

Gendered Care Work as “Free Labor” in State Employment: School Social Workers in the Education Welfare (Investment) Priority Project in South Korea

JESOOK SONG

This article draws on ethnographic research to elucidate ways in which young women’s care labor is appropriated by the state as “free labor” in South Korea. Building upon John Krinsky’s notion of free labor as state-orchestrated exploitation of public sector workers and Kyounghee Kim’s research on gendered care labor, this article examines the gendered experience of school social workers who are certified at a lower level than professional social workers, and are hired, laid off, and rehired by the state-sponsored Education Welfare Priority Project. It traces recent unionization efforts by school social workers and attempts to explain why these workers do not recognize care work as a source of exploitation. Finally, the author presents analytical tools to better understand the intersection of state employment, exploitation, and gendered care labor as an emerging neoliberal form of labor.

Keywords: education, gendered labor, South Korea, state employment, welfare

Teachers are first class and we [temporary school social workers] are second. We don’t have teacher certificates, and are hired as annual contract workers. I used to feel ashamed about this, but not anymore. So, I openly tell [teachers] that I’m a minority employee in the school. We have worked for the last seven years for this education welfare program [based on renewal of annual contracts], but this year the government has not confirmed that it will renew our contracts or continue sponsoring the program. Now we hear that the government is creating counseling teacher positions, which require teacher’s college and certification. We’re losing ground after creating an infrastructure of welfare for students. I thought about what makes us so different from teachers. It’s the difference between regular workers and irregular workers. No matter how loud we cry out, our voice is not heard. (Ms. Suh, 2009)

Ms. SUH IS A school social worker in her early thirties in a harbor city (hereafter referred to as “the City”) located on the southeast coast of South Korea. She is one of the school social workers hired by the South Korean government to work in public schools under the aegis of the Education Welfare Investment Priority Project (hereafter, “the Education Welfare Project,” or “the Project”).¹ As an ambitious, state-led education reform program targeting urban poor neighborhoods, the Education Welfare

Jesook Song (jesook.song@utoronto.ca) is Professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of Toronto.

Project was designed to provide services to children and adolescents attending elementary and junior high school in working poor–class neighborhoods designated as “priority zones.” School social workers I encountered in my field research in 2009 shared Ms. Suh’s agonizing concern that the government’s unwillingness to make their employment permanent was a sign that their positions would eventually be terminated. And in fact the City’s school social workers were laid off in January 2011 as a result of a new ordinance that transferred financial responsibility for the program from the central government to the municipality, an example of decentralization as a governmental technique.² The labor law states that employers must provide permanent job security for annual contract workers who have reached their eighth renewal. So since 2011, a number of municipalities that took over the responsibility of supervising the Project have laid off school social workers in order to avoid them turning into permanent contract workers (Chang 2013; Kwōn 2015).

Using the case of school social workers in the Education Welfare Project, this article aims to trace and analyze the contexts of precarious labor in the South Korean public sector, particularly in state-initiated projects. It focuses on the way in which the Education Welfare Project has shaped skilled young adults into a stratum of disposable, irregular workers—in this case heavily gendered care workers—despite making them responsible for building a school welfare system from scratch. The content of their labor requires not just their skill set as intake social workers and project managers, but also their emotional labor, passionate devotion, and creativity in developing resources for deprived children and adolescents in order to meet auditing or merit-based evaluation standards (Song and Lee 2014).³

School social workers hired in the Project epitomize a broader trend in contemporary South Korea, namely, the active engagement of the state in the creation of a precarious labor market for professional workers. This article draws on John Krinsky’s (2007) concept of “free labor”—not in the sense of labor without a wage, but describing the

¹The Korean title of the Project is “*kyoyuk pokchi t’uja usōn saōp*.” It is usually referred to as “*kyo-pok-t’u*.” In January 2011, the name was changed to Education Welfare Project, omitting “investment.” I have accommodated the Project’s changing moniker in this article’s title by putting the word in brackets. I explain the background and implications of this change later in the article (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and Korean Educational Development Institute 2010).

²The Korean government has significantly expanded welfare and social policies by amplifying self-governing authority to municipalities as a key governing method since the Asian financial crisis (1997–2001). While such changes appear to have encouraged democratic governance and expanded entitlement of citizens, the potential of implementing a new policy and ordinance became structurally restrained, due to limited budget capacity at the municipality level. Homeless policy is an example, in that it established homeless people’s entitlement to state protection without being able to realize the promise because of decentralization (Song 2011).

³The school social workers’ counseling work is implicated in a larger social context of rapid growth and professionalization in the psychological therapeutic industry. The growing industry and its professionalization are motivated by a desire to increase the education capital of children by “fixing” their problems, and have contributed to producing children and youth as subjects of a cure for educational capital and competitiveness. Song and Lee (2014) discuss nurturing and treating children and youth as curable developmental subjects in the context of the therapy industry and the mass media in conjunction with the education market.

kind of employment that depreciates the value and quality of labor—to show how the state introduces stratification and precarious conditions into professional labor markets in South Korea. In addition, building on Kyounghee Kim’s (2009) research on care work, this article demonstrates that the Project has effectively harnessed the gendered care work of school social workers: while they perceive their work of looking after schoolchildren as professional labor and a source from which to cultivate a sense of self-worth, their emotional and service labor are extricated without bounds in the name of caring.

THE EDUCATION WELFARE PROJECT

When the Project began in 2003, it was implemented in forty-five elementary and middle high schools in eight urban poor districts designated as priority zones. By 2009, the Project had expanded to 538 schools in 100 priority zones, serving 531,932 students (C. Kim 2009, 31). The City oversaw sixty-five schools in ten priority zones in 2009, and this increased to one hundred fifty schools in 2011. School social workers in the Project were hired as annual contract workers by the municipal government using federal funding. Each school was assigned (and later employed directly) one school social worker, and other social workers worked outside the schools under the municipal education bureau as coordinators of each priority zone. The total number of school social workers varied, depending on the number of coordinators hired, but it was around 700.

Of the seventy-five school social workers in the City in 2011, one-fifth were participants in my research. Their educational background ranged from two years of college to master’s degrees, mostly in social work but sometimes in educational psychology or child psychology. The school social workers appointed to each school in the priority zones were tasked with four responsibilities: the improvement of client students’ learning ability, cultural exposure, counseling, and welfare support. They were also responsible for creating extracurricular activities, after-school programs, and summer programs, and for building community support networks. School social workers without affiliation to particular schools were coordinators of the Project in each priority zone to maintain and expand the community network as well as mediate between community and government and train new school social workers inside the schools. The building and maintenance of the community network involved extensive groundwork and reaching out to neighborhood agents and organizations, including school teachers and principals; social workers working for community welfare centers; the police; ward offices; and other government-sponsored programs, such as the Multicultural Center (*tamunhwa sentô*), the New Settlers Project (*saetômin saôp*) for North Korean refugees, the Healthy Family Support Center (*kôn’gang kajok chiwon sentô*), the Mental Health Support Center (*chôngsin kôn’gang chiwon sentô*), and the Suicide Prevention Campaign Center (*chasal yebang chiwon sentô*). The goal of building community alliances was to provide a social safety net for schoolchildren, adolescents, and their families in urban poor areas.

I conducted research on the Education Welfare Project in a remote shantytown in the City from 2008 to 2012.⁴ A primary method of the research was participant

⁴It was part of my research on psychological health support networks in South Korea, funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

observation in ten elementary and junior high schools in the Project priority zone where the shantytown was located. Another primary research method was in-depth interviews with over forty people involved in the Project, including fifteen school social workers annually contracted and renewed until 2011 under the Project, and people with whom the school social workers interacted on a daily basis. These included teachers, counseling teachers, and principals; therapists (e.g., cognitive, art, music, speech), social workers, and directors of local community welfare centers (*pokchikwan*, for which the direct translation would be “welfare institution”); municipal personnel in the education bureau; labor organization staff and community activists; and workers in other government programs linked to the Education Welfare Project (which is implemented and sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, from now on simply Ministry of Education), such as the Family Support Centers (implemented and sponsored by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family) and the Suicide Prevention Campaign Centers (implemented and sponsored by the Ministry of Health and Welfare).⁵

Although the idea of such an undertaking for urban poor neighborhoods was raised at the end of Kim Dae Jung’s presidency (1998–2003), the Education Welfare Project was launched by the Roh Moo-Hyun regime (2003–8) in 2004 along with the above-noted Family Support Centers and Suicide Prevention Campaign Centers contemporaneously. It aimed to intervene to narrow the widening gap between the middle class and the working poor classes by ameliorating the lives of working poor students.

Roh’s welfare regime, “participatory welfarism,” should be understood within the unique history of the Korean welfare state. The first welfare state established under Kim Dae Jung during the Asian Debt Crisis (1997–2001), “productive welfarism,” resulted in criticism and disappointment that welfare was hijacked by workfare in the sense that people received state provisions only when they were employable and workable subjects (Cho 2001; Song 2009). Workfare became the dominant form of welfare in the United Kingdom during the Thatcher years and in the United States under the Reagan administration, often accompanying neoliberalization. South Korea, like many other late-industrializing countries, did not follow the historical precedent of welfare as an affirmative tool for mitigating poverty. Rather, the welfare state in South Korea appeared with the presence of workfare from the start, primarily for easing the unemployment crisis during the Asian Debt Crisis and preparing the labor force in the market, with the justification that a classic welfare system merely drained national coffers. Following Kim’s presidency, Roh’s regime took a relatively more classic position on welfare in the name of participatory welfarism, and was vocal about its aim to reduce the gaps between classes.⁶

The Education Welfare Project was launched in a context in which the private education market emerged as a key engine of widening class gaps. This trend was especially pronounced after the neoliberal restructuring of the public sector and the opening of

⁵The names of ministries have changed and fluctuated over the years. This article indicates the current labels of corresponding ministries.

⁶Roh’s government was not exempt from criticism of its neoliberalism in other respects. Instead of focusing on welfare in general, the government centered on education as the strategic venue for decreasing gaps in material wealth, because education was the place where the tension between the affluent and working classes seeking upward mobility was most felt (Jun 2012).

domestic markets to foreign capital after the Asian Debt Crisis. The private education market included English-language schools (many of which were staffed by native English speakers), massive after-school tutoring programs, and agencies to assist with education migration to Anglophone (later Chinese) countries (i.e., sending children to study abroad in their elementary or junior high school years, with or without parents).⁷

Given that Roh's regime was one of the most left-wing state governments in the history of South Korea, his education reforms through the Education Welfare Project might be compared to post-1968 French socialist education reforms. At that time, Alain Savary, then the French Minister of Education, designated “priority zones”: poor neighborhoods whose elementary schools and high schools were provided with supplementary funding, extra teaching positions, custom-designed curricula, and extracurricular activities (Ranci re 1991). The difference between the French example and the more recent South Korean left-wing education reforms, however, was that the extra labor provided for the priority zones in South Korea was not additional teachers, but social workers, which itself was a novel recognition of the need to mobilize the socioeconomic resources of the local community, not limited to school per se, only if they were not hired based on annual contracts.

In addition to the fact that education reform in South Korea involved hiring social workers in lieu of increasing numbers of teachers, it also differed from the French education reforms in that it sidelined high schools. High school is not mandatory education in South Korea. Among 583 schools under the Project nation-wide, only four high schools were supported, and they were vocational high schools, not regular high schools. The Project's support for only vocational high schools indicates that it was designed to promote “blue class” careers for students from the priority zones without institutional support for the students who aim to enter universities. As a matter of fact, none of the City vocational high schools were allocated support by the Project. Elementary schools and junior high schools were prioritized, and the Project was later extended to kindergartens. According to interviewed school social workers and social workers working in the community welfare centers, the government seemed to assume that it was best to focus on early childhood development and that supporting the higher levels would not be as effective.

One day in 2009, I got a ride with Ms. Nam, who began working in a junior high school in 2003 and was one of the most experienced school social workers in her priority zone. Ms. Nam stopped at a gas station for fuel and realized that the teenage boys working there that evening were former students. She smiled and shouted, “Hey guys, what's up? I didn't know you were working here.” A teenage boy with a shaved head came to her car window, and while taking her credit card said, “*Sae:m* [a word in the regional dialect referring to a teacher in an affectionate way], long time no see. Which do you want, water bottles or Kleenex tissue [commonly given as free gifts at gas stations]?” She said, “Water bottles, please. By the way, how's your younger brother

⁷See Park and Abelman (2004) for a discussion of English education in the private after-school market; Oh (2015) for a discussion of districts designated to use only English and foreign schools in Korea that were formed along with markets opening to foreign investors; and Yoonhee Kang (2012) and Jiyeon Kang and Abelman (2011) for a discussion of the early studying abroad phenomenon.

doing?” With a shy grin, and avoiding eye contact, he said, “He’s still in the youth facility [*sonyônwon*].” When we left, we were silent for a while, but then she sighed, saying, “He was there [at the youth facility], too, but he got out of it and stayed away from drugs. But the younger brother isn’t like that.” When I asked when he was her student, she said it had been three years earlier. She added:

After he graduated from the junior high school I was working for, he dropped out of high school. The Education Welfare Project doesn’t include high schools, meaning there are no social workers who can pay attention to problems that students with poor attendance might have at home or in their lives. Thus, students who are well cared for up to junior high school tend to fall out of the system when they get to high school. And this project is entirely school-oriented so that youth who have dropped out or do not go to school are not counted as valuable enough to be assisted by the Education Welfare Project.

Some of the school social workers and local welfare center-based social workers who were involved in community networks created projects for youth who had dropped out of school, including tutoring for high school diploma exams and a mural painting group. They tried to create an educational center for dropouts modeled on successful precedents in Seoul, such as the Haja Center, an NGO initiative run under the Seoul municipality’s financial sponsorship.

School social workers employed in the Project whom I met in 2009 were surprised when the Lee Myung Bak administration (2008–13), which was perceived as a resurgence of the conservative ruling party after two previous regimes (Kim Dae Jung’s and Roh Moo Hyun’s) that were mostly liberal and left-leaning, expanded the Project in order to garner wider political support. In 2009, during Lee’s presidency, the Project was drastically extended and reached the highest numbers by designating 100 priority zones and covering 583 schools. In the case of the City, when the Project was implemented under Roh Moo Hyun’s administration (2003–8), it began with only two priority zones and twelve schools; however, starting in 2009 under Lee’s presidency, the Project was expanded, with priority zones in up to ten districts and sixty-five schools in the zones. Despite their surprise that the Lee administration had expanded rather than eliminated the Project, the social workers noted that the Project moved away from its initial goal of reducing gaps between classes to become a neoliberal government project by decentralizing state responsibility from the central government to municipalities.

According to Ms. Sônu, a veteran school social worker in her early thirties working as a coordinator outside the school in 2010, “welfare is absent in the Education Welfare Project.” She offered two examples. First, the title of the Project had fluctuated from Education *Welfare* Investment Priority Project to Education Investment Priority Project. “Welfare” was dropped in 2008, after the Lee government took over the Project. Although it reverted to Education *Welfare* Investment Priority Project because of resistance from rank-and-file social workers in the spring of 2009, Ms. Sônu and other school social workers considered the dropping of “welfare” as marking the difference between Lee’s and Roh’s regimes with respect to the prioritization of “welfare” and issues of equity. Second, the central government omitted “investment” in January 2011, not because it had abandoned its neoliberal agenda, but because the

central government withdrew from its role as primary investor and funder of the program by rendering municipal governments fully responsible for the Project, regardless of differing resources among local administrations.⁸

In January 2011, the Education Ministry announced a new ordinance that gave primary financial and administrative responsibility for the Education Welfare Project to the municipal government’s education board. In other words, the expansion of the Project in terms of the numbers of schools and priority zones coincided with the decentralization of the responsibility for the Project to the municipal level. The background of the ordinance was predicated upon the liability of employers, including the state government, to provide annual contract workers who had worked eight years with the right to keep their jobs permanently, although the job was still by annual contract and without pension and promotion (*yông’gu kyeyakchik*). The ordinance prompted some municipalities, including the City’s education board, to lay off all school social workers and let those workers be reemployed under individual contracts with each school (for social workers inside schools) or the education bureau at the district level (for social workers outside schools). In that way, the City could displace the municipal government’s liability as an employer mostly onto individual schools. The fact that all school social workers hired by the City with the central government’s funding were fired in 2011 was exactly what Ms. Suh had feared in 2009.

As a result of these changes, of approximately 150 school social workers under contract with the City, almost 20 percent left the Project by refusing to directly apply to schools different from where they used to work. More than 80 percent of them reapplied under the new conditions, and their job stability and security became more precarious. All of them were limited to working for a maximum of one to two years in the same location without possibility of further renewal. The school social workers were left vulnerable in the process of being hired directly by individual principals, since their reputation among a small circle of local principals—whether they were docile workers or caused headaches—was vital for their successful relocation to a new position every year or two, if they wanted to continue their job in the Project.

Although these young adult, mostly female workers were reluctant to unionize to negotiate with their employers before the ordinance, because the ordinance thwarted their hopes for minimal job security—permanent annual contracts under the education board—they established a labor union and rapidly developed a working-class consciousness, seeking support and alliances with union federations. Ms. Yang was one of the school social workers who decided to stay in the Project after the ordinance. She had not been experienced or interested in unionization in the past but became an active member supporting unionization when the union was formed. Reflecting on why the unionization was necessary, she noted, “The City did not leave us any other option to keep our dignity and living security. We had been patient and ignored enough. It was time to show that we can fight back, not just for ourselves [school social workers] but for our kids [schoolkids in our care].” The total number of school social workers and

⁸As indicated earlier, the expectation of democratic measures through welfare was a rather unique product of Roh Moo Hyun’s government, not a general expectation for welfare.

union members doubled within two years, despite the fact that 20 percent of the workers left the Project in 2011.

STATE-ORCHESTRATED FREE LABOR

Krinsky (2007) uses the concept of “free labor” to situate a particular kind of state employment that makes labor precarious and depreciates the value of labor. “Free labor” is not unwaged labor or labor outside job markets, such as normalized reproductive and domestic labor. Rather, Krinsky uses the term to describe the domain of exploited, skilled workers in the public sector. In particular, he describes workfare workers employed by New York City’s neoliberal government beginning with Mayor Giuliani’s tenure from 1994 to 2001. The workers called the city’s workfare program, the Work Experience Program, “a waste of time at best and slavery at worst,” because they were “working in the same jobs as regular workers but without the full panoply of workers’ rights ... with little to no hope for being hired into their jobs” (Krinsky 2007, 1). He describes the dilemma of workfare workers with respect to organizing and how they struggled over whether to do so as state subjects (i.e., welfare recipients) by demanding entitlement to subsidies, or as state workers (i.e., workfare workers) to claim appropriate labor compensation. Because workfare workers were mostly working in urban poor communities, there was confusion and debate about whether they needed to organize their actions to target the city administration (i.e., workplace-centered) or mobilize themselves as community activists (i.e., community-based).

Although the South Korean school social workers’ situation was confined to the terrain of education within welfare or welfare within education, their work for the Education Welfare Project undeniably fit Krinsky’s description of “working in the same jobs as regular workers but without the full panoply of workers’ rights.” The school social workers’ labor as social workers and education specialists with high qualifications and intense hours of work could be regarded as “free labor” in the same way Krinsky uses the term to describe the labor conditions of New York City workfare participants. Like them, the South Korean school social workers had ambiguous affiliations: their work as school social workers was closer to that of full-fledged welfare agents (i.e., state workers), but their work identification was similar to public works project workers (i.e., state subjects) in terms of being framed as temporary, despite it being a longstanding program. Their struggle to get recognition for the significance of their work was also similar to the New York workfare workers in that they were torn between whether their struggle was better organized as school-based (workplace-centered) or community-based. In other words, they were debating what would be the most effective mobilization of their collective power: should they resist labor exploitation as government irregular workers and seek out other irregular government workers for solidarity, or should they identify as precarious workers in education and schools (e.g., substitute certified teachers) and as outsourced private company workers (e.g., janitors and cafeteria workers)? Or should they identify with social workers in welfare sectors that were scarcely unionized, or with women’s labor organizations that covered care and service labor that relied heavily on undervalued, gendered workers?

There were also heated discussions about whether the school social workers should create an association to include those who did not want to be in a union, or whether they should require every school social worker to be a union member. A thorny question in 2011–12 was which labor organization they should join if they decided to unionize. They questioned whether they should join the women’s labor organization most supportive of irregular school employees (e.g., cafeteria workers, nutritionists, janitors, teaching assistants), or whether they should be part of the co-gendered union for public and transportation workers, part of the largest left national labor union organization (i.e., *min-no-ch’ong*), because their workplace was a public school.⁹ Although the school social workers eventually joined the co-gendered union for public and transportation workers under the largest trade union in 2013, they initially decided to be affiliated with the local women’s labor union in 2011 because they felt that the public and transportation workers’ union would not be efficient or prompt in providing support.¹⁰

An explanation by Ms. Chang, a long-term school social worker whom I met in May 2011, was indicative. If school social workers went on strike, subway workers’ union members would be unlikely to show firm solidarity because of a lack of shared experiences and agendas, even if they technically belonged to the same public and transportation workers’ union. She said that these union members were predominantly male full-time workers from state firms (e.g., state firms specializing in pension and construction, such as *yôn’gûm kongdan* and *kôn’sôl kongdan*) and public transportation companies (e.g., subways and buses) who would not necessarily understand irregular, female, public sector workers’ work. She said that the big unions categorized workers based on the industrial sector, which does not necessarily fit public sector workers. Before the ordinance, Ms. Chang had not been convinced that unionization would be an effective strategy. But after the ordinance, when there was a debate about whether to unionize and whether to require everyone to be union members, she realized that unionization and also having everyone on board was absolutely necessary to give the workers negotiation power. She was elected president of the first City school social workers’ union.

The social workers’ confusion about how best to organize and classify themselves partially arose from a changing labor force and market in which the numbers of irregular

⁹South Korean labor movements are famous for their militancy against the military dictatorship’s repression and contributions to the democratization that ended the regime in 1987 (Chun 2009; S. Kim 1997; Koo 2001). There were domestic concerns that labor movements were not as strong as they once were (Sonn 1999). However, South Korean workers and social movements still appeared powerful during occasions such as the 2005 anti-WTO agenda in Hong Kong or the 2008 Candlelight Vigil against a proposed treaty to import US beef despite the prevalence of mad cow disease.

¹⁰The City school social workers joined the largest trade union because of the change in school social workers’ union strategies and the maturation of the trade union’s support for precarious workers. School social workers from the City and other municipalities who tended to be insular in their own local issues, even just after the ordinance, eventually formed a united front as precarious workers in school, along with janitors, kitchen workers, and nutrition specialists, under the public workers’ section in the trade union when they noticed increasing labor disputes in similar patterns regardless of locality after the ordinance (i.e., municipalities displacing the liabilities of school social workers’ employment to schools). In addition, the trade union’s awareness of contract and part-time workers as legitimate members of the union became elevated because of the sheer numbers and the militancy of the precarious workers.

workers were expanding. Another important factor was that the government preempted labor claims about fairness or equity on the grounds that making these positions permanent would be an unjustified expenditure of public money. Meanwhile, the government represented projects to create temporary employment as a rare opportunity for professional development in a precarious job market. This is similar to Krinsky's (2007) observations of workfare workers in New York City. Their work was scarcely different from that of permanent workers, but they were exploited in the name of an opportunity for professional development—their skilled labor exploited by the state project was “free work.”

The Education Welfare Project is only one of the South Korean state's many government-initiated projects that involve the creation of temporary jobs to fill demands for professional and/or skilled workers. Other projects include many nongovernmental programs based on temporary contracts with and financial support from governments: the Multicultural Center for migrant brides and their children, the New Settlers Project for North Korean refugees, the Healthy Family Support Center for families on the verge of breakdown, the Mental Health Support Center, and the Suicide Prevention Campaign Center. All these projects were launched as parts of the post-Asian Debt Crisis Public Works Program (*kongkong kũllo saôp*). These quasi-governmental temporary projects run by nongovernment organizations originated in South Korea during the Asian Debt Crisis, in the romanticization of partnerships between government and nongovernment organizations (*min'guan hyômnyôk* or *hyôpch'i*), and in reality, in the maximization of state-sponsored, temporary, low-cost projects, such as the Public Works Program and later social intern programs. During the Debt Crisis, the Public Works Program targeted a highly educated and information technology-skilled labor force for whom there was a dearth of secure job markets. This program implemented workfare programs that temporarily employed skilled professionals at minimum wage levels not only in regular government machinery but also in nongovernment sectors and businesses. When the Debt Crisis officially ended in 2003, the South Korean government downgraded the program to highway construction, the cleaning of national parks, and employment for unskilled workers. The temporary skilled jobs were not replaced by permanent positions but by low-wage positions requiring higher skill levels. These jobs were created under the name of “social enterprise/employment (*sahoe jôk kiôp/iljari*)” (Jun 2012) or temporary initiative projects, such as those of the Education Welfare Project.

GENDERED CARE WORK IN STATE EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR RESISTANCE

While Krinsky's work offers insight into the nature of exploitation in government-initiated employment, his analytical framework does not provide sufficient tools for understanding the connection between free labor and care work in the school social workers' case. According to Krinsky (2007), scholars have criticized workfare programs for not offering jobs that would help alleviate women's domestic responsibilities by including daycare work in the workfare work programs. Workfare workers themselves, mostly male workers in Krinsky's context, however, did not consider this academic criticism relevant to their struggle between the identities of government workers and welfare recipients (Krinsky 2007, 231). However, in South Korea, public work programs and their descendants, such as social enterprise/employment and state-sponsored temporary

projects, fully endorse the need for and value of care work, including programs for assistance for the elderly, disabled people, new mothers, and sick people.¹¹ The problem is that while the market value of care work is recognized by the government, this type of work fetches very low compensation and earns very little respect.¹² This discrepancy between Krinsky’s research context (where care work is not part of government workfare programs) and the South Korean case (where care work is a crucial part of corresponding state programs) encourages further analysis of the hierarchically inferior position of care work, which is still understood as unskilled and feminized, low-wage work.

Kyounghee Kim’s (2009) research on gendered, low-wage care work, such as nursing, childcare, and domestic work, supports my argument that the state exploited gendered care work as free labor in South Korea. Two of Kim’s findings are applicable to the school social workers’ situation. First, Kim concludes that low wages for care work established by government employment set the bar for the private market to reproduce low-waged, gendered care work. For example, employment within government-initiated programs, such as the employment of a nurse working with elderly or ill people, requires professional certification; however, this certification does not function to increase wages or benefits in government temporary jobs, such as those in social enterprise/employment programs. Employees in government temporary jobs are not paid more than nurses without certification in the informal private sector. Although Kim’s argument might appear to be pertinent only to the informal sector of care work, it also elucidates the relationship between temporary government employment in the realm of care work and the corresponding private care labor market in terms of the determination of wages.

Second, Kim points out that the nature of emotional labor and personal relationship-centered work facilitates care workers’ acceptance of poor conditions. Affection, intimacy, and emotional bonding are considered to be primary rewards. Kim concludes that these workers deserve much higher monetary remuneration because of their quality and skills. These two aspects of gendered care work are pertinent to understanding the challenges school social workers face while working within the Education Welfare Project.

School social workers are systematically exploited. In the government-sponsored temporary projects in which they are employed, their professional skills are unacknowledged and inadequately compensated. More specifically, I maintain that it is the “care” component of their work through which these workers are exploited. The investment of emotions is an essential requirement of their work, but they are not paid for this component of their labor.¹³ School social workers see care labor as a key source of their professional identity, as well as a source from which they derive dignity in their work. I argue that this contradiction is the most relevant to explain why the state is able to exploit these

¹¹I use the term “care work” when referring to the kinds of labor involving care that are commoditized in the waged labor market in distinction from affective labor, which can include the kinds of emotional labor not to be subsumed as commodity, such as activists’ emotional baggage of social duty. Elsewhere I focus on affective regime and labor in unmarried women workers in non-governmental organizations (Song 2014).

¹²Examples of such treatment include the expectation that assistants to the elderly will essentially be housemaids, rather than people focusing on elder care.

¹³See other feminist work on emotional or care labor (Barry 2007; Hochschild 1983; Lawson 2007).

young female workers so efficiently and why these workers find it difficult to develop class consciousness and organize labor resistance. Although the school social workers rapidly forged a labor union in the aftermath of the decentralizing new ordinance, this was after eight years of work in the sector.

For example, Ms. Yang, who radically changed her attitude on unionization, cautiously shared her anxiety about associating school social workers' labor with care workers' labor: "I do not degrade care workers' work. But care workers are known as manual laborers with low wages because the kind of jobs are simplistic and repetitive. Whereas school social workers are not like that." I asked her if she could think of boundless emotional efforts on behalf of their clients (i.e., school students and their families in their care) they need to put forward—because of no infrastructure to reach out to their clients and systematically follow up with them—as a kind of care work. She cautiously agreed, but not without clarification:

Yes, I guess we can say we do care work as well. But, the kind of care we provide and believe in is deeply connected to why we are devoted to our clients in the last eight years despite our job being so insecure. Our priority is our clients, the young people at risk, not us. This is related to our identity as school social workers. So, I do not feel comfortable to conflate what we cherish most with something degraded in the mainstream. Again, I do not personally think care workers' work unworthy [of better treatment].

My interviews with local women's labor activists in 2012 also reveal a history of reluctance to organize or join unions in sectors where women workers are in the majority (e.g., cafeteria workers, janitors, teaching assistants) and where they work alone in the workplace (e.g., school nurses, school and hospital nutritionists). The activists contend that it took time for these types of workers to recognize the potential of alliances through the workplace (e.g., school or hospital) or across the jobs in the category of care work or emotional work. School social workers were disproportionately women (in my research context, 95 percent were women), and their annual income in 2010 was approximately \$17,000 before taxes and employment insurance. The salary for the highest-waged worker among my informants, who had worked for seven years as a lead social worker, was approximately \$22,000. According to my interviewees, in 2008 to 2010, monthly net incomes for school social workers ranged between \$1,000 and \$1,300, which was confirmed by an official report (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and Korean Educational Development Institute 2010, 121).¹⁴ Given that average monthly living expenses for a person in a South Korean city was around \$1,300, this wage barely allowed the school social workers to make ends meet. As noted, the educational background of school social workers ranged from two years of college to master's degrees,

¹⁴Note that the changes introduced to the program via the January 2011 ordinance actually provided slightly higher wages than before. The coordinating position of the program, the highest available rank, entailed managerial work and required longer experience in the field, and was paid \$23,000 per year, while entry-level positions were paid \$17,100. However, this nominal increase did not compensate for what the workers lost, namely, the impossible renewal of their contract after one to two years.

mostly in social work and educational psychology. Compared to social workers employed by community welfare centers (*pokchikwan*)—who began at approximately \$2,000 a month with full benefits, annual wage increases (*hobong*), and overtime pay—school social workers in the Project were paid much less and had fewer benefits. Social workers working in community welfare centers had certificates issued by professional associations following a four-year university degree. However, school social workers working for the Project were certified by the government only for the purpose of the temporary contract job in the Project and only went through a light screening process, not the rigorous process required by professional associations. They completed only a short training session provided by the Ministry of Education.

Social workers in Korea have had a professional association, ensuring quality control of registered social workers’ work, for decades (Korean Welfare Research Institute 2014; Lee 2009). But it is only recently that social workers in South Korea have established social and public recognition of their professional status. Now the professional association regulates the quality of registered social workers by requiring them to complete two weeks of training every year. By comparison, school social workers, who are not registered social workers or members of the association, are overseen minimally by the government and are required to complete only a few days’ training per year. Other than this brief training, improving professional qualifications and receiving appropriate supervision were entirely up to the individual. As such, school social workers could not compete with professionally certified social workers. Therefore, most of school social workers I met were taking evening courses to increase their qualifications, including youth counseling courses in university continuing education programs, developmental psychology or personality testing courses organized by psychological professional associations, and courses for “creating children’s storybooks and/or motivational reading for children” (*kuyôn tonghwa*) offered by municipal and community recreation centers.¹⁵ In terms of supervision for emotionally and ethically challenging cases—for instance, finding a guardian for children who have lost their caretaker, whether parent or grandparent, after struggling with poverty, depression, and/or other issues—these school social workers garnered advice and guidance from senior workers who had moved to other municipalities or from local community leaders, instead of being supported by a systemized supervision system within the profession.¹⁶

The job security of social workers in community welfare centers varied, depending on the sponsors of these centers. For instance, in corporatized welfare institutions, social workers received more benefits than in independent local community centers. A certified social worker in her mid-twenties, whom I met in 2010, was working for an independent local community welfare center. She said that she was planning to move

¹⁵Many arts and professional courses (e.g., the creation of children’s storybooks and/or motivational reading for children, or therapy through music and drawing) were offered in the rubric of the Humanities Studies Fever (*immunhak yôlpung*) or the Humanities Studies Movement (*immunhak undong*) that emerged in the aftermath of Asian Financial Crisis (Choi 2014).

¹⁶Since 2014, there have been “supervision workshops” offered by the City education board in order to encourage more experienced school social workers to take up the role of supervisor of less experienced ones. However, according to Ms. Chang, the plan to convince more experienced ones, like her, to add a supervisor role on top of the regular duties without financial compensation made the supervision plan unsuccessful.

to a community welfare center sponsored by a big corporation because of the better wages. She had a social work degree from a top social work program in the province, where she proudly noted that she had learned the latest South Korean welfare framework and jargon, including “education welfare,” “community welfare,” “family welfare,” and “welfare for elders.” She implied that those were just trends and not really worth long-term attention. Further, she told me that her degree made her mobile within South Korea and gave her the necessary backing to study abroad if she wanted to.

Directors and senior-level social workers in community welfare centers acknowledged that social workers had a high turnover rate, mostly because of the heavy workload—the responsibility of managing multiple projects involving detailed paperwork and client management. Irregular social workers, such as school social workers, did not have the same options, despite their more challenging work conditions, in terms of the amount of work that was uncompensated and the infrastructural work necessary to build the safety net for schoolchildren and adolescents. Kyounghee Kim’s (2009) research on low-waged, gendered care work demonstrates that working conditions and benefits between the public sector and private sector are not very different: both are undervalued. If we consider school social workers to be in the public sector and professionally certified social workers in the community welfare centers to be in the semi-private sector, the case of school social workers demonstrates that temporary social workers in the public sector are worse off in terms of labor conditions and benefits than social workers in the private sector.

The semi-professional nature of school social work, the precarious labor conditions of school social workers, and the fact that these workers are disproportionately women performing undervalued care work are all important features of a system of government certification that produces low-ranking professionals. For instance, the government system also certifies “family social workers”—social workers who have completed undergraduate programs in child and family development, enabling them to work at Healthy Family Support Centers. Another example is the “mental health social worker certificate.” Individuals are qualified to receive this certification after completing programs in nursing, psychology, and social work. This certificate allows individuals to pursue social work in Mental Health Support Centers. I interviewed a staff member working in a Healthy Family Support Center who earned the “family social worker” certificate after graduating with a BA from a top university. She told me in 2009 that her co-workers in the center and other Healthy Family Support Centers in the region were surprised to hear where she had earned her degree. Her co-workers had degrees from less prestigious universities and took jobs at the centers as temporary options while waiting to find more secure jobs or while saving money to continue their education or for marriage. She began working at her job to help out a professor who was involved in launching the center and then stayed because she learned a lot about an area she might study later and because of her sympathy for people in crisis.

Given the structural challenges of their work, it is surprising that the school social workers did not protest the lack of institutional and professional support for their difficult task of providing a safety net to urban poor children. Until the new ordinance in 2011, despite sporadic complaints, my interviewees said their main reason for being in their jobs was altruism, and they were proud to be building the school social work system from scratch. Even after they organized collectively through the labor union, they

cherished the emotional labor and bonding with their clients. They took long-drawn-out emotional labor for granted as part of their commitment to help youth deprived of socio-economic and cultural resources, but they were not willing to see their emotional labor as “care labor,” which they associated with more manual and low-skilled jobs in nursing and domestic service. The fact that school social workers tended to ground their identity in their skill at offering care but not in care work per se made it difficult for them to see the nature of their work as an apparatus of exploitation.

However, it is important to note that the 2011 ordinance helped school social workers develop class consciousness and organize a resistance movement. The school social workers’ initial decision to affiliate with the women’s labor union revealed that they were aware of the gendered nature of their membership and work. My interviews with school social workers and women’s labor union leaders revealed that these women did not consider the possibility of creating a union for welfare and public care workers working in government-sponsored temporary projects. To them, the concept of public workers’ unions was relatively new in general, as was the idea of organizing irregular workers across many temporary state projects under “care labor” as a trade union category, because the unions they were familiar with were organized through industrial divisions (*sanbyôl nojo*). In addition, it has been challenging to unify workers under different state affiliations (Im 2011). The Education Welfare Project and school social workers working in the project have been employed by and are under the control of the Ministry of Education. This separated them from other social workers who were certified and paid by the government, and were supervised mainly by the Ministry of Welfare and Health, with some by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

CONCLUSION

This article highlights the South Korean state’s production of gendered care work as free labor by analyzing the case of school social workers employed by the Education Welfare Project. The Education Welfare Project is just one of many examples of similar government-initiated temporary projects in the social and welfare domain. Soon after the January 2011 ordinance, which made these workers highly vulnerable, the Ministry of Education systematized the ranking of schools through publicized national academic tests in order to pressure principals into mobilizing all available resources to increase academic performance. This policy made the work of school social workers employed by each school even more difficult. They were concerned that when they were tasked with producing successful students, they became less able to address the real needs of working-class children.

In 2012, the City social workers’ union members told me that their work had been trivialized since the ordinance and the new pressure of ranking schools. They were now assigned to be in charge of after-school programs that were not previously part of their work, and sometimes they were even asked to clean the stairways and serve coffee to teachers. There were new developments in the Project. On the one hand, it looked as if the Ministry of Education recognized the significance of counseling in schools—one of the four key responsibilities of school social workers—by creating new positions for counseling teachers (who have a teacher’s certificate but are also trained as counselors).

This recognition, however, came after the Ministry of Education had exploited the gendered care labor of the school social workers for seven years. This exploitation was particularly acute because the social workers had to go out of their way to seek help and create social support networks for their clients. In the context of an infrastructural vacuum, they had to build an infrastructure themselves, and they did this because they were driven by both their philanthropic passion for their clients and the job insecurity they continually experienced.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Education did not seem to realize that case management requires stable jobs and long-term case workers. Until the school social workers were rehired as permanent annual workers under the City education board in 2014, each school social worker had to quit her job or move to another location every one or two years by reapplying for the position in another school. This lack of case management might not have been solely the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. South Korea did not have a state-sponsored social workers' case management system, and social workers did not have the authority to intervene in domestic disputes and cases of abuse. According to certified social workers in the community welfare centers I interviewed in 2011, this was true even in the case of their workplaces, the private community welfare centers, where 80 percent of their welfare service clients were officially entitled welfare recipients. An implication of this lack is that if a client moved to another neighborhood, there was no guarantee that the client could continue to be assisted. When it came to the temporary social work program in schools, the lack of a case management system and authority to negotiate with parents was the critical ground for the failure to provide consistent support for young students when they dropped out of schools or transferred to another school, or when they were exposed to domestic abuse. Against this backdrop, the labor of social workers was often wasted and the living conditions of deprived students worsened. In this context of multiple structural limitations, the temporary state works for skilled workers promulgated in the last decade or so in the terrain of welfare, by targeting gendered care labor, beg fundamental consideration of infrastructures for the stability of workforce in the domain, if the state is serious about accomplishing the goal of narrowing the gap between classes through elevating the quality of public education and the quality of life for children of the working poor-class neighborhoods.

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