.

제2조 1916년 3월 경무총감부령 제4호는 차를 폐지함.

종래 동 영에 의하여 취득한 유곽(貸座敷) 영업, 창기가업의 허가 급 유곽영업자조합 설치의 인가는 자에 그 효력이 상실됨.

제3조 좌의 각 호의 1에 해당하는 자는 2년 이하의 징역 5만 원 이하의 벌금 우는 우 양자를 병과함.

가. 본 영에 의하여 폐지된 제도의 업무를 계속하며 우는 경영하는 자

나. 매춘의 행위를 하며 우는 그 매개, 장소 제공을 한 자

다. 전호 전단의 자를 상대로 한 자

라. 타인에게 성병을 전염시킨 자

(공창제도 등 폐지령, 군정법령 제7호, 1948년 2월 12일 시행)³

3. "Gongchang jedodeung pyejiryeong" (Order to Abolish the Public Prostitutions System), [https://www.law.go.kr/법령/공창제도등폐지령/\(00007,19471114\)](https://www.law.go.kr/법령/공창제도등폐지령/(00007,19471114)).

This ordinance leans on certain premises: (1) a conflation between the licensed prostitution system and prostitution itself; (2) the moral framing of both as *evil customs*; (3) an attribution of their origins to Japanese colonial rule; and (4) the positioning of prostitution's abolition as necessary for democratic and gender-equal nation-building. Against the backdrop of widespread calls for decolonization, it may seem almost self-evident to associate the abolition of licensed prostitution with the broader project of democratic reform. Yet ambiguities remain. What precisely was being abolished?

Article 2 refers to Police Commissioner's Ordinance No. 4 from March 1916, which had formalized the Daejwabu Prostitution Control Regulations (貸座敷娼妓取締規則)—a unified set of laws governing brothels (*daejwabu* 貸座敷), licensed prostitutes (*changgi* 娼妓), entertainers (*yegi* 藝妓, or geisha), and female hospitality workers (*jakbu* 酌婦). Scholars widely regard this ordinance as the formal institutionalization of the licensed prostitution system (Kōshōsei) in colonial Korea (Jung-ae Park 2009, 61). However, the 1948 ordinance also declares “all prostitution” prohibited. Does abolishing Kōshōsei imply prohibiting prostitution entirely? Could the licensed system have encompassed all forms of prostitution? If not, what precisely was being dismantled?

Park Jung-ae, who has extensively examined this point, challenges the commonly held belief that the term Kōshōsei refers merely to a system for regulating licensed prostitutes (*changgi*) as distinct from private prostitutes (*sachang* 私娼). She argues, rather, that the Kōshōsei refers to the entire network of prostitution management widely implemented in the Japanese Empire during the 20th century (Jung-ae Park 2024b, 182). This includes licensed prostitution managed through direct permits, private prostitution identified and regulated through registration, and even unregistered prostitution subject to crackdowns. This interpretation aligns with that of Fujime Yuki, who characterizes the “modern licensed prostitution system” as a state-managed structure centered on military comfort stations and venereal disease control, where the state manages and intervenes in all forms of prostitution (Fujime 2004, 55).

Fujime further contends that even though Japan had a similar system

in pre-modern times, it was the modern elements—such as compulsory venereal disease examinations and an emphasis on the economic choice of individual parties involved in prostitution—that defined the modern licensed prostitution system (Fujime 2004, 94–96). When this system was introduced in colonial Korea after the opening of ports, it created an alien space: the brothel. As the number of Japanese residents in Korea increased following the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), even the previously passive Korean Empire began to regulate prostitution in a modern, state-sanctioned manner (Song 1998, 232). Considering the fact that even researchers of women's history in Japan have long recognized the licensed prostitution system as a uniquely Japanese custom, in contrast to Western civilization's more *advanced* norms (Fujime 2004, 30–34),⁴ it is not surprising that Christians, nationalists, and feminists in colonial Korea easily perceived this foreign system as an *evil custom* implanted by their enemy.

Nevertheless, Fujime emphasizes that the state's intervention and management of prostitution is a phenomenon that transcended the Japanese Empire, being a common feature during the modern type of nation-state building. Rather than an inherently *primitive* custom exclusive to Japan, this system was in fact, introduced from the West as an aspect of civilization (Fujime 2004, 55). Viewed in this light, it becomes clear that the licensed prostitution system, deeply entwined with the formation of the Western style nation-state, is linked to broader questions about the definition of citizenship—particularly regarding colonies and racial hierarchies. Prostitution, which inevitably involves elements of personal constraint, has historically been associated with the caste systems in various societies. Modern nation-states, acting as iconoclasts against traditional social structures, must redefine citizenship to accommodate these heterogeneous elements within their imagined communities. In this context, each society's approach to prostitution in the modern era is shaped by its unique historical circumstances during the process of nation-state building.

Even though the conception and operation of modern prostitution

4. For criticism of the methodology of Murakami Nobuhiko, who represented the above position in women's history in Japanese academia, see Fujime Yuki (2004, 30–34).

policy in imperial Japan are not unique, the specificity of its system is incommensurable, including between the imperial metropole and colonies. In Korean historiography, such questions surrounding how the Japanese Empire managed women's sexuality differently in the metropole and in the colonies have been explored to prove the existence of *colonialism* in various forms, from the opening of ports to wartime policies (J. S. Kang 2010). For instance, it has been noted that the crackdown on human trafficking in colonial Korea was less robust due to Korea's colonial status. The human rights of the colonial women were often easily neglected on site, in accordance with the overall profit of Japanese colonial governance. Consequently, opposition to the licensed prostitution system in the colonies was often interpreted as an act of anti-imperialist resistance, both at the time and in later historical analysis.

However, the anti-licensed prostitution movements during the colonial period were more directly influenced by Christianity rather than the nationalist camp, both in terms of personnel and ideology. The movement, primarily led by elite women and Christian missionaries, drew upon the tradition of American Christianity, particularly the Third Great Awakening—a religious revival movement that began in the early 19th century in the United States.⁵ The anti-licensed prostitution movement in Japan was brought to Korea by Japanese Christian women's groups (Yoon 2007, 182), and Korean Christian activism on this issue became part of the broader temperance movement, which advocated for abstinence from indulgent behaviors such as drinking and smoking (Yoon 2009, 127–128).⁶ The movement against licensed prostitution in colonial Korea, driven by Christian women, thus focused not only on challenging Japanese colonial policies but also on moral and religious enlightenment, rejecting prostitution

5. The Third Great Awakening Movement, which began in the United States in the early 19th century, was a religious movement that advocated the Puritan spirit and Protestant values and had a major impact on American society (J. Lee 2004, 50–103, as cited in Yoon [2009, 129]).

6. In the 1920s, Korean Christians, concerned about the colonial economic situation, expanded the existing concept of religious temperance and attempted to popularize it as a kind of nationalist economic movement (Yoon, 2009, 127–128).

itself rather than merely opposing governmental licensing policy. In the 1930s, as the number of impoverished women entering the prostitution industry rose following the Great Depression, the movement began to acknowledge the socioeconomic factors driving prostitution, although it responded primarily with charitable efforts to *save* prostitutes from what was viewed as moral degradation (Yoon 2007, 187).

When the public enthusiasm for decolonization surged following the defeat of the Japanese Empire, the licensed prostitution system—symbolizing the colonial “evil”—naturally became a prominent target in the colony. Initially, the left-wing camp took the lead in the political landscape immediately after liberation, aligning with the Korean Women’s Federation on this issue. At this point, the alliance with the Christian women’s movement was almost unavoidable, as regardless of their ideological spectrum, all factions commonly recognized that dealing with women’s rights were an ineluctable issue to their respective visions of a modern nation-state. At this point, the issue of the licensed prostitution system, which had symbolic significance as a so-called “women issue” and popular resentment over the colonial legacy, and furthermore, which had little direct interest with celebrities participating in central politics, whether left or right, or groups that identified with them, could be a useful and relatively safe material for public opinion wars.

Although the abolition of the licensed prostitution system was an unusually compatible resource for both left and right factions, however, it doesn’t necessarily mean it could transcend the political polarization of the time. While almost zero political forces could directly oppose the abolition of the licensed prostitution amidst the fervor for dismantling colonial legacies, there was disagreement over the specific measures to be taken. Left-wing women’s groups, for example, emphasized that prostitution must be eradicated for “[all] women’s liberation,” as the aforementioned resolution indicated. However, the rhetoric of the Christian women’s movement, which had for a longer time been at the forefront of the anti-prostitution campaign based on religious ideas of temperance, was far more accessible to the public. At a time when even the police were establishing special departments to crack down on the *immorality* of students, including such behaviors as

drinking, smoking, and engaging with any women,⁷ it was much easier that the moralistic rhetoric calling for the eradication of prostitution—framed similarly to calls for abstinence from other *immoral* behaviors—would resonate with the public. Thus, even after liberation, the logic for abolishing the licensed prostitution system functioned in close alignment with the right-wing Christian women's movement. At least in relation to this specific agenda, it can be argued that the leftist camp missed an opportunity to seize the initiative and formulate their own revolutionary language.

The American Stance: Okay, Unless Human Trafficking and the Kōshōsei

In the internal records of the US Army's XXIV Corps, which oversaw the initial stages of the occupation, the military reflected on its early years in Korea as below:

The XXIV Corps had to do benevolently what more than half a million Japanese had done tyrannically...While the United States had but a minimum of experience in Military Government, and while Korea was new and in many ways strange, still we had behind us our record in Italy and the Philippines, and though amateurs in training other people how to govern themselves, we were professionals in a way of life so desired by the liberated millions in the Orient that to teach it was but to live it.⁸

The licensed prostitution system, which had become a universal public enemy in post-liberation Korea, emerged when the Japanese Imperial Army established the Chōsen Army (朝鮮軍) as a regional command during the colonial era. The licensed prostitution system was originally created to serve

7. For example, "Haksaeng punggi mullan" (Students, Out of Discipline), *Kyunggyang Shinmun*, December 29, 1946.

8. "XXIV Corps-First Year in Korea," NARA, Department of Defense, Department of the Army, US Army Pacific, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Military History Office, RG 550, Box 275.

two military divisions, the garrison forces, and other military units stationed throughout the peninsula (Jung-ae Park 2009, 61). After Japan's surrender, and Korea's partitioning by Soviet and American occupation forces, the issue of prostitution became one to which the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) felt compelled to respond. As the occupying force south of the 38th parallel, the US military signaled its intention, in contrast to Japanese colonial rule, to govern southern Korea *benevolently* rather than *tyrannically*. According to them, despite their inexperience in military governance—having only limited experience in Italy and the Philippines—they were experts in the *way of life* long yearned for by millions of liberated Asians. The military asserted that to impart this way of life, they merely needed to *live* it.

In this context, the US military articulated its occupation of southern Korea as an embodiment of the most advanced material and spiritual life, thus positioning themselves as a benevolent but firm liberator and protector of *less fortunate* peoples like the Koreans. To reinforce this narrative, it was essential for the military to undertake symbolic gestures clearly differentiating its governance from that of the preceding colonial regime. In March 1946, when the Joseon Women's General Federation proposed abolishing the licensed prostitution system to the US military commander, they depicted Americans as a liberating force representing democratic nations. This stance played a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape of the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. Subsequently in the contemporary history of South Korea, such symbolic gestures targeting prostitution have often been appropriated by political groups engaged in what became known as "social purification" movements. In those phases, prostitution, defined as a form of *moral corruption*, has been proven an effective target in mobilizing public affect. Such strategies can be traced to these post-liberation politics. After 1945, it became well known that the Japanese authorities had also mobilized Japanese women to establish special comfort stations on the Asian mainland. Upon assuming control of these facilities, the US military instituted a prohibition on their operation, also characterizing this measure as the "liberation of Japanese women" (Höhn and Moon 2017).⁹

9. Michiko Takeuchi points out that the process of recruiting special "Comfort Women" to

In the aftermath of World War II, international consensus largely consolidated around the premise that human trafficking was inherently immoral. In 1949, the United Nations formally adopted the “Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others.” Even before that, since the early 20th century, Western powers had been concerned with human trafficking, particularly involving women, in connection with the so-called *white slavery* issue. As is well documented, the League of Nations dispatched an investigative commission on this issue to Korea in 1931, then under Japanese colonial rule, to which Japan responded with considerable sensitivity (Jung-ae Park 2023). Given the United States’ fairly strict stance on prostitution, influenced in part by the Great Awakening Movement, the US military could not afford to disregard domestic public opinion on this issue.

Despite the US government’s official prohibition on prostitution, the situation on the ground among US military personnel in southern Korea became increasingly ambivalent. Notably, in 1944, legal revisions had eliminated the penalties associated with venereal diseases, and penicillin was supplied to military personnel, thereby reducing the incentives for soldiers to avoid prostitution (Jeong-mi Park 2017). In a context where large groups of men from the victorious nation were stationed in occupied territories, the possibilities of sexual activities by these personnel emerged as a predictable constant for policymakers. In January 1947, an internal US military document titled “Association with Korean Women,” widely circulated among military personnel, cautioned that “Sexual relations, regardless of how inspired, other than through the lowest form of prostitutes, is deemed by Koreans to be classed as an act of rape.” This document advises US personnel to avoid reckless behavior in order to safeguard US prestige before the local residents,¹⁰ which paradoxically symptomizes the widespread aspect of sexual contact between US personnel and local women.

serve American soldiers in postwar Japan in a manner no different from wartime showed how the state treated lower-class women as if they were colonized persons (Takeuchi 2017, 139, 161).

10. “Circular No. 9: Association with Korean Women,” NARA, Records of United States Army Force in Korea, Lt. Gen. John R. Hodge Official File, 1944–48, Entry 11070, RG 338, Box 80.

Given the sensitivity of the issue, how did the US military navigate this complex situation? First of all, it clearly delineated its stance on human trafficking, which was a significant issue in global politics. As a result, in May 1946, Military Government Ordinance No. 70 officially prohibited human trafficking.¹¹ Interestingly, it seems necessary to point out that local media erroneously reported this decision as the “abolition of the licensed prostitution system,”¹² which forced the US command to clarify that the prohibition applied specifically to human trafficking, rather than prostitution itself (Yang 2001, 217).

The US military’s official stance was that prostitution based on the *free will* of individuals—but not human trafficking—was basically permissible. This clarification effectively severed the connection between human trafficking and prostitution, which had long been intertwined in public discourse. By emphasizing free will as the defining characteristic of acceptable prostitution, the US military sought to distinguish between the historically sensitive issue of human trafficking and forms of prostitution that it would get involved with. At this point, it is worth noting that the Japanese licensed prostitution system used similar justifications during the colonial period, where the premises of contracts were purportedly based on that free will. As previously noted, the issue of prostitution had historically been linked to the traditional caste system and, later, to the status of citizens within a nation-state. Even under the same designation of “Kōshōsei,” coercive practices such as human trafficking were not entirely excluded from its colonial application.

Accordingly, the meanings of licensed prostitution, human trafficking, and prostitution itself were often conflated during the colonial period. Thus, it was not a mere misunderstanding that domestic newspapers interpreted the US military’s decision to ban human trafficking as the abolition of the public prostitution system. Even the most prominent figures closely aligned

11. “Bunyeoja maemae-e dan, segi-ui akpung geumbire buteo ilso” (As the End of the Women Trafficking, Eradicate the Evil Custom of the Century from Today), *Dong-A Ilbo*, May 27, 1946.

12. “Gongchang jedo cheolperyeong-ui gongpo” (Promulgation of the Decree to Abolish the Licensed Prostitution System), *Dong-A Ilbo*, May 27, 1946.

with the US military government, such as Im Yeong-shin and Hwang Sin-deok, shared the same misunderstanding about this decision (Yang 2001, 216–217). However, the US military's approach applied their rhetoric of *liberal democracy* in a manner that publicly and overtly differentiated coercive forms of human trafficking from other imaginary forms of prostitution. Following this clarification, an epistemological change in public discourse occurred, whereby the element of personal confinement became distinct from the concept of abstract prostitution. As a result, alternative approaches to this issue, which had once been part of the broader semantic network surrounding prostitution, were marginalized.

This shift was not merely a consequence of the US military's decision but also resulted from the physical exclusion of left-wing political factions from the political scene in South Korea. From 1946 to 1947, left-wingers represented by the Korean Communist Party (Joseon gongsandang 朝鮮共產黨) were effectively ousted from the Southern part of Korea by the US military government, which undermined their capacity to influence the political landscape there. Previous studies have suggested that the Abolition of Public Prostitution Rescue Alliance, formed in August 1946, was led by the left-wing Joseon Women's General Federation (Yang 2001, 221); however, by this time, left-wingers were already under significant suppression.¹³ Even if the Joseon Women's General Federation could participate in the alliance, the right-wing organizations already seem to have taken the internal initiative, considering Kim Mal-bong of the Independence Farmers Party (Dongnip nonongdang 獨立勞農黨) was serving as chairperson. Following this, former solidarity among women's groups on the issue of licensed prostitution largely disappeared, and right-wing women's organizations began engaging directly with the US military's branches, e.g., the Women's Office (婦女局). On April 2, 1947, now an organization newly named the Public Prostitution Abolition Alliance submitted a proposal to the Provisional Legislative Assembly,

13. Three months earlier, with the Jeong Pansa incident of May 1946, the physical suppression of leftists had begun in earnest, and in response, in July of that year the leadership of the Korean Communist Party declared an uncompromising struggle against the United States, also known as the so-called "Sinjeonsul" (New Tactics).

symbolizing a shift from the previous “rescue of retired prostitutes” discourse to a focus on the “abolition of (any) prostitution.”¹⁴

At this point, it is necessary to examine how the North Korean leadership, who achieved the task of abolishing the licensed prostitution system earlier than the South, evaluated this achievement. Rather than treating the abolition of the licensed prostitution system as a single agenda item, the Provisional People’s Committee of North Korea passed women-related agenda items as a kind of package deal called the “Law on Gender Equality.” In July 1946, the Committee announced the Law on Gender Equality in North Korea, allegedly for the purpose of “purging the remnants of Japanese colonial policy, reforming the old feudal relationship between men and women, and allowing women to fully participate in cultural, social, and political life” (Young-ja Park 2017, 183). This was part of the so-called “democratic reforms” that continued throughout 1946. Article 7 of this law broadly prohibited institutions and customs incompatible with monogamy, including both the licensed and private prostitution systems of the colonial period, as well as traditional *gisaeng* culture (Young-ja Park 2017).

Article 1. Women have equal rights with men in all areas of national, economic, cultural, social, and political life. [...]

Article 7. The abuses of polygamy, a relic of medieval feudal relations, and a violation of women’s human rights by selling women as wives or mistresses are prohibited in the future (both licensed and private prostitution, and the *gisaeng* system—*gisaeng gwonbeon* [co-ops], *gisaeng* schools—are prohibited). [...]

Article 9. With the promulgation of this law, all laws and regulations of the Japanese Empire regarding Korean women’s “rights” are rendered null and void.¹⁵

14. “Ibi-e gongchangje pyeji geonui” (Proposal for the Legislative Assembly to Abolish the Public Prostitution System), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, April 2, 1947.

15. *Bukhan Gongbo* (North Korean Public Information), National Institute of Korean History,

We can discern the self-evaluation of the North Korean leadership on this issue in the public statement by Ho Jong-suk, director of the Propaganda Department of the North Korean People's Committee, on "Women's Liberation" on March 8, 1947, International Women's Day. Ho Jong-suk asserted that by this law the North Korean leadership had prohibited the mistress system, polygamy, licensed prostitution, and the *gisaeng* systems, which "violate and insult human rights" (Ho 1947, 108). This indicates that abolishing the licensed prostitution system in North Korea was a key propaganda tool in North Korea, demonstrating the superiority of the socialist system. In this respect, it was closely related to central politics of the period, which included a feminist agenda along with the establishment of their regime and mobilization of North Koreans. The North Korean leadership attempted to reconstruct the existing family community structure surrounding women, who made up the majority of the population, in order to make them the subjects of the modern socialist order. According to Park Young-ja, this was part of North Korea's political project to reorganize the traditional family order into a nuclear one and to individualize female citizens (Young-ja Park 2017, 179–184).

Apparently, this agenda was also *political* in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. If we look more closely at the process of this bill in the South Korean Provisional Legislative Assembly, we can see that both the US military government and right-wing politicians actively utilized the abolition of the licensed prostitution system as a propagandistic tool, just like the North Korean leadership at that time. First, the abolition of the licensed prostitution system was proposed as a bill in March 1947, led by a right-winger named Park Hyun-sook, one of the only four women to secure a seat in the Legislative Assembly (Yang 2001, 223–225; Shin 2024, 170). Notably, it ended up being the only women-related issue taken up by the Assembly. Second, this was a time when the US military was focusing on promoting the superiority of its occupation policies by comparing them with those of their counterparts in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, ahead of the Second US-Soviet Joint Commission in the coming May. The other hasty

accessed April 30, 2025, https://db.history.go.kr:443/id/nkgb_1947_01_15_b0002_00290.

discussion on human rights-related bills, such as the Child Labor Act, was also largely conscious of legislative advances in North Korean labor law at that time (D. Kim 2020, 312). Thus, in August, the abolition of the licensed prostitution system was passed. As the second US-Soviet Joint Committee reached a deadlock, prospects for resolving the Korean issue through a bilateral agreement became bleak. When in July 1947, Lyuh Woon-hyung, who had remained committed to the end to the possibility of resolving the issue of national division, division became a *fait accompli*.

The abolition of the licensed prostitution system, which was eventually announced in November after many twists and turns, once again became an effective rightist tool to attack their opponents right before it began to be enforced after a three-month grace period. In January 1948, some Assembly members proposed the extension of the grace period, but this was disregarded and the act was pushed through as is.¹⁶ Then, on February 19, it was reported that those members of the Assembly who had proposed postponing the implementation had received bribes from brothel owners.¹⁷ Previous studies have commonly analyzed this scandal as the reaction of the concerned parties to the abolition of the licensed prostitution system under the assumption that the incident actually occurred (Yumi Park 2010, 57). However, at the beginning of 1948, when this denouncement suddenly appeared, the Korea issue had already been brought to the United Nations, with the United States pushing for separate elections south of the 38th parallel. In that context, preparations had begun for North-South talks, as a last resort, to prevent the establishment of separate governments. In particular, just a few days before this scandal, on February 10, Kim Koo released the famous appeal titled “A Speak-out to 30 Million Compatriots,”¹⁸

16. “Gongchang pyeji gigan yeongi ankiro ibi gyeorui” (Legislative Assembly, Making a Resolution Not to Delay the Closure of the Licensed Prostitution System), *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 31, 1948.

17. “Gongchang pyeji bandae undongbi munje ibi-eseo nollan” (Scandals on Bribery in the Legislative Assembly in Lobbying for the Retention of the Licensed Prostitution System), *Dong-A Ilbo*, February 19, 1948.

18. “Samcheonman dongpo-ege goham, Kim Gu seonsaeng seongmyeong (sang)” (A Speak-out to 30 Million Compatriots, Mr. Kim Koo’s Statement [Part 1]), *Dong-A Ilbo*, February

while the US military and right-wing groups were also closely monitoring the situation. It is suspicious that at just such a time, a scandal targeting only left-wing or centrist members would break out, resulting in a timely undermining of their political influence. Furthermore, despite the explicit denials of the parties involved,¹⁹ including Minister of Civil Affairs Ahn Jae-hong, neither the right-wing accuser nor US military authorities ever presented any evidence.²⁰

Female Citizenship and Those Who Freely Chose Non-National Status

Through this process, the argument for the abolition of the licensed prostitution system was reframed in a right-wing manner acceptable to the new American order. The practice of prostitution, which survived this chaotic phase, had to be rewritten in the language of American-style liberalism. It is particularly noteworthy that the newly coined term “*eoptaebu*” replaced former legal terms such as *changgi* (prostitute), *yegi* (female entertainer), and *jakbu* (female hospitality worker) under the former licensed prostitution system. In this context, *eoptae* 業態, an expression meaning the manner of an occupation or business, actually became a euphemism for prostitution.

This new nomenclature had two major differences from existing terms like *changgi*, *yegi*, and *jakbu*. First, it did not directly define its target, but did so conditionally, using the suggestive term *eoptae*. In other words, theoretically, this term could encompass a broader-range of economic activity. When the licensed prostitution system was abolished, the category of prostitution itself had to be redefined, and its boundaries had to be re-established. What constitutes prostitution and how far does it extend?

12, 1948.

19. “Chilbaengman won sageon na-wa gwangye eopda” (Seven-Million-Won Scandal Has Nothing to Do with Me), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, March 9, 1948.

20. “Balpyo yong-ui eopda” (We Do Not Plan to Announce), *Chosun Ilbo*, July 9, 1948.

The ambiguous category *eoptaebu* reflects the blurred boundary between prostitution and non-prostitution at that time. Accordingly, this term came to regard women in this broad category as potential prostitutes first, due to how its usage worked.

Another characteristic of this nomenclature is that the power of naming shifted from the agents of regulation to the regulated. In the past, the state regulated specific targets through the licensed prostitution system. In postcolonial South Korea, the content of the regulation changed depending on the *manner of business* chosen by the objects of regulation. In theory, these individuals would choose which regulation applied to them. This element of autonomy was a key factor in conceptualizing prostitution as separate from human trafficking after the abolition of the previous system. This was particularly essential in the process of extracting the new *liberal and democratic* conception of prostitution distinct from the colonial legacy of Japanese evil practices.

We need to keep in mind that the core of the prostitute *contract* during the colonial period also involved consent, albeit from parents or husbands. Under the rubric of American democracy, however, the consenting party became strictly the female body itself. This shift made individual female citizens the ones exercising the right to sell their bodies through free *contracts*, rather than parents or husbands having to do so.

Through this process, the terms and meanings surrounding prostitution in South Korea were completely rearranged around the criterion of voluntary/involuntary. After the 1949 United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, the dichotomy of whether prostitutes were victims or not based on voluntariness was further reinforced. As a result of abolishing the licensed prostitution system, any potential prostitution in South Korea became an act of *free will* distinct from human trafficking. Women who *freely* chose this work were not only considered non-victims but were seen as having had the *freedom* to choose from a range of wage-earning work.

Was the title of *eoptaebu* not a fixed status, unlike *changgi* under the licensed prostitution system? A newspaper report stating that the Ministry of Social Affairs of the new government had issued an “*Eoptaebu* Liberation

Decree” (業態婦 解放令) in December 1948 paradoxically suggests that remained elements of personal restraint persisted within this new occupational category. Even after the abolition of the licensed prostitution system and the establishment of the Republic of Korea, *eoptaebu* were still understood to require *emancipation*. Given the central claim of the purported decree (that all occupations semantically linked to the blurred category of prostitution, not only former licensed prostitutes, should cease engaging in sexual services), this represented a shift far beyond the previous abolition.²¹ Existing scholarship generally interprets this episode as a continuation of the abolition process, as if it was actually enforced. Within this narrative, the termination of the licensed prostitution system, the proposed liberation of *eoptaebu*, and the ultimate abolition of all forms of prostitution could be positioned within the same historical framework (H. K. Kang 2010, 266).

However, we need to keep in mind that the report in question was formally retracted the following day. In fact, the liberation of *eoptaebu* never occurred, unlike the abolition of licensed prostitution system, as the two were considered fundamentally different. The minister of social affairs even publicly declared, “This is completely groundless, and the Ministry of Social Affairs has never even drafted such a plan.”²² From this sequence of events, at least two conclusions can be drawn: (1) at this juncture, various forms of sexual services categorized under the loose designation of *eoptaebu* retained elements of personal restraint akin to those under the former licensed system; and (2) despite this continuity, policymakers legally and administratively treated *eoptaebu* as wholly distinct from the abolished licensed prostitution regime.

There was a rationale behind this seemingly contradictory stance of the US military, as well as the South Korean government, which basically adhered to the former occupier’s policy line on this issue. Although the

21. “Eoptaebu gyujeong silsi, punggi sunhwa-wa yeogwon ongho” (The Enforcement of Eoptaebu Regulations, To Improve the Public Order and Protect Women’s Rights), *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 8, 1948.

22. “Eoptaebu chwi cheoryeong, sahoe buseo buin” (Ministry of Social Affairs Denies Issuing the Order of Control on Eoptaebu), *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 9, 1948.

symbolic abolition of the licensed prostitution system served as a politically expedient gesture, the operational interests of the occupying forces often conflicted with this official stance, under the circumstances that the US armed forces still stationed even after the Republic of Korea was established. The US military's imperative to control venereal diseases among its garrison personnel continued to necessitate regulatory mechanisms resembling those employed under the prior system. In this sense, the enforcement of American democratic values paradoxically required infringements upon the bodily autonomy of prostitutes, echoing practices previously exercised under Japanese imperial rule.

Consequently, even as the licensed prostitution system was dismantled under a postcolonial rationale, stricter STD inspections were implemented, and infected individuals were detained against their *free will* on practical grounds.²³ The US military frequently lamented that the abolition had led to the dispersion of prostitutes and a rise in venereal infections. Although unregistered prostitution had already been widespread prior to the abolition, making it difficult to draw a direct causal link between the licensed system and the prevalence of disease (Moon 2017, 95–96), it became evident that the Japanese Kōshōsei system alone could not be held solely responsible for the persistence of prostitution or the spread of venereal disease.

In this respect, although it was theoretically a job chosen by legal citizens according to their freedom of contract, workers who *chose* to engage in prostitution also assumed an exceptional status in Korean society. Those workers had to take it for granted that their bodies would be violated by the state. As the irregular *business manners* that the state had difficulty grasping rapidly increased, controlling the bodies of sex workers in the private sector became a critical issue. Paradoxically, it was their free choices that put them in a status with restricted freedom. Because they had chosen it voluntarily, the moral responsibility for prostitution had to be borne by the individual.

This illustrates the fragmented and conditional nature of female

23. “Gongchang pyeji-e daebi, changgi geomjin danhaeng” (In Preparation for the Abolition of the Licensed Prostitution System, STD Inspections Conducted), *Chosun Ilbo*, January 18, 1948.

citizenship within the emerging *democratic* nation-state. While foundational works in gender history have long highlighted the gendered dimensions of citizenship within nation-state formation (Pateman 2001; Scott 2023), it is important to recognize that postcolonial societies such as South Korea exhibited indigenous characteristics within this process (E. Kim 2021; Jeong-Mi Park 2024). Shaped by the complexities of the postcolonial context, the reconstruction of female citizenship entailed conditional functions, continuously subject to repositioning through their association with particular statuses—most notably, that of the prostitute. To attain full citizenship, women were expected to internalize and perform normative sexuality. Under this regime, sexual non-conformity functioned as a rationale for exclusion from the realm of full civic belonging. In this context, the colonial experience—frequently invoked as a comparative reference—was mobilized to amplify rhetorical distinctions in American discourse, regardless of the practical continuities that persisted on the ground.

Although such rhetorical distinctions temporarily blurred the boundary between prostitution and non-prostitution, this transitional space remained susceptible to closure, much like under the previous system, as its contours continued to be heavily shaped by state policy. Following the abolition of the licensed prostitution system, a range of women with diverse social backgrounds entered the sex industry, thereby dissolving the prior boundary between former licensed prostitutes and new entrants. Consequently, any woman who developed intimate relationships with US military personnel near bases could readily be labeled a prostitute, even if she personally understood the relationship differently (Höhn and Moon 2017).²⁴ In other words, the loosely defined category of *eoptae*, associated with prostitution, had not yet been fully delineated as a fixed legal or social status. The moment these temporary and fluid status-based restraints were re-consolidated was with the onset of war. As is well established, the Korean War marked a critical juncture in the reintensification of state control over prostitution.

24. This phenomenon was also observed in postwar Germany and Japan, where US military bases were established (Moon 2017, 87; Takeuchi 2017, 134).

Conclusion

This article has examined the post-liberation abolition of the licensed prostitution system as a site where decolonization, democracy, and gendered citizenship intersected. While the abolition of Kōshōsei was publicly framed as a moral and democratic imperative—a break from colonial *evil customs*—the actual logics underpinning both policy implementation and abolitionist activism often reproduced older modes of exclusion and control. Both the US military government and Korean actors across the ideological spectrum contributed to this discourse, mobilizing concepts such as “voluntariness,” “public hygiene,” and “moral citizenship” not only to justify the dismantling of colonial institutions but also to regulate the boundaries of legitimate womanhood in the emerging nation-state.

Importantly, while the abolition of licensed prostitution appeared to enjoy rare bipartisan support, it was far from politically neutral. The issue itself became embedded within the broader contestation over nation-building in the post-liberation South. Initially shaped by diverse political and religious actors—including leftist women’s groups and Christian reformers—the discourse surrounding prostitution was ultimately absorbed into the dominant framework of right-wing governance as the left was gradually ousted from South Korean politics. As a result, the terms of abolition came to reflect the conservative moralism and disciplinary ethos promoted by US military authorities and right-wing Korean elites. In this sense, the campaign to abolish licensed prostitution—though couched in the language of liberation—was ultimately incorporated into the project of constructing a postcolonial national order in southern Korea aligned with anticommunist and patriarchal norms.

Paradoxically, what appeared to be a progressive moment of liberation—articulated through democratic rhetoric and humanitarian concerns—actually reinscribed older patterns of state control over women’s bodies. The emergent category of *eoptaebu*, while presented as a departure from colonial terminology, carried forward the assumption that women who engaged in prostitution, regardless of their personal circumstances, were outside the bounds of full citizenship. Their sexual conduct, rather than

being addressed in terms of labor or structural inequality, became a moral problem to be solved through surveillance, registration, and control.

Moreover, this study underscores how the discourse of postcolonial democracy—especially as articulated through the liberal idioms of the US occupation—recast prostitution not as a condition shaped by systemic coercion, but as a matter of individual moral and economic choice. In this framework, the violence inherent in state-regulated or carceral sex work systems was no longer attributed to structural inequality or institutional complicity, but instead to the presumed voluntariness of the women involved. This shift not only effaced the persistent conditions of exploitation and bodily control but also laid the ideological groundwork for displacing responsibility onto the women themselves—a logic that remains deeply embedded in contemporary South Korean discourse.

The binary of *voluntary* versus *coerced* sex work continues to serve as a powerful framework through which both public institutions and civil society evaluate the legitimacy of sex workers' subjectivity. As such, the moral burden of prostitution is still disproportionately placed on the individual, who is expected to prove her victimhood or moral worth within a narrow frame of acceptability. In this regard, the historical trajectory traced in this article offers a critical lens for reflecting on the ongoing dilemmas and strategic tensions faced by today's anti-prostitution movements. By illuminating how the rhetoric of *choice* has functioned within broader systems of gendered regulation, this study contributes to the ongoing effort to critically reevaluate the assumptions and political vocabularies that shape feminist and abolitionist activism. A deeper historical understanding of these frameworks may help chart more reflexive, inclusive, and structurally grounded approaches to justice for those whose citizenship remains contested at the very margins of moral and legal recognition.

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