

Special Feature

Ambiguous Agency and Change: Life Stories of Working Women in a Seoul Marketplace

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1. Introduction

Female dressmakers and street entrepreneurs have contributed enormously to the national and local economic development of South Korea (hereafter Korea). Garment manufacturing was one of the leading sectors in the country's modern industrial development, which began in the 1960s, while street business has long sustained numerous Korean households. The Dongdaemun Sijang developed as a center of garment production and trade and street business in the 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s, in and around the marketplace, the number of female street entrepreneurs grew, and garment manufacturing developed rapidly through the hiring and exploitation of young unmarried women (Chun 2004). In the 1970s, the labor movement crystallized in the area as a response to this exploitation with the active participation of female workers (Chun 2004; Koo 2001; Kim 2006). Towards the 1980s, through changes in international and national industrial structure, the Dongdaemun Sijang became a fashion trade center in Korea, while the environs became its production sites. Many garment workers started their own subcontracted workshops or worked as employees of those workshops. In addition, more and more married or widowed women engaged in fashion and food-related businesses on the street throughout these periods.

The shape that Korea's most recent pursuit of market-oriented economic growth has taken has threatened the economic activities of these women. Urban development forces have been replacing many "traditional" places of business, including the Dongdaemun Sijang, one of the few remaining "traditional" marketplaces. Large commercial complexes and middle-class residences have begun to exclude small-scale garment manufacturers and street vendors. The dominant public image of these women as "backward" and "old" social and economic subjects equates them with the image of the "traditional" marketplaces now "old-fashioned" sites to be eliminated or revamped.¹ Living in this changing environment, these women continue to engage in their economic activities but in diverse and varying ways. Yet, little public and scholarly attention has been paid to the current circumstances and processes of these women's lives.

While the number of studies on working women in marginalized sectors of the Korean economy has increased recently, they concentrate on the young unmarried female factory workers of the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on that prime

1. See Noritake (2009a) for the details of the spatial and social reconfiguration of the area's economic development.

time of the “Miracle on the Han River” and Korean labor movements, many of these studies tend to view these women’s lives as the processes of their struggles against, and negotiations with, the structures that constrained their life possibilities. As many of those women actively participated in the labor movement in the 1970s and the democratization process in the late 1980s, the accounts regard these women as social agents who acted for change in order to overcome the once-dominant representation of female factory workers as either exploited victims or docile daughters and workers for Korean economic prosperity.

Such a view tends to reduce these women’s agency to the capacity to resist and fight against the constrictive conditions related to gender, class and labor. Chun (2004) depicts both how limiting gender and class relations dominated the labor process and trade unionism in the textile and garment sector in the 1970s and how young unmarried female workers challenged and resisted such forces to contribute to labor, cultural and political development. Koo (2001) emphasizes the braveness of female activists and workers to lead the labor protests and democratic union movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly, the academic feminist agenda to overcome gender hierarchy and women’s subordination through research prioritizes focusing on women’s agency as resisting and transforming uneven gender relations. This agenda is likely to promote, or be supported by, a generalized notion that *all* women wish to resist and subvert gender relations and that they enact agency to resist gender inequality. This occludes other forms of agency women may enact for multiple and different desires, as well as those forms of agency which do not seem to lead to a transformation of unequal gender and other social relations but nevertheless in the long term bring about such an end.

In contrast, a few other studies describe the multiplicity and complexity in the forms of women’s agency as a capacity to resist, cope with, consent to, or reproduce structure. Kim Seung Kyung (1997) shows how young female workers’ lives in the Masan Free Export Zone in the late 1980s were constrained by age, gender, and class, and how these women became actively involved in *various* forms of resistance, overt and covert, for better living conditions. Kim Won (2006) analyzes the dialectical relationships between the dominant discourse and the counter discourse of young female factory workers of the 1970s. He includes a variety of women’s desires which can be understood not only as resistance to the structures but also as reproduction of the structures and autonomous everyday desires. In these studies, the ambiguity of women’s agency emerges.

However, the limited focus on young unmarried female factory workers of the

1970s and 1980s as key social agents has left open the question of what happened to them after they married, left the factories, and grew older. This narrow focus also relates to the notion that once married “not-young” women are principally “mothers” and passive subjects for change.² It further leads to overlooking “less formal” (temporary and non-regular, *bijeonggyujik*) and “informal” female workers as the subject of labor studies. This is because married and “not-young” women comprise the majority of “less formal” and “informal” workers, and also because they are less organized as “workers,” therefore, less involved in visible labor movements.³ That their lives are not viewed as part of economic and social processes. Neglecting “not young” female marginalized workers limits our understanding of the relationship between women’s agency and change.

Thus, while contributing to the body of studies focusing on the complexity and ambiguity of the forms of women’s agency, this article also attempts to emphasize the uncertain and unpredictable dimensions of agency in relation to social change. As Laura Ahearn has argued:

[I]t is important to ask how people themselves conceive of their own actions and whether they attribute responsibility for events to individuals, to fate, to deities, or to other animate or inanimate forces.... [There is a] need for anthropologists to ask not only what agency means for themselves as theorists, but what it means for the people with whom they work, and how those meanings may shift over time (Ahearn 2001, 113).

Tracing how women articulate their life stories as coherent processes, we can observe a meaning and diversity in those women’s experiences, which cannot be explained if these women are viewed as static or as a unified sociocultural group. When the research is about agency and change, it is not adequate to represent a woman’s

2. It is relevant to note that Korean dominant public discourse perceives women as composed of two categories: *gihon* (married) and *mihon* (unmarried) women. This imagined distinction is neither temporary nor mutable. Once a woman married, she will not become *mihon* again. Generally, *gihon* women are equated with mothers and “not-young” women, therefore include those divorced and widowed. Even unmarried women could be included if they were not “young,” and tend to be marginalised. In this picture, the category of *mihon* women is equated with that of *never-married* “young” women. “Young” women are largely conceived of as those who are not far older than the “marriageable age” (*gyeorhon jeongnyeonggi*), although it differs across time, space, gender, etc. About the public representation of inot-youngi working women in Korea see Noritake 2009b.

3. As the problems of and collective protests of female *bijeonggyujik* workers are becoming visible more studies are emerging on these less formal and informal female workers. See Chun (2009) and Noritake (2009) as representative studies of female *bijeonggyujik* workers.

experience within a short period as her whole life experience and a woman's experience as applicable to all the members of her group, such as the categories of Korean women and marginalized working women. Some forms of change are not always visible or transformed into large-scale changes in a short period, even if in the long run, they give rise to meaningful social changes (McNay 2003:153; Ortner 2006:8). We can understand such changes and their implications only if we trace women's lives as long-term processes.

In this article, my argument is that these women have enacted agency not only to resist constrictive conditions, but also to enjoy pursuing their multiple desires. These desires can be similar but also different among the women, coexist in a single woman's life, and change according to life cycle and changes in the wider society. The principal motors for, and effects of, the pursuit of their desires are related to acquiring capacity or becoming capable of doing something in particular, and making relationships or becoming related to someone in a particular way. And even the actions they have taken without aiming to transform constrictive gender and other social patterns can bring meaningful changes over a long period.

To better understand women's self-formation and social change as on-going, uncertain, and unpredictable, this paper considers ambiguity, complexity and changing aspects of women's agency by highlighting what the women evaluate as examples of their own agency. The analysis draws on ethnographic research conducted in October 2006, May to August 2007, and March 2008. It includes in-depth interviews with eight street entrepreneurs and eight dressmakers, and my interaction and participant observation with many other street entrepreneurs and dressmakers.⁴ I begin by reconstructing the women's life trajectories, then go on to discuss their agency as resistance, acquiring capacity and building relationships.

2. Becoming Different

The street entrepreneurs and dressmakers differ from each other in the paths that led them to engage in their current work. This is partly due to life-cycle events, such as pre-marriage employment, marriage, and post-marriage employment. All the street entrepreneurs I interacted with started their businesses after marriage. Just a

4. The details of the sixteen women with whom I conducted in-depth interviews are provided in the appendix at the end of the article.

few of them were born in Seoul or migrated there alone before marriage, with most having migrated with their husbands upon marriage. Before marriage, they helped their family in work such as agriculture and small businesses. In contrast, most of the dressmakers involved in my research started dressmaking as *sida* (apprentices) when they were teenagers and unmarried as their first waged job. Some of them migrated to Seoul with or without their families, and others were from Seoul. They soon became *misingsa* (skilled machinists). Many of them married men who were also garment workers, and continued working in the sector after marriage. Some moved to other workshops and others sewed at home as a side job. Most commonly, they ran family-owned subcontracted garment workshops together with their husbands. In recent years, many of these women stopped running their workshops due to economic constraints, and now work as waged dressmakers. Many divorced or widowed dressmakers run their own workshops, while a smaller number are engaged in different jobs including the operation of fitting and alteration workshops. Only some of the dressmakers are the principal breadwinners of their families, while almost all of the street entrepreneurs are married and serve as their family's main source of support. All these dressmakers have participated in *Chamteo*, a social organization that supports the career development and well-being of female dressmakers. All the street entrepreneurs currently face the threat of eviction from the Dongdaemun Sijang area, and are members of the KOSC (Korean Street-Vendors' Confederation), which aims to defend their right to engage in street business to earn a livelihood (*saengjonkwon*) against the local authority's attempts to evict them.

Although all of the street entrepreneurs and dressmakers have been married at one point in their lives, had children, and supported their families, these two groups' identities have changed in different ways. Most of the dressmakers have transformed themselves from *sida* to *misingsa*, to *misingsa*-wives of family-run subcontracted workshops, or to self-employed workshop entrepreneurs, and are now becoming dressmaking artisans. The street entrepreneurs have multiplied their identities as housewives and mothers, street workers, family breadwinners, entrepreneurs, anti-eviction activists, and they are now in the process of becoming ageing subjects. The dressmakers tend to view their work as a means to be self-sufficient and remain autonomous, rather than as primarily a means to support their family. They became self-supporting wage earners before marriage, and marriage did not change the course of their professional lives drastically. In contrast, most of the street entrepreneurs began to support themselves after marriage, and view their work

and life's path with greater ambivalence. Many of them see their changing status from homemaker to street entrepreneur as one forced by the economic needs of their families, and consequently as undesirable. A yearning to become homemakers and a confidence in their ability in business coexist both within the group and in individual women.

I will now discuss the women's articulation of the relationship between their enactment of agency, self-formation and change. What forms of agency do they articulate that have impacted on their lives in ways that have empowered them? How can we understand the similarities and differences among these women's experiences and articulations? First, I examine the women's enactments of agency as resistance. Although few women articulated straightforwardly their resistance to dominant gender and other social inequalities, these narratives reflect uncertain, ambiguous and complicated relationships between agency and change.

3. The Ambiguity of Resistance

Longing to Change One's Life

A difference observed between the street entrepreneurs and dressmakers in their articulation of agency and change is that many of the street entrepreneurs evaluated their desire for marriage as a means to change their lives, while none of the dressmakers did. The narrative of Mun Mijeong, a street entrepreneur in her late forties, highlights her experiences of gender discrimination at young age. She still resents her grandmother's discriminatory preference for her grandson over her granddaughters. Mun Mijeong was born in Seoul and had six sisters and one brother. She was the youngest of all. Her father died at an early age, and her mother and grandmother ran a small restaurant to raise the seven children. "At that time, the son was the best [for the grandmother]." "[She] wanted to raise the [grand] son [well] unconditionally, and would say that the [grand]daughters should keep to their work." Mun Mijeong says that even though she did not have any specific dream she had wanted to stay on at school. In her generation, a woman pursuing higher education was already becoming quite common.

Her response to this condition was to stay at home to work in her mother's restaurant. Her wish to marry early was an expression of a desire to live

independently of her family. She apparently did not do anything to resist her family's gender hierarchy, and to wish early marriage seems to follow the dominant womanhood of that time. Can her act be understood as neither resistance nor enactment of agency? If one traces attentively how she articulates this experience of wishing to marry, her agency emerges as resistance. She says that she believed that marriage could change her life for the better. Resistance to gender discrimination emerged at a later stage in her life in the form of giving her daughter and son equal access to education. Her act to endure gender discrimination in her natal home to decide to marry early has now transformed into a resistance but in a creative way and over a long period.

Song Okhui, another street entrepreneur in her mid-sixties, born in Jeollabuk Province, was sent at the age of eight to work in her aunt's silk reeling workshop. She recounts that her aunt was a hard taskmaster and that combined with the separation from her family meant that she cried everyday. She describes this childhood as the hardest time in her life. Rather than poverty or the loss of schooling, her sense of justice was outraged by the fact that it was her own mother's sister treating her so harshly. At the age of fifteen, she decided to flee to Seoul. This project was fueled also by the fact that there were many *gachul yeoseong* (young unmarried women running away from home) at that time, and that she had a close friend who wanted to go to Seoul with her.⁵ When this project failed, Song Okhui decided that marriage was the only way to liberate herself from the hardship. She evaluates her marriage positively and describes her husband as having been a very good person. When he was alive he appreciated her work and care for the family very much, and she claims that this was a main source of her energy to endure the hard life they shared after marriage. Her narrative shows that she reinforced her desire to become a housewife following her husband's death, implying that this desire was nurtured by her experience of being appreciated by her husband for her performance of homemaking and not by the desire to do homemaking work itself.

Whether women found interesting work and became self-sufficient before marriage seems to have a marked influence on women's life trajectories. Many street entrepreneurs stayed at home and wished to marry for their self-realization. In contrast, Bae Minsuk, another street entrepreneur in her mid-fifties, became self-

5. The issue of *gachul yeoseong* was a serious concern of the local authorities of Seoul and other regions. Within their imagination, it is argued, these young unmarried women who came alone to Seoul or other urban areas were the objects which have deserted the protection of the patriarchy therefore should be protected, and at the same time, a threat to the ideal nuclear family whose core was the married couple of man and woman (Kim 2006:157).

supporting before marriage by migrating to Seoul by herself. She decided to search for an interesting job in the capital, to escape from the strict gender norms of her hometown in Gyeongsangbuk Province. In addition, she married a disabled man despite her parents' opposition, and decided to support her new family by running a snack stand on the street. Emerging from her narrative is her desire for, and pride in, becoming independent, self-confident, and a successful and ethical entrepreneur by paying special attention to socially marginalized customers, such as those with disabilities.

However, many of those street entrepreneurs who were not self-supporting before marriage, too, found other life possibilities at a later stage in their lives. Both Mun Mijeong and Song Okhui now find themselves capable and happy to run street businesses and make efforts to better their operations. Simultaneously, Song Okhui's desire to become a housewife is strong. Here we can observe the ambiguity of women's identities and agency enactment in self-formation.

Desire for a Specific Job

While most of the dressmakers found interesting jobs by chance, some fought for specific jobs they wanted to pursue against Korean gender norms. Some jobs were supposed to be for young unmarried women and others for older married women. Even though it has been illegal for some time, employers still ask that candidates stipulate their gender, age and marital status.⁶ Apart from formal employment practices, there is also a dominant public perception of jobs regarded as appropriate or inappropriate for young unmarried women. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the light manufacturing sector actively sought young unmarried female workers. In the 1980s, those sectors started to seek married female workers because the employment opportunities for young unmarried women diversified and those sectors suffered a labor shortage. New "decent" jobs for young unmarried women included *samuwon* (clerks) while self-employment in business including street entrepreneurship was regarded as the province of married women.

Ahn Eungyeong, a dressmaker in her late forties, endeavored to run a *hompaebyeon* (home decoration and bedding fabric wares) business. Her parents wanted her to get an office job such as a *gyeongni samuwon* (accounting clerk) so

6. For women, the conditions of both age and marital status are presented for most jobs in addition to academic record. For men, military services rather than marital status is an important qualification for jobs.

they sent her to a *sanggo* (commercial high school).⁷ She did not enjoy the work, however, and resigned in order to pursue her desire to run her own business. She explains:

As I went to a *sanggo*, I was able to find work. But the accounting job didn't suit me.... and I thought I should learn a business.... The reason why I married is also.... Well, I didn't have any thoughts of marriage, and when I was twenty-two years old, I learned machine-sewing, and at twenty-four, I wanted to establish a shop. Before that, from eighteen on, I earned my salary and gave all of it to my mom, and she helped me save money. I started to earn money in order to... to run my own business. But, my dad and mom said, "an unmarried woman must not engage in business (*gyeorhondo anhan yeojaeaga museum jangsaya, jeoldae andoenda*)! What are you saying? We will not allow it!" In this way, I quarreled with them, and then I ended up getting married.

The notion that a woman of marriageable age (*gyeorhon jeongnyeonggi*) should not engage in *jangsa* (self-employed in business), has been a powerful discourse that has long kept young women away from self-employment.⁸ Among the women involved in my research, although a few had helped with the business of their mother or other relatives before marriage, none of them engaged in business as self-employed entrepreneurs. Ahn Eungyeong conveys her frustration at this social censure, which stopped her from running a business just because she was of marriageable age.

Importantly, Ahn Eungyeong's narrative shows the ambivalence that characterized her decision to marry. She pursued her desire to run a business by marrying, conscious that once married she could pursue this life project. At the same time, however, she decided to marry because she liked her husband. He was a colleague in the *hompaesyeon* shop where she worked as an employee to obtain work experience until marriage. Her parents opposed her marriage because of his family's poverty. Yet, she was determined to marry him, she says, because she was sure that if they worked hard together they would be able to support their family. She ran a curtain-manufacturing workshop for several years while her husband ran

7. In Korea, as alternatives to high schools of humanities and sciences, there are *sanggo* for commercial vocational training, and *gonggo* for industrial vocational training. There are many *sanggo* exclusively for girls and many *gonggo* exclusively for boys.

8. Many people still seem to have such a notion about unmarried women's self-employment in business as inappropriate despite the recent increase of the number of young women engaged in street or non-street entrepreneurship at least in Seoul.

a fabric shop, and then opened a *hompaesyeon* shop. In Korean society where one must navigate through the many “musts” and “must-nots” for women according to their marital status, the passage from *mihon yeoseong* (unmarried women) to *gihon yeoseong* (married women) involves multiple conflicts. In all appearances, Ahn Eungyeong married to follow the dominant model of womanhood. Yet this has not reproduced the dominant model of gender relations. Her married life has not meant her becoming an idealized wife and mother, but rather becoming equally capable, productive and responsible with her husband, realizing herself as a dressmaker at the same time as supporting her family. She now participates in *Chamteo*'s skill-upgrading training to aid in her daughter's dream of becoming a fashion stylist. What other forms of resistance and change in relation to marriage do the women articulate?

Yearning for Marriage

Most of the dressmakers are not interested in talking about the desire they had for marriage. Their narratives imply that their interest to marry was something natural. Chang Haegyeong, a dressmaker in her mid-fifties, says, “As I am a woman (*yeojainikka*), I came to marry in the middle [of my career].” Most of the dressmakers married garment workers whom they met and fell in love with in the workplace while most of the street entrepreneurs married by matchmaking.

A narrative of resistance runs through the desire of many dressmakers of marriageable age not to marry men who are also involved in garment work. They actively avoided doing so in order to escape from garment work, which they considered hard. Kang Sujeong, in her mid-forties, says:

We said we should not marry men of the same sector...It's because if your husband does the *jaedansa* (cutter)'s work in the same sector you will have to do more [garment] work.⁹ Among ten colleagues of ours, seven married those who weren't a part of this industry. Two other friends and I married men engaged in this trade.... But after marrying a male garment worker, one friend earned a lot of money. They opened a business, ran a workshop, and sold [their products]. Now they don't work. They bought a large building,

9. In the garment manufacturing, there was a gender division of labour that women were *misingsa* and men were *jaedansa*. Mostly skilled *misingsa* married *jaedansa* to run their own subcontracted garment workshops. The work of *misingsa* and *jaedansa* is the core of the garment manufacturing industry.

and built a new one.... Some do their business well to make money, and others... suffer hardship. Therefore, most of us tried not to marry men in the same field, and searched for men with other jobs.

For most dressmakers I met during my research, marriage meant continuous work in dressmaking, and they found different meanings in doing so as their lives advanced. Most of the dressmakers married garment workers and kept working in the industry. All the dressmakers I interviewed deny that they had regrets about having kept working in the sector until now. They distinctively talk about their desire for dressmaking work itself. Although these women's continuous working in dressmaking looks on the surface as though it is reproducing existing uneven gender relations—gender division of labor between subordinate female *misingsa* and male managers/*jaedansa*—, it meant for them neither stasis nor lack of progress, but rather an important opportunity for change over a prolonged period. I now turn to these different meanings, which have largely been overlooked in the existing accounts and dominant imagination because they have not been seen as resistance or change for which women enacted agency.

4. Becoming Capable as a Form of Agency

Desire for a Meaningful Occupation

One desire of the women I had not considered at all prior to meeting them is a desire *not* to pursue study. It is thought provoking in contemporary Korea, where there is a widespread assumption that everyone has to, and wants to, go to school to realize a promising future. Many scholarly accounts of Korean female factory workers of the 1970s and 1980s, too, have articulated their desire to go to school as one of their main motives to engage in factory work at a young age as some factories had organized night schools for employees (Chun 2004, Kim 1997, Koo 2001). Yoon Myeonghwa, a dressmaker in her mid-fifties, migrated to Seoul with her family when she was ten years old, and started to work in a garment workshop in the Dongdaemun Sijang area. When I asked her if she had had to interrupt her schooling because of the need to earn money for her family, she said, “Yes, but I was not sad at all, which surprises people. I was very happy to quit school because

I didn't like to study. I didn't want to go to school. I wanted to do something else." Kim Mina, in her late thirties, too, found joy in garment work. She came alone to Seoul from Gangwon Province when she was fifteen to work in a workshop. Having worked more than twenty years as a *misingsa*, she expresses how happy she was to find herself capable and skilful:

At the very beginning of the first stage [of my career], I was not able to do anything well. But working as a *sida*, I made clothes.... Then, I was proud in general. You understand, don't you? (Smiling) I was proud generally of the fact that other people wore the dresses I made and looked beautiful, and walked around, and that I could carry out something, such a thought....

The life course that these women took could superficially be seen as resonating with the dominant view that they were kept from opportunities to study in order to support their family. However, listening carefully as they recount their lives enables us to imagine that the act of not studying—generally viewed as negative in the dominant narratives of class mobility—can also turn positive, or can be taken as positive by the actors themselves. These narratives remind us that a structure which constrains someone's life can also provide them with alternatives, especially when it is evaluated as part of a long life process.

The dressmakers' narratives clearly show their happiness and pride in being highly-skilled *misingsa* and dressmaking artisans, and attachment to those embodied skills. Not everyone can become good at sewing and dressmaking, and these women distinguish their skills as a craft. They are committed to the acquisition of more challenging skills even now. That is the main reason for their participation in *Chamteo's* training. They have enacted agency to fulfill their desire to acquire superior dressmaking skills. Importantly, this is a bodily pleasure as well as a psychological pleasure. In contrast, many street entrepreneurs, while expressing some satisfaction with their successes, show less passion for their professional pursuit. This may be related to their evaluation of their entry into street entrepreneurship as forced or against their will and due to their family's economic circumstances. Now I turn to how dressmakers articulate their desire to acquire higher skills.

Desire and Pleasure in Acquiring Skills

All the dressmakers involved in my research who worked in the garment sector as *sida* became *misingsa*. At that time, it took at least four years for them to become *misingsa* on average (Chun 2004:165). Not everyone made it. Yoon Myeonghwa states, “When I worked as a *sida*, all I wished for was to become a *misingsa*...” The fact that young unmarried female workers wished to become economically independent during the 1970s and 1980s has been discussed by other scholars (see Kim 2006:212-216). However, the meaning of acquiring skills for many dressmakers was not limited to the ability to earn money. They desired capability as a component in seeing themselves as professional dressmakers. Even under poor working conditions, they were passionate about making progress in acquiring skills.

Many of the dressmakers actively explain how they learned skills while working as *sida*. They commonly assert that they made many efforts to learn skills from working with *misingsa*, those who were already skilled, when skill training was done only on the job, not in separate training sessions. Chang Haegyong migrated to Seoul from Chungcheongnam Province with her father and siblings when she was fourteen years old. She immediately started to work in a garment workshop. She recalls:

In the morning... I used to go to work earlier than other *misingsa*... Before the *misingsa* got there... first, I used to come to finish what I was doing earlier. After finishing it... I used to learn new skills. If you meet a *misingsa* whose character is rough (laughter), you can split up with her. In such a case as mine, I tried not to do so.... While helping *misingsa*'s work..., to some extent each of us furtively looked at *misingsa*'s work at lunchtime, or at free time....

While stressing the importance of the relationship with *misingsa*, this discourse suggests that those skilled *misingsa*, too, were *sida* once and learned skills to become *misingsa* by making efforts under similar difficult conditions. Nobody was skilled from the beginning. Skilled *misingsa* were proud of their skills, which were precious properties they had acquired. Therefore, not all *misingsa* were willing to teach *sida* these skills. In this sense, the garment workshop was a place where workers cultivated their desire and competed to acquire higher skills more quickly than others through rivalry and friendship. And to acquire higher skills and become a *misingsa* meant earning more money. Chang Haegyong continues, “while a

misingsa, well, they really earned hundreds of thousands of won, a *sida* earned tens of thousands of won. The difference was a factor of ten.... Therefore, all of us dream[ed] about it (becoming a *misingsa*)....” The upgrade system within the garment work also promoted their wishes to reach a higher level. There were several grades before reaching the status of *mishingsa*, and the wages were differentiated by grade.¹⁰

This opens a way to view self-formation as a changing process rather than a static one. Most of the literature about Korean female “unskilled”¹¹ workers in the 1970s and 1980s have focused on the temporary status of those women as “unskilled” or *sida* in the case of garment workers and therefore exploited, and have hardly taken any account of their process of becoming skilled. After becoming *misingsa*, they worked hard to earn as much money as possible not only to gain more income but also to be respected and recognized by their higher skills and experience. Proof of their immense skill was the way they were paid by the piece. When they worked as *misingsa* in their own subcontracted garment workshops after marriage, too, they were appreciated for their skills and experiences as contributing to the business success. Even now that they are highly-skilled veteran dressmakers, they assert this sense of happiness in the acquisition of new ability, saying that there are many skills to learn as dress designs quickly change. They are also proud of teaching their skills to co-workers although their income and the workload tend to decrease. The skills are a sign of economic power and independence. Kim Mina is sure that she can obtain a job easily because she has high skills while it is difficult for people without skills to enter the workforce. Tracing these women’s life stories, we can recognize how they appreciate what they have achieved. Many of the street entrepreneurs’ narratives lack this articulation of their passion and pleasure for acquiring professional capacity.

Becoming Economically Independent and Autonomous

Many of the street entrepreneurs actively choose to become economically

10. According to Chun (2004,197), the grades of the workers in the Pyonghwa Sijang, a garment workshop and shopfront complex located within the Dongdaemun Sijang, were made up of low-level *sida*, high-level *sida*, assistant *misingsa*, and *misingsa*, and their wages in 1974 were 4,200 won, 7,500 won, 10,000 won and 70,400 won respectively.

11. Here the usage of “unskilled” in quotation marks is to indicate that I am conscious that some workers who are indeed skilled are officially categorized as “unskilled.”

independent and autonomous as they age.¹² They often talk about how they wish to live in their twilight years, although none of the dressmakers discuss such things. I have observed that while the dressmakers have valued economic independence since youth, the street entrepreneurs grow to value financial independence and autonomy as they age. Among the women involved in my research, the street entrepreneurs are on average older than the dressmakers. The older dressmakers tend to see their ageing as a transient point within their ongoing self-formation processes. As most of the street entrepreneurs opened their businesses when their children were young, they originally aimed to support their children's schooling. But once the children gained independence, the women's primary goal shifted to that of self-support and autonomy, which seemingly was not as relevant for them before. Choe Hyeonmi, in her mid-sixties, says, "parents are parents, and children are children. Children go toward their own future, and mothers go toward their own future." Ko Sunggyeong, in her mid-sixties, started a small street restaurant business three years before I met her in order to make her own pocket money (*yongdon*). She was a full-time housewife until her three children all married and her husband resigned from his job. With less pension money than they expected, she felt that her economic standing was not stable and that she could not do many things she wished to do. At the same time, her relationship with her husband was changing. After raising her children "satisfactorily," she says, she desired to dedicate time and resources to herself. She decided to start her own business despite her family's opposition. Having friends who ran street restaurants also encouraged her decision. To make relationships with people outside home through street entrepreneurship also sustains aged women's efforts in economic engagement, she believed. After many years of dedicating themselves to their family and children's lives, many of the ageing street entrepreneurs have felt a need to realize themselves in different ways, such as by feeling capable, recognized and appreciated by others. To run a street business gives these women such an opportunity. Their decision to take up street entrepreneurship is a form of agency enactment to react to this change of their status and identity from that of housewives and mothers to that of somebody else by creating other meanings in their lives. It is a kind of agency that emerged from their long-term commitment to their family and children. Such agency could be obscured if these

12. In the year 2000, Korea became an ageing country having 7.2 percent of the total population older than 65 years of age, according to the UN definition of an ageing country (*Chosun ilbo*, 10 July 2000). The UN defines an ageing country as one whose population older than 65 years old is more than 7 percent of its total population, and an aged country as one whose population older than 65 years old is more than 14 percent of its total population.

women were viewed permanently as “housewives” or “mothers.” Women can run street businesses utilizing their social skills such as sociability, which are also products of the women’s abundant life experience. The ways in which these women engage in their economic activities and enact their agency have also been diverse and changing through their participation in collective activities.

New Identities and Hope

There is a general contrast in the narratives about participating in collective activities between the street entrepreneurs and dressmakers. This seems to be associated with their desire for new life projects and identities. The narratives of most of the female street entrepreneurs involved in my research show that their participation in the KOSC (Korean Street-Vendors’ Confederation) is passive. Many narratives reflect the negative aspects of the actual situation street entrepreneurs are facing within the marketplace. Forced relocation and the threat of eviction have accentuated their sense of tension, instability, and uncertainty. Along with the redevelopment of Seoul and of the Dongdaemun Sijang area, the Seoul Metropolitan Government actively seeks to regulate street businesses through registration, tax, and eviction of street stalls which do not meet the standards (*The Korea Times*, 28 January 2008). Becoming members of the KOSC gives street entrepreneurs greater security over their place and rights for street business in the area. In addition, participation in the KOSC does not require much of their time. However, their narratives suggest that within the KOSC most of the street entrepreneurs identify themselves only as “threatened by eviction.” The KOSC’s activities concentrate on countermeasures against the local authority’s attempts to evict street entrepreneurs. They participate in the protest demonstrations for which the KOSC demands their participation and sometimes in its entertainment activities such as picnics. There are no activities organized for street entrepreneurs’ business needs, female entrepreneurs’ gender needs, and those of the aged although women and the aged dominate street entrepreneurship. Continuous threats with eviction result in the KOSC’s view of street entrepreneurs as victims and leads to a lack of vision about their future in the area. The absence in the KOSC of concern about female street entrepreneurs’ specific needs explains the entrepreneurs’ lack of interest in the organization’s activities and direction. Although the relationship among street entrepreneurs is based not only on that of being commonly threatened with eviction but also on that of co-workers, collaborators, friends and rivals, these different identifications remain at an individual level.

However, perhaps the passive participation of many female street entrepreneurs in the organization reflects – and is reflected in – the minor representation of female street entrepreneurs in the KOSC’s direction. Active participants evaluate their participation in the KOSC very differently and show that they enact agency to participate in the KOSC also in order to enjoy the increase of their self-esteem and confidence. A female representative of the KOSC says (KOSC, 2008:4):

The external world is very rough for a woman who runs a stall alone. I have had to resist crackdowns alone, exhausting all my energy, and to suffer for days after such incidents. Moreover, when I met stupid civil servants as a regional representative, I had little bargaining power. I lost self-confidence because I felt that I was “just a woman” [for them], rather than because of the lack of my ability and experience. It is more often that I am treated coldly because I, a woman, come out alone to do a business on the street, rather than because I am a street vendor.... Nevertheless, the reason a woman can endure [the situation] while running a stall is because of the organization [KOSC]. Without the organization, I would have been a weak female street vendor who withers before the blade of crackdowns, and I could not have discovered myself, a street vendor with dignity who acts also as a member of the board of directors, providing important services.

On the other hand, the dressmakers I encountered during my research are vocal about their collective endeavor to create a new identity through participating in *Chamteo*. They actively cultivate their desire to achieve mastery of dressmaking. *Chamteo* aims to promote the well-being of female dressmakers by fulfilling their professional and personal needs. Its study room (*gongbubang*) and scholarship accommodate dressmaking mothers’ concerns about children’s studies. Its dressmaking workshop aims to promote fair work conditions and to upgrade dressmakers’ skills. Through these activities, the participants have been gaining higher skills, more self-confidence and new work opportunities. A few ex-participants are now employed as assistant instructors for *Chamteo*’s program. A few others are working in its production unit which produces garments by eliminating brokers. Some others have decided to run fitting and alteration shops instead of subcontracted garment workshops. The elements which encourage the dressmakers’ participation are numerous: *Chamteo*’s flexibility and participatory approach; its leading role in the alternative redevelopment project of the Dongdaemun Sijang

area; peers' mutual support and encouragement; families' understanding and support, etc. These women have reinforced their attachment to dressmaking, the collective, and the area. Sharing time and companionship with peers who have similar life experiences and passion for dressmaking also makes a significant difference in the women's process of becoming.

However, there is a difference in the extent to which the ex-participants could benefit from their participation in *Chamteo*. It is more difficult for those who are the family breadwinners, with or without husbands, to participate in the collective activities and to change their jobs. In addition, *Chamteo's* program does not cover the issue of ageing. Many dressmakers are ageing without a secure pension, and declining physical condition will negatively affect the women's professional activities. Therefore, whether the women can enact agency to continue their involvement in *Chamteo's* activities largely depends on its future direction. Now I turn to another important enactment of agency for the women's process of becoming, one that cannot be considered to have emerged only from resistance: relationship building.

5. Relationship Building as a Form of Agency

Relationships with Parents

Most of the women's narratives indicate that when they were young their parents wished a better future for their daughters. Some parents clearly supported their young daughters' studies. Other parents took the decision to migrate to Seoul wishing to give better opportunities to their daughters as well as to their sons, rather than only to earn money for their family. Chang Haegyeong says that when her father migrated with his children to Seoul after her mother's death he used to say that he had brought them to Seoul to widen their opportunities, repeating a Korean saying, "If a pony is born, send it to Jeju Island and if a baby is born, send the child to Seoul (*maleun namyeon jejudoro bonego sarameun namyeon seoulro bonera*)."¹³ The

13. Jeju Island is historically viewed as the best place to raise ponies. In the thirteenth century, the Mongol Empire invaded the Korean Peninsula ruled by the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), and also attempted to conquer Japan. In 1277 the Mongols governed Jeju Island and introduced their horses to the island. During the Mongols' rule (1277-1375), Jeju Island became a strategic horse-breeding area (Yang, 1973: pp.114, 116) as well as an important tributary to the Mongols. Even after the end of the Mongol's rule in Jeju Island, it has remained as the best place to breed horses in Korea. The native ponies of the island are designated as a Korean national treasure.

proverb implies that Seoul is a land of promise for children's studies and future. Her understanding is that her father did not gender-discriminate his children in this regard.

It is undeniable that many women also had a desire to help parents and family members economically. However, only the dressmakers who had worked as waged workers when they were young talk about such feelings towards their parents. The other women emphasize their relationships with their children and husbands. This can be a reflection of different self-formations. Those dressmakers' search for self largely started with their first waged employment, which involved the relationship-making process with their parents. Many of those who engaged in waged work gave a good amount of the money that they earned to their parents. This act has been seen, in the dominant imagination, as these young women's "silent" acceptance of, or obedience to, a moralistic duty of children or daughters, so-called "filial piety." However, many of the women's narratives portray this as their wish to respond to their parents' thoughtfulness towards their daughters' future. Mostly, the dressmakers were conscious that they could help their parents more effectively if they engaged in waged work. Yet these women's decision-making on early employment was not a monolithic process.

But what if the desires of one conflict with the other? Some dressmakers who had clearly defined dreams found themselves in this situation. Kang Sujeong dreamt of becoming a lawyer. While recognizing her family's economic situation, her articulation highlights the interrelation between her feelings and those of her parents, especially of her mother. Kang Sujeong started to work in a workshop in the Dongdaemun Sijang area after finishing junior high school. Her father failed in business and lost his health, leaving her mother to be the family's sole breadwinner, with three daughters. Her encounter with garment work coincided with such family circumstances, and she had two conflicting desires: to help her parents, and to continue going to school. She recounts:

At the beginning, my parents used to say, "If you do this work, you'll have to work late... and it'll be hard. So it would be better if you didn't do it at all." So after graduating from [junior high] school I went to work at another place. But A *chincheok eonni* (elder female relative), who was doing this work, invited me by saying, "let's work together." She invited me very often. And my mom was in [economic] difficulty, too.... I was as terribly thin as this. [Gestures] Then, my mom said, "If you go [to work] there, it'll be hard.

If you did something different, not hard work, it would be better.” But that *eonni* repeated, “Let’s go work together.” So I thought I would do it for just for a short time. But... that road ending up leading me here. Once I began working, my skills improved and I found I was well suited to this profession (*jigeop*).

My teacher [said], “Come [to school]. I’ll pay your school expenses this way.” If he had given me tuition, I would have been able to go to school. But if I hadn’t been able to earn money, I wouldn’t have been able to help our household economy. So, I said, “Well, I can’t go [to school]. I’ll have to help my mom...” I don’t regret not studying in order to help my mom.... I couldn’t but help my mom.... What’s more, my mom, too, relied on me....

Kang Sujeong’s decision to go to work was supported not by the unilateral feeling she had towards her mother but by the interaction of mutual feelings between herself and her mother. Her narrative conveys her strong desire to sincerely respond to her mother’s care. Respect, thoughtfulness, trust, and affection towards her mother are all part of this narrative at the same time as one can glean a sense of her mother’s reliance on her. This interaction with her mother was a motor for her decision to enter the labor force early and also for her to assume responsibility to look after her aged parents. She is the one, among the three daughters, who took care of her parents until their recent death. Kang Sujeong’s satisfaction and happiness with her deeds is reflected in her discourse that her parents were very sorry until their death for having constrained her to support her family and thereby sacrificing her wish to study. A daughter’s response to her family’s economic necessity, which can be seen as obedience to patriarchal and gender norms, can be understood as active decision-making and a product of long-term rich and complicated relationships and interactions among the diverse desires and feelings of herself, parents and other family members. The significance of these interactions emerges when she articulates her life course as a long-term dynamic process. Then, how about the women’s relationships with children?

Needs and Desires for Mothering

In the women's narratives, the theme of infertility is absent. All of them have children. Seemingly, they did not have problems making the decision to have children.¹⁴ Instead, the women talk about raising children. For the dressmakers who continued working after their children's birth, childcare was the most common concern. It was so for every working mother in Korea with the absence of a free childcare giver such as her mother and mother-in-law. Some of them took their toddler children to older women who provided day care services in the vicinity. Many of those who worked at home looked after their children while working. A few others had support from their parents. Kim Mina entrusted her three children to her own parents and in-laws alternately until they reached school age. She says that one hundred days after their birth she and her husband took them to their parents who lived in another province. Kim Mina and her husband used to go to see their children only during around major holidays because the garment work demanded so much of their time.

The street entrepreneurs' narratives are far more expressive in their inclination towards children's lives. To my question, "Why do you think you have continued to work until now?" most responded straightforwardly that it was for the sake of their children. Some are happy that their children appreciated the mothers' contribution and helped them in house chores. Many express their satisfaction with or desire for their children's completion of higher education. They suggest that their central concern has been how to make children study. Hwang Sukja, in her late sixties, from Jeollanam Province, recounts:

After getting married and having children, I started a business. Before that, I didn't know how to do it.... [My husband's] business went wrong and we didn't have money.... We had to make the children study. We cannot survive if we don't make them study. So, as I did business there all night long, in the police stand they suspected that I was a spy, they ran an identity

14. Until recently in Korea, a woman attained full adult membership to the society only by childbirth. A married woman without a child was considered problematic, and childlessness was a powerful factor, which caused women life-long social and personal conflicts. In the Goryeo (938-1392) and Joseon times (1392-1910), a husband had a legal right to divorce his wife or take a concubine for the wife's infertility (Kim Young-Chung 1976:52-3, 99-100). While there is no discriminative legal disposition against childless women in contemporary Korea, the cultural heritage from the traditional legal and social practices is still powerful.

inquiry, and... the policemen even staked out my place.... It would have been hopeless if we had not made our children study. Five brothers and sisters were born within ten years... and we had to make all of them study, didn't we? Even with only me earning I had to make my children (study). So, sitting up late at night... I did business till late.

Many of the street entrepreneurs seem to have invested much more money in children's studies than did the dressmakers. Most of the dressmakers decided not to send their children to after-school academies (*hagwon*). The dressmakers tend to appreciate more the interactions between themselves and children and the children's process of self-cultivation not limited to formal studies. *Chamteo's* program of a *gongbubang* and scholarship also helps to reduce the mother dressmakers' concern and burden and facilitates their concentration on their own work and pursuit of other desires.

The difference in emphasis attached to their children's studies between the two professional groups' narratives seems to be associated with the relative importance of children's studies in the women's own lives. Many of the street entrepreneurs relate children's studies as a principal indicator of the success of the parent's own life, while most of the dressmakers juxtapose children's studies, as equally or less important, than many other aspects of their lives. The street entrepreneurs have a sense of identity deeply related to their children's lives, while the dressmakers have other coexisting meanings of their lives. The reason for this, it seems to me, is that most of the street entrepreneurs started their professional career after marriage, and the dressmakers had started their professional lives before marriage and the base of their sense of self was already beginning to take a shape before their identity as mothers with school-aged children came to the fore.

Relationships with Husbands

The relationship with their husband is another aspect of the women's lives that reveals much about agency. The women articulate the relationships with their husbands in two main ways: by valuing their husbands' appreciation of the wives, or by making sense of the separation from their husbands.

While many of the dressmakers are divorced and some are thinking of such a possibility, I have encountered no divorced street entrepreneurs.¹⁵ After failing in

15. Of eight dressmakers I interviewed, two are divorced and two are thinking of divorce. Two others are

their business, many of the street entrepreneurs' husbands are no longer gainfully employed. Similarly, many of the divorced dressmakers attribute their decisions of divorce to their husbands' unwillingness to work. And yet, why are there more divorced dressmakers than divorced street entrepreneurs?

It can be partly because more dressmakers are self-confident in their earning power. If the relationship of a married couple is unstable, it can be easier for women with sufficient earning power to think of divorce. The divorced dressmakers were all the initiators of the divorce. Kang Sujeong, for example, decided to divorce her husband a few years after he had stopped working. They used to run a subcontracted workshop together, but for several years the workload had decreased and her husband had lost interest in the work. She continued working, nevertheless, to maintain him but got fed up. Her daughters and parents also supported the decision to divorce. She says that she felt confident also because there were many divorced women around. Earning power is a product of a long process of self-formation, and without such a process, it would be difficult to decide to divorce.

At the same time, many of the dressmakers who have run family workshops with husbands express their happiness in being appreciated by their husbands. Under the gender division of labor in their garment workshop, husbands are the business owners, and wives are *misingsa* as family unpaid workers. However, the *misingsa*-wives generally do not feel exploited. Their husbands, also skilled garment workers, appreciate their wives' dedication. A male workshop owner asserts, "In fact, we say that if the wife didn't know how to sew, 95 percent of the workshops would collapse" (*Chamteo* 2008:13). This suggests the duality of this gender relation that *misingsa*-wives are an indispensable labor force even though they are in a subordinate position within the garment workshop. Therefore, the relationships the women have with husbands in the workplace are intricate and diverse.

The street entrepreneurs, too, join the dressmakers in evaluating their lives on the basis of their husbands' appreciation of their work. Many street entrepreneurs' narratives imply that their husbands acknowledge their economic contribution, and that their business abilities became clearer when they started to run street businesses independently from their husbands.

Their stories also suggest that the relationships are not unilateral. They are the product of everyday interactions and long mutual commitment. Therefore, the

widows. In addition, there are quite many other divorced women who are running subcontracted garment workshops within the area. On the other hand, of the eight street entrepreneurs I interviewed, none are divorced and two are widows (see Appendix).

relationships are subject to change. Separation from husband is an example. Another example is the case of Shin Kyeonghui, a street entrepreneur in her mid-fifties. Shin Kyeonghui's relationship with her husband has changed significantly since he quit his job at an established company and she became the family breadwinner by running a street stand. He now works as her business assistant. In the beginning, she says, it was difficult for her to work with him, as he had previously worked as a manager in a large firm and knew how to work neither on the street nor with her. However, they both have gradually learned to work together. In addition, this has changed the division of work and power between her and her husband, both within and outside the household. Shin Kyeonghui says, "[It is good] because we work together, make money together, and use it always together for family needs."

Work Relations

Many of the street entrepreneurs actively express their positive evaluation of their own business abilities, and highlight the meaningfulness of the relationships they have developed with other street entrepreneurs and customers, as collaborators, rivals and friends. This motivates them to work daily. Hwang Sukja joyfully says, "Everyone in the marketplace knows me as the candy auntie. And, while I was selling candies, customers often told me that they were delicious and that I should try to sell more."

Most of the dressmakers, too, stress the importance of their relationships with employees and co-workers. Such relationships are also a product of their long-term mutual commitment. Running their own workshops, they have enjoyed leading skilled work and helping their employees to upgrade their skills despite the hard work and financial difficulty. Many also identify themselves as responsible entrepreneurs. They prioritized their ethical relationship with their employees when structural changes in the sector severely affected the financial situation of their workshops. These dressmakers claim that they would have closed their workshops much earlier if they had been concerned only with their own survival. Ahn Eungyeong's experience during the 1997 Financial Crisis exemplifies this:

As I had many employees, it became very hard for me to pay their salary.... Although it was very hard for me, I couldn't think of dismissing my staff (*sikkudeul*) who worked with me. Until all my employees knew how to make their living to stop working [in my workshop], I continued to run the

workshop (laughter). I had run the workshop for 11 years, and ran it for two years more while the IMF (the 1997 Financial Crisis) cast a further shadow.

They have also developed ways to help each other, and this mutual support has become an important source of energy for their continuous engagement in the workshop labor. Such mutual support is particularly appreciated now that many of the dressmakers have had to shut their own businesses and find work again as employees. Many employers have similar experiences, and are willing to help these dressmakers in their search for work. In addition, while working as employed *misingsa* again, dressmakers with high skills and rich work experience receive respect from employers and co-workers. Their cultivation of these relationships have become a source of pride in their engagement in the industry despite other non-ethical aspects of their relationships with co-workers as rivals. Their enactment of agency to continue working in dressmaking cannot be conceived of without their long process of self-formation being considered.

6. Conclusion

This close reading of the women's life stories has shown that the ways in which they have come to understand their current lives and participate in the transformation of the society are diverse and creative, and, therefore, ambiguous and uncertain. Such ambiguity and uncertainty reflect the *different, changing* and *complicated* interrelationships between the women's agency and the structures that impinge upon it. In addition to the complexity of resistance, the women articulate other modalities of agency such as capacity creation and relationship building. Their sense of self is highly meditated by their experiences of gender, family and work relations and subject to change according to their life cycle, personal feelings and sociocultural conditions. And the women's agency enactment has neither always nor immediately brought the intended consequences.

Through this reading of the women's narratives, becoming capable and fostering relationships have emerged as the principal motors for these women's self-formation. Most of the significant changes in their lives have come out of their pursuit of desires for becoming capable and related to family members, co-workers, and customers in particular ways, rather than out of resistance. The women have acted for the pursuit of these desires not always with the intention to transform

gender and other socially uneven relations. However, these acts have enabled the women to gain an increased sense of self, as capable, autonomous, and self-confident women. Notably, these acts have not brought outcomes, intended or

Appendix. Interviewed female street entrepreneurs and dressmakers

Name	Age	Marital status	Children	Schooling	Current occupation	Period of engagement
Street Entrepreneurs						
Hwang Sukja	Late-60s	Married	One son and four daughters	Did not complete primary school	Self-employed in second-hand bag stand	Over 30 years
Song Okhui	Mid-60s	Widow	Six sons	Did not complete primary school	Self-employed in snack stand	Over 30 years
Choe Hyeonmi	Mid-60s	Married	One daughters and two sons	Did not complete primary school	Self-employed in second hand /antique goods stand	Over 8 years
Ko Sunggyeong	Mid-60s	Married	One son and two daughters	Completed primary school	Self-employed in street restaurant	3 years
Bae Minsuk	Mid-50s	Married	Two daughters and one son	Completed primary school	Self-employed in snack stand	Over 25 years
Shin Kyeonghui	Mid-50s	Married	One son and one daughter	Graduated from university	Running sewing workshop with husband as assistant	Over 10 years
Mun Mijeong	Late 40s	Married	One son and one daughter	Completed junior secondary school	Running street restaurant with 6 employees	Over 20 years
Im Eunju	Mid-40s	Married	One daughter (college)	Completed junior secondary school	Running street restaurant with husband's supervision	8 years
Dressmakers						
Lee Yeongran	Early 60s	Widow	One son and two daughters	Not completed primary school	Employed as piece-rate machinist, employed as assistant instructor in <i>Chamteo</i> .	Over 35 years
Yoon Myeongwha	Mid-50s	Widow	One son	Not completed primary school	Self-employed in a garment workshop without employee	Over 30 years
Park Keumyeong	Early 50s	Married	One son	Completed primary school	Employed as regular machinist	Over 30 years
Chang Haegyong	Early 50s	Married	Two daughters	Not completed junior secondary school	Self-employed in a fitting and alteration workshop	Over 30 years
Kang Sujeong	Late 40s	Divorced	Two daughters	Completed junior secondary school	Employed as piece-rate machinist, employed as assistant instructor in <i>Chamteo</i>	Over 25 years
Ahn Eungyeong	Mid-40s	Married	Two daughters	Completed secondary school (commercial high school)	Employed as part-time worker for drinks delivery, employed as piece-rate accessory creator	Over 20 years
Han Yujin	Late 30s	Divorced	Two daughters and one son	Completed junior secondary school	Employed as regular machinist	Over 25 years
Kim Mina	Late 30s	Married	Two daughters and one son	Completed junior secondary school	Self-employed machinist with employees	Over 25 years

unintended, within a short period. These processes are lengthy and complicated, and the women appreciate the meaningfulness of these past acts at this moment when they try to spin and knit their experiences into coherent narratives. When they relate their present to their past, they realize that they have gained the power to become what they long wished to become.

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Abstract

This article explores the processes of self-formation among female street entrepreneurs (street vendors) and dressmakers (garment manufacturers) in the Dongdaemun Sijang (market) area in Seoul through an examination of their life stories. My aim is to delve deeply into the relationships of agency and change in the lives of women working in these marginalized sectors of the Korean economy. Through ethnographic research, I argue that the dominant notion of agency as resistance to constrictive structure cannot solely account for these women's lives and experience of social change. They have enacted agency not only to resist structure, but also to enjoy pursuits of their diverse desires. This array of desires can be similar or differ among the women, coexist in a single woman's life, and change according to life cycle and changes in broader society. The principal motors for, and effects of, their pursuit of desires are related to acquiring the capacity to do something in particular, and establishing relationships or relating to others in a particular way. I argue that even those actions taken without the aim of transforming constrictive gender and other social patterns can bring change over an extended period.

Keywords: agency, change, street entrepreneurs, dressmakers, self-formation