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# The Question of Child Abandonment in South Korea: Misplacing Blame on Personhood

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**THE QUESTION OF CHILD ABANDONMENT IN SOUTH KOREA:  
MISPLACING BLAME ON PERSONHOOD**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR SEO YOUNG PARK  
PROFESOR MINJU KIM**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

## **THE BABY BOX**

“For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in.”

(Psalm 27:10)

The psalm is written above what appears to be a small blue door, hinged into Jusarang Community Church’s wall in Gwanak-gu, Seoul. The founder, Pastor Jon-Rak Lee, gestures to it explaining its importance: “[We] installed the baby box [in accordance with] God’s heart.”

The door leads to a “drop box” for unwanted babies, waiting with a heated interior and lined with blankets. Once a child is dropped off, an alarm sounds within the church, alerting staff about a new orphan’s presence<sup>1</sup>. As their page on Facebook states, “‘Baby Box’ is a facility made to prevent the death of babies who are abandoned in dangerous situations because of various reasons, often if they were born from single mothers or born with disabilities<sup>2</sup>.” For many mothers, the baby box provides the necessary comfort and anonymity these individuals desire when making the decision to abandon their child.

Pastor Lee was first inspired to open the baby box in 2009 after receiving multiple abandoned newborns left just outside his church. He claims that the incident had helped him understand the young mothers’ desperation as well as the necessity behind saving the abandoned infants. Since its creation, there has been a constant flow of received orphans over the last few years. With Lee and his wife the guardian of 19 children, a small group of staff and volunteers help him find the children permanent homes. Having helped countless orphans, the international community especially has revered Pastor Lee for his dedication to his work with great admiration, as exemplified through countless articles,

<sup>1</sup> Haruch, Steve. "In Korea, Adoptees Fight To Change Culture That Sent Them Overseas." NPR. Code Switch, 9 Sept. 2014. Web.

<sup>2</sup> "The Babybox Korea." Facebook. 베이비박스, n.d. Web.

interviews, and even a newly released documentary. However, despite the massive support that has flooded in and basking in the international spotlight, the project has long since stirred controversy in South Korea itself.

In recent years, this pastor's journey to help abandoned children has come under a great deal of debate and criticism. The both famous and infamous baby box's growing recognition has brought light onto Korea's continuing issue with child abandonment. Officials have criticized the pastor for running an unlicensed facility while being unaware of the consequences of his actions-encouraging mothers to abandon their children. Lee has retaliated by acknowledging that it certainly is not the most ideal situation, but is necessary at the moment. Because, after all, those who abandon their babies are most likely doing so to avoid the various social discriminations that come with being an unwed mother in an enormously conservative society. The baby box seems like the only way to escape a lifetime of discrimination and poverty. However, Lee's baby box is just the tip of the iceberg.

With the release of the film, *The Drop Box* in theaters throughout the United States, it has reignited the general discussion surrounding the box's necessity and relevance. Despite the box's intentions, it does cater to the idea that only two viable options exist for mothers: abortion or abandonment. Campaigns such as #BuildFamiliesNotBoxes by Adoptee Solidarity Korea in Los Angeles (ASK-LA), have come about calling for stronger support towards family preservation through various proposals: increased welfare support, enforcing support obligations, revising current

policies, establishing anti-discrimination laws, and creating stronger agencies and centers to enforce these changes<sup>3</sup>.

South Korea has long since been recognized for its massive economic and social development. Revered for rapid modernization by both the West and the East, the small nation has been acknowledged and placed on the international radar. Despite the growing success and recognition, the rapid development has more to do with the economic than the social, meaning setbacks in certain cultural aspects; in this case, defining the modern woman. South Korea has faced a considerable amount of criticism from both international and domestic spheres about their general lack of support for single mothers and their children. With a continuing decrease in birth rate, it has become a growing concern despite attempts to reverse it. In addition, newer generations have begun to place less emphasis on the family, with decreasing desires to settle down. Surprisingly, the single, unwed mother population is going unnoticed. Lacking both governmental aid and general societal support, many of these single mothers are guided into taking alternative routes.

In this thesis, I argue that traditional notions of Confucianism and its growing modernity within Korean society have contributed to the continuing issue of child abandonment, inhibiting Korean mothers from gaining bodily, social, and economic independence. There are a variety of governmental and societal pressures, including the emphasis on motherhood and the nuclear family, and expectations for the women, that push these unwed mothers to make undesirable decisions on whether or not to keep their child. For this thesis, I have collected both current and past data from the South Korean

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<sup>3</sup> ASK-LosAngeles. “#BuildFamiliesNotBoxes.” Facebook. March 2, 2015.  
<<https://www.facebook.com/AdopteeSolidarityKoreaLosAngeles/posts/535267509945101:0>>



Government's ministries, officials and policies to create the present political and social basis for the issue of abandonment. I have also drawn from additional existing research from the fields of sociology, gender studies, and history of local and international scholars in order to gain general insight into both the domestic and international views of the issue at hand. Also, in order to supplement the factual information of current and historical, social changes and state policy, I also draw interview data from various news articles and first-hand accounts to gain insights into these subjective experiences. For the sake of privacy, all names have been changed in order to preserve and protect the individuals' identities.

### Terminology

Throughout this thesis, I will be referencing terms that define and characterize these individuals, and how the terms' usage and growth has developed over time. In South Korea, there are two terms that play major roles in identifying the population in question: single mothers and unwed mothers. More broadly, the group consists of any mother that is not married but with a child, whether they are caring for them or had put their children up for adoption, often due to social constraints such as economic hardship, domestic abuse, prejudice and the stigma surrounding single motherhood<sup>4</sup>. The term single mother, also called 미혼모 [*mihonmo*] in Korea, acts as an umbrella term, unifying the widowed, divorced and unwed mothers into a single category. The identification helps dissolve any indication of marital status and eliminates a recognized moral hierarchy: the widowed are single not by choice, divorced mothers have been married

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<sup>4</sup> Brian, Kristi. "Choosing Korea: Marketing "Multiculturalism" to Choosy Adopters." *K. Bergquist, ME vonk, D.-S. Kim & M. Feit (Eds.), International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice* (2007): 61-78.

previously while unwed mothers lack the central father figure in their family sphere. Thus, the first two are perceived at a much higher moral level than unwed mothers within Korean society. As a result, there has been some preference in identifying the persons as single mothers.

However, as blogger Shannon Heit mentions in her blog post, she explores why the term “unwed mothers” has become more popular over “single mothers” within the populace. There has been a general debate within the Korean feminist community on utilizing the term *비혼모* [*bihonmo*] over *mihonmo*. Both terms indicate that the mother is not married; yet, the second term insinuates that the individual had desired marriage but was unable to do so due to circumstantial difficulties. Feminist circles have argued that *bihonmo* carries a stronger connotation. It identifies the mother as one who willingly decided to raise their present child(ren). Marriage may be an option for these individuals, but it is not necessary. It presents an image of a financially stable and educated single mother compared to *mihonmo*. Consequently, single mothers claim that there is no definitional difference between the two as both are used to describe the various precarious positions of these mothers. But, *bihonmo* discriminates against those who do not fit the image of a well-endowed mother. As a result, a significant portion of single mothers have made attempts to instead alter the negative connotation that comes with using the term “unwed mothers”<sup>5</sup>. The term’s popularity has grown over the years, creating a stronger, more condensed community of mothers. Presently, the marriage system within South Korea can be viewed as limiting with strong restrictions and few

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<sup>5</sup> Heit, Shannon. “Why Do I Use the Term ‘Unwed Mothers.’” *Tales of Wonderlost*. Tumblr, 25 April 2013. Web.

freedoms. The women who associate themselves as such report having attained a sense of self-empowerment.

### **Framework**

This discussion addresses different aspects of Korean society that have influenced these mothers to go about the direction they choose. In chapter 1, I will be talking about the historical foundation and traits that surround the idea and expectations on motherhood and how current understanding of it has affected single, unwed mothers. A large component is the notion of pregnancy. From conception to birth, critically influential factors influence these mothers to take on decisions and roles that are often undesirable. It begins in the classroom where sex education, though it is provided, does not provide these individuals with enough information that is necessary for them to be aware of its implications. Another major factor concerns contraceptives. Though it is readily available, certain obstacles, like restrictive laws, have taken place recently, preventing individuals from gaining access to items such as birth control pills. Lastly, there is also the issue of abortion. Though it is illegal in South Korea, many individuals do go about finding outside services as aid.

In chapter 2, I will be focusing on another major variable centered largely on why mothers are unable to keep their children. As mentioned before, both societal and economical pressures are major deterrents. Already with the implications that come with non-marital births, the social stigma surrounding it is enormous. Firstly, the family, perhaps what is recognized to be the foundation of both society and Korean individuals, are often unable to provide necessary support and care. In a society that prides itself in

pure family lineages, social stigma is rampant as those affected organize to change their circumstances. Outside the family sphere, economics do come into play. Where women are already discriminated against in the South Korean workforce, maintaining a job and attempting to provide for themselves and their children becomes a constant struggle.

In chapter 3, I will be exploring how the lack of external forms of care and welfare contribute to the issue. Though it is necessary for a majority of this population to receive aid, the government continues to lack provisions. Rather than attempting to provide aid and welfare for the individuals, most officials instead place the blame on social stigma as an underlying reason behind the lack of change. As a response, even the mothers themselves have begun attempts to defend their rights to raise their own children by constructing associations; the small but first step to working against a society that ostracizes unmarried mothers. However, despite the lack of support from within the country, support from overseas has been rampant, especially from Korean adoptees.

Lastly, in chapter 4, I will be exploring the history and role that adoption, domestically and internationally, has played in the past half century. It is undeniable that many of these mothers are often heavily persuaded to resort to adoption. Known as the “Baby-Exporting Country,” South Korea is known to have one of the highest rates of international adoptions in the world. Discussed in chapter four, many of these organizations and the mothers especially show a great deal of contempt towards this faction. Adoption agencies have been accused of tricking single mothers into giving up their children through the promise of future visits and aid throughout the pregnancy. Simultaneously, it becomes difficult to disagree with their arguments as it does come to be more of a business than a form of social aid. After all, with funds continuing to pile in,

the country itself makes around \$15,000 USD with each child that is successfully adopted internationally, totaling up to \$22 billion yearly<sup>6</sup>. However at the same time, it becomes difficult to lessen international adoption when domestic adoption itself is a complicated matter.

Though there have been many reviews and discussions on this matter, I hope to observe and analyze the various factors that have come into play. Compared to Western nations, South Korea as a nation has certain circumstances, such as its ideological foundations and historical processions, that makes its issue of abandonment unique. However, this does not entail that South Korea is an isolated case within the global sphere, particularly in the East Asian region. Undoubtedly, this conglomeration of outside pressures and lack of support from all sides only works towards increasing and worsening the issue of abandonment.

### **Positionality**

My interest in the topic had first begun with my mother's offside comment on child abandonment in South Korea. Watching the Korean national news that night, she had clicked her tongue while shaking her head in disappointment and sorrow. That evening, my mother and I had a somewhat lengthy discussion on her views on the overall issue. She discussed her views on single, unwed mothers, appearing to be more forgiving than the average Korean, and the debate on abortion and international adoption. This brief conversation only helped pique my interest in this topic. Since then, my dedication to the topic has since soared, resulting in frequent research and discussions with others.

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<sup>6</sup> Bitzan, Catherine M. "Our Most Precious Resource: How South Korea is Poised to Change the Landscape of International Adoption." *Minn. J. Int'l L.* 17 (2008): 121.

Because of this, through conversations with other Korean individuals and my observing media outlets, I have garnered a general understanding of the issue at hand and how society and history have played continuing roles in it.

I feel that the South Korean government has been making generally small strides towards unpacking the issue of child abandonment. Often times they tend to continue to change policies and make changes in law to decrease numbers and improve these social conditions. However, they continue to avoid or give very little to no attention to the issue with single, unwed mothers. Welfare is difficult to attain and societal discrimination only helps to worsen the situation.

## **CHAPTER 1**

# **GENDERED HIERARCHY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

For many South Korean mothers, pregnancy is intended to be a time of celebration and appreciation. However, the results and reactions all rely on the original intent, whether it was an unplanned pregnancy or intentional family planning. Misguided and lacking the necessary knowledge, unintentional single mothers are thrown into the throes of making the “correct” or “necessary” decision. The misplaced blame and the historical and social basis of Korean culture only help to pressure these individuals into choosing between social responsibility and personal desire. Thus, many of these pregnancies come about as a result of a lack of freedoms, resources, and awareness.

### **Confucian Foundations on Motherhood and Social Changes**

Korean women represent the spirit of the Korean nationality as motherhood is a role constantly looked up to in the public eye. Motherhood entails the familial and reproductive responsibilities of women as nurturers or protectors of their family members' welfare<sup>7</sup>. Historically, the notion of the family has been the long-standing foundation of this society and culture. However, the cultures and societies have evolved and modernized, developing into the state that is present today. Korea has been and still is changing into a modern culture from a traditional standpoint<sup>8</sup>. Yet, that does not signify that the social structure and cultural norms have changed as well. Though major economic development has been occurring, the nationalistic aspect of the Korean identity remains intact. Nevertheless, this disparity creates conflict for Korean women.

Motherhood, family roles and the opportunities that come with a modern society are rife

<sup>7</sup> Yoon, Bang-Soon L. "Democratization and Gender Politics in South Korea." *Gender, Globalization, and Democratization*. Ed. Rita Mae. Kelly. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 171-94. Print., 179

<sup>8</sup> Choi, Elizabeth. "Status of the Family and Motherhood for Korean Women." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Ed. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994. 189-205. Print., 189



with opportunities<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the Korean women's status is not static but consistently dynamic. As Confucianism acts as the overarching frame of Korean societal behavior and functionality, Korea's behavioral cultural is slow to change as reflected in the inequities shown within women's roles<sup>10</sup>.

Korea has undergone rapid industrialization and western modernization since the end of World War II. As the women's status remained the same, the inequality continued within an elaborate system of "role relationships" rationalized by Confucian customs and were "socially mandated and legally condoned"<sup>11</sup>. Throughout Korean history, it is important to note that Confucianism is not a fixed value, having changed and altered its form according to growing modernity. Its values become articulated through social changes. Nations that continue to follow the system include a father-like government, education based on competitive examinations, local organizations formed by consensus, and the notion of a core family with an emphasis on inner loyalty, cooperation, and mutual support. These traits are just a few that have been able to adapt old values to the imperatives of modernization<sup>12</sup>. In Korea, the ethical values have long since served as a source of inspiration for laws and social control by addressing the various levels of human interactions and relationships. Conclusively, Confucianism has created a restricting foundation in how these nations operate today.

Modernization escorted by demographic changes, urbanization and industrialization have all contributed a great deal to the changing dynamics and definition

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 189

<sup>10</sup> Palley, Marian Lief. "Feminism in a Confucian Society: The Women's Movement in Korea." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Ed. Joyce Gelb. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994. 274-96. Print., 275

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pg. pg. 190

<sup>12</sup> Tu, Wei-Ming. "Implications of the Rise of Confucian" *East Asia*. " *Polis: Journal of Political Studies* 1 (2012)., 33

of the South Korea's family structure<sup>13</sup>. Much of Korean society's foundation relies heavily on the nuclear family: a basic social unit that is situated as the basic building blocks of this society. As the family is established as the basic social unit, it is believed that the woman is given the resulting social status and honor. In this case, as the typical family size has decreased over time, the mother's role has concurrently intensified. The influence of women has long since been confined within the constraints of the home while the external world belonged to men. Conclusively, it is believed that a woman does not need to and cannot possess a self-identity beyond family existence, neither as an "individual" nor as a "member of society"<sup>14</sup>.

On the other hand, resulting events and movements showed great potential in changing this dynamic. Continuing on after World War II, the spread of Christianity, Japanese-induced modernization, expansion of a modern educational system and various independence movements helped improve the position of women<sup>15</sup>. At the time, a variety of issues were brought forth into the political sphere, such as the question of nationalism and developing the Korean identity, in an attempt to rally the masses and create a nationalistic force against outside powers. Additionally, the westernization of cultural values helped pique the public's interest in modernization. The Japanese occupation (1910-1945) also particularly played an enormous role by entwining Korean feminism with the cause of national liberation<sup>16</sup>. One frequent issue concerned the relationship between females and domesticity, demanding for more personal independence and

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<sup>13</sup> Palley, Howard A. "Social Policy and the Elderly in South Korea: Confucianism, Modernization, and Development." *Asian Survey* 32.9 (1992): 787-801. Web., 787

<sup>14</sup> Choi, Elizabeth. "Status of the Family and Motherhood for Korean Women." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Ed. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994. 189-205. Print., 191

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pg. 192

<sup>16</sup> Kim, Elaine H., and Chungmoo Choi. "Introduction." *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. New York: Routledge, 1998. 1-9. Print.

freedom. However, the nationalist position of the male elite was not aiming to separate women from the nation, but instead emphasized enlightenment for the group as mothers. This ever-present anti-colonial nationalism helped propagate the idea of the woman as “asexual vessels of fertility dedicated to revolutionary husbands and sons<sup>17</sup>.” Many of the individuals attempted to legitimize this notion as a way to accommodate women under an immensely male-dominated social system. For the women, this “mother power” was perhaps one of the most secure “sources of power” that they had under the patriarchal system<sup>18</sup>. In turn, when Korea gained its independence, it also regained its masculine nationalist discourse. It homogenized the nation, and re-normalized women and their chastity in order to have them properly belong to the patriarchal order. The national liberation movement was hostile to the idea of female empowerment of sexuality and their “emancipation from the patriarchal household”<sup>19</sup>. Nationalism had helped reclaim masculinity at the expense of the women.

The domestic sphere is no longer a matter of privacy as this domain is now accountable to the state. Rather than working to improve and heighten their sense of self-expression and identity, “public identities<sup>20</sup>” are instead provided, becoming a template of sorts for these individuals to mold themselves into. They are subconsciously required to internalize these values of domesticity. The Korean nation is ultimately a community of men where the women exist as only the preconditioned womb<sup>21</sup>. Inevitably, a great

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pg. 2

<sup>18</sup> Cho, Haejoang. "Male Dominance and Mother Power: The Two Sides of Confucian Patriarchy in Korea." *Confucianism and the family* (1998): 187-207., 200

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pg. 5

<sup>20</sup> Kendall, Laurel. *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii, 2002. Print., 9

<sup>21</sup> Moon, Seungsook. "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea." *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. Ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi. New York: Routledge, 1998. 33-66. Print.

deal of “role stress” is placed on the married women, particularly. Those who are well educated and carry enough financial support consistently seek a balance between raising a child and maintaining a professional career, as well as the added responsibility of caring for the elderly. Because of this enduring emphasis on keeping the traditional, it becomes difficult to integrate into the modern familial state, “destabilizing traditional family support systems and [becoming responsible] for a crisis in the people’s well-being<sup>22</sup>.” They disguise the individual’s (mostly the mother’s) inability to celebrate individual freedom by creating a “celebration of motherhood<sup>23</sup>.”

Simultaneously, this present discrimination also becomes a source of stress for the children as well. When the necessary “father-figure” is not present within the ideological neo-Confucian family structure, already there is a lacking source of major income leading to overall economic hardship: the perceived major male breadwinner is absent and/or the mother is only able to take on limiting, underpaid employment opportunities for financial support. There is added stress when lacking the patriarchal protection that comes with an existing father figure. At times, younger, unmarried mothers who are more concerned with social stigmatization will opt out of child rearing by abandonment. Thus, it comes down to the question of what exactly pressured them to make the decision outside of social stigmatization. Mothers lack the ability and resources to address the situation in a manner that is satisfactory for both her and her child.

### **Women’s Control Over Their Body**

<sup>22</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web., 27

<sup>23</sup> Leshkovich, A. M. "Rendering Infant Abandonment Technical and Moral: Expertise, Neoliberal Logics, and Class Differentiation in Ho Chi Minh City." *Positions: Asia Critique* 20.2 (2012): 497-526. Web., 502

*The Debate on Abortion*

According to the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare in 2007, out of 100 pregnancies of unwed women in Korea, 96 will ultimately have an abortion and only four will give birth. In addition, of those four, three will be forced to give up their child as an unwanted result of varied economic difficulties and unchanging social discrimination, making it fairly difficult for unwed mothers to support both themselves and their children within the Korean sphere (Korean Unwed Mothers Families Association [KUMFA]). Abortion is illegal in Korea, but is permitted in certain cases of rape or incest; if the pregnancy is hazardous to the mother's health; or the fetus is suspected of having some genetic disorder or disease. Despite the restrictions, the number of women who have successfully obtained an abortion has skyrocketed since the early 2000s, with 350,000 abortions performed yearly compared to 450,000 live births<sup>24</sup>.

Additionally, these procedures are always done safely in the privacy of the hospital. There is constant access to safe, low-risk abortions performed in sanitary locations by trained professionals, despite their illegality. Presently, as exact statistics are difficult to gather, many estimate the number of abortions performed to be well over one million. With only 17 indictments made between 2005 and 2009, it is safe to say that the law is enforced very rarely<sup>25</sup>. For many, the most difficult part of the process was finding a hospital or ob-gyn to perform the termination as very few openly advertise this services because of the possible consequences. If a woman is found guilty of undergoing an abortion without exceptions, they can be jailed for a year and additionally fined two million won. For the doctors, they may lose their license and be jailed for a minimum of

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<sup>24</sup> DeWeese, Shelley. "The Choice." Groove Korea. Groove Korea, 27 Aug. 2014. Web.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

two years. According to various accounts, the experience has overwhelmingly been more-or-less positive. One anonymous individual<sup>26</sup> states, “The nurses were amazing...so comforting and kind. My situation was totally non-unique. They held my hand the whole time and communicated their care, even without a common language<sup>27</sup>.” Melissa Salvatore<sup>28</sup> looks back at the experience fondly, with the doctor explaining the process and aftercare in great detail to ensure her comfort. Others have echoed the same positivity and comfort they felt when at the hands of trained individuals, and a safe and secure environment. A surprisingly good experience all things considered.

Currently, there are two laws in effect surrounding abortion. The first of the two is the 1953 Korean Criminal Code that prohibits abortion entirely. The second is from the 1973 Maternal and Child Health Act which lists specific exceptions to the former ban<sup>29</sup>. The government had originally promoted these laws and their restrictions from the early 1960s through the 1990s in order to prevent overpopulation in a period of national modernization. Thus, abortion was actively encouraged at the time. However, in recent years, Korea’s deteriorating birth rates have caused a great deal of alarm. According to the CIA Factbook, presently South Korea has the fifth lowest birthrate in the world. Simultaneously, there have been studies done attributing to the notion that the South Korean populace is due to be extinct by 2750 if this low birthrate continues with women producing an average of 1.24 children a year<sup>30</sup>. For decades, there has been little to no debate made on abortion rights. Presently, abortion is an unspoken topic, because it

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<sup>26</sup> Name not provided.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Named changed for sake of privacy.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web.

begins to unravel the foundations of Korean society through sexuality and motherhood. The discussion is centered on whether the government should enforce their laws and crack down on illegal abortions<sup>31</sup>. Proponents consist of government officials who advocate crackdowns in order to increase their fertility rates and a group of obstetricians who argue for government enforcement on abortion laws due to both religious and non-religious reasons<sup>32</sup>. However, opponents have opposed the idea of punishing the women for having abortions. A coalition of women's groups have stated that what advocates call out for is a plan that represents the anti-human rights stance of the government, by portraying women as more of an instrument for childbirth rather than as an individual with reproductive rights<sup>33</sup>. Instead, they have called out for alternative human rights-beneficial methods in an attempt to raise the birth rate<sup>34</sup>. Officials have proposed a variety of monetary gain from procreating, such as providing third-born children completely free education and advantages in gaining entry-level employment; special mortgage rates for families with many children, and financial support for artificial insemination. Others have chosen to go about a different route, proposing to extend retirement age and relaxing immigration rules<sup>35</sup>. To make matters more complicated, mothers who were successful in producing many children are given the title "patriot," insinuating that those who are unwilling or unsuccessful are "traitors<sup>36</sup>." It gestures back to the old ways of thought.

Despite this given role, females are still expected to be rather passive when it

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<sup>31</sup> Wolman, Andrew. "Abortion in Korea: A Human Rights Perspective on the Current Debate Over Enforcement of the Laws Prohibiting Abortion." *J. Int'l Bus. & L.* 9 (2010): 153-169., 154

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pg. 154

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pg. 154

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, pg. 155

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pg. 156

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, pg. 158

comes to sex. However, this only causes concern for the mother's welfare in terms of economic and social independence. Shackled by the possibility of new life, Korean women hastily make the decision to abort due to secrecy and reluctance to discuss sex. With a lack of access to proper health services, women need more information, particularly on sex education and contraceptives.

### *The State of Sex Education and Contraceptives*

Sex education in South Korea formally began in 1967 when the Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea promoted contraceptive use and provided peer support to overcome the social taboo around contraceptive use. Today, the federation operates up to seven counseling centers to help assist youth. They are working towards expanding to many more young male and female populations. In 2013, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology had raised the number of hours required for sex education from 10 to 15 per year, recognized as the seventh revision of the curriculum. However, the increase did little to improve the nonexistent standard national curriculum with classes only showing a video. External restrictions, such as parents, also prove to be a hassle when attempting to educate younger generations. Cha Chi-young, a professor at Ewha Women's University had commented that sex education in Korea was an extreme failure. The most available form of sex education is called "Virginity Education" which focuses on the notion of virginity and maintaining abstinence until marriage, doing little to educate the students<sup>37</sup>. As a result, many turn to other ways of educating themselves, such as the Internet, where a great amount of provided information is unreliable. In a country

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<sup>37</sup> Power, John. "What Should Schools Teach about Sex?" Korean Herald. N.p., 23 July 2012. Web.



where most report having their first sexual encounter at the age of 14 without contraception, shows a possible link to the high rise in unwanted pregnancies<sup>38</sup>.

Still, strides have been made to change this format. In 1983, the Department of Education of Korea had published the “Teacher’s Guide for Sex Education” guide, considered more liberal than their virginity education. Influenced by western sex education, the guide was the first attempt to define sex education on more realistic terms<sup>39</sup>. Currently, the present form of sex education is comprised of four parts: human relationships and the sexual psychology; human body development and sexual health; social environments and gender equality; and marriage and family<sup>40</sup>. All forms of sex education have been designed to be embedded into the school’s curriculum and be age-appropriate. For adolescents in elementary school, the content of their sex education programming places great emphasis on enhancing their knowledge on sex with the focus on “safe sex” rather than abstinence only. In middle school, the content teaches the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, pregnancy, sex and dating, masturbation and controlling sexual desires<sup>41</sup>.

Statistics have shown that a significant number of teenagers are sexually active despite society’s norms. Nearly nine percent of high school individuals have experienced sexual intercourse. The number continues to rise over the years. Studies have also suggested that most sexually active teens in fact do not use contraception, just under 60 percent (2010). Sexually transmitted diseases and infections also appear to be frequent. In

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<sup>38</sup> DeWeese, Shelley. "The Choice." Groove Korea. Groove Korea, 27 Aug. 2014. Web.

<sup>39</sup> Kim, Jinseok. "Silent Cry: Adolescent Pregnancy In South Korea." International Handbook of Adolescent Pregnancy: Medical, Psychosocial, and Public Health Responses. Ed. Andrew L. Cherry and Mary E. Dillon. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 563-74. Print., 570

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pg. 570

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pg. 572

a study of 1,500 people aged 20-59, 5.58 percent had chlamydia. The number of births born out of wedlock has also increased in recent years to about 1.6 percent in total births<sup>42</sup>. In another study, 80,000 middle and high school students aged 13 to 18 participated in a study measuring their sexual health and knowledge. Among respondents who had experienced sexual intercourse, the rate of the use of contraceptive methods was 38.2 percent whereas the rate of using inappropriate contraceptive methods was 21.6 percent. Of the group, 72.2 percent had a sex education. Over time, the average age of the first sexual experience has decreased while the rate of adolescents who experienced sexual intercourse increased. Considering the somewhat low rate of using appropriate contraceptive methods, the study indicated that adequate sex education including contraceptive methods need to be conducted<sup>43</sup>.

Sexual double standards, described as the “sexual attitude of being unequally permissive to men in relation to sexual behaviors<sup>44</sup>,” are also the cause of many issues, having negatively impacted women’s sexual health. About 60 percent of Korean female adolescents have reported that they had sex due to being drunk or because their partner had wanted to. At the same time, only 30 percent of the population had reported having sex because they were in love<sup>45</sup>. In another case, Korean women who have been or are victims of sexual violence do not report the case because they are afraid of being attached to the negative stigma of having loose morals. As a result, gender-specific issues of the

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<sup>42</sup> Power, John. "What Should Schools Teach about Sex?" Korean Herald. N.p., 23 July 2012. Web.

<sup>43</sup> Lee, Im Soon, Gyu Yeon Choi, Sang Heon Cha, Hye Yeon Park, and Jeong Jae Lee. "A Survey on the Sexual Behavior of Adolescents in South Korea: The Third Survey in 2007." Korean Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology 53.6 (2010): n. Web.

<sup>44</sup> Shin, Kyung Rim, Hyojung Park, and Chiyong Cha. "Sex education during the school-aged years influences sexual attitudes and sexual health in college: A comparative study from Korea." *Nursing & health sciences* 13.3 (2011): 328-334.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pg. 333

female body and their sexuality have always been overshadowed by external fears<sup>46</sup>. In order to change this, developing a more feministic approach to reproductive health issues revolves around addressing the core issues and politics of sexuality and sexual relations.<sup>47</sup> Such issues include matters related to sexuality, physical ailments, relationships, breast-feeding and the role of motherhood. The system overall leaves the individuals ill-informed about pregnancy and their sexuality. At the core, the high rate of single mothers within Korea is a result of a variety of factors that have come into play. For instance, the lack of sex education is a great contributor to the numbers. Younger individuals are left uneducated in addition to an enormous lack of available general aid. Though most do learn about bodily functions, they are rarely aware of the basic facts and necessities that come with conducting safe sex. Children, in a sense, are now being rocketed into a sphere that they had not intentionally stepped into nor hoped to approach so soon. Therefore where is the distinction between being a mother versus being an adult woman?

As experts point out, sex education at school focuses only on physical aspects of sex such as contraceptive measures. Students should take sex education according to their individual developmental stages. Sex education at school should not follow a strictly biological approach. Instead, integrated forms of sex education (covering the physical, mental and social) should be offered to students. It is a state responsibility to protect students from sex trade, pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. It is also their duty to help students establish their identity so that they may enjoy a sound and happy sex life in the future<sup>48</sup>. Others have recommended expanding the time on sex education

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<sup>46</sup> Davis, Lisa K. "Korean Women's Groups Organize for Change." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Ed. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994. 223-39. Print.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pg. 224

<sup>48</sup> Sook-hee, Jeong. "Substantial Sex Education Is Necessary." *Statistics Korea*, 16 Aug. 2004. Web.

courses and bringing in professional help from specialists, such as midwives or nurses, to give the necessary information to students. Schools hiring counselors who provide counseling sessions with students could also provide a safe passageway into sex education and awareness<sup>49</sup>.

The notion of exerting physical control over a woman's body and its products is a result of Korea's traditional past. Confucianism has played an ongoing role in exerting its influence over Korean women livelihood. The given identity motherhood in itself is restrictive, leaving little room for individual differences. In the society, it becomes difficult to live a comfortable life outside of an assigned identity. The debate on abortions is also representative of how women's rights and freedoms are contained within the means of childbirth. In addition, chastity in its entirety circulates and works in enormously influential ways. The idea of chastity plays a crucial role in helping regulate women's sexuality. It is not that it solely involves virginity, but rather is a place of belonging for female sexuality<sup>50</sup>. Because of these restrictions, single mothers are often caught in the threshold of modern Korean society and are pressured to make decisions that may not be their primary choice. The women who were unable to uphold Confucian ideologies are socially and politically rejected, leaving a trail of "shamed mothers and unwanted children<sup>51</sup>."

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<sup>49</sup> Lee, Ji-min. "Sex Education Is Just as Important as Math." National Korean Times, 21 May 2014. Web.

<sup>50</sup> Hurdis, Rebecca. "Lifting the Shroud of Silence: A Korean adoptee's search for truth, legitimacy, and justice." *International Korean Adoption: A fifty-year history of policy and practice* (2007).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 2**

# **THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PRESSURES ON YOUNG WOMEN**

In the face of the familial, social and economic, a variety of factors come into play when wishing to raise a child. Whether intentional or not, most single mothers voice desire to raise their children with or without support. However, that proves to be extremely difficult in the face of social stigma and the present lack of economic aid. As a result, many feel compelled to give up their babies because of social and economical fears: the high possibility of losing the familial support, social discrimination and pressure, and being unable to attain economic stability. For most mothers, insecurities ranging from successfully navigating the labor market to the possibility of marriage are playing enormous roles in changing how individuals think about baby making<sup>52</sup>.

Motherhood as a livelihood is no doubt a heavy responsibility. When factors that would make the process both easier and swifter are lacking in the formula, it becomes difficult to live a “satisfying” lifestyle: domestically, socially and economically. Delving deeper, there are a variety of constraints that only help contribute to making the role of motherhood that much more difficult to delve into. Among those issues lies the “heavy burden of domestic labor, authoritarian family structure, patriarchal culture of sexuality, and traditional gender division of labor both in the public and private spheres<sup>53</sup>.” As a result, this inhibits and prevents these individuals from taking back the role given to them.

### Family Pressures

In this section, I will be speaking about how the family acts as an integral social unit. As mentioned, under the system of neo-Confucianism, the “patriarchal family” plays

<sup>52</sup> DeWeese, Shelley. "The Choice." Groove Korea. Groove Korea, 27 Aug. 2014. Web.

<sup>53</sup> Cho, Soon-kyoung. "The Limits and Possibilities of the Woman's Movement." *Gender Division of Labor in Korea*. Ed. Hyöng Cho. Seoul, Korea: Ewha Womans UP, 1994. 275-91. Print., 275

a central role in “social control, political integration and welfare provision<sup>54</sup>.” As a result, these neo-Confucian values and ways of thought are so deeply incorporated into the society that many are under both moral and at times political pressure to sacrifice their individual interests for the sake of ultimate familial unity; to “confine familial problems within the family and to abstain from resorting to social or governmental measures in solving familial needs<sup>55</sup>.” Confucianism continues to be an integral part of the individual’s “psychocultural construct.” Thus, the maintenance of the family’s stability is valued more than the individual’s expense, because the essence of a Korean family maintains stability. But more importantly, the family in a sense is the basic unit of economic production and consumption<sup>56</sup>.

For those who move away from the “nuclear family setting,” these ‘alternate’ families in the public’s eyes ultimately fail to maintain the given Confucian virtues such as familial solidarity, filial piety and self-sacrifice; thus, disrupting the supposedly harmonious and stable relationships and support that exists among family members<sup>57</sup>. As such, those with social deficiencies that threaten the notion of a stable family life lead more to society-wide moral criticism of the individuals versus viewing it as a source of political discussion in order to implement and instigate governmental and communitarian aid efforts<sup>58</sup>. To make matters even more difficult, publicizing the single mothers’

<sup>54</sup> Tu, Wei-Ming. "Confucius and Confucianism." *Confucianism and the Family: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*. Albany: U of New York, 1998. 3-36. Print., 17

<sup>55</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web., 23

<sup>56</sup> Cho, Haejoang. "Male Dominance and Mother Power: The Two Sides of Confucian Patriarchy in Korea." *Confucianism and the family* (1998): 187-207., 189

<sup>57</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web., 25

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pg. 24

through this “authoritative system of knowledge<sup>59</sup>” complicates the situation. Rather than hear the tales from the mothers themselves, the general public and government tend to make harmful assumptions, consequently doing little to provide aid and comfort. They blame it on the individual’s lack of morals rather than attempting to understand the circumstances that may have driven these persons to make these decisions. For those who do not fit under the neo-Confucian definition of a family, there are a variety of terms used to name this population: to the families that have lost a parent whether it be due to divorce, death, separation, or whatever present reason. The issue with these terms is that they act as more as a social function to differentiate these families from the “ideal.” Rather than denoting these families as those in need of support for society and assistance from the state, it seems to do a better job of validating the ongoing prejudice and injustices against them within personal relations as well as social opportunities<sup>60</sup>.

There is also a great deal of negotiating and fund-based decisions that are being made in order to succeed in a highly competitive and capable society much like South Korea’s. “Family self-sufficiency” relies heavily on the labor of all family members whereas both the men and women must cooperate in order for the family to survive<sup>61</sup>. In the typical setting, the husband would be the breadwinner while the wife would be responsible for keeping the domestic sphere intact. Undoubtedly, unwed mothers face a substantial amount of stigma, particularly when it becomes difficult to hide the fact that their families lack a father-figure. This can result in a great deal of unwanted scrutiny, and hurt chances of employment or marriage. As a result, the single mother’s economic reality is undoubtedly intimidating. Consequently, many of these individuals

<sup>59</sup> Leshkovich, A. M. "Rendering Infant Abandonment Technical and Moral: Expertise, Neoliberal Logics, and Class Differentiation in Ho Chi Minh City." *Positions: Asia Critique* 20.2 (2012): 497-526. Web., 506

<sup>60</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 24



are often advised to give up their children so that it would provide both the mother and the child the chance of living better lives rather than being raised together<sup>62</sup>.

However, Confucianism did open up a new pathway for these individuals as all women were given the opportunity to create a new community among themselves; one consisting of a strong sense of support and functionality. By driving them into an alternate sphere, they were able to dominate a new space within the domestic sphere. By utilizing a space where support systems could be found, this newfound method of self-expression and exploration helped provide them a novel sense of personal worth. Therefore, within a patriarchal society, women rely on each other as support in order to create a formidable force that would counteract the patriarchal values placed before them. In the face of contesting this lasting definition of motherhood, many worked towards redefining its role in the face of changing domesticity. Overall, there continues to be a variety of factors and aspects that play into the difficult role that motherhood is. And things are only made more difficult when one lacks the perceived 'necessary' aspects that constitute a healthy, satisfactory family lifestyle.

### **The Individual Woman as Economic Agent: Gender Division of Labor**

Over time, with the industrialization of these Asian countries, it has provided us an interesting backdrop of the role and influence that Confucianism plays. Initially, there is a great deal of difficulty present when attempting to find life outside of the domestic sphere. For example, with external employment, there have certainly been a continuing increase in female participation with outside work; however, it has done little to alter the grounded domestic gender

<sup>62</sup> Haruch, Steve. "In Korea, Adoptees Fight To Change Culture That Sent Them Overseas." *NPR*. NPR, 9 Sept. 2014. Web. 08 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/09/09/346851939/in-korea-adoptees-fight-to-change-culture-that-sent-them-overseas>>.

division of labor within the home. Despite governmental emphasis and encouragement for female involvement in the labor workforce, as a result of previous labor shortages, there has been little attempt to provide an alternate, more public means of substituting for the women's domestic responsibilities or creating a new system to somehow lessen the burden. Thus, the issue of subjectivity can be reduced to circumstances of poverty or ignorance, whereas the mother's vulnerability should not be attributed to lowered morality or a lack of self-discipline, but should be attributed to the ways in which the general structure of inequality has been able to deny both the mother and her child these rights<sup>63</sup>." Thus, economic gain is seen as another "aspect of moral cultivation" and poverty is viewed as a "moral indictment"<sup>64</sup>." Economic privilege in a general sense is justified as reflecting its "possessor's morality, propriety, and respectability"<sup>65</sup>."

When a society much like this continues to exist and foster a growing presence, it demands a great deal from those who do not fit its domestic standards. Instead, it makes it difficult for the mother and her child(ren) to live a life of simple prosperity.

Industrialization and the instilled capitalistic economy grew immensely, leading to the economic environment that exists today. With the rise of these economic features, the women's economic dependency upon their husbands increased<sup>66</sup>. Originally, the employment of women had started to grow since the 1970s, leading to the development of the women's labor movement. However, the economic crisis followed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in late 1997 resulted in a harsh blow to women's employment, especially for married workers. Though some women continued

<sup>63</sup> Leshkovich, A. M. "Rendering Infant Abandonment Technical and Moral: Expertise, Neoliberal Logics, and Class Differentiation in Ho Chi Minh City." *Positions: Asia Critique* 20.2 (2012): 497-526. Web., 517

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pg. 520

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, pg. 521

<sup>66</sup> Cho, Haejoang. "Male Dominance and Mother Power: The Two Sides of Confucian Patriarchy in Korea." *Confucianism and the family* (1998): 187-207., 189

to work, they were forced to do so under disguise if they were married or postpone planned marriages in order to avoid layoffs<sup>67</sup>. This tradition continues today as many women in the workplace often work until they marry or have families<sup>68</sup>. With restrictions to participating in wage labor, issues that are specific problems for women workers such as equal pay for equal work, protection of motherhood, and the right to labor cannot be raised<sup>69</sup>. Today, in a market that is easier on the men than the women, competition continues to rise, making it difficult to maintain a position that would be enough to sustain a mother and her child. Thus, the emphasis placed on the 'preferred' family sphere ultimately worsens any form of aid or help for the individuals, making it difficult for them to take charge of a position that was supposedly given to them. A major source of income for most single mothers consists of (in decreasing order): "family, social welfare facilities, government subsidies, earnings of unmarried fathers and the families of unmarried husbands<sup>70</sup>."

Interestingly enough, of the mothers who choose to put their children up for adoption, 37.7 percent had shown desire to raise their own children if economic support was available<sup>71</sup>. Those who wish to pursue motherhood are instead given the burden of what was originally designed to give them both honor and status. Unable to receive funding, it makes it difficult to pursue motherhood. What was perceived as the women's

<sup>67</sup> Yoon, Bang-Soon L. "Democratization and Gender Politics in South Korea." *Gender, Globalization, and Democratization*. Ed. Rita Mae Kelly. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 171-94. Print., 180

<sup>68</sup> Palley, Marian Lief. "Feminism in a Confucian Society: The Women's Movement in Korea." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Ed. Joyce Gelb.

<sup>69</sup> Yoon, Bang-Soon L. "Democratization and Gender Politics in South Korea." *Gender, Globalization, and Democratization*. Ed. Rita Mae Kelly. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 171-94. Print., 181

<sup>70</sup> Soma, Naoko, Jiyoung Park, Sun-Hee Baek, and Akemi Morita. "Teenage Pregnancy and Its Support System in Korea." *Contemporary Social Issues in East Asian Societies: Examining the Spectrum of Public and Private Spheres*. Ed. Mika Markus Mervio. (2012) N.p.: n.p., n.d. 137-162. Print.

<sup>71</sup> Soma, Naoko, Jiyoung Park, Sun-Hee Baek, and Akemi Morita. "Teenage Pregnancy and Its Support System in Korea." *Contemporary Social Issues in East Asian Societies: Examining the Spectrum of Public and Private Spheres*. Ed. Mika Markus Mervio. (2012) N.p.: n.p., n.d. 137-162. Print.

main source of power and control becomes a burden. After all, “it has everything to do with who can afford to be a mother at all<sup>72</sup>.”

When speaking about the women’s role as a whole, there are three levels of social reality that need to be considered when exploring its histories: “economic roles, ideological background and social organization<sup>73</sup>.” All three factors have played enormous roles in creating and enforcing the drive behind the movement as well as rendering support for more independence and an escape from the patriarchal society that continues to exist today.

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<sup>72</sup> Hurdis, Rebecca. "Lifting the Shroud of Silence: A Korean adoptee's search for truth, legitimacy, and justice." *International Korean Adoption: A fifty-year history of policy and practice* (2007)., 178

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **LACK OF WELFARE AND AID**

Though these mothers require governmental welfare, aid and services, the provided amounts are simply insufficient and difficult to attain. The government is not providing these families the proper amount to live sufficiently. As a result, these mothers and children are unable to receive aid and so are pushed to go in alternate directions such as abandonment. Policies and programs are simply not assigned to help these families support themselves and their way of life. In cases where individuals require outside assistance and services for themselves and their families, they are instead neglected as the source of their social problems is placed on their apparent individualism, going against the popular tide of family solidarity. Though some programs of welfare exist, the persons who require the most aid in fact lack the appropriate means of receiving that social assistance, economically and socially. Thus, for the less superior populations, the cause of their deteriorating fate is the inability to be accommodated for and receive support by able family care-givers to which solutions should be found outside of the domestic sphere, within the state and society.

There is no doubt that South Korea has long since been recognized as a majorly patriarchal society. That being said much is at risk for those who are unable to fit to its standards—particularly in the family setting. As South Korea continues to modernize and approach new lifestyles, Korean culture and society have begun to diversify. However, there is no doubt that society's aversion and view of single mothers has been an ongoing, difficult obstacle. And yet, policies and support have steadily been introduced into their society, to help these individuals to achieve both independence and a safer, more pleasant livelihood. In this ongoing process of attempting to overcome societal stigma and establish better, stronger aid for single-parent families, it is certainly an arduous task.

Many attribute this lack of aid as a major source for a wide variety of issues, pertaining to abandonment rates, international adoption, and the decreasing national birth rates.

However, it seems that a great deal of change is underway in order to improve these circumstances as more attention is being given to the issue. Though progressive changes are being made subtly.

### Forms of State Welfare

South Korea's political structure has strongly been male-oriented since its beginnings; however, there have been changes. The political process concerning any government-related works or acts have been authoritarian in style. The system surrounding elite recruitment and promotion has always been relatively closed, informal and patriarchal<sup>74</sup>. Political leaders frequently refer back to their Confucian roots, emphasizing on the virtues regarding family care as the basis of social policy<sup>75</sup>. By focusing more on the family than the social and fundamental needs, this decision only helped (and continues to help) hinder the aid that was necessary in leading a satisfactory life in Korea. As a result, this neo-Confucian integration within society has played an enormous hand in the political and societal situations that take precedence in these nations, and modernization has done little to lessen the load for some. Initially, the political structure's emphasis on economic development during modernizing made it difficult to relieve any social stress factors through developing a social welfare

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<sup>74</sup> Suhk, Sohn Bong. "Agenda for Social Reform." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Ed. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994. 257-73. Print., 264

<sup>75</sup> Palley, Howard A. "Social Policy and the Elderly in South Korea: Confucianism, Modernization, and Development." *Asian Survey* 32.9 (1992): 787-801. Web., 788

infrastructure. The political-economic models that were implemented to improve Korea's economic structure did little in creating effective social services and income maintenance.

The present policy on social welfare aims to sustain political order and aid individuals and families into social integration whereas for the entire nation, family support "is not only a private virtue but also a political goal in which it becomes the main means and objective of policy implementation"<sup>76</sup>. The most applicable set of policies for single-parent families is the *Single-Parent Family Support Act* (2007). As the act states, its purpose is to continuously contribute to the overall "stabilization of living and to the promotion of [their] welfare." The act claims to work towards helping support these individuals into leading "healthy and civilized [lives]" (Article 1). Thus, the overall focus and intention lies heavily in the notion that it will center on both the government's and family's combined efforts.

As with most welfare programs, the government has particular definitions as to which families under what circumstances are allowed to receive additional aid. As such, any individual that identifies as either the "mother" or "father" head of the household, must fall under any of the following: any individual who has been "bereaved of, divorced from, or abandoned by his/her spouse"; any individual who is lacking in "work capability due to mental disorder or physical handicap"; or any unmarried individual. Additionally, within the more general sphere of the single-parent family, whether it is a "mother-and-child family" or a "father-and-child family," it requires that either the single father or mother is the head of the household. This includes individuals who are the main supporters for members of the household whether or not they are the actual head of the

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<sup>76</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web., 24



household. Simultaneously, the “child” themselves must be a person who is under 18 years of age (Article 4). This portion was later amended on Jan. 18, 2010 to apply to other individuals in similar situations as those in “single-mother’ and “single-father” families. As such, the Act also applies to the grandfather or grandmother that cares for the child in the case that the parents have died or are no longer present; have lost their work capability whether it be due to mental disorders, or physical handicap or disease; or are unable to support their child due to long term penal servitude (or other similar circumstances). Concurrently, the Act also applies to individuals of foreign origin, in the case that the foreigner has married a citizen of the Republic of Korea and is caring for a child with Korean nationality. They both must also reside in the nation if they wish to be eligible for aid (Article 5-2).

The sources of aid can originate from two major sources. The first primary source would be the “protection agency” which entails any State or local governments that could provide “protection pursuant to the Act” (Article 4). In addition, all “single-parent family welfare organization” includes all agencies and organizations that aim to promote the welfare of all these single-parent families. The Act progresses into addressing what forms of financial and social aid the facilities and government are eligible to provide. Once eligible to apply for these welfare benefits, they can be used for the cost of living; expenses for assistance in the education of children; vocational training expenses and living cost during a training period; general expenses for childcare; and other expenses that can be requested for. It is also possible to be granted additional welfare benefits so long as if it is within budget limits, particularly in the case that the child that

is being cared for is under five years of age. The welfare benefits are provided at regular intervals so long as if the families are eligible (Article 12).

At the same time, the Act also aims to help the parents with outside employment and developing skill sets. Within Article 14, it focuses on accelerating the individuals' chance and skill levels for employment. The local or state governments are expected to help conduct workplace skill development training that is in correlation to the "capability, aptitude, etc. of mothers and children or fathers and children of single-parent families" in order to help them develop their workplace skills. Its purpose is to make sure that all capable parents acquire skills for all various kinds of workplaces in order to help accelerate the chance of employment. In addition, the government also aims to help create a stronger connection between employment opportunities and the parents. All local governments are expected to help establish more efficient connections between the employment security offices and single-parent family related facilities and agencies. Establishing a stronger relationship between the two is a key component to expanding opportunities for these adults to be employed and achieve a steady employment status. More specifically, the Ministry of Employment and Labor is expected to closely cooperate with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in order to more effectively promote these various employment support projects and so forth. Simultaneously, the State and local governments also offer welfare loans for these families. In order to qualify, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family states that the families must be of low-income and carry a "strong willingness for self-support and rehabilitation and a feasible business plan." For each individual that applies for the policy, there is a maximum loan that comes in three different forms: roughly 20,000 USD can be given

without guarantee, 18,000 USD with guarantee, and 50,000 USD with security as collateral.

Despite the various regulations and policies that have been established to help protect and further the families' livelihoods, it appears that they have done little to improve their circumstances. In fact, the Act mentions that it is expected that the "mother and child or the father and child of a single-parent family shall endeavor to achieve self-support and to elevate the standard of living by making the most of their asset, work capability, etc" (Article 3). With the way these single-parent families carry themselves within Korean society, it could be argued that a majority of these policies are mostly ineffective and are not enforced. Instead, the governments provide the bare minimum in order to enforce these policies. According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of South Korea, there are a variety of financial benefits that are given to the families as governmental assistance. The single parents are provided around 70 USD per month for child nurturing expenses. If the families are headed by either grandparents or a single parent (over 25 years and not married), the government will provide an additional 50 USD for children that are less than five years old. For child education assistance, such as school supplies, the families are then granted 50 USD per year for every middle or high school student. At the same time, there is a supplementary living allowance for those who have entered into a welfare facility designed for single-parent families, granted 50 USD per month.

The Ministry also offers welfare benefits for younger, independent single parents. In order to apply, the parent must be of 24 years or less, and their income recognized as 150 percent or less than the minimum cost of living. If they are eligible, they will be

given around 150 USD per month for each child in the family. In the case that the parent is studying for Korea's national school qualification exam, the government can assist them up to a maximum of 1400 USD per year. In addition, admission fees and tuitions can also be paid for when the father or mother of the family has completed their regular high school courses. Lastly, in order to help facilitate self-support, the family that lives as a beneficiary of national basic living security and is taking care of infant(s) at the age of 24 months old or less, will be provided 100 USD per month if the parent is participating in "self-support activities such as studying, job searching, etc." As mentioned, though the act pledges a great deal of support for the individuals, the total financial aid that the government provides continues to be minimal. The act states that it will provide expenses for education, childcare and legal and counseling services. Currently, however, unwed mothers with children 12 years and under while simultaneously earning less than 1100 USD a month, are provided 70 USD a month by the government. In comparison to parents who adopt, they receive almost three times as much.

Many individuals are unable to meet the necessary requirements to receive the aid. As such, the calculation on how much the unwed mothers may earn includes income and possessions such as a car or a house, and also their parents' wealth, whether or not they are receiving parental support. According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of South Korea, the criteria for eligibility in terms of low-income centers greatly on how many family members exist in the household. As such, a family consisting of two individuals must earn less than 1,335 USD; consisting of three individuals must earn less than 1,728 USD and so forth. The families earn 130 percent of the minimum cost of living in order to receive financial aid. Thus, the only other option available to the

individuals is to place themselves below the poverty lines, which is currently measured at 98 USD per month. This is often the more favorable choice for parents. Though fathers are required by law to help pay for child support, this is often unsuccessful. With little to no enforcements and comprehensive legal processes, it often means that the mothers are forced to carry the financial responsibility alone. The 70 USD monthly aid that the unwed mothers receive pales in comparison to other stipends that others may receive. For example, foster families receive a monthly stipend of 500 USD. Child welfare facilities such as orphanages receive around 1050 USD per child per month. Finally, families that adopt domestically receive around 150 USD per month for each child up to 14 years old.

### **The Contradiction of the Welfare System: Family Centeredness**

Family centeredness in both the private and social spheres has been highly emphasized where social support from within the family is enormously idealized culturally and politically. However, this turns out to make things difficult for those who do not fit within the idealized family image, particularly those who live in more difficult circumstances—less educated and little to no employment. They are instead guided to believe that they themselves must relieve their difficulties and unpleasant circumstances—poverty, health issues, housing problems and lack of education—through their own means versus relying on the state for aid. Because the family is perceived as the basic component of the state and society, well-grounded family welfare must result in social stability and help “achieve the welfare state<sup>77</sup>.” And yet, ironically, this emphasis

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<sup>77</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web., 38

on family welfare has not yet been integrated into current governmental guidelines and effective policy measures.

The lack of financial aid provided to the unwed mothers from the government plays a major role in contributing to the various stressors that pressure these individuals to make unwilling decisions. Both the mothers and the children simultaneously face a great deal of discrimination. Perhaps most disappointing is the idea that the government, rather than attempting to help their citizens, blame all familial problems on the individual's lack of morality. Particularly with the Ministry of Health and Welfare, they had defined unwed mothers as individuals who have "low levels of education" as well as an "unstable job." They were also characterized as those who live alone and have "open and impulsive sexual values." The Health Guide, to which the definition and information had first originated from, is no longer available. The ministry had taken down the publicly available guide by May 2010 after mothers of all backgrounds made multiple complaints. Still, there is an ongoing sense of blame that is more misplaced on the individual rather than on the factors that influence these individuals to make these decisions (such as the political and social regulations from governmental policy and welfare). After all, even the most politically progressive men are not completely free from the society's patriarchal attitudes and the ideas of male superiority. This leads them to believe that it is up to the women to help themselves through their social disabilities and fight for their own fundamental, democratic rights<sup>78</sup>.

### **Nongovernmental Organizations' Efforts to Make Change**

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<sup>78</sup> Choi, Elizabeth. "Status of the Family and Motherhood for Korean Women." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Ed. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994. 189-205. Print.,194

Ultimately, family welfare aims to provide all of the necessary means of sustaining a financially stable and psychologically positive family life. The government views the family as “a means of inexpensive social welfare” that works towards “reducing the fiscal burden of the state<sup>79</sup>.” Because of this notion, little improvement should be expected in the overall well being of the Korean population. Consequently, growing numbers in unstable family lives only indicate the government’s failure in creating a family-based self-support system that could provide the necessary physical and emotional support for these individuals. A more effective means of addressing these issues would have to potentially support the families themselves rather than continuing to reward those who follow the social regime. A more worthy and fulfilling policy would require providing economic and social resources to those who face the various obstacles that come as a result of integrating family life. Instead, out of all of this, these governments have ultimately arranged their policies to benefit the nation’s development as a whole rather than focusing on the subsets that band together to create this foundation/basis. There is a certain refusal to directly provide aid to the more disadvantaged individuals.

Others have complained that the policies and general aid that are provided to the populace do not center on the individuals at all. Instead, the policies center more on available facilities, assisting them with provided funds and freedoms. Thus, if the unwed mothers do not wish to associate with the facilities and centers for external help, there are few opportunities for them to live independently. They instead become entrenched in the same state of poverty and difficulty. As Kim Hye-young’s study, the “양육미혼모의

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<sup>79</sup> Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct." *Economy and Society* 26.1 (1997): 22-40. Web., 36

자립기반 실태와 지원방안 (Current State of Groundwork for Independence of and Ways of Support Unwed Mothers Raising Children)” revealed, despite the ‘aid’ these mothers are entitled to, over 60 percent of the affected population are struggling a great deal because of the extensive costs that come with child-rearing and education. In addition, more than 80 percent of unwed mothers are living in unstable housing conditions; for example, paying monthly rent is of great difficulty for many. These have largely signified how the general government and social spheres perceive the mothers. Accordingly, a survey carried out in 2009 by the Korean Unwed Mothers Support Network and the Korean Women’s Development Institute discovered that in terms of the general populace’s attitude towards unwed parents, unwed mothers sadly experienced the most prejudice, following queer individuals. Among the 2,000 participants, they discovered that 60 percent of them had answered that they believed that unwed mothers were “people who lack judgment and a sense of responsibility<sup>80</sup>.” With these continuously present obstacles and the stigma attached to their personas, it negatively affects both the unwed mother population and the general populace. According the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the ratio of children that are born from single mothers compared to the total number of childbirths is the lowest among the member nations. Concurrently, the proportion of adolescent single mothers is also not very high.

Though the media and government have made recent attempts to stop the decreasing birthrates, the difficulties that come with childrearing are undoubtedly vast. The overall gendered structure facilitates very few opportunities to promote women’s

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<sup>80</sup>김은경. "미혼모 문제 다양한 대책 마련해야." *여성신문*. 여성신, 6 Mar. 2009. Web. <<http://www.womennews.co.kr/news/39255#.VND02F7F9tI>>.



interests and to expand their rights further in the political space<sup>81</sup>. This gender asymmetry continues to manifest itself in various areas concerning social practice, particularly the enormous underrepresentation of women in all branches of Korean government<sup>82</sup>. Many continue to believe that the woman has no place in such a high position of society, given that they were already designated a very particular job: motherhood. In fact, the Korean government's directives specify a woman's 'primary responsibility' within society; they must facilitate her husband's work 'in society,' a principle that is highly internalized by a large number of housewives<sup>83</sup>. By this, it thus means acting as the main source of inspiration and support for the male individual to successfully carry out his role within the Korean community. There exists the view that "men do the critical work," creating the basis of what is now recognized as contemporary Korean patriarchy<sup>84</sup>.

Ultimately, "masculinities and femininities are perpetually constructed and reconstructed in the busy unfolding of histories<sup>85</sup>." It is an ongoing process to which views and expectations must be altered according to the demands of that particular state. Thus, these somewhat long-standing views on the role of masculinity and femininity have resulted in an enormous imbalance of equality and left the minority unable to fend for themselves successfully. Consequently, by educating one another and questioning the notions of masculinity and femininity helpful change could support greater policy change and possibly even a more positive, newer view towards those once ostracized.

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<sup>81</sup> Yoon, Bang-Soon L. "Democratization and Gender Politics in South Korea." *Gender, Globalization, and Democratization*. Ed. Rita Mae Kelly. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 171-94. Print., 178

<sup>82</sup> Kendall, Laurel. *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii, 2002. Print., 6

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 8

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 8

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 8

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **THE CYCLE OF ABANDONMENT AND INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION**

Young mother Hyoung-sook Choi had given up her son for adoption in 2005, but later returned to reclaim him. She had ventured to the unwed mothers' home run by Holt International Children's Services, one of the only four adoption agencies in the nation, asking for help for supporting her son and herself. The organization instead gave her advice and encouragement to give up her parental rights. She looks back at the event with confusion, remembering being asked to sign an adoption consent form before receiving her counsel. Still unsure of what to do at the time, she was disconcerted. The organization also promised her meetings and frequent correspondence with her child. At the time, though the practice was illegal, it was a routine tactic used by agencies to encourage relinquishment. She later discovered that their promises were false<sup>86</sup>. Choi's story is not all that rare; many others, unwed and single, have found themselves in similar predicaments.

Adoption, especially international adoption, has recently received a great deal of attention, attributed to the lack of welfare and aid provided from the government and lack of community towards single-parent households. Many of these individuals who receive little aid from the government, their families and the public thus go to adoption agencies for help. With nowhere else to go, the often expectant mothers enter government homes and shelter, most times run by adoption agencies. Since the end of the Korean War, South Korea has long been recognized as the baby-exporting country (*koasuch'ulguk*); a title that many wish to change. Most countries that send children to abroad adoptive families are often recognized as developing nations or have had experienced sudden political or

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<sup>86</sup> Lee, Deva, and Jenny Na. "A Silent Sacrifice, a Human Cost." Groove. Groove Korea, 17 Sept. 2014. Web. <<http://groovekorea.com/article/silent-sacrifice-human-cost>>.

socio-economic upheaval<sup>87</sup>. Kim Dong-Won, the head of adoptions at the Korean Ministry of Health had mentioned that for a nation that is the world's 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy, ridding themselves of the international stigma or disgrace of the title would be preferential<sup>88</sup>.

The overseas adoption has not been a supplementary domain for the domestic adoption issue in the case of South Korea. Despite promoting domestic adoption since 2005, the nation continues to be one of the top five sending countries to the United States, responsible for nearly 13 percent of all 2010 overseas adoption<sup>89</sup>. Concurrently, South Korea currently holds the world's lowest birthrate, with unwed mothers, usually aged 25 and over, constituting only 1-1.25 percent of live births<sup>90</sup>. Though there is growing political and economic pressures to end the installed international adoption program, the country remains unable to create homes for its children domestically. In this chapter, I will trace the factors that complicate the issue: international and domestic criticisms, the dramatically low birth rate, and Korean people's cultural opposition to adoption<sup>91</sup>. Through this, I will show how single mothers and their children thus participate in a never-ending cycle that consistently traps both parties into participating in international adoption; an originally well-intentioned system that has turned into a major obstacle for single mothers.

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<sup>87</sup> Bitzan, Catherine M. "Our Most Precious Resource: How South Korea is Poised to Change the Landscape of International Adoption." *Minn. J. Int'l L.* 17 (2008): 121., 122

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Dobbs, Jennifer Kwon. "Ending South Korea's Child Export Shame." *Foreign Policy In Focus*. N.p., 23 June 2011. Web. <[http://fpif.org/ending\\_south\\_koreas\\_child\\_export\\_shame/](http://fpif.org/ending_south_koreas_child_export_shame/)>.

<sup>90</sup> Hübinette, Tobias. "Adopted Koreans and the development of identity in the 'third space'." *Adoption & Fostering* 28.1 (2004): 16-24.

<sup>91</sup> Bitzan, Catherine M. "Our Most Precious Resource: How South Korea is Poised to Change the Landscape of International Adoption." *Minn. J. Int'l L.* 17 (2008): 121., 122

### International Adoption as a Permanent Institution

Residential care for South Korean children had first begun while under Japanese rule. In 1921, the government had established a social welfare division that would act as the central government unit, thus marking the beginning of national child welfare policies. By 1934, there were 23 established child welfare residential facilities for 2192 children<sup>92</sup>. Even after Korea had gained independence in 1945, the previous regulations and laws continued to remain intact, guiding operations for residential care institutions. By 1950, there were 116 child welfare residential care facilities for 8908 children. In time, concerns about the poor quality of these institutions began to arise resulting in new regulations and standards in 1950. These standards were revolutionized in terms of recommending the creation of more “family-like” institutions compared to highly institutional, large residential facilities<sup>93</sup>. Sadly, demand for these facilities increased enormously as a result of the Korean War’s orphans and refugees. According to the Korean Institute of Military History, 2,800,000 among Koreans and non-Koreans, both combatants and civilians: 200,000 widows and 100,000 orphans were created (2001). The greatest victims were the children where an enormous number were lost, abandoned, neglected and orphaned whose needs were unmet<sup>94</sup>. At the end of the war in 1953, the number of facilities had increased to 440 institutions and served around 54,000 children. As a result, the war had left Korea’s traditional family system no longer function. The

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<sup>92</sup> Joo, Bong, Lee. "Residential Care in Korea." Residential Care of Children Comparative Perspectives. Ed. Mark E. Courtney and Dorota Iwaniec. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 120-36. Print.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. pg. 128

<sup>94</sup> Kim, Dong Soo. "A Country Divided: Contextualizing Adoption from a Korean Perspective." *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice* (2007): 3-23.

system had become so weakened that a majority of families were isolated and fractured. In addition, unemployment and poverty were both unchecked<sup>95</sup>.

As the government was struggling to recover, child welfare services now had to depend on others' charities, mostly from international organizations and religious organizations which helped increase the number of institutions to 542 for 60,000 children in 1960. The institution's foundations and activities not only provided necessary relief to children but also missionary activities. The overwhelming need to find these children new permanent homes was responded by American families reaching out and beginning to adopt. However, there were no explicit government policy attention or guidance. These foreign groups had dominated the structure of child welfare in Korea before the 1961 Child Welfare Law. As a result, the nation remained the largest single source of adopted children to the United States and others for the next forty years. The Child Welfare Law was a turning point in the history of Korean Child welfare policy development. The government once again financially supported the programs, while national laws shaping regulations. For the first time, policies spelled out what types of services and protection were necessary for children according to their specified needs. By 1981, a shift had occurred from focusing on giving certain children at risk services to promote family and well-being. Thus, instead of focusing on "protecting" children they changed to promoting the well-being of all children. However, the government still failed to implement any actual programs or policies that were directed towards accomplishing their policy's goal.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, pg. 20

They focused instead on only providing necessary substitute care for the children who needed it<sup>96</sup>.

Then, poverty has been a major factor in whether or not country continues to send children abroad. As seen presently, many developing countries are unable to handle a sudden influx of children during the event of a political or socioeconomic shift when lacking the necessarily strong infrastructure. Consequently, international adoption is seen as the most preferable route for the immediate help of children. While sending countries the children they are unable to care for, they are also provided a consistent source of money to the country's government and adoption agencies<sup>97</sup>. Anthropologist Elena Kim noted, "[Korea's adoption] policy has become a seemingly permanent solution to what was, at the time, considered an emergency situation. What was supposed to be a humanitarian effort to rescue mixed-race children and war orphans became the largest and longest-running adoption program in the world<sup>98</sup>." The onslaught of international adoptions was intended to be a temporary solution to post-war chaos, mass poverty, and incoming industrialization. Indeed, as Kim stated, international adoption has become a permanent institution in the case of Korean child welfare. The nation has sent an estimated 220,000 children to 14 receiving countries, now recognized as the world's longest and oldest international adoption program<sup>99</sup>. Yet, there have been various attempts to control the growing numbers.

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<sup>96</sup> Joo, Bong, Lee. "Residential Care in Korea." *Residential Care of Children Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. Mark E. Courtney and Dorota Iwaniec. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 120-36. Print.

<sup>97</sup> Bitzan, Catherine M. "Our Most Precious Resource: How South Korea is Poised to Change the Landscape of International Adoption." *Minn. J. Int'l L.* 17 (2008): 121.

<sup>98</sup> Lee, Deva, and Jenny Na. "A Silent Sacrifice, a Human Cost." *Groove*. Groove Korea, 17 Sept. 2014. Web. <<http://groovekorea.com/article/silent-sacrifice-human-cost>>.

<sup>99</sup> Kim, Dong Soo. "A Country Divided: Contextualizing Adoption from a Korean Perspective." *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice* (2007): 3-23.

The first step the nation has taken was seen with a yearly quota for adoptions set in 2007. The second step took place on August 5, 2012 when the government enacted the Republic of Korea (ROK) Special Adoption Act which governed international adoptions. The law prioritized domestic adoptions and various endeavors towards reducing the number of Korean children adopted abroad. Each international adoption would also require the approval of the ROK Family Court. It also required an adoption agency that had been authorized by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs to be used for overseas adoption for all Korean orphans. According to the U.S. Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. citizens who were considering adoption in Korea were reminded that the Korean government had expressed its desire and intent to reduce the need for international adoptions by encouraging domestic adoptions. Thus, the nation has established specific international adoption quotas that are currently being reduced by 10 percent each year. Once that quota is reached, all agencies are forbidden from submitting emigration applications to the Korean government for a specific child. Overall, due to a lack of aid, women instead go to adoption agencies to receive immediate support and funds. As a result, adoption agencies function to foster more international adoptions rather than support these mothers in keeping their babies. Below, I will explore the structural problems that pose as obstacles for the government's intents.

### **The Single Mother's Struggle for Aid and Protection**

A major question from skeptics is whether the international adoption system is ethical, moral and just. For infants that are relinquished by their mothers are sent to one of four international adoption agencies, Holt International Children's Services, Eastern



Social Welfare Society, Korean Social Services, and Social Welfare Society. Other child welfare institutions carry children until they turn 18, sending them out into a society that is extremely prejudiced against their identity, limiting them to few job and social opportunities. The United Nations has also noted that the foundations are substandard because of a lack of funding and staff, calling out for the care systems to be reformed<sup>100</sup>.

Around the 1980s, the adoption agencies had started to engage in profit-making projects in order to run their own delivery clinics, foster homes and temporary institutions for single mothers. Since then, these maternity homes had been the primary source for newborn babies from young, unwed mothers<sup>101</sup>. Many from this group, who already receive little help from the government, their families and the public, go to adoption agencies instead for aid. With nowhere else to go, the more often expectant mothers enter government homes and shelter, run by adoption agencies.

According to Shannon Heit, the volunteer coordinator for the Korean Unwed Mothers Families' Association (KUMFA), nearly half of the facilities in the country are run by these agencies. This results in a conflict of interests. The homes run by the agencies will only accept those who are willing to give up for adoption (or have a higher likelihood of choosing adoption such as those who are younger individuals with no family or outside support network)<sup>102</sup>. For example, one such individual, Kyoung-hwa decided to keep her baby but still required outside aid. She had decided to have her child at a government-subsidized unwed mothers' home, but of the 33 homes she contacted,

<sup>100</sup> Onishi, Norimitsu. "Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop 'Exporting' Babies." The New York Times. The New York Times, 08 Oct. 2008. Web.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=5&em&](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&_r=5&em&)>.

<sup>101</sup> Lee, Deva, and Jenny Na. "A Silent Sacrifice, a Human Cost." Groove. Groove Korea, 17 Sept. 2014. Web. <<http://groovekorea.com/article/silent-sacrifice-human-cost>>.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

only two had returned her call offering assistance. In Kyoung-hwa's case, the agencies displayed hypocritical behaviors in acting differently from stated intentions and refusing a mother the help she needed. Advocates for unwed mothers have argued that the adoption agencies hold an unnecessary amount of power over these individuals who come to them for necessary aid. Already receiving little to no aid from the government, families or the public, these women are pressured to enter government homes and shelters. Sadly, 34 percent of mothers had listed economic hardship as a reason behind relinquishing their parental rights<sup>103</sup>.

A small comparison among unwed mothers between those who choose to relinquish and those who choose to raise their children displays an enormous difference in treatment from the facilities and the aid they receive. Individuals who have decided to relinquish are allowed to stay in the facilities for up to two years with an optional six-month extension. However, those who choose to raise their children must vacate the homes after one to two years in order to make space for new residents<sup>104</sup>. The four adoption agencies altogether collect an estimated \$35 million per year, a single overseas adoption today averaging \$15,000. The revenue is generated from a total of 220,000 children sent abroad. However, this does not include other fees, such as unreported cash donations in order to strengthen inter-agency relationships for increased child referrals; cost savings associated with exporting the children and the families' social welfare needs. The nation itself only spends 6.9 percent of its overall GDP on social welfare. Compared to the monthly 70 USD that unwed mothers receive, foster families instead receive a monthly stipend of 500 USD. The childcare facilities themselves receive 1050 USD per

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

child per month. Families that adopt domestically also receive around 150 USD per month for each child up to 14 years. An overseas adoption could pay an unwed mother's subsidy for 25 years of the child's life<sup>105</sup>. In short, the government is unwilling to devote a similar monetary amount to single mothers despite how easily assigning a greater amount could help them.

To make matters more difficult, even more restrictions are placed on the mothers in order to prevent any doubt. It has been reported that unwed mothers are not allowed to see their children once having birth as social workers will shortly take them away, preventing them from changing their minds. If a mother was to attempt get her child back, they would be forced to pay for various healthcare and foster care expenses—costs that have been subsidized by the government for adoption agencies. Undoubtedly, most mothers are unable to pay for this. Others have also mentioned that agencies will require an additional signature from the birth father on documents that rescind adoption consent, though it was not required for child surrender. In other cases, mothers who have asked for information have been denied, officials claiming that it would violate the adoptive family's privacy and rights. They were then asked to wait until the adoptees themselves turned 18. However, there are no laws that seal and regulate the files which are considered to be the agency's private property. From 1995 to 2005, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family had reported that 78,000 adoptees had initiated a birth search, but only 2.7 percent were able to reunited with their birth mothers. Their searches had revealed that many structural abuses had been conducted, such as falsified orphan

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

identities and kidnappings by the orphanage<sup>106</sup>. Though many claim that it is no longer necessary for South Korea to continue having international adoptions, increasing domestic adoption is seemingly just as difficult as ending international adoptions.

Restricted by difficult procedures and complicated policies, single mothers are pressured to participate in international adoptions. Left with little freedoms, abandonment becomes a reoccurring factor. Some single mothers resort to utilizing the Baby Box mentioned earlier in order to avoid these complications and formally declaring abandonment. For many, using the Baby Box over having their babies internationally adopted is the more discrete, comfortable process that they desire.

### **The Difficulties with Domestic Adoptions**

Historically, nations have adopted and developed various approaches to adoption policies based on two factors: the country's ingrained cultural perspectives and values and the external political, social, and economic environment surrounding international. Concurrently, South Korea has been recognized as one of the first sending countries that attempt to transform their large-scale international adoption program into an exclusively domestic adoption<sup>107</sup>.

South Koreans have always embraced a very conservative, cultural approach to adoption. The ideas and notions surrounding adoption have always been grounded in the Confucian emphasis on the importance of family bloodline. The traditional patriarchal family values have always placed the male bloodline as the "central organizing principle

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<sup>106</sup> Dobbs, Jennifer Kwon. "Ending South Korea's Child Export Shame." *Foreign Policy In Focus*. N.p., 23 June 2011. Web. <[http://fpif.org/ending\\_south\\_koreas\\_child\\_export\\_shame/](http://fpif.org/ending_south_koreas_child_export_shame/)>.

<sup>107</sup> Bitzan, Catherine M. "Our Most Precious Resource: How South Korea is Poised to Change the Landscape of International Adoption." *Minn. J. Int'l L.* 17 (2008): 125.

of kinship and community” within Korean society<sup>108</sup>. As a result, this loyalty has prevented many domestic Koreans from adopting outside of their family lineage. Thus, this strict adherence to the blood-based family structure meant that a child without biological lineage faced great discrimination. In the past, if adoption had occurred it was simply to continue the family bloodline, usually among relatives or within the same surnames. Adopting a child that was of “wrong blood” or mixed blood was not culturally acceptable<sup>109</sup>. With a strong cultural hesitancy to domestically adopt, it becomes difficult for the government to format and create its adoption law. However, those who do adopt domestically often take great precautions to protect their child from discrimination, often faking a pregnancy or obtaining a birth certificate as proof that the child is biologically theirs<sup>110</sup>.

Through various research and studies, the government has determined that family-type care is more beneficial for children in need. Consequently, a handful of demonstration programs in order to recruit foster care families have been implemented in recent years according to the Ministry of Health and Human Services (2002). And yet, it has been difficult to expand this type of “in-home” services. The foster family care has been severely limited and usually occurs only as a temporary placement option, often for pre-adoption services. Though the prospect of change is estimated to be slow, residential care has been determined as an integral part of the Korean child welfare system. Now, the goal of residential care needs to be redefined<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, pg. 126

<sup>109</sup> Kim, Dong Soo. "A Country Divided: Contextualizing Adoption from a Korean Perspective." *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice* (2007): 3-23.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, pg. 127

<sup>111</sup> Joo, Bong, Lee. "Residential Care in Korea." *Residential Care of Children Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. Mark E. Courtney and Dorota Iwaniec. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 120-36. Print.

Still, the government has been aggressively pushing towards increasing domestic adoptions and decreasing overseas adoptions. This has resulted in less restrictive laws and regulations around domestic adoption. Single people now qualify as well as older individuals whereas until 2007 prospective adoptive parents could be no more than 50 years older than the child. Now, they have increased the age gap to 60 years. Concurrently, the government has also made it more difficult for international adoptions to take place by imposing an additional five-month waiting period before children could be considered. They had also increased welfare and payments to foster parents in order to keep children inside South Korea longer and increase their chances of domestic adoption. Thus, in order to improve domestic adoption, it is in turn critical to expand the foster care system. After all, foster care placements can serve as an important transition to intracountry adoption, especially for children with special needs (such as older children or those with disabilities)<sup>112</sup>. Outside of the foster care sphere, the government had also began offering 90,000 WON monthly allowances for those who adopt children up to 12 years old, in addition to generous health benefits for these children and disabled children in 2007<sup>113</sup>.

**Table 1. Number of Cultural Organizations**

International Adoptions per Year	
Year	Number of Adoptions
2007	938
2008	1064
2009	1079
2010	865

<sup>112</sup> Kim, Wun Jung. "International adoption: A case review of Korean children." *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 25.3 (1995): 141-154.

<sup>113</sup> Onishi, Norimitsu. "Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop 'Exporting' Babies." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 08 Oct. 2008. Web.  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=5&em&](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&_r=5&em&)>.

There have been some results with international adoptions steadily declining even further over the years, as seen in Table 1. Though phasing out international adoption has been a governmental goal since 1976, the general Korean reluctance to adopt and the general disapproval of single motherhood have been major obstacles to the task<sup>114</sup>.

However, the new policies surrounding adoption encouragement has made little progress because of prejudice and discrimination against adoptees. Thus, the nation cannot truly address the problem without taking other, stronger measures to improve the general public awareness and opinion on adoption. According to a survey by the Korean Institute for Health and Social Affairs, 32.1 percent had said that they did not want to adopt children because it is difficult to raise them as if they were their birth children; 29.5 percent had mentioned the need for strong blood ties; and was followed by 11.9 percent reasoning financial burden and 11.4 percent on prejudice against adoption<sup>115</sup>. It was also mentioned that most Koreans have a strong preferences when it comes to adopting: 95 percent had desired young (under 3 months), healthy (no special needs) females (70 percent)<sup>116</sup>. Another study had shown that approximately 95 percent of prospective adoptive parents had wished to adopt a healthy child under six months of age. Thus, children with special needs have had a difficulty finding homes in Korea and are thus more likely to be placed overseas<sup>117</sup>.

Various suggestions have been on how to go about the desired direction. Many have suggested staging a national campaign in order to help individuals garner a better

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> "Promoting Adoptions." The Korea Times. The Korea Times, 11 May 2011. Web. <[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2011/05/137\\_86824.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2011/05/137_86824.html)>.

<sup>116</sup> Onishi, Norimitsu. "Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop 'Exporting' Babies." The New York Times. The New York Times, 08 Oct. 2008. Web. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=5&em&=>](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&_r=5&em&=>).

<sup>117</sup> Kim, Wun Jung. "International adoption: A case review of Korean children." *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 25.3 (1995): 141-154.,210

awareness about adoption. Suggestions have also been made towards increasing state support for families with adoptees even further. Lastly, a major suggestion has been directed towards young unwed mothers on extending more assistance so that they are able to raise their children on their own<sup>118</sup>

### *Continuing Debate*

In recent years, the Korean government has been taken massive strides in various directions to address this concern. New policies have been implemented concerning adoption both internationally and domestically. However, individuals have called out for more effective methods concerning other major obstacles that the government appears to be ignoring. In terms of lessening the restrictions placed previously, adoptive agencies, parents and experts have argued that these new policies are more centered on the notion of saving face rather than being concerned with the children's welfare. After all, increasing the age gap and allowing single individuals to adopt have most likely lowered the standards for domestic adoptions in a detrimental manner to the children<sup>119</sup>. At times, the Korean government has not been involved in some adoptions as sales of children have taken place over the Internet<sup>120</sup>.

Bills have been instigated surrounding the unethical practices with adoption agencies and to help lessen the chance of child surrender. As mentioned before, adoption agencies counsel unwed mothers, who are responsible for 90 percent of adoption

<sup>118</sup> "Promoting Adoptions." The Korea Times. The Korea Times, 11 May 2011. Web. <[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2011/05/137\\_86824.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2011/05/137_86824.html)>.

<sup>119</sup> Onishi, Norimitsu. "Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop 'Exporting' Babies." The New York Times. The New York Times, 08 Oct. 2008. Web. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=5&em&](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09adopt.html?pagewanted=1&_r=5&em&)>.

<sup>120</sup> Dobbs, Jennifer Kwon. "Ending South Korea's Child Export Shame." Foreign Policy In Focus. N.p., 23 June 2011. Web. <[http://fpif.org/ending\\_south\\_koreas\\_child\\_export\\_shame/](http://fpif.org/ending_south_koreas_child_export_shame/)>.



placements, to sign illegal paperwork in order to consent to adoption though the child may not have been born yet. This bill has proposed urgent revisions to the current law: to stipulate a court process for adoption, a cooling off period for child surrender without coercion and documentation of identities. Known as the Special Adoption Law, it was a collaborative effort among Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK), Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association (KUMFA), Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea (TRACK)<sup>121</sup>. The Special Adoption Law (SAL) in 2011 was intended to shift the focus of the country's adoption system in order to help preserve original families within international adoption. The new law enforces a mandatory seven-day reconsideration period for all expectant mothers to address the issues of coercion. It also ensures that if a mother chooses adoption, her consent must be verified and her child's birth must be registered. In addition, the mother may choose to revoke the adoption up to six months after sending in her application. The law also bans adoption agencies from providing facilities for unwed mothers by 2015<sup>122</sup>. The children placed will only be eligible for adoption by foreigners if the government is unable to place the child in a foster home. The new legislation mandates that parents receive court approval before adopting children while requiring adoption agencies to declassify information on birth parents. If the birth parents do not wish to be identified, those who want to know more about their origins will be given all information except for the birth parents' personal details. This law arranges for more effort to be made in order to support single mothers and encourage them to parent their children rather than leave them to adoption. Presently,

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Lee, Deva, and Jenny Na. "A Silent Sacrifice, a Human Cost." Groove. Groove Korea, 17 Sept. 2014. Web. <<http://groovekorea.com/article/silent-sacrifice-human-cost>>.

almost unwed, single mothers place their children up for adoption, nearly 80-90 percent of them, as opposed to 5 percent in other European and North American countries.

**Table 2. Number of Cultural Organizations**

International Adoptions per Year	
Year	Number of Adoptions
2006	1332
2007	1338
2008	1306
2009	1314
2010	1462

It also aims to encourage domestic adoptions as it has fluctuated in the past, as shown in Table 2. However, there are still some present concerns in that the new legislation may increase domestic adoptions, but the increase does not exactly lead to a reduction in foreign adoption<sup>123</sup>.

Others have argued the current law places priority on expediency over mother and child rights. Often, unwed mothers do not want to surrender but have little choice in these instances. As a result, some policymakers have believed that the best way to help the children today is to eradicate the international program and care for the children within the country. Some have mentioned this as only an aid to Korea's escalating population crisis. Though their original incentive to encourage domestic adoption may help in the long-term, they are still incapable of creating permanent Korean homes for these individuals as a substitute for overseas homes. There have been a variety of proposals to "solve" the issue. The primary proposal considers increasing the government's social services to Korean families in order to help the children stay with their birth parents and

<sup>123</sup> "New Korean Adoption Law 2011 - South-Korea - Korea4expats." Korea4expats. K4E Consulting, 30 Mar. 2015. Web. <<http://www.korea4expats.com/article-Korean-law-limiting-foreign-adoptions.html>>.

decrease the number of children up for adoption. The government needs to address and help with the high costs of education, medical care, and childcare in order to promote future childbearing. In addition to that, Korea can also help decrease international adoptions by facilitating the adoption process and creating stronger incentives for those who adopt domestically. It may be preferential for the government to extend all child-based tax incentives and welfare benefits to families with adopted children. They could also grant the parents the same educational, medical and housing subsidies that biological parents enjoy.

Single mothers also need a great deal of support to help them care for their child. As single mothers already face both cultural and economic discrimination and barriers, raising children becomes an impossible possibility. Economic concerns can be eradicated with the government expanding its funded housing to help mothers transition into a stable home. The cultural aspect however will require a more gradual, transitional series of changes. For example, the nation's lessening emphasis on male bloodlines is underway for change. Both could help ease the families' economic hardships thus encouraging parents to have more and raise more children in response to the declining birth rate. In terms of the cultural, the government should attempt to pursue a more active form of changing the public's eye on these notions of single mothers and adoption. Public and comprehensive educational campaigns should be held in order to help present domestic adoption in a favorable light. They should also integrate adoption into family-education schools as a positive opportunity for the parents and child. This should work towards

promoting a systematic change towards creating a more favorable impression of adoption in general<sup>124</sup>.

In general, it thus becomes an issue of the government ignoring the one population that would perhaps be most effective in eradicating the issue of both international adoptions and abandonment. Encouraging single, unwed mothers to care for their children through additional financial welfare and governmental support could play a major role in decreasing the number of abandoned children. As Hollee McGinnis, a Ph.D. student living in Seoul on a Fulbright scholarship, says, "It's tension between how much do you pull a culture and a society to change, and how much do you let them evolve<sup>125</sup>?"

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<sup>124</sup> Bitzan, Catherine M. "Our Most Precious Resource: How South Korea is Poised to Change the Landscape of International Adoption." *Minn. J. Int'l L.* 17 (2008): 121., 153

<sup>125</sup> Haruch, Steve. "In Korea, Adoptees Fight To Change Culture That Sent Them Overseas." *NPR.NPR*, 9 Sept. 2014. Web. 08 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/09/09/346851939/in-korea-adoptees-fight-to-change-culture-that-sent-them-overseas>>.

## CONCLUSION

In an interview on the television show, *Calling*, on CGNTV America, Pastor Lee commented on the baby box's existence solemnly, "[The] door of the baby box shouldn't open. It should cease to exist." He looks back fondly at the individuals he encountered through the baby box, reminiscing on the pity he felt for the young mothers. Having given birth to a fatherless baby after nine months, he identifies them as individuals who are helpless to do much of anything else for the baby. As a result, they suffer bouts of extreme depression but Pastor Lee counteracts it. He stated, "I tell them that they did all they could do as a mother under the circumstances, for they brought the baby [to the Baby Box] and did not abandon them somewhere else."

The issue of abandonment has long plagued Korean society in the past few decades, creating both social and governmental mechanics to deter the situation. However, despite their attempts, the nation has still received criticism surrounding its difficulty with providing single mothers the resources necessary to live satisfactorily. There is no doubt that within Korean society, unmarried single mother families are still receiving the highest degree of social rejection among divorced families, families of remarriage, and marriage immigrants<sup>126</sup>.

In this thesis, I argued that Confucianism has long since been an overarching framework of Korean society, playing a major role in the continuing issue of child abandonment. Traditional ideas and notions have prevented and inhibited Korean mothers from gaining bodily, social and economic independence, outside of patriarchal control. In order to change the misperceptions that exist about unwed mothers, there needs to be an atmosphere of support. This would entail having greater economic

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<sup>126</sup> Soma, Naoko, Jiyeon Park, Sun-Hee Baek, and Akemi Morita. "Teenage Pregnancy and Its Support System in Korea." *Contemporary Social Issues in East Asian Societies: Examining the Spectrum of Public and Private Spheres*. Ed. Mika Markus Mervio. (2012) N.p.: n.p., n.d. 137-162. Print.

assistance, unbiased counseling and the reinforcement of necessary child support, rather than encouraging the separation of mother and child<sup>127</sup>. As a result, for these women, their liberation is not simply on their sexual freedoms, but instead pertains more to the redistribution of privileges, powers and properties between genders.

In chapter 1, I discussed how the historic and traditional traits of Confucianism have affected modern Korean society through war, colonization and industrialization. The significance of motherhood has become a constant aspect in most women's lives, intended as a reminder of the woman's role to be a birth mother. Abortion, sex education and contraceptive use all bring into question the insufficiency of personal rights and freedoms for Korean women.

Chapter 2 explores on the factors that contribute to a single mother's inability to raise her children. Societal and economic pressures are enormous hindrances, as the recognized responsibility to sacrifice one's individuality for the sake of familial unity becomes apparent. As the foundational family unit is crucial to leading a stable familial life, mothers often lose this family centeredness. Outside of the family, monetary factors inhibit single mother families from leading comfortable lives.

In chapter 3, I looked into how the general lack of external forms of care and welfare contributes to abandonment. Though it is necessary for a majority to receive aid, the government lacks the needed provisions. In retaliation, NGOs including the mothers themselves have begun attempts to defend their personal right to raising their own children.

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<sup>127</sup> Lee, Deva, and Jenny Na. "A Silent Sacrifice, a Human Cost." Groove. Groove Korea, 17 Sept. 2014. Web. <<http://groovekorea.com/article/silent-sacrifice-human-cost>>.

Lastly, chapter 4 looks into the history and role that the notion of adoption has played in both the domestic and international. With a lack of governmental aid, single mothers often resort to participating in the business-like atmosphere of adoption agencies, as they are the main providers of major forms of support. In addition, the difficulties that arise when attempting to successfully instigate domestic adoptions do little to thwart international adoptions.

With the growing support of international Korean adoptees and growing feminist movement in South Korea, changes are constantly underway in attempting to provide better care and freedoms to this population and their children. Korea's case of child abandonment is unique when considering its historical foregrounds and monumental events. It is my hope that this thesis will make the framework behind child abandonment in South Korea clearer and help others gain a clearer understanding of what has contributed to the phenomenon and what can be done to alleviate the circumstances.



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