

# Korea: Women Worker, the Crisis of Social Reproduction and Care Labor

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**In recent times, there is growing discussion around the crisis of social reproduction and care. South Korea has the [lowest fertility rate in the world](#), while Japan is similarly wrestling with the same issue and [a fast aging population](#). Even China has seen [its population fall](#) for the first time in six decades. Governments warn of dire economic consequences, labour shortages, an aging population uncared for, and pressures on the pension system.**

However, is their crisis our crisis, too? How should we understand it from a labor (movement) perspective? What are the underlying structural transformations that produced this crisis, and what implications does it hold for workers? To answer these questions, we spoke with Hyunok Lee, an Associate Professor in the Department of Global Korean Studies Sogang University, Korea, who has been researching and writing about gender, women workers, migrants, social reproduction, and care work.

**Asian Labour Review (ALR): The International Women's Day has very radical origins in the labor and socialist movements in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What meanings does the International (Working) Women's Day still hold today?**

**Hyunok Lee (HL):** When we talk about the origins of International Women's Day, we often refer to the women workers' demonstration in New York in 1908. But it was not just in New York, but worldwide, including Russia and Germany in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is worth recognizing that the International Women's Day originated from the mobilization of women workers during a period of radical political and economic changes.

We should ask why women workers organized themselves in that particular historical moment. Two things are clear: women were being integrated in the labor market during this period, and their working conditions were unbearable. The exploitation of women's labor played a role in the capitalist development during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the present moment, we are also facing other radical changes. We don't know where we are heading. I'm sure the women workers at the turn of the century also didn't know where the world was going, but they couldn't help but be on the streets. The uncertainty was not simply about how the technology will change the industrial structure and the labor market.

**ALR: One of the things that people talk a lot about recently is care and care work.**

**HL:** After the COVID-19, the ways in which we organize our life have changed dramatically. In this process, we discovered the value of care. I've never seen care being emphasized so much in the public discourse. At the same time, it makes us wonder why the issue of care didn't gain public attention before despite its importance. It is like air. It is quintessential for our lives, but we barely

recognize it until we are out of it.

Care is provided by women in most cases. It is not a coincidence that various care workers' unions have been organized during the last ten years in South Korea, and the care service industry is one of the fastest growing industries in South Korea.

Despite the public attention to the value of care, society seems to be regressing in terms of gender justice. This year, the Korea Women's Association United put the motto: "We are moving forward even though the world is moving backward."

**ALR: The current government in South Korea has an anti-feminist, anti-women's rights agenda. And they made it very explicit, and Yoon Suk Yeol from the conservative People Power Party won the presidential election last year partly on that basis. Why do you think that's the case?**

**HL:** In the last presidential election, gender issues became huge. Yoon Suk Yeol, who was a presidential candidate at the time, claimed that "there is no structural gender discrimination" and promised to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality. According to the election poll, the young men in their 20s were core supporters of Yoon Suk Yeol.

His victory not only disguised the patriarchal reality in South Korea, but his supporters also accused those who demand gender justice as being selfish. The same strategy was applied to other groups such as people with disabilities. Now claiming one's rights is seen as a selfish act. Unfortunately, there are growing voices in support of this stance. We are really seeing the regression in terms of how we imagine ourselves and how we relate to each other in our society.

One thing that needs attention is both young men and women are not very satisfied with the current political-economic situations. Young people feel frustrated. Some of the young men scapegoat women for being selfish.

The current government took advantage of the discontents of people and took them to the worst direction. We need to pay attention to the sources of frustration but also admit that social movements, including the women's movement, have not done a great job in responding to this situation. [The space for the social justice and democracy is shrinking](#), and the politics of hatred is occupying the public discourse without any shame.

**ALR: Let's talk about social reproduction. In Korea, Japan, China and many other places, there's declining birth rates and impending demographic crisis with a huge aging population. How should we understand the crisis of social reproduction?**

**HL:** Social reproduction is very broad concept. It has three dimensions: biological reproduction, reproduction of labor, and reproduction of the totality of the society.

In the context of public policy in South Korea, the crisis of social reproduction means low fertility rate and deficit of care. How it happened is closely linked to the compressed modernization process. If you think about the 1960s, the total fertility rate in Korea was around 6 births per woman. It dropped to around 2 in the 1980s due to state-led industrialization and family planning policies. Last year, it was 0.8. Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world right now.

In terms of care deficit, it is associated with changes in family patterns and women's labor participation. The family has been crucial in care provision in Korea. To be precise, married women's care labor has been crucial. Over the last five decades, we had a lot of achievements in terms of female education and female labor force participation. Yet, it is ironic that the crisis of social

reproduction looms large despite these achievements.

The crisis of social reproduction can mean much more than just low fertility and lack of care labor, however. It calls for attention to the current structure of social reproduction and the new arrangement of care.

**ALR: Thinking back to the 1960s or 1970s, there was a moral panic about overpopulation. The idea was the planet couldn't take that many people if people gave birth at a high rate. But now there seems to be another panic around the declining birth rate. Governments are panicking and worried about labor shortage. But I don't quite get as much a sense of panic from ordinary people. My question is: whose crisis is it?**

**HL:** You're right. All these narratives of the crisis of social reproduction are coming from the government. The decrease in the dependency ratio is linked to labor shortage, provision of care, structure of healthcare, and pension. It's a problem for the government but also for the ordinary people. The older people may have trouble with getting proper care provision, and younger people may worry about increasing social burdens with declining opportunity.

I think it is the crisis of the current mode of production and reproduction. The assumptions of the institutional arrangement for social reproduction in modern society — such as maintaining certain level of labor force and population for national economic growth, taking family as a primary unit of social reproduction, male breadwinner ideology, and the status of workers for the basis of social protection — have been eroded.

What if we don't take an ever-growing economy as a given? It may open up other ways to imagine modes of production and reproduction.

**ALR: I want to ask how you think about the class question in terms of the crisis of social reproduction.**

**HL:** The crisis of social reproduction affected various segments of the population in different points of time. We think that marriage is just a personal matter, but it is not only about having a partner. It also means care. Someone provides food, cleans the house, and takes care of children and other family members.

At the societal level, forming a family as the primary unit for care is an important mechanism. Rural bachelors in the 1980s and 1990s were linked to the crisis of agriculture in rural communities. Marriage migration started around this time, and it expanded to urban workers.

I interviewed a male factory worker who married a foreigner. He works in the steel industry and used to be very proud about being a worker. He got laid off during the financial crisis, and he realized that he could not find a spouse anymore. It can be a matter of age or education, but this anecdote also reflects the changes in the industrial structure and the positions of workers in Korea. He felt that they are left out of these changes. For him, marriage is a goal to achieve. It really tells something about class differences in the matter of social reproduction.

Out of three dimensions of social reproduction, we have pretty good sense of biological reproduction and reproduction of labor. How these are linked to the reproduction of the totality of the society is difficult to explain. Connecting these individual narratives to the structural changes is our task as researchers.

**ALR: Let's talk more about care work. Tell us why you think care work is such an important issue.**

**HL:** Care labor or care work is a commonly used term these days, but it was not very common among people who didn't see care as workers. Some people even got offended by the fact that "care" and "work" are put together, because they think care cannot be measured in monetary value. So from the beginning, there is a very fundamental tension around commodifying these intimate activities.

But the fact is that care work takes effort. It is quintessential for maintaining our lives. Someone has to do it. Unpaid care labor was conducted at home, but it is not sustainable any more. We cannot avoid the socialization of care. Whether you bring it to the market, or provide it with public institutions, attributing monetary value to care is unavoidable.

The other problem is, once we see care as a labor issue, we face a range of new questions including the labor process, working conditions, and workplace safety. In most cases, care work happens in someone's home. Also there are all sorts of tasks. It's not just cleaning the floor and washing the dishes. It involves a lot of emotional work, too. How to itemize or formalize this kind of work is very challenging and such workplaces are difficult to regulate.

One of the efforts by the Korean government was Long Term Care Insurance for the Elderly. It was an attempt to formalize care work by introducing education programs and certificates. Once you have a certificate, and you are eligible for social insurances and minimum wage. But the regulation doesn't fully cover what happens between care providers and users.

The relationship between the employer and the employee in this case is quite different, as the nature of care labor depends on the relationship between the carer and the recipient of care. There are the issues of abuse on both sides. Despite the government's attempt to formalize care and provide public care, there are limitations. The issue of care provision is discussed in terms of the quantity, price, and quality of the care service supplied. But care workers are often missing in this discussion. As a response to these problems, we have three different Long Term Care Workers Unions right now.

I also want to add that the socialization of care in Korea is accompanied with marketization. This happens in a gendered way. We see a lot more women participate in the labor market as care workers. It's not just taking care of children, the elderly, patients, and the households, but also providing various sorts of educational activities. It created more opportunities for women in a way. The government gives you a certificate and claim that you are doing professional work. Great. But their positions in the labor market are very marginalized, which exacerbates current gender inequality.

**ALR: You have also written a lot about migration. You proposed the idea of reading migration and development through a gendered perspective. Can you talk about your work on migration?**

**HL:** I wanted to explore the uneven development in Asia by following the narratives of Vietnamese women. People talk about the Asian Century, but we see uneven developments very clearly within the region.

I started with Vietnamese marriage migrants, and I heard their stories. They shared very similar stories. They are from rural area, and then they dropped out of school, moved to the nearby cities or industrial complex as they had opportunity to work in the factory, mostly textile and shoes or food processing. Their working conditions were not great, and the turnover rates of these factories were very high.

When they wanted to quit their jobs and get out of poverty and traditional family responsibilities,

getting married with foreigners was one of the few options. And then they moved to Korea. It is why they don't see themselves as victims. They made a choice under a very constrained environment. One part of the project was describing these Vietnamese young women workers under Vietnam's economic development during the 1990s.

As South Korea faces the crisis of social reproduction and care deficit, the Vietnamese women are the ones who have filled the gap by providing care in the family. The middle class families don't have any trouble with this whole demographic changes as they can hire someone as a care worker. Well, the working class families actually face very serious issues.

I follow the Vietnamese women's narrative and how women occupy different kinds of national development discourses. In a developing Vietnam and a post-industrial South Korea, they serve particular roles to meet the needs of the state, and their rights are guaranteed by being wives or mothers or caretakers. I don't deny that there are some positive aspects at the individual level, but it largely relied on and was intensified by the gendered structure.

**ALR: What should be on our agenda for both research and movement building?**

**HL:** What I tried to do in the last 10 years was to look at alternative economic movements, like social and solidarity economy, which may expand the notion of economy, labor, redefine social relations, and imagine new arrangements of social reproduction.

Nancy Fraser emphasize at least two things. One is we shouldn't lose the focus on the big structural changes, especially when we discuss gender issues. I think it should be connected to structural conditions. The other issue is the principle of democracy. Now I'm looking at the discussion on caring democracy, and different ways of imagining the human being, human relations, and social organization.

Where do we find the political momentum? Increasingly, I see that people don't talk too much about social movements, including labor movements. I don't see a lot of discussion going on within academia. So at least I tried to keep the record of any small movement-building efforts. How we can conceptualize and find meaning in our actions are very much on my agenda.

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