



KOREAN  
WOMEN'S  
DEVELOPMENT  
INSTITUTE

## National Human Rights Commission of Korea

Choi Young-ae,

Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea

The Me Too movement has spread across the globe including Korea, exposing the ugly truths that have been concealed in almost every area of society such as culture, arts, sports, education, politics, religion, and so forth. This issue fundamentally relating to human rights has stirred up diverse controversies and debates and led the [National Human Rights Commission of Korea](#) (hereinafter, the Commission) to be strongly asked to come up with effective measures to deal with the issue. Against this backdrop, senior researcher Kim Bohwa (Ulim, an affiliate of the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center) met with Choi Young-ae, Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea. The interview was held at the office of the Chairperson of the Commission located in Jung-gu, Seoul, from 15:00 to 16:00 on December 04 (Wednesday), 2019.

**Both individuals and society have changed. Individuals tell their personal story in public through the Me Too movement. Society responds via the 'With You' initiative. This is a great change.**



Senior researcher Kim Bohwa (left) interviewing Ms. Choi Young-ae (right),  
Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea

**Senior researcher Kim Bohwa (hereinafter, Kim):** Looking back on the three-decade history of the Korean women's movement, you, who once served as the First President of the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center(hereinafter, the relief center), have played a pivotal role in promoting the initiative. Up to now, the sphere of violence against women, especially sexual violence, has experienced significant changes. However, such an initiative is deemed to be subtly different from the current Me Too movement. Could you tell us about the differences?

**chairperson Choi Young-ae (hereinafter, Choi):** It should be regarded as development, rather than differences. In fact, when the Relief Center was established in 1991, founding members who majored in women's studies gathered and studied together for about eight months and invited prosecutors, judges, lawyers, and medical experts for more in-depth studies. At that time, we thought of a different title for the center. We launched the center based on a concept similar to that of the US's Rape Crisis Center. However, considering that only a specific act, rape, can be handled in connection with women's human rights, we thought of something that goes beyond it or a more essential issue that we want to raise. This led the concept of sexual violence to come to our mind. Therefore, we decided to use the term, 'sexual violence'. At that time, The mass media in Korea did not use the term, 'rape', directly. Instead, they employed a euphemism such as, "She falls victim to something very bad and cruel".

When we set up the center, people often said, "Shame on you! Why do you operate such an organization?". People showed negative attitudes toward the center, glancing suspiciously at us. The term, 'sexual violence', was deemed to be a very strong word. It was recognized negatively enough to make it impossible for one of our members to directly tell her husband about a meeting that she would attend. People were not able to reveal their personal stories in public. However, they are now able to share their stories with others, even though it is still not enough. In the past, they talked about something that occurred thirty, twenty, or five years before. Now, they visit the center immediately after an incident happens. This is deemed to be a big change. About ten years after the center was founded; it held a kind of "tell us the truth" event, which was not made public. In other words, such an event served as an opportunity for participants to tell their personal stories in private but they failed to share their stories with society as a whole. Such a situation has greatly

changed. Now, individuals tell their personal secrets in public through the Me Too movement. Society responds via the 'With You' initiative. This is a great change not only in recognition but also in systems.

When establishing the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment, etc. of Sexual Crimes, we encountered strong resistance. At first, the Legislation and Judiciary Committee argued, "Why should we make it public that Korea is the Republic of Sexual Violence by enacting the special law? Then, the victims of child sexual abuse and intrafamilial sexual violence were reported, shocking people believing that such incidents have never occurred. This led incest to be handled as an offense indictable without complaint. The bill passed the National Assembly but it was very hard to secure necessary budget. Victims should be financially supported but the fact that perpetrators are parents or relatives made it difficult to offer financial assistance to victims. Highlighting such problems, only the sexual violence counseling centers were able to be financially supported. However, now I heard that there are almost 200 sexual violence counseling centers in Korea. Is it true?

**Kim:** Yes, there are more than 170 centers across the nation.

**People's attitudes toward sexuality have changed little. Women have begun to reveal their stories, causing people to gradually change their attitudes. However, many people still think that women are partially responsible for such violence.**

**Choi:** That is deemed to be a big change. Our society accepts children as victims. However, female teenagers and adults are thought of as partially responsible for such violence. Such an attitude has little changed. In the past, people actively held women responsible for such violence. At present, women are not deemed to take such active responsibility for such incidents. However, people still say, "Anyway, you went out at night or you wore a short skirt", holding women partially accountable for such violence. Even in the case of Ahn Hee-jung, a former Governor of Chungcheongnam-do, some people still think that the female victim is old enough to defend herself effectively and that she may also have had romantic feelings for him. This shows that people's attitudes toward sex are hard to change. Over the past several years, a female prosecutor and other women who are in a difficult position to reveal such stories have exposed untold truths, playing a catalytic role in disclosing stories that have been hidden for a long time. This can be regarded as a significant

change. However, the aforementioned practice of holding women accountable for such incidents has yet to change.

**Kim:** I agree with you. This relates to the Me Too movement. You have played a leading role in making investigation into violence and sexual violence in the sphere of sports, announcing the results, sending written opinions to the UN, and establishing and operating a task force. Press reports made several days ago shocked many citizens in Korea, leading them to support the Commission. Leading this process, what came to your mind?

**Choi:** The workplace organization is structured to make it difficult for women to disclose sexual violence or harassment. In other words, the vicious acts of violence have been committed under the guise of affinity. In the world of sports, bosses are deemed to have life-or-death authority. Therefore, many citizens have pointed out the problems of camp training for elementary, middle, and high school students, leading us to officially abolish the camp training system. However, it has brought about some adverse effects. Our system has focused on performance or achievements, thereby causing athletes to stay in an apartment or a motel for covert training. In particular, elementary school students are younger and are exposed to absolute authority and to grooming. The problem is that they can hardly understand whether such acts belong to the category of sexual harassment or abuse. The sports world is deemed to be structured to make it very difficult to disclose such problems.

Shim Suk-hee, a Korean short track speed skater, reported incidents of sexual violence against her, sending shock waves through the nation. Do you think that sexual violence has never happened in our sports world? The answer is 'No'. More specifically, we conducted a survey of 63,000 elementary, middle, and high school players and 1,200 semi-pro team athletes. More than 30% of semi-pro team athletes experienced verbal violence while a significant portion underwent physical and sexual violence. The fact that the percentage is higher than 30% signifies that the problem is very serious. More than 10% of elementary, middle, and high school players, who are expected to have difficulties in understanding such violence, experienced it while almost 5% of middle school athletes were exposed to sexual violence.

In the world of sports, violence perpetrators usually have absolute effects on the sports career of young students, making it harder for the athletes

to reveal such problems. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has paid keen attention to this issue but it is Korea's sporting world that should play a leading role in resolving such a problem. It is not an easy job. This is the main problem that the Commission is faced with. The Commission is expected to make various recommendations on this issue. About ten years ago, the Commission made investigation into the sporting world and recommended it to effectively solve the problem. Despite that, this incident happened again. This time, the Commission, which is a pan-government organization, is conducting a thorough investigation into the case, collaborating with other Ministries, offering training services, and preparing a recommendation. Recently, the Commission is carrying on a pledge campaign to improve human rights in the sports world. More than 1 million netizens have watched the campaign via YouTube. Considering the Me Too movement and the human rights initiative in the sports world, I think that the women's circle and the human rights movement took another leap forward this year.

**Kim:** I belong to the generation who have benefited from such movements that seniors like you have promoted. Some people recently raised the issue of reverse discrimination against the backdrop of some men displaying greater sensitivities to human rights. In other words, we have seen social polarization in this area. For example, in connection with the film 'Kim Ji-Young Born 1982,' some people, who have yet to watch the movie, argue that men are in a more difficult situation as victims, rather than perpetrators, and are exposed to reverse discrimination. They even say that if watching the film, men will break up with their girlfriends. In these situations, the Commission may experience difficulties in implementing its policies. Some may be regarded as backlashes, attacks, or counter narratives. Have you ever undergone such backlashes based on the issue of reverse discrimination or sensitivity to human rights? How should the Commission or Korean society as a whole react to such discourses on reverse discrimination?

**Backlashes against women are based not only on ideological attacks and awareness but also on actual systems and formalities. Women's issues should be handled in terms of human rights to be socially accepted and overcome the prejudice that women seek their own interests. Based on such perspectives, I have worked for the Commission and will deal with women's issues.**

**Choi:** Korean society has experienced rapid polarization and the

percentage of Korean women participating in labor markets has gradually jumped. However, we have already reached a point where people start to point out that the shares of female diplomats and women who pass the bar exam have exceeded 50%. Some argue that things are going wrong and that women are taking away jobs from men. These issues were not raised when the percentage of men in those areas is higher than 50%. A bigger number of women have recently let their voices heard and occupied higher positions, thereby bringing up such issues. We should also think of the fact that Korean men must serve in the military. As a result, some men argue that women can have higher test scores than men because the former do not experience such a gap in their education. Partially, this is true. However, this is not attributable to women. We should think of improving the military culture. When I visited Germany, I had a chance to meet a military ombudsman. He was a conscientious objector but was able to work as an ombudsman. What was more surprising is to see that the military program includes humanities, philosophy, and social sciences.

It is true that there are backlashes. The problem is that they are now very strong in Korean society. Such backlashes against women and men relate to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea is supposed to cope with homosexuality, migration, refugees, human rights in North Korea, and residents in North Korea. There is an interesting change in discrimination-related incidents that we are dealing with. I think that those researching women's studies should pay attention to it. For example, the shares of women and men among flight attendants are 80% and 20%, respectively. In reality, the number of female flight attendants recruited is higher than that of their male counterparts. As a result, related universities limit the number of new male students who are prospective flight attendants. Is this a kind of discrimination against men? We don't have any reason for choosing only female flight attendants.

Therefore, we can't say that there are backlashes only in recognition or awareness. Many petitions have been sent to the Commission due to discrimination or reverse discrimination. In connection with a quota system, a number of petitions have been filed to the Commission in the name of reverse discrimination even before the system is put on the right track. How should we handle this issue? Those who majored in women's studies and have engaged in women's movements may not have a clear understanding of this matter. Such petitions have been

delivered to the Commission.

Conservatives are also promoting their initiative within the legal framework. Backlashes against women exist not only in ideological attacks and recognition but also in systems and formalities. Simply speaking, a variety of backlashes exist in Korean society. As a result, the Commission should cope with such issues in the context of human rights, putting human rights before gender issues.

At present, the Commission deals with women's affairs and sexual harassment but there were controversies surrounding role-sharing between the Commission and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. Even when the Commission was established, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family was very concerned about the matter. Engaging in women's movements and working for the Commission for a long time, I realized that women's issues should be brought up from the perspectives of human rights. Only when this is ensured, such arguments can be strong and compelling, overcoming the prejudice that women seek their own interests in terms of human rights. In the old days, I would think that the issue of abortion should not be handled by the Commission. Moreover, there were many discussions on this matter. I believe that the issue should be dealt with from the perspectives of human rights and relates to women's human rights. Therefore, fulfilling my duties as the chairwomen of the Commission, I will cope with women's issues from such perspectives.

**Kim:** Discussions on numerical equality or gender-mainstreaming have been conducted too mechanically, leading us to stick to the ratio of 50 to 50. When I visited the Commission to give a lecture about one year ago, I heard about one incident. When a victim filed a petition to the Commission, the perpetrator argued that he or she is also a victim. In the same incident, the two parties are regarded as victim and perpetrator. Such incidents have occurred continuously. The following cases were presented: 1) A woman gave a clap on his shoulder while passing by; 2) He is a victim of sexual harassment; and others. These petitions have been continuously sent to the Commission, causing officials to have difficulties in fulfilling their duties. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, women's studies scholars, and women's organizations are supposed to actively bring up gender-related issues. I think that the Commission has often seen the term 'equality' be understood differently.

**The Commission has not been effective in forming relationships with women and has lacked gender-sensitivity. It has worked hard to cope with human rights from gender perspectives, avoiding dealing with the issue mechanically.**

**Choi:** We have also conducted research on various issues. We once made a book on the 100-year history of the movements in Korea, but which did not have any section regarding women's movements.

**Kim:** really? such a story...

**Choi:** We implemented the research project with a budget of more than KRW 300 million. The book consisted of many sections but did not have any part concerning women's movements. Therefore, I asked, "Women have played a key role in carrying out human rights movements and promoting the right of freedom and social rights. Why were women's movements omitted? In fact, in the process of discussing labor rights at the workplace, the issue of sexual harassment was raised. The decision to abolish the patriarchal family system was also made based on the recognition of human rights and self-existence. The issue of sexual violence has been handled based on the right to personal liberty which belongs to the category of the right of freedom. Women's movements have significantly affected the development of human rights but were not included in the book. Commission officials said that the book was made before I joined the Commission. It did not occur to them that it had no section on women's movements.

The compilation group included one or two female writers by field, but they had no gender perspectives. Even the Commission thought it was enough to just include a few female writers in the compilation group. Even though the compilation process was almost completed, I strongly urged them to include the history of women's movements. As a result, the section was included in the book. While experiencing such an incident, I thought that the Commission should be more sensitive to gender issues. The issue of human rights needs to be handled based on gender perspectives. I have worked hard to promote such an initiative.

**Kim:** Now, I see.

**Choi:** As a result, the book has a section written by a researcher working for Korean Women's Development Institute. Anyway, women's movements



and human rights movements are separated from each other.

**Kim:** It's a good thing that you played a key role in resolving the issue. Now, I have a better understanding of current circumstances.

**Choi:** I once worked as the first female secretary-general. Until then, both the chairperson and the secretary-general have been males. The secretary-general has no fixed term in office. When a new chairperson is appointed, the secretary-general is usually replaced by a new one. Therefore, I recommended a new secretary-general, who is female. This resulted in some members of the Commission arguing that it is unusual to have a female chairperson and a female secretary-general at the same time. I replied, "Don't you remember that both the chairperson and the secretary-general have been males? The members responded, "Is that so?" They think that it is natural to have a male chairperson and a male secretary-general and that it is exceptional or strange to have a female chairperson and a female secretary-general.

**Kim:** Yes, you're right. I also remember that such an issue has been raised whenever both of representatives are female in many areas. Let me ask you another question. The Commission has discussed many topics including the rights of the elderly, the death penalty, and human rights, engaging in a variety of activities. Considering global cases, what areas in Korea should be further discussed and handled in connection with human rights? For example, the military culture or human rights-related spheres that we need to pay attention to.... Can you introduce those areas to us?

**Choi:** Assuming this post, I talked about four responsibilities. One of them is to actively deal with the issues of hatred and discrimination. To this end, I will do my utmost to ensure pan-governmental participation. Over the past year, significant results have been produced in this area. In connection with hatred and discrimination, government ministries and agencies have selected and implemented various projects. About three weeks ago, together with superintendents of offices of education in Seoul, Gyeonggi-do, Gwangju, and Jeonbuk, I worked to actively cope with the issues, offering education and making related declarations. The superintendents asked related officials to prepare and carry out projects, even establishing project teams.

Next year, we should make a Discrimination Prohibition Act and lead it to pass the National Assembly. Preparing the bill, we plan to create a

social consensus, raising awareness of the issues and establishing a standard law. It is not deemed to be an easy job. This is expected to serve as an opportunity to deal with gender issues, the problems of the aged, and issues surrounding housewives who are often negatively depicted as those relying on breadwinners for living without working. The Commission is projected to play its due role in discussing the ILO's efforts to ensure labor's three primary rights, the abolishment of the death penalty, alternative service for conscientious objectors, and others. The Commission, which is an independent body, is able to recommend ministries and the President to take proper actions. Anyway, considering that the President has paid keen attention to human rights, related ministries are forecast to accept our recommendations more seriously and actively.

The international community has asked us to actively deal with the issue of human rights in North Korea in the context of universal human rights. At the Forum on North Korea Human Rights held on December 03, I had a chance to discuss this issue with experts, realizing that the international community plays a certain role in handling this issue. I think that discussions on the right of freedom have effects on this matter to a certain degree. North Korea has continuously submitted its reports to international organizations. It has actively cooperated with the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and organizations on children, disabilities, and other areas where it is deemed to have taken effective and active measures. The international community, the government, and the Commission should play their due roles in improving human rights.

Many ambassadors have tried to meet with the chairperson of the Commission. They have special interest in women's human rights or human rights in North Korea, or the abolishment of the death penalty. I think that the Commission can play more active roles in dealing with human rights-related issues. However, the Commission is suffering from lack of financial and human resources, even though it should cope with a number of human rights-related issues. This is one of my main worries.

**Kim:** As a junior activist, I think that you have acted as a role model, helping us think of playing bigger roles in Korean society. You have encouraged us to carry out more active roles in enhancing human rights. Lastly, I would like to ask you to send out a few words to those who will read this book or are interested in women's studies and women's

policies.

**Women's movements have made great contributions to expanding the scope of human rights movements in Korea, playing a key role in raising awareness on human rights. They have widened the scope of human rights that were limited to the primary right of freedom, exposing the problems of social minorities and handling issues surrounding migrants, refugees, and the disabled in wider contexts.**

**Choi:** I think that women's movements have greatly contributed to expanding the scope of human rights movements in Korea, increasing people's awareness of such rights. They have widened the scope of human rights that were limited to the primary right of freedom, revealing the problems of minorities in Korean society and dealing with issues surrounding migrants, refugees, and the disabled in wider contexts. However, current circumstances require NGOs to devote more time and efforts to improving human rights. As a result, they have difficulties in crafting and implementing long-term plans. Against this backdrop, the central government should take more active measures. Korea's NGOs have carried out various projects, relying on pride and self-respect. In this sense, they ought to be highly commended. The achievements that women's movements have made are deemed to be recorded as significant and meaningful progress in Korean history.

We have said that our activities are distinguished from others. However, it is also true that we tend not to acknowledge such differences. To make real differences, women need to take more active stances. Until now, I have crossed boundaries between NGOs and GOs. In the past, women's rights activists working for women's groups talked about NGOs' purity, showing negative attitudes towards government ministries' activities. However, I thought that female activists need to cross boundaries between NGOs and GOs in order to promote development and collaboration. In other words, they should not be isolated in the realm of NGOs or GOs. While working in the US, I witnessed many activists work for NGOs or GOs, crossing such boundaries. This may be why I took such a position.

While acting as the president of the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center in the past, I told my colleagues that I plan to work as a full-time employee after my term expires. All of them discouraged me from doing so, saying that I could not choose such a career. I think that we need to break this mold. Our aim is not to demand something but to improve

women's rights or human rights. We should be a little more open-minded when thinking of GOs or NGO. We don't have to show negative attitudes towards GOs.

**Kim:** I also think that NGO activists have inflexible ideas to a certain degree.

**Choi:** Anyway, we should be more actively trained. When the Commission was in its infancy, I actively recommended women's rights activists to join the Commission. If they had accepted my offer, they would be working as managers or directors for this organization. Many of the women that joined the Commission at that time did not come from NGOs and were experts in diverse areas. Now, it is very difficult to enter the Commission. They should join the Commission as regular or contract workers. Therefore, I regret that such activists did not decide to enter the Commission at that time. I am not sure whether this is right or wrong. However, I think that if they can do their utmost to complete their given tasks, there will be no problem.

**Kim:** As times have changed, there have been more jobs or spheres relating to human rights or women's issues. As you mentioned earlier, we need to have a flexible attitude and should do our best to fulfill our duties, crossing boundaries. This is also deemed to be a process of carrying out women's movements.

**Choi:** Yes, I agree with you. If GO members join NGOs, they are able to know what approaches should be taken to revise laws and systems. They have a better understanding of how to create a social consensus. On the other hand, we tend to think that because NGO activists work hard with a sense of duty, their work and efforts do not have to be financially rewarded. I think that this is wrong. As we receive financial benefits when working overtime, so should NGO activists be rewarded for their hard work.

**Kim:** Yes, hard work and dedication have been highlighted excessively. What you said today is in line with what we are now thinking about, enabling me to understand your points more easily. Your insight into NGO activities helped me learn a lot from this interview. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule. I would like to have another chance to talk with you in the future.

**Choi:** Thank you! Very nice meeting you!