

Uncomfortable Transit from Caregiving to Care Receiving: Elderly Women Encounter the Problematic Reciprocity of Caring

Lee Dong-Ok, Cho Uhn, and Chang Pilwha

Abstract

As Korean society turns into an aging society, the elderly are becoming one of the new social risk bearers due to the lack of an adequate care system. This paper deals with the experiences of elderly women who are transitioning from care giving to care receiving, representing the last phase of the gendered circuit of caring. Approaching the issue from a feminist perspective, this ethnography of the elderly reveals the perplexing position of Korean women, in particular, elderly women, and shows that Korean elderly women are the locus of contradictions and dilemmas that arise when the family, the state and the market contest, upon which the assumptions of intimacy and reciprocity, male breadwinner ideology and ideal independent elderly discourse are nested.

Keywords: elderly women, gendered care, caregiving, care receiving, gendered circuit of caring

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Introduction

Women have been frequently problematized either as caregivers or care receivers in gender studies as well as in gerontology.¹ In particular, elderly women are regarded as care-receiving dependents. However, most elderly women are transitioning from the role of caregiving to care receiving, representing the last phase of the gendered circuit of caring. This paper focuses on elderly women who are neither exempted from caregiving nor entitled to receiving care, and addresses the dilemma and contradiction that elderly women confront in contemporary Korea. It is well known that elderly women struggle with fading filial piety and the discourse of the "ideal independent elderly." They are stuck in the gulf left by an eroding family care system and a state that is unprepared, where the market seeks the commodification of care services (Kim and Kang 2008).

This paper approaches the issue of Korean elderly women from a feminist perspective that uses the concept of gender not as a category but as an analytical concept with which to frame elderly women's problematic living status. Gerontologists rarely address gender concerns even when they deal with elderly women. Only recently have elderly women become highlighted within elderly care studies in the West (Reinharz 1997). Additionally, the subject of gendered caring has not been sufficiently attenuated in the approach to elderly women's issues in gender studies (Datan et al. 1981; Copper 1988; Reinharz 1997). Accordingly, feminist theories have been criticized for having failed to develop an adequate model of the female life cycle to include elderly women. It is even pointed out that they are "blatantly insensitive" to elderly women (Reinharz 1997, 73).

In contemporary Korea, the general approach towards elderly women is connected with demographical changes in which the average period of longevity increases while the number of children decreases, thus placing pressure on the part of children with the end result of

1. Most studies focus on the low quality of care workers or the lack of a long-term care system for the elderly (Park Y. 2007; Park and Kim 2007).

reducing the quality of elder care (Kang et al. 1999). Another point is that elderly women cannot expect younger daughters-in-law to care for them as in the past, when care was mostly carried by women, more specifically by daughters-in-law (Song and Kim 2003; Chang et al. 2006). The argument extends further, asserting that the younger generations tend to expect the state and society to shoulder a larger share of the responsibility for elder care than the children themselves.²

The statistical picture of women elderly more clearly demonstrates the adverse situation they encounter. The elderly population of age 65 and above makes up 10.3% of the whole population according to the Korea National Statistical Office (KNSO 2008). While elderly women account for 68.1% of the total elderly population, out of that, only 41.7% live together with their children. Of elderly men, 33% live with their children as of 2007. However, the proportion of those living alone has been greater for elderly women than elderly men. The proportion of elderly women living apart from their children has consistently increased over the past 20-30 years compared to elderly men. Elderly men are more likely to live with a spouse than elderly women, as the latter outlive the former by more than 5 years on average. Meanwhile, the proportion of elderly women living with married children is consistently higher than that of their male counterparts, which raises one of the questions this study addresses.

Elderly women are economically worse off than their male counterparts. In the case of elderly women, the economic participation rate stands at 23.3%, while for elderly men it is 42.8%. The average monthly income level of elderly women is less than 300 thousand won, or 37.5% that of elderly men (KNSO 2008). 9.9% of elderly women qualify for basic national livelihood security welfare, compared to only 5.3% of elderly men. Meanwhile, the number of women who receive national pension support accounts for only 57%

2. According to KNSO (2008), more than 43.6% of those surveyed responded that the state, society and the family should share the burden of caring for elderly parents, while 40.7% responded that it is the responsibility of the family. In 2002, as much as 70.2% responded that it is the family responsibility while 18.2% demanded that the burden be shared with the state and society.

of that of men as of 2008. Also, it is further argued that social insurance is man-friendly, while public assistance is woman-friendly (Seok and Im 2007). The pauperization of elderly women is more serious than elderly men, though elderly women become more heterogeneous as the baby boomer cohorts join them (Kim and Kim 2004). This is another point to be emphasized in this paper, revealing the crossroads at which the family, the state, and the market converge.

The position of elderly women represents another phase of women's contradictory location in current Korean society. Due to the increased economic participation of women, elderly women are supposed to fill in for those family members who would have previously cared for others. While the feminization of cheap labor reduced the number of family members available to care for others, elderly women are expected to care for other family members rather than be cared for (Jang and Kim 2008). Elderly women not only extend help to daughters-in-law, but they also tend to support their own daughters, providing child care and even domestic labor to keep them working outside the home (Kim and You 1994; Min 1995; Yang and Ha 1997; Lee K. et al. 2007). Sometimes they receive financial support from their children in exchange for their care work, but the stress nevertheless puts a burden on their health and well being (Kim and You 1994; Jang and Kim 2008). This, along with the rising divorce rate, exacerbates the cases of some elderly women who look after their grandchildren. In addition, with the increasing divorce rate, households are changing to a grandmother-grandchildren structure (Kim D. 2005; Oh J. 2007).³ In the conventional sense, intimacy is assumed between caregiving elderly women and care receiving family members; however, the reciprocity between them has recently been questioned. The contradiction and dilemma is the third point this paper tackles, focusing on elderly women's uncomfortable transit from caregiving to care receiving, utilizing an ethnographic approach.

3. The number of divorces per 100 marriages was 5.9 in 1970, jumping to 54.7 in 2004. It slowed to 40.6 in 2005, then recorded 40.6 in 2005 and 37.4 in 2007 (KNSO 2007).

Trapped in the Gendered Circuit of Caring: An Analytical Framework

As feminist scholars focus on the linkage between gender and aging, they cannot neglect the gendered circuit of caring.⁴ The gendered division of labor, at its core, is a division of caring. In most of societies, the caregiver is vulnerable to exploitation, not because of the special demands of caregiving but because of the traditional assignment of this work to women or servants (Folbre 2001). It is well known that dependent workers are more subject to exploitation than most.⁵ In the nuclear family that has appeared as a result of modernization, women continue to provide care work, but are marginalized in terms of economic resources, such as medical expenses or hired caregiver, unlike men, who have typically been wage earners. Given the limited resources in a nuclear family, mothers find it difficult to afford child care. Medical and childcare expenses, as well as time spent caring for the elderly, may cause conflicts with the children's interests. The situation sometimes generates intergenerational gender conflicts between caregiving women and care receiving women (Han and Kim 1994; Choe 1998; Park K. 2007). Accordingly, the burden of family support and caregiving generates and aggravates family conflict (Park and Song 2008).

In the absence of a viable welfare system, both caring for the aged and child care are problematic sites that place the burden squarely on women's shoulders. Here, we come to realize that women are bound up by a gendered circuit of caring in different ways, depending on their life cycle within the capitalist patriarchal system. The gendered division of labor presupposes an unequal

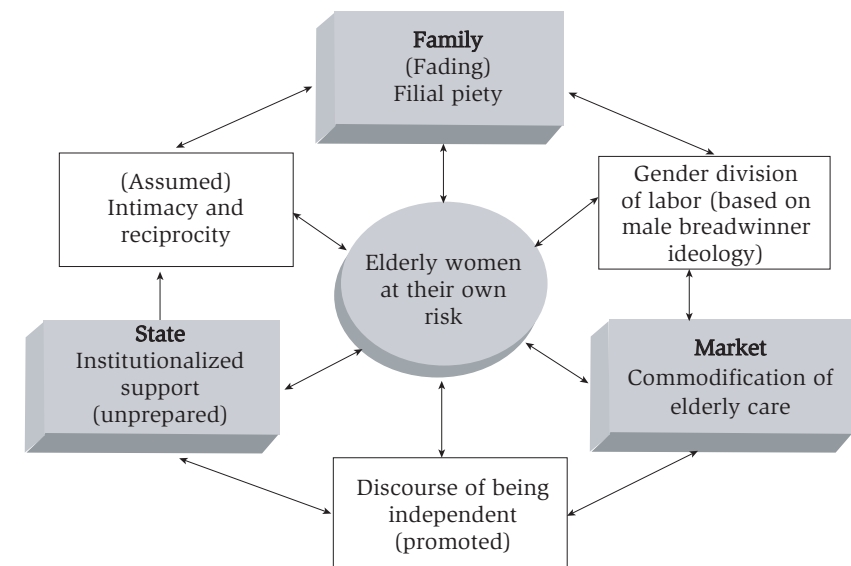
4. In the case of family elder care, the average age of caregivers is 55.24. In general, they work more than 15 hours a day to care for the elderly (Chang et al. 2006).

5. Here, "dependency worker" means a paid care provider. Dependency work is rarely well paid. When done by family members, it is, as a rule, unpaid. Paid dependency workers are frequently drawn from economic classes or groups who are themselves relatively powerless within the society at large and who occupy a social status lower than that of their charge (Kittay 2002, 260).

exchange between men's wage work and women's caring work. Women have looked after their families out of good will, but when they come to be in need, they are left vulnerable in a social structure that gives no guarantee of care. This is clearly shown in the circuit of caring that is based on a gendered division of labor relying on the triangular relationship among the state, family, and the market (Figure 1). This is the analytical framework through which elderly women's lives must be analyzed.

The modern form of a gendered division of labor forces women to secure resources through her husband, which follows the gendered placement of women in the home rather than individual women's voluntary choice. The modern gendered division of labor prescribes that "her" caring work is exchanged with "his" wage labor, but the contradiction of this division of labor is that caring for her at a later stage of life is not provided for in the scheme. The gendered circuit of

Figure 1. Gendered Circuit of Caring



caring works on women differentially, depending on their life cycle and their social class, which is linked to social and cultural change. For example, the increase in the absolute number and proportion of elderly people, particularly in Western industrialized nations, is paralleled by other major social changes with “vast consequences” fuelled by the increase of women in the paid labor force (Reinharz 1997, 83).

In the same vein, Korean gender studies confirm that women are trapped in a gendered circuit of caring that differs according to the different stages of their life cycle. First starters focus on working women’s double burden between paid work and unpaid care work during their “productive” age (Shin 1998; Chung and Lee 2000; Joung 2001; Lee J. 2004; Lee J. et al. 2006). Then, the overwhelming burden of child care and prescribed motherhood in women’s early life is emphasized (Kim J. 1995; Byun 1991; Cho J. 2002). In the later phases of women’s life, the dilemma has to do with not being able to expect institutional help from the state nor from the family in the name of filial piety (Park H. 1995; Kim Y. 2004; Kim H. 2004; Hwang 2005; Lee W. 2007; Kim and Kang 2008; Park Y. 2007). The gendered division of labor means that caring and wage work are exchanged, but women bear the contradiction that caring is not provided to them when they need it later. Here, the family, the state and the market mobilize different discourses and mechanisms.

However, few studies take issue with a social system that relies on the basic premise that caring is “invaluable” women’s work in the family. These basic premises have rarely been questioned, even when lots of elder care studies recommend gender-sensitive policies and programs, along with socialization of caring work (Song and Kim 2003). We have to question these basic premises and the gendered circuit of caring in terms of how they work on elderly women.

Caught Between Fading Filial Piety and a Rising Discourse of Independent Elderly Women: An Ethnography

Elderly Women’s Lives: Some Vignettes of the Elderly

The in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted with 14 elderly women and two elderly men from 2007 June to October 2008. They were interviewed with structured and unstructured questions for two to three hours, on either one or two occasions. They were additionally interviewed over the phone to get further information. Sometimes, the mediators who arranged the interviews were interviewed for more detail. The in-depth interviews started with interviewees’ daily lives, life stories focused on caring, and their relationship with children. Intimacy and reciprocity were key concepts in the interviews. Interviewees were encouraged to dwell on the stories from their lives that they thought important in showing their aging status. All the interviews were recorded and analyzed according to the researcher’s framework.

During the initial stage of research, it was hard to find elderly women willing to participate in in-depth interviews. Fourteen women and two men aged 65 and above were selected. The elderly women were all married with children. Two elderly men were selected for men’s tales. The interviewees’ ages ranged from 65 to 83; four were in their sixties, eight in their seventies and two in their eighties. Besides An and Bang Halmeoni,⁶ the interviewees did not have jobs; however, half of them had been engaged in earning activities from time to time throughout their lives. They have taken care of themselves as well as others. Lee, Yoon, and Mun Halmeoni worked until last year. The elderly men, Jin Harabeoji and Woo Harabeoji, were living with their wives apart from their children. They became devoted to their health and leisure after retirement.

The elderly were very reluctant to talk about their lives, as they

6. “Halmeoni” is Korean for grandmother and “Harabeoji” means grandfather. They are used as titles of respect when addressing or referring to an elderly person.

were not familiar with encountering strangers as interviewees. Interviewing for long hours was also difficult, as they became tired. However, the women we interviewed did not hesitate to speak about their experiences of caring and the uncomfortable transit to care receiving once the interview started. Regardless of education or class, they were fluent in telling their life stories, depending on their status and positions in society and family. Being advanced in age reflects a wide range of relationships both inside and outside their families and spanning both past and present, so they conveyed different and various stories about their life. The researchers allowed their stories to flow. To grasp the following life stories focusing on caring demanded specific interviewing techniques that were utilized in parsing stories that covered a long span of time and many events. Meanwhile, male interviewees were not fluent in telling their life stories and their interviews did not last long. Specifically, their interviews were short since they did not have much experience in caring for others.

Vignette of Interviewees

Kim Halmeoni is 78 years old and lives alone in a one-room, rented apartment. She has taken care of her parents-in-law and a son since her husband died during the Korean War. She was pregnant when she was widowed at the age of twenty-one. She came to Seoul to educate her son in the capital by working either in a restaurant or as a seamstress. She has lived alone since her son married in his thirties on a soldiers' survivor pension. She is economically independent from her son. She stays in close emotional contact with her son and grandchildren.

Yi Halmeoni is 74 years old and lives alone on allowances given to her by her five children. After her husband died of stomach cancer thirty years ago, she came to Seoul from Gangwon-do province so her five children could attend better schools in the capital. Along with an acquaintance, she managed a small restaurant to support her children until a year ago. She stopped running it due to ill health, when

she developed rheumatism in her legs and hypertension. Though her son wants to live with her, she insists on living alone since she has close friends in the neighborhood. She prefers not to live in the same apartment building because she has trouble operating the digital door locks.

Yang Halmeoni is 83 years old and lives with her divorced son and his son and daughter on his income. Out of eight children, seven live separately, but she does not receive financial support from them. She was injured in a traffic accident 28 years ago. She keeps her house tidy and clean, though she has difficulty walking after the car accident. Her toilet is immaculate. She takes care of all the housework by herself. She regards that as her last contribution to her children.

Bak Halmeoni is 76 years old and has lived with two grandsons since both her husband and son died eight years ago. She has taken full care of her grandsons from early childhood even before her son died, because her son and daughter-in-law were too occupied with their business to look after their children. Now she and her grandsons live on a 500,000 won stipend provided by her daughter-in-law. Two daughters live in the neighborhood but cannot afford to give financial support, although they are emotionally close to their mother.

Jo Halmeoni is 83 years old and lives in an apartment with her husband. She is very dedicated to her role as a housewife who maintains the traditional gender division of labor. However, she complains that her duties of caring for her husband did not diminish even after he retired. In spite of her weak health, she nurses her husband day and night whenever he is hospitalized, which occurs quite often. Economically, they are independent from their children, though they keep close ties with those who live in the neighborhood. She moved to an apartment instead of a retirement home or "silver house," as it was too expensive for them. She expects that her children will look after them when they are in need, although she hesitates to offer further comments on how they would do so.

Jeong Halmeoni is 73 years old and lives with her husband, who helps with housework and is flexible in terms of the gendered division of labor. She enjoys her hobbies and is actively involved in reli-

gious activities. She lives on her husband's retirement pension so that they are economically independent from their children, with whom she maintains close ties.

Mun Halmeoni is 69 years old and lives with her husband in their own house, which they also partially rent out. She lives on a rental income of 500,000 won and a monthly payment of 500,000 won from her second daughter for looking after her son, who lives nearby. Until the year before, she maintained an income from a tailoring business. Before that, she sold groceries in a department store and also worked in a restaurant. She saved up to own the house she lives in now. Her husband does not contribute to daily expenditures although he has a regular income of one million won from his investments.

Yun Halmeoni is 66 years old, divorced, and lives with her two unmarried daughters. Her eldest daughter is married and moved out. Her two daughters do not plan to get married. She thinks she may live with them permanently in order to keep looking after them. She worked in a factory until a year ago and wanted to keep on working, but her daughters stopped her because of her age.

Choe Halmeoni is 83 years old and lives with her son's family. Her husband, who was conscripted as a Japanese soldier, did not return from the battlefields of the Second World War. Her parents-in-law were killed during the Korean War. A son was left to her. She raised her son by herself. After his divorce, she began raising her three grandchildren from his first marriage. Now she lives with her son and his new wife and their children, which sometimes creates conflicts, while also keeping in close contact with the grandchildren by her son's first marriage. She needs about 100,000 won for medicine and spending money every month but finds it difficult to ask for it from her son or daughter-in-law. Still, she does all housework.

Bang Halmeoni is 67 years old and lives with her second son's family after her husband died of liver cancer. She has earned a living from her tailoring business. Her second son brought in a pregnant girlfriend before anyone was prepared to help him start a new household. Although they both work, they do not give her financial sup-

port, and rely on her for household chores and occasional childcare. The first son, an employee in a large company, earns enough money but does not give her any allowance on the grounds that she has her own income.

Chung Halmeoni is 75 years old and lives with her unmarried son and daughter. Her husband died of heart attack three years ago. She worked as an elementary school teacher for twenty years. Her eldest son married and left home. He sends a monthly stipend of 500,000 won for the property left by her husband, which was directly passed down to her son without her being involved in it for the purpose of evading taxes. She spends her days doing volunteer work.

An Halmeoni is 72 years old and lives with an unmarried daughter. Her husband died 12 years ago and her only son married and left home. She still runs a small clothing shop that pays for her living expenses, and she earns rental income and money from her children. She started her business at the age of 50, when her husband's business went bankrupt. She lived with and looked after her father-in-law for about 30 years until he died. She does not expect her children to take care of her. She prefers to go to a nursing home when the time comes.

Shin Halmeoni, who is 65 years old, lives with her unmarried son who is in his late thirties. Her husband is hospitalized in a nursing home with Parkinson's disease. Her son is a middle manager in a big company and earns a substantial paycheck. She and her husband live on rental income from property they own. She has gotten some relief from taking care of her husband since he was hospitalized, only having to visit once a week, though it is difficult for her to pay the 1.3 million won a month as the fee for the nursing home. Her social activities had to be curtailed because of her husband's medical expenditures.

Heo Halmeoni is 80 years old and lives with her husband and an unmarried son. All of her six other children are married. She earned money selling fish until her early seventies. Presently, her major task is to take care of her sick husband, who demands intensive care. They rely on their children's financial support. She does not intend to

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees

| Case | Age | Living Arrangement | Income Source/ Occupation | Education | Housing | Care Experience |
|------|-----|--|--|---------------------|------------------|---|
| Kim | 78 | Living alone | A soldier's survivor pension | No schooling | Lease (one room) | Child (1) |
| Yi | 74 | Living alone | Children's support | Elementary school | Lease (one room) | Husband (deceased), children (6) |
| Yang | 83 | With a son (divorced) and grand-daughter | Son and grand-daughter's support | No schooling | Lease (house) | Husband (deceased), children (7) |
| Bak | 76 | With two grandsons (university students) | Daughter-in-law's and grandson's support | Middle school | Monthly rent | Husband (deceased), children (3) |
| Jo | 73 | With a spouse (83-years old) | Rent | High school | Own house | Husband, children (3), mother (deceased) |
| Jang | 73 | With a spouse (76-years old) | Husband's pension and children's support | High school support | Own house | Mother-in-law (deceased), children (5) |
| Mun | 69 | With a spouse | Rent and children's support | Elementary school | Own house | Children (3), mother-in-law (deceased), mother (deceased), husband (laryngeal cancer surgery), grandson |
| Yun | 66 | With 2 daughters | Daughters' support | High school | Own house | Children (3), mother-in-law (Alzheimer's, deceased) |

Table 1. Continued

| Case | Age | Living Arrangement | Income Source/ Occupation | Education | Housing | Care Experience |
|-------|-----|---|--|--------------------|-----------|---|
| Choe | 83 | With a married son, a daughter-in-law, and a grandson | Son's support | No schooling | Own house | Child (1) |
| Bang | 67 | With a married son, a daughter-in-law, and a grandson | Mending clothes | Elementary school | Own house | Husband (deceased), children (2), mother (deceased) |
| Jeong | 75 | With 2 children (a daughter and a son) | Son's support | University dropout | Own house | Children (3) |
| An | 72 | With a daughter | Clothes shop, rent, and children's support | Elementary school | Own house | Children (2) |
| Shin | 65 | With a spouse and a son (husband in hospital) | Rent of buildings and son's support | High school | Own house | Child (1), husband (parkinsonism) |
| Heo | 80 | With a spouse and a son | 7 children's support | No schooling | Own house | Children (7), husband |
| Ryu | 65 | With a spouse and a son | 7 children's support | No schooling | Own house | Children (7), husband |
| Jin | 78 | With wife | Retirement/office worker | Pension | Own house | No |
| Woo | 74 | With wife | Retirement/taxi driver | Pension | Own house | No |

live with any of her children even after her last unmarried son gets married.

Ryu Halmeoni is 65 years old and lives with her husband and unmarried children. She is college educated but has not worked. She has a housekeeper due to an operation for intestinal cancer a year ago. She also has a history of uterine cancer. She does not want her children to take care of her. She is afraid of becoming a nuisance to her children. Instead, she is prepared to be cared for by a paid worker in a nursing home.

Jin Harabeoji is 78 years old and lives with his wife. He complains that he cannot see his children as often as he wants as they live some distance away. He refuses to move in with his children because he does not want to leave the house he designed. He regards it as natural that his wife should take care of him. He thinks leaving the house to his wife would be a sufficient reward for her to care for him. He used to advise his wife to use her inheritance to pay for a nursing home for herself after his death.

Woo Harabeoji is 74 years old and lives with his wife, Mun Halmeoni. He has a regular income from his investment in a taxi company from which he is retired as a driver. He likes to drink and socialize with friends. He is not interested in leaving any inheritance to his children, believing that his wife will look after him until he dies.

Reciprocity at Stake

An unbalanced and unfair reciprocity between parents and children is most explicit in the study. Complaints are expressed in terms of labor, money, or both. They rarely mention the emotional reciprocity at stake as a major factor. Choe Halmeoni and Bang Halmeoni were the breadwinners after their husbands' death and now look after the family instead of their daughters-in-law. However, neither of them are free to ask for money or demand care from their children. Choe Halmeoni questions how any mother can ask her own children for money. One of the reasons seems to be because they feel guilty for

not having provided sufficient economic support for their education or marriage. Bang Halmeoni says, "Had I given them enough to get a house, I might be able to ask for some spending money. But I only gave 50 million won when my first son needed 70 million for a housing deposit. I can't ask them for money. They give me 100,000 won here and there, but how can a mother ask her children for money?" She feels sorry that her second son is still living with her because she could not provide for a separate house. She believes she should be a giver for her children, but not a receiver.

At the age of 67, Bang Halmeoni continues to work almost two shifts. She also cooks for the family, does household chores, and takes care of her grandson. She knows very well that it is hard work, but caring for her grandson gives her a sense of life fulfillment and without whom life would seem "too empty." But she does not hide her resentment that she is neither economically supported nor respected by her sons. She earns money as well as looks after the family, but she feels that her children do not treat her properly. She is afraid that if she does not help look after them, they may be harsh towards her. She explains her situation:

I have to prepare all the meals and that often makes me very cross. I go home from work and then have to start cooking. Who says we should enjoy it? But when my daughter-in-law took the baby to her mother's home, my life felt too empty. For ten whole days, I didn't cook. Without them, I didn't feel like I was really living. So I cook for them and manage to eat a little, too. My children do not give me spending money. They think that I have my own income. The fact is that I am penniless, but I can't bring myself to ask for money. . . . I would rather earn it myself. I do housework until ten o'clock, then on the way to my job at the tailor, I drop my grandson off with a neighbor who looks after him (informal arrangement). After getting off work at eight (after working for ten hours), I play with the baby for three to four hours until my son and daughter-in-law come home. They leave home before seven in the morning. If I had one hundred million won, I would kick them out and live alone. So I keep telling them to save and save at least 50 to 60 million won,

but they don't seem to manage to save. . . . They travel, dine out, play around, and never think ahead or save their money. The old saying goes that ten children cannot support one parent, while one parent can raise ten children. I hope that if I get sick, I'll die within a few days. I cannot bear the thought of my children dragging me through a prolonged illness.

Choe Halmeoni did her best to raise her only son, but his education stopped at the secondary level. She feels guilty when his business does not thrive (which she attributes to him not having gone to college). For economic reasons, she lives with his son's family and continues to look after them, but the arrangement does not seem to satisfy their economic needs, nor provide emotional support. If she could afford to, she would prefer to live alone. She does all the household chores, as her son and daughter-in-law are busy running their shop. She prepares breakfast, washes clothes, cleans up, and cooks alone. Her daughter-in-law does not feel obligated to do housework. Sometimes Choe Halmeoni even washes her daughter-in-law's underwear, and regrets that she has no daughters of her own. She complained of her ill health all throughout the interview.

Being old means feeling pain everywhere and always needing money. I thought I would only need to eat but I need money for medicine, around 100,000 won for medicine for my hypertension, stroke, and eyes. Having dentures requires laser treatment. But I cannot ask for money from my son. It would be a little bit better if I had a daughter.

Our cases show that living with married children creates psychological confusion and conflict as the arrangement does not necessarily solve economic or emotional needs. However, living alone does not necessarily solve these same conflicts. They are not entirely free of the expectations of filial piety from their children. Women certainly give the gift of caring and carry a value not recognized in the exchange economy of capitalist society, but there is a contradiction in that they do not encourage or even leave their children to take on an

elder-care job. The thought of being cared for by their children makes them uncomfortable. Some are strict about not giving or receiving anything from their children, as demonstrated by the interviewee who said, "We live on our own means and never get any spending money from the children." She receives 200,000 won once a year for her birthday. Her two sons bought houses through combination of income and bank loans.

Caring Burden Extends to Grandmas' Shoulders

It is a well known fact that elderly women extend their caregiving work to their grandchildren, especially in cases of their children's divorce. In contemporary Korea, it is quite common to see *joson gajok* (grandparent-grandchild family), which are mostly made up of grandmothers and their grandchildren.⁷ The families of Yang and Bak Halmeoni are typical *joson gajok*. Despite some serious health problems, they both look after their grandchildren, following the divorce of Yang's son and the death of Park's son.

Yang Halmeoni takes pleasure in her caring role as a grandmother and is devoted to caring for her granddaughter. By the time she was done raising her own children, Yang's son was divorced. At the time when she was free from caring her own children, her divorced son and his daughter joined her. She does not complain much about it. She considers caring for them to be her work. Her son is retired and her granddaughter is in her late twenties. Yang Halmeoni rarely leaves the house due to mobility problems following a car accident. Despite this, she is satisfied with the fact that she is looking after her granddaughter with whom she has a very close relationship. All she cares about is looking after her son and granddaughter, and she

7. According to KNSO (2005), approximately 60,000 households are *joson gajok*, where the burden of care mostly falls on the shoulders of the grandmother. They are usually lower income. The number of *joson gajok* has doubled over the past ten years since 1995.

emphasizes that the most precious thing in her life is her granddaughter. Sometimes she is just happy to do anything for them and does not feel tempted to go out to enjoy herself at all. She says she would not trade her granddaughter for anything in the world.

She says that in her younger days, she only got two to three hours of sleep a night because of the burden of raising seven children. She never had a moment of rest or play. She believes that a mother has to keep busy every moment to keep her children free from household chores, and to never let them be bothered with menial work.

Park Halmeoni used to live as a typical middle-class housewife until her husband, a producer for a major broadcasting station, died. Her economic means were drained from treating a son with stomach cancer, and she dropped into the low-income bracket. Her son and daughter-in-law ran a business together, so she took care of two grandsons from a very early age. Her daughter-in-law did not take the sons after the death of their father, as they had become used to living with their grandmother. Park Halmeoni's daughter-in-law sends her 500,000 a month. It is not sufficient to pay the monthly rent and living costs for the three of them. Her grandsons are college students but are taking terms off because they have to earn money for tuition. The thing she dreads the most is that she might become a burden to them when she gets old and sick. The two grandsons, being boys, do not know anything about housework. She would like to help them until the day she dies. Though she admits that it is really hard work to look after them, she rarely complains about the work. Sometimes she just pleads with them not to create too much laundry. She says she has terrible pains in her back, but only wishes to live longer so she can look after them.

Both Yang and Park are determined to stay alive to help their loved ones and to overcome their health problems. They want to help out until their grandchildren are settled with jobs and spouses of their own. Neither of them have daughters-in-law, but they manage to extend their caring job as much as they can. They are grateful that they are able to be so close to their grandchildren, to whom they

devote their remaining energy, which they say they offer as a last gift to their grandchildren.

Gendered Caring and Men's Tales

It is interesting to hear different tales of elderly life from men and their spouses. Mun Halmeoni continuously complains about her husband who creates more work around the house but brings in less money since he is retired.

As my husband is retired I have to prepare three meals a day, and nothing is more of a nuisance than this. It would be easier to work in the snack shop (which she used to run). He is particular with his food, demanding hot soups and broths with every meal. I wish I were dead. He only eats freshly prepared food, which makes me feel like I'm his personal chef. . . . He likes to go out, which makes it easier on me, but he spends money. He receives 800,000 won from his investment, but nothing is left after paying for car insurance and gasoline. He spends a lot of money on his car, because all of his friends got rid of their own and get rides from him without paying for gas. He was not the only breadwinner; my economic contribution was essential for the family. However, if I speak my mind, he gets upset. I'm tempted to suggest selling the house and getting a divorce, but I don't dare. Still, I wish he would.

On the other hand, Mun Halmeoni's husband, Woo Harabeoji, has different stories about how he spends his day. Woo Harabeoji is retired but always looks for opportunities to get out of house. He has a position as an honorary member of a company where he invested some money, so usually has lunch in the company. To him, home is only the place where he sleeps, because he spends most of his time away from home. But when he is there, he wants to be cared for by his wife.

Elderly women tend to complain more about their husbands' incompetence in daily life.

My husband never picks up his own socks. He never even looks after our grandchildren when they visit. He turns a deaf ear to my pleading to wipe the table. My only consolation is that he's not sick. What more can I hope for? He likes shopping together, and dresses up to go shopping. My daughter asks, "Why does he get so dressed up? Who would look at him?" He is really obsessed with his looks. Also he is a hypochondriac; he goes to the hospital for tests all the time even though he has no real symptoms. I had to take him to the hospital two, three times. I said he should be hospitalized but he never goes alone and insists that I go with him (Jo).

On the other hand, elderly men think they deserve care as they have worked to earn a living for the family. Jin Harabeoji thinks that he deserves his wife's care as he has been the primary breadwinner all his life. So he expects his wife to care for him until he dies in the same house where he currently lives. He does not hesitate to speak about his right to be cared for by his wife.

In principle, I want to die at home. I have lived here for the last thirty years, so I am attached to this house. That is how I feel, but our children live elsewhere, and my wife is the only one near and the only one for me to depend on. So I get really worried when she gets sick. Who else would look after me if she is not around? She shouldn't be sick and so I take her to doctors when she does not feel well. I tell my wife, "When I am dead, sell this house and go live in a nursing home." When I am gone, it will be difficult for the children to take care of her as they live far away (Jin).

He has an income from pension and rent and thus is economically independent. But he expects in vain to receive economic support and care from his children. He has declared that he will take care of all the living expenses and medical fees for his wife and himself, but will not leave any inheritance to his children. He follows the current trend of the elderly to live independently from their children. However, his sons want to receive some financial assistance from their parents, which threatens the financial independence of the old couple.

Jin Harabeoji and Woo Harabeoji prefer to die at home rather than in a hospital. Wherever that happens, they assume without any doubt that they will be looked after by their wives. They seem more at ease with the idea of receiving care from their wives rather than their children. As Jin Harabeoji cannot read newspapers due to age-related macular degeneration, he likes to stay at home listening to the news on the radio or watching news and sports on TV. As he usually occupies the living room, his wife watches soap operas in her small room. When the researcher visited their home, Jin Harabeoji was in the living room, the center of the house, while the wife was hidden in the room. This scene demonstrates how women sacrifice for the comfort of their husbands. Jin Harabeoji does not even imagine having to look after his wife. He assumes he will get sick and die before her, as she is younger than him.

A Wish to Be "Independent," Not a Nuisance

Elderly women are perplexed as "independent elderly" is currently promoted in public discourses. Without a well-established social safety net for the elderly, they are encouraged to be independent in their old age, a state to which they have never been accustomed (Rhee et al. 2003; Park Y. 2007). All of our interviewees expressed their desire to be "independent" as much as possible in their daily lives. Some said they want to live apart from their children, while others said they do not want to be a "nuisance" to their children. Heo Halmeoni is typical of an ideal independent elderly person. She proudly tells the researcher that she wouldn't live with her children even though her eldest son invited her to stay in his apartment. She emphasizes that her house is most comfortable and she likes to cook for her husband to her own taste. She plans to live by herself even after her husband passes away. He is a little sick. When the researcher wanted to interview her, she was on the way back from a pharmacy bringing his medicine. He needs her "next to him all the time." On the other hand, Ryu Halmeoni is more typical in not wanting to be a burden to her children. She gave lengthy details about her hospitalization and

paid helper. She hired a helper so her children would not have to be bothered. She told the researcher that she would be uncomfortable with having her children take care of her. Ryu Halmeoni thinks it is bad for her children to take time out of their schedules for her. She cannot bear to have her children sacrifice their own lives to look after a sick mother. Her children's achievement is more important and valuable to her. She repeatedly says, "I really don't want my children to visit me instead of doing their own work. I really don't want that." She is determined to go to a retirement home when she is too old to lead an independent life.

The elderly cannot always be independent. Only a few can afford to live alone. Among our interviewees, only those above middle class could afford to lead an independent life. Most had to live frugally but feel guilty about spending their children's money for themselves. For example, they do not want to spend their children's hard-earned money for their medical expenses. Elderly women are very eager to manage their own health so as not to be a bother for anyone. Our interviewees visited doctors at an early stage in their illnesses. Knowing that nobody will take care of them, elder women have no choice but to stick to a "healthy life style." They take pains to manage their own health and run to the doctor whenever necessary, partly for the sake of "an independent life" and partly so as not to be a nuisance to their children. But women do not manage health for their own sake like men do. Such efforts are more crucial for lower-income women, but women who are well off show a similar tendency. Even when they have sufficient economic resources for medical care and hired assistance, women who have spent their whole lives looking after others feel uneasy about being looked after. Furthermore, it is a dilemma for elderly women, who were used to providing unpaid care services, to have to replace unpaid family care with paid labor when they get old. It is also difficult for them to afford these "dependency workers" (Seok 2006).

Becoming Elderly Women: The Site of Contradiction and Dilemma

As Korean society becomes an aging society, the elderly are a new social risk-bearer in the absence of an adequate care system. Specifically, elderly women who have been life-long caregivers are left to their own care in old age as the conventional family care system erodes with no institutional care system to replace it. They cannot but feel uneasy and uncomfortable in making the transition from caregiving to care receiving when they are in need, partly because they are not accustomed to it, and partly because the care system does not work at either the family level or institutional level. This ethnography of elderly women's lives reveals the contradictory position of Korean women in general and elderly women in particular. They are tightly bound up in a gendered circuit of caring.

Our interviewees demonstrated that women who are placed in the role from caring for family members do not easily transform their role from caregiver into care receiver in family. Or we might say that the transition does not properly occur. In the later phases of their lives, elderly women come to see a kind of contradiction in caring as they experience a shift or transition of their position from caregiver to care receiver. They are branded as "unproductive" people in need of their children's care, attention and time rather than caring for them as they used to. This situation leads to conflict with younger women in the family who are supposed to take over the role of caregiver. This conflict between women on the surface makes us reflect on the relationship between the male avoidance of caring work and oppressiveness of caring work for women. As women cannot survive only by caring for family members but need a (male) breadwinner, their caring role makes them bear the double burden of wage work and caring. Otherwise, they lose out on employment opportunities and become vulnerable in the social structure as being placed as dependents of the person they look after (Kittay 2002).

The findings of this study are similar to those of feminist scholars who critique the research trend that marginalizes elderly women as

social burdens or objects of caring from the perspective of younger women who juggle a double burden of employment and caring (Copper 1988; Reinharz 1997). The juxtaposition of young women caring for others against elderly women being cared for can be differentiated from that of elderly men who are used to being cared for. Such conflict interests us in the need to further examine the role of women's caring vis-à-vis individual men's avoidance of that role. In the patriarchal family structure, men have the power and resources to be looked after while women bear and raise sons and are rewarded by being cared for by their children in their old age. The problematic reciprocity of caring is the point where most of our elderly encounter in different ways depending on their situation. In particular, many elderly women tend to find solutions independent of their children rather than expecting filial piety from them. This study reveals the mechanisms used to camouflage reciprocity with closeness on the one hand and invent "independent elderly" to counter the fading sense of filial piety on the other. But it is becoming more difficult to burden grown children with elder care in the name of filial piety.

In the rapid change towards an aging society, coupled with an increasing number of women working outside the home, the limitations of elderly care within individual families and the need to institutionalize elderly care cannot find the right interface between the state and the family or between the family and the market. The critical point to be attended to here is that this is not limited to elderly women but that it reflects a gendered cycle that will be repeated for younger women when they grow old in the future. This ethnographical study of the elderly shows that elderly women are the site where contradictions and dilemmas are delineated, where the family, state and market conflict, and upon which (unfair) reciprocity, (assumed) intimacy and (ideal) independent elderly discourse is nested. Accordingly, absurd combinations appear that jeopardize the security of elderly women. It also shows the point where feminists and elder studies meet. It deserves our attention that what feminism and gerontology have in common is an attempt to create a social consciousness, social theory and social policy that will improve the opportuni-

ties of a specific group (Reinharz 1997, 74). Further studies on elderly women are expected to spark fresh interest not only in gerontological issues but also in gender studies. Elderly women have the potential to trigger meaningful social changes, as it is not unusual for women to be more progressive in their later life.⁸ Elderly Korean women and our interviewees represent the limits and possibilities of change.

8. Gloria Steinem carried a placard which read, "Women Get More Radical with Age," at the 25th reunion of her graduation from Smith College. Her sign was taken from her 1979 article, "Why Young Women are More Conservative" (reprinted in Steinem 1983), which argues that, although there are exceptions, and in contrast with men, women in general do not begin to challenge the politics of their lives until later (cited from Reinharz 1997, 80).

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