

CHAPTER I

Journey to a Room of One's Own



A woman must have money and a room of her own. . . . At the thought of all those women working year after year and finding it hard to get two thousand pounds together, and as much as they could do to get thirty thousand pounds, we burst out in scorn at the reprehensible poverty of our sex. What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? . . . thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, I thought at last that it was time to roll up the crumpled skin of the day, with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter, and cast it into the hedge.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929 (italics added)

A Room of One's Own, the well-known essay by Virginia Woolf, satirizes male-dominated British intellectual society and asserts the need for women's spatial and economic independence. A dramatization of *A Room of One's Own* (*Chagi man ūi pang*) has been a central text in the feminist theater movement in South Korea since 1992. The play employs the satiric, Enlightenment style of the original work but reconstructs the content for the Korean context.

The changes in the play over the last two decades reflect transformations in the South Korean political ethos and in South Korean feminism. In the early 1990s, the piece focused on a critique of South Korean male intellectuals who were notorious for denigrating or patronizing women in

their writing and theory.¹ The narrator was an indignant woman whose antagonism to patriarchal power resonated with the oppositional political movement that sought to bring an end to the military dictatorship. The 2007 version of the production showed a dramatic shift in focus and narrative style. Instead of criticizing the views of male intellectuals, it focused on women's space and women's bodies, particularly the womb, which was used as a metaphor for the universe. Yi Yōng-nan, the producer and actor, noted that the new version promoted inner harmony for individual women rather than a collective confrontational approach to the status quo.²

This transition from a socially antagonistic rhetoric to an individual-centered, harmonious discourse reflects the historic political change that took place in South Korea in 1987 when electoral democracy was established after three decades of Cold War military dictatorships. The political change was accompanied by a tremendous growth in civil society movements (Moon 2002; K. T. Park 2008), giving rise to a women's movement, environmental activism, consumer movements, and human rights movements for sexual minorities, adoptees, migrant workers, and people with disabilities. Before democratization, the predominant sociopolitical movements populated by university students, peasants, and workers organized potent collective demonstrations against state oppression (Koo 2001; N. Lee 2005; Nam 2009). Although the post-1987 civil society movements still highlighted solidarity among these different groups, individual interests and the spirit of independent entrepreneurship came to be seen as a prominent element of democracy throughout the 1990s (Abelmann 1996), especially during and after the Asian Financial Crisis from 1997 to 2003 (Seo 2009; Song 2007, 2009b). In chapters 3 and 4, I consider the way in which this political transition affected public feeling and people's attitudes about how life should be—in particular, that life should be enjoyable. In this chapter, I want to address the concrete consequences of the political transition in the lives of single women, especially the process by which they become single household dwellers.

Sexual Moral Regime

Korean women are expected to live with their parents before marriage because of customary traditions (as well as the high cost of urban housing, as I demonstrate in chapter 2). Single women living apart from their parents are considered unusual in South Korea, where women are seen as belonging to their fathers until they are married (Deuchler 1992; Haboush 1991; Janelli and Janelli 1982). The neo-Confucian convention was solidified in the last Korean dynasty (1392 to 1910). It dictates parents' responsibility to protect and supervise their unmarried daughters' sexualities.³ Surprisingly, this continues in spite of the wide exposure to and

popularity of cosmopolitan culture through travel and the mass media and the fact that more women consider marriage to be optional than in the past.⁴ The convention continued even when neo-Confucianism, as well as other religions—such as Buddhism and aboriginal shamanism—began to lose their force as western religions, most significantly Protestantism and Catholicism, became more widespread in Korea.⁵ Christianity itself is founded on a conservative gender norm that recognizes sex for procreation within a conjugal relationship as the only legitimate sexuality.⁶ In addition, the predominant Christian denomination in South Korean development was led by fundamentalist Protestants, making any reversal of the age-old convention highly unlikely.⁷ Sojông, a single woman in her early thirties, shared her experience:

Among older generations, there is certainly a prejudicial perception of unmarried women not living with their parents—the sense that their life is undisciplined and that they are sexually promiscuous [grin]. So people are uneasy about single women not living with their parents in the marriage market or match-making context. I met an older auntie who used to quite adore me at my sister's wedding. She chastised me for telling people that I live alone and said that rather I should tell them that I'm living with a sibling or my parents [another grin].

Chunhee, a single woman in her early thirties, reveals her parents' continuing surveillance even when she lived in a college residence:

If I wasn't there to get their phone calls in the evening, or there were signs of me sleeping over at someone else's, the whole family went crazy. So I ran away. They were so mad at me and I was angry with them.

Most of the women I interviewed do not submit to the conventional norms that regulate women's sexuality and residence; rather, they resist them. Their forms of resistance vary, depending on the extent of marriage pressure they receive and their own positions on marriage. Some forms of resistance are subtle, like Sojông's grin. In other cases, the resistance is more pronounced. For example, Chunhee ran away from her parents, so they negotiated to send her to study English in Canada. In short, South Korean single women who dream of the freedom of adulthood, including being able to live on their own, are active agents of liberal self-governing practices that compete with the conservative sexual moral regime. They are on the battleground of moral governance.

It is nothing new for Korean women to struggle and negotiate between a conservative moral regime and a more liberal one. Without those struggles since the early twentieth century, the legal achievement and slow social acceptance of gender equity in education, the vote, political leadership, art production, economic power, and cosmopolitan cultural exposure would not have occurred.⁸ Of course, gender equity has by no means been achieved. But what is new since the late 1980s and the end of the dictatorship is the impact of popularized liberal ideas, desires, and practices on ordinary women's daily lives. Certainly, an attempt to have their own space was not a prevalent social phenomenon among unmarried women under the previous era's rigid political, moral, and cultural rubric.⁹

To be fair, some Korean women sought a life outside the institutions of marriage and family in the 1920s and 1930s. They were known as "new women" or "modern girls," like similar women in other Asian countries and on the global scene.¹⁰ Images of well-educated women exercising their free will appeared again briefly in the short-lived liberal regime of the late 1950s while the country recuperated from the Korean War (1950–1953) and before the first military dictatorship was established in the early 1960s.¹¹ Yet these precursors were few and far between. Unmarried women trying to live a life of freedom only became widespread much later, when freedom of travel abroad became permitted in 1989. This enabled not only upper middle class people but many young working-class adults (including college students from working-class families) to travel. A number of my informants backpacked in Europe, Australia, and Mexico or studied English and/or visited relatives in North America. Young people without much economic power could seek new experiences and freedom by choosing the cheapest travel options in the growing competitive market of travel agencies.¹² My research participants proudly shared these experiences as evidence that their pursuit of individual development and cosmopolitan experience were similar to their young male peers.

Another example of the popularization of the liberal environment that affected young single women is their exposure to contemporary foreign films, especially Hollywood films and TV series,¹³ through the mass media, which grew and was fully liberalized during the Asian financial crisis. (The market was deregularized as a condition of restructuring the economy.) Although Hollywood films were introduced into South Korea in the 1950s and some old U.S. TV series, such as *MASH* and *Dynasty*, were shown in Korea, American TV series were only introduced en masse after the crisis (McHugh and Abelmann 2005). My informants commonly mentioned *Sex and the City*, *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *Ally McBeal*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *CSI*. Even before the crisis, from the beginning of the liberal era in the early 1990s, there was an increasing opportunity to watch foreign films in new independent film festivals, including women's film festivals and queer

film festivals.¹⁴ These were initially begun in universities but came to be more widely held, with corporate and government sponsorship. During and after the crisis, it became common for municipal governments to host major film festivals, such as the Seoul Women's Film Festival, the Chônju Independent Film Festival, the Puchôn Fantastic Film Festival, and the Busan International Film Festival.¹⁵ The single women I interviewed were almost all ardent fans of Hollywood TV dramas and a regular part of the audience at the film festivals. Many of them were volunteers or temporary employees at those festivals.

In addition to cultural liberalization, women's rights and consciousness-raising movements reached their peak after democratization, in the early 1990s. During this period the first *A Room of One's Own* was performed, establishing the legend for the following decade. The local women's movement was reinforced by the global women's movement's promotion of the "mainstreaming of gender equality" (in politics and government leadership) and the Beijing conference in 1995.¹⁶

Although unmarried women played a central role in the leadership and staff of the women's movement throughout the gender mainstreaming era, ironically, single women's issues emerged very slowly (see chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of these issues). Unmarried women attempted to address the marginalization by creating and circulating a new category of single women: *pihon yôsông*, meaning literally "unmarried," but with the added connotation of being "unassociated with marriage." *Pihon yôsông* includes women who are not legally married, regardless of whether they have a significant other, and divorced women. This new term is to be distinguished from the more conventional labels of "not-yet-married women" (*mihon yôsông*) and "never-married women" (*toksin yôsông*). These newly defined single women are the audience for and supporters of the feminist Pihon Yôsông Festival, founded in 2007, and other progressive women's media and labor organizations.¹⁷

Thus, my research participants, identifying as *pihon yôsông*, were armed with a new identity for the battle against social norms, spearheading women's residential liberation as an individual action but also as part of a collective consciousness and public feeling. Not only did they go through these particular social historical moments (cosmopolitan cultural influence through media and travel and mainstreaming of gender equality) with other South Koreans, my research participants had also been student activists throughout democratization and the liberalization of social movements, refocusing their political attention on women's issues and other social justice issues. Thus, their journey to live in their own dwellings as unmarried women and their efforts to be connected to social movements are signs of both liberal and leftist personae.

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that unmarried women without family support still had few options apart from being homeless, both symbolically and literally. The courageous praxis of liberal and leftist ideologies represented by many *pihon yôsong* such as my research participants have had precedence from the early twentieth century in Korean history (before the division of Korea into North and South), when the country begun systemizing antifeudal polity and law. Na Hye-sôk, a liberal pioneer “new woman” artist in the 1920s to 1930s, became homeless and socially ostracized after divorcing and being vocal about the patriarchal subjection of women in marriage.¹⁸ She died of hunger and cold. Kang Kyông-ae, a socialist woman writer in the 1920s and 1930s, wrote about proletarian women’s impoverished life outside of the institution of marriage. Even following liberalization in the late 1990s, when during the Asian financial crisis many women became homeless, they were not considered such by government workers. They were not imaginable as homeless, but if they had to be categorized, they were seen either as immoral mothers who left home, abandoning their children, or as sex workers, who were morally unacceptable (Song 2009b). The single women who benefited from liberal policies and discourses and became more bold and willing to try new paths in the new millenium, such as my research participants, had to deal with their sense of insecurity and fear of becoming “homeless” when they do not choose to be or happen to be aligned with the institution of marriage.¹⁹

Despite the fear of being in poverty or homeless because of not getting into marriage, it was, ironically, family pressure to marry more than anything else that motivated my research participants. The constant matchmaking discussions and the invasive comments about their appearance intended to make them more suitable for the marriage market were part of most of the women’s experience. For example, Pohûi, an unmarried woman in her mid-thirties, said:

My mom said constantly, “Don’t you have a boyfriend? Aren’t you going to get married? Why do you live like that [without having a boyfriend], unlike a young woman? You must lose weight. If you are not going to marry, make enough money to live by yourself. What you make for working in the women’s organization is like pocket money from a student’s part-time job.”

In the context of marriage being regarded as the guarantee of subsistence and economic safety for women (and also a morally legitimate destination), daughters who do not prioritize going into the marriage market—by making efforts, for example, to have a feminine appearance and manner—are objects of concern. Even more worrying is that some daughters do not

have the time or energy because they are “distracted” by working at low-income NGO jobs. In extreme cases, parents themselves have suggested that their “old maid” daughters move out in order not to lose face, because it is not just the women but their parents who risk becoming the object of pity from kin members and social networks (including church members, coworkers, neighbors, and friends). Although the individual women’s economic and emotional relationships with their parents varied, their reliance on family for economic and moral support was fundamental, regardless of their resistance to family regulations. What follows are these women’s stories of how they came to be living on their own.

Moving Out to Go to University in the City

One of the most common routes to single households for these young women is leaving home to attend university in big cities far from where their parents reside. More than half of my informants started living apart from parents as “students from the countryside” (*chibang haksaeung*), staying in boarding houses or places their parents arranged for them (sometimes with siblings). Eventually all of them ended up living by themselves when they graduated from university or when their siblings left to marry or to take a job in another location. According to Wony, a single woman in her late thirties who went to Seoul from a southern city and lived by herself for ten years:

Marriage has been the issue that my parents nagged me about most. The first four to five years were really tough. But living apart from them really helped me. If I see them, it’s hard to bear. My mom’s personality is quite strong. She always makes comments on the way I talk and behave, or my clothing style. So, I had a really hard time to find out what I like or want to do because I spent more time on how to make my mom understand and fighting with her all the time. It is painful even visiting home occasionally for holidays.

I think marriage pressure is the biggest reason why single women in their late twenties or early thirties want to get out of their parents’ place. But my parents would not allow me to move out unless I got married. That’s why I chose to do my master’s degree in Seoul. I think very highly of unmarried [women] friends whose parents live in Seoul, but they still managed to leave home and live by themselves. Can you imagine how difficult the process would have been for them? It probably matters less if they can afford to live on their own. But if not, if they need their parents’ support to pay for rent, then it would be enormously hard.

Wony lived with a friend for a while in order to rely less on her parents for her rent deposit (*pojûng'gûm*), but she eventually moved out on her own. Although she weighed her economic reliance on her parents as almost as difficult an issue as emotional attachment in terms of her autonomy, she found the emotional distance more challenging:

While I was living apart from my parents, there was a brief period of getting their support for living expenses. They constantly scrutinized my life through phone calls. They seemed to think they were entitled to know everything because they were paying for my living expenses. Then, over time, I began tutoring and took over my own living expenses. Of course, even so, I still needed my parents' support for situations that require a large lump sum (*moktton*), such as tuition and, more important, the rent deposit. I've paid back more than half of the rent deposit by now. After I started paying them off and taking care of my living expenses, I was able to distance myself somewhat from my parents and they had less control. However, I feel I'm only 80 percent self-reliant because I'm not emotionally independent from my parents. . . . The toughest part of living alone is to make significant decisions, such as repairing the apartment or negotiating the rent deposit. My parents used to make those decisions when I lived with them. I know I have to do it but I still have an expectation that someone else should do those decision-making things for me. I ended up leaving things unrepaired. Also, my parents are still relying on me. If my parents get ill, I have to support them. If that happens, I cannot keep my current lifestyle.

Wony left home with the excuse of going away to school, but Sojông, the single woman whose grin signaled her less pronounced resistance, did not plan to live alone at first. She is also from the countryside. She left her parents' hometown as a successful student entering a prestigious university in Seoul. Initially, her departure was not associated with marriage pressure. She began living in a place her parents had arranged for herself and her siblings. She was left alone after her siblings were married. She lived alone for five years, during which time she started getting heavy pressure to marry. She said, "my parents would not have allowed me to move out if they had lived in Seoul [grin]. I would have tried leaving anyway around the age I am now. But I would have had to give up living alone within a few months without their economic support." She is a rare case among my research participants of a single woman who graduated from a first-tier university. A freelancer who

translates films, her income is irregular and her housing is fully financed by her parents. She wants to be a cosmopolitan, stylish single woman and to make more money, but she is not confident that she can achieve economic autonomy. More important, she dreads angering her parents:

I'm anxious because I am economically unstable [grin]. When I quit my first job at a press after a year-long employment, I spent the money I had saved to prepare to be a freelance translator. But the payments for translations were paid awfully late and unpredictably—between a few months and a year after the job was done.²⁰ I can survive for a few months on the savings, but I wonder if I can do this freelancing over the long term for the next few decades. I'm not confident of getting a regular office job. Compared with my sister, who entered university a few years earlier than I did, my job situation is much worse.²¹ She quit her job and went backpacking in Europe because she expected to get a job without much hassle when she returned from her trip. *But I never had such luxury or optimism* [grin]. People like me who graduated in the middle of the crisis don't have any prospects of getting a stable job. But still, there is peer pressure to be successful, cool women in terms of not only having good jobs but of being stylish. I think this emphasis on style and appearance is influenced by *Sex and the City*. It is a matter of whether you are good at self-management. If you are not pretty, it is not just a disadvantage but a sign of being a loser and unable to manage yourself. It is hard to live up to both expectations of getting a stable job and being a stylish single woman. . . . I do not think I am emotionally independent from my parents. *It is not that I am depending on them but that I cannot object to what they expect.* More than anything, the marriage pressure opened up a big chasm between my parents and me. I have to laugh about my situation because I'm not saying I'd never marry but just that I want to marry when I feel like it—and it's not like I'm going to wait until I'm fifty. But it doesn't make sense to them at all. I get devastated when my parents get upset with me. Actually I feel worse when I find them being hurt than when I see them angry at me. For example, we never fight, but since my mom began pressuring me to marry, we had the first awkward moment of phone conversation. After the uneasy phone call, my mom did not pick up my calls for two days. I couldn't handle the psychological rejection from my mom. I'm not confident that I'll change my parents' minds, but I wonder whether they would be more understanding if I made more money [grin]. (italics added)

Moving out When Parents Live in the Same Area

Wony and Sojông do not think living alone would have been possible if their parents had lived in the same city. However, a few of my research participants managed to do it. Chisu is a self-identified lesbian in her mid-thirties who has lived by herself more than ten years.²² Although marriage pressure was the tacit reason that she moved out, she justified leaving with the excuse of her intense workload at her job. She did not mention her lesbian identity during my interview as a reason for resistance to marriage or as a reason for moving out, although she made a connection between her identity and her job security as a primary concern of a single woman dwelling alone.

Chisu is a contract lecturer in a private after-school. Since the liberalization of the education system in South Korea in the late 1990s, many tutors and teachers work as temporary contract and part-time workers (S. J. Park and Abelmann 2004). In the context of the neoliberal job market—with a reduction in stable jobs and an expansion of unstable or precarious jobs—after-school private education is one of the major job markets that was expanded and primarily taken up by part-time or irregular women workers. Chisu's job is irregular in that there are no benefits, pension, or insurance, but the pay is relatively high. Regardless, her experience of living with her parents until she moved out is not much different from the experience of Wony, the single woman who moved away from her parents in the countryside with the excuse that she was going to university in a different city:

My parents initially objected to me living alone. They think unmarried women's living away from their parents is deviant (*chôngsang chök iji anta*) and dangerous (*tongnip haesô sal myôn wüihôm hada*) because they don't get their parents' protection. However, it wasn't like I felt protected by them when I was living in their place. It's rather an economic reason. However, marriage pressure got more intense after the Asian financial crisis. . . . After I turned twenty-eight—you know, after the so-called marriage age (*kyôlhon chôngnyông'gi*)—my parents felt very uncomfortable. Sometimes my parents got upset with me after relatives visited or after returning from extended family gatherings. They yelled at me, "Why do we have to hear such condescending comments from them [relatives]? They wonder what's wrong with you that you're not married and whether you have a deficiency." I, too, was stressed out by seeing my parents being hassled. Then they gave me two options: either get married or go abroad so that I am out of their and the relatives' sight. So I went abroad to learn English. Moving out felt so good because I didn't get pressure to marry. Especially after my parents

found that this job I'm in pays well, they seem to think that I'm economically stable and do not mention marriage that much. I feel fantastic about not being pushed to go on dates with guys arranged through matchmakers. Also, I don't have to avoid running into my relatives when they visit. My mom used to ask me if I had anywhere to go because my aunts were coming by.

When I asked Chisu if she felt the situations to be intrusive or violent, she answered:

I took it as my mom being considerate. She basically says, "Aren't you going to be uncomfortable if the aunts visit today? Why don't you go to somewhere like the library and come back after they leave? They'll leave around such and such a time." Anyway, I myself didn't want to be home when the aunts dropped by.

After she moved out, her parents visited her place once a month and she visited them for holidays. She was very busy at work and barely had a day to rest on the weekend. She was sympathetic to her parents' situation but considers herself independent from her family, both emotionally and economically. She thinks that economic independence from her parents saved her from marriage pressure.

Chisu's excuse to move out from her parents' home was her work, but Hosōn, another single woman in her late thirties who had lived alone for two decades while her parents lived in the same precinct, made no excuses, neither work nor education. She simply moved out because she wanted to. Hosōn is the woman whose narrative (on the difficulty of society taking single women's issues seriously in the context of social anxiety about low fertility) I quote in the introduction. After being a music tutor for young children for a decade or so, Hosōn began marketing through the Internet. Neither job gave her economic stability. She openly revealed her vacillation between confidence and insecurity about living alone. She left her parents' home in her mid-twenties, abruptly announcing that she was moving out when the family was planning to move to a commutable suburb. When I asked her why, she said,

I didn't want to live with my parents. I hated so much seeing my parents' disputes. I had put up with enough by then. My mom was the breadwinner, but living with my father has been very hard for her. My father is very temperamental and drinking all the time. So there was no peace at home. What made it unbearable was to witness my mom deteriorating because of this environment over the years. I loathed the situation. I wanted to be free of the environment.

Because I am the oldest child, I felt I was neglecting my obligation [to take care of parents and family].²³ However, when I let it go, I felt so liberated. I think I was really right to move out then. I enjoy my life so much; it's full of things I like to do. My friends and I, we say that around our age, we must move out. People who haven't moved out say they are frustrated with themselves and brood about how to make a move-out happen. I feel truly liberated. Although my parents weren't intervening much in my life when I lived with them, *I noticed a big difference between liberty under watching eyes and liberty without them.* (italics added)

Hosôn was not as pressured to marry as others I interviewed, and her motivation for moving out was not directly related to her parents' attempts to control her morally and sexually. However, her connection to her mother and her interactions with the family and relatives made her very self-conscious about not being married:

I felt shocked by some changes in my family dynamics after my younger siblings got married. I used to be very self-confident, at least in front of my family and relatives, because my mom trusted me and said I needed to live my life as I wanted. Then, within a year or so after my two siblings got married, my mom felt sorry for me and treated me as an object of pity in the eyes of relatives. It made me so discouraged and withdrawn. So even though I am a cheerful and respectful person whom all my relatives like, I stopped going to relatives' gatherings and even my mom's birthday dinner. That [not going to my mother's birthday dinner] upset my brother and sister quite a bit. I just said that I was busy. I surprised myself. I guess it was a very insecure and timid act, which is not really who I am or at least who I used to be. But I just did not want to join the parties. There are only married couples at the family gatherings. And my mom would feel pity for me. So I didn't want to see them [trembling voice] because I didn't want to be shaken by it. Seriously, if I see my mom or family, I can't control my emotion. The more I hear what my mom thinks of me, the harder I become on myself. So I avoid seeing and listening to her in order to live in peace.

When I asked Hosôn what she thought of marriage, she said:

I used to ignore the very thought of marriage. But recently I am becoming less adamant about it. I want someone to be in love with me. You know, people keep asking whether I'm not lonely, especially

after I reached thirty years old. I've said no to that confidently so far. Even now, if people ask me, I can say "not lonely" more easily than "lonely." However, I ask myself again and again whether it's true, whether I'm really not lonely. Then, I answer myself, it's true that I'm a bit lonely. So, I have noticed a change inside me. I just want to have a person I can talk to about what I'm struggling with or to whom I can express my emotion.

Hosôn's trajectory challenges Wony's assumption that it is almost impossible for a single woman not to live with parents if they are in the same area unless she is earning a high salary. Hosôn's economic stability is no greater than that of Wony (or of Sojông, who also doubted the feasibility of moving out into the same city). But Hosôn left without hesitation when she knew what she needed and wanted (living in peace). Maybe Hosôn is "unusual" in that she was able to put her thought into action without feeling obliged to follow convention. However, her emotional vulnerability to her family and her efforts to distance herself from them is not unusual at all. What pressured Hosôn to change her feelings about marriage was her mother's pity and concern. Her soul searching about whether or not she was lonely shows how other people's preconceptions motivated her to identify her desires for a romantic relationship and to conflate the desire with a reconsideration of marriage. Thus, although the physical distance afforded by moving away from home helps unmarried women keep an emotional distance from family, their emotional susceptibility to the family remains challenging.

Moving out at Odds

Some women seek an alternative network or community to compete with the force of the family.²⁴ Minsô is unique in terms of her trajectory and her way of dealing with marriage and ties to family. Minsô came to live alone accidentally. While she was in college, her father decided to retire from his life-long employment. He was in his fifties. According to Minsô, he finally decided to live life for himself, which shocked and inspired her at the same time. Her parents announced that they were leaving Seoul in order to relocate to a country farmhouse. She and her brother lived together for three years until he was married, and then she lived on her own. Although she considers it very fortunate, in her mind she thinks she would have moved out anyway.

Minsô was plotting to move out because she felt suppressed by her parents, like a subordinate who must follow orders and is punished for any violation. She described the context as "coercive familialism" (*kangje chôk*

kajokchuu). Her litany of grievances included the presumption that she was expected to sacrifice everything for the family; the pressure to marry but at the same time the prohibition against dating; her parents' dependence on her academic performance for their own satisfaction (common among the post-Korean War generation); severe punishment for drinking, smoking, and violation of her curfew; prohibition of or inability to understand extensive time spent with non-family members, including student activists; and disapproval of her work in an NGO because of the low income. However, after she lived apart from them, her parents gradually changed. She said:

In the past, they hated the idea of me staying over at someone else's house. Then, after I'd been living on my own, although they spotted me coming home drunk, they just said, "Don't go around too late!" It astounded me, because it's a sea change. I'm still nervous about being spotted by them, but they seem to think it's unavoidable. I even used to be beaten if I came home late and drunk. But now, they just say, "Please come home early," and "Please quit smoking." I mean, it's not an order any longer but just putting their opinion out there. It took at least three years for them to adjust to this change. When they first moved to the countryside, Mom used to visit my place once a month. But she's hardly doing that now. Although my parents have errands and come to Seoul a couple of times a month, they don't visit me. They used to stay over at my place, saying it's what families do (*kajok tŏn tori*). But nowadays, they say it's uncomfortable for them to stay with me, because I sleep late and have an irregular lifestyle. So they just go back home on the train without stopping by my place.

Although she is very critical about familialism because of her own family experience, she clarified that she does not hate her family:

When I used to work in a women's organization on the outskirts of Seoul, my coworkers thought I was a bit strange. I don't date, I'm not interested in marriage, and I am a workaholic with very low wages. They encouraged me to get married. When I told them I was not going to marry, they asked me what was wrong in my family. They thought the reason why I wasn't interested in marriage was because of a big problem in my family and that I hate my family members. It's not like that at all. I'm just trying to be true to my ideas. I have never thought of office work, marriage, family, or socially accepted norms seriously. I just don't feel I belong in that kind of life. It's not because I dislike my family. My relatives also

think of me as quite odd. A close relative cornered me, asking, "So, is it true you haven't been on a single date to find a marriage partner arranged by a matchmaker (*matsôn*)?" When I answered "That's right, I haven't," the relative was shocked and said, "How is it possible? Are you lying to me?" In the past, if I was chastised by those people because I wasn't meeting their expectations, well, it upset me. But now, it amuses me. So I'm throwing back jokes to them. . . . I heard a comic story that cracked me up. A comedian was asked, "What is the family to you?" He answered, "I would throw it out if no one was watching me" [smile].²⁵

When I asked whether she feels that way about her family, she answered indirectly, sharing a reflection about the natal family versus the "chosen family":

I realized that even the most beautiful memory about the family is like a mortgage of guilt or someone's sacrifice, something like, my mom went through so much trouble for me; my father sacrificed his life for me. Touching memories about the family are mostly based on the recognition of family members' sacrifice. . . . I don't think living together in the same space necessarily makes a primary social network. To me, sharing a lifestyle and perspectives makes the network. But there tends to be a coercive expectation within the family just because of blood and regional connection. The birth family seems to follow the "principle of proper." In order to get out of the family boundary, my friends (*chubyônin*, literally meaning people existing in one's surroundings, but referring to close neighbors in this narrator's linguistic usage) and I made huge efforts to build a community. We are six people who used to live around the same neighborhood. Some are married to each other now. It took more than five years of living like a flock. We found each other to be communicative and on the same page by doing things together like travel, meals, and collective purchases. Although I do not want to bind us as a family, they are more like a chosen family. Even now that we live in different neighborhoods, we meet quite often, at least twice a week. We agreed on the creation of this kind of a community based on our similar observations about our poor fit in the natal family. Most important, we allow ourselves to be individuals. When someone heard that I was living communally, she asked me jokingly how I could live with other people when I'm such an eccentric person. I told her that I don't live with other members in the same unit. I can't even sleep with another person in the same

bed. Making a community doesn't mean sharing everything, eating the same thing, doing the same thing, keeping the same sleeping schedule. It'd repeat the framework of natal family norms. If we follow the frame, we'll again generate an unhappy family [smile] that becomes a burden and generates guilt. I want to live alone and live in a community that respects my lifestyle.

After Moving Out

After moving out, young single women continue to be harassed by neighbors and coworkers because of their single lifestyle and sexuality. For instance, Nani, an after-school tutor (a temporary contract job) in her late thirties, did not want to be in the office at lunch hour, the daily gathering time for tutors, because her coworkers repeatedly tried to persuade her to get married. Her coworkers—mostly women in their late twenties who considered working to be a transitional activity on the way to getting married—told her that living alone was abnormal and commented loudly enough for her to hear that she must be “lesbian.” Nani is, in fact, a self-identified lesbian woman, active in the underground queer movement, but she did not come out to her coworkers because of fear of social and job discrimination. Nani eventually quit the job for other temporary work as a coordinator of a local film festival, where people were less inquisitive about her personal life, although her salary and benefits were no more secure.

Chisu, the woman with the relatively high income in a competitive private after-school, is also a self-identified lesbian. As noted, she did not present her identity as a ground for moving out. However, she told me she would have risked losing her job if her identity was exposed:

Although I'm economically stable now, if I am outed [as a lesbian], I risk being laid off immediately. I had a male colleague who is gay. There must be a noticeable incident. The rumor is that he harassed students at work. I can hardly believe the accusation of sexual harassment, though. Why would he do such a stupid thing? He was fired because of the rumor and he did not get any support from colleagues at all. That kind of exposure ruins your career and isolates you from your workplace.

South Korea does not have legal protection for sexual minorities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. A human rights commission established in 2001 included discrimination against “sexual orientation” in its mandate. However, that particular item was excluded in the 2007 revision of the commission's protections (along with family composition

and national origin), despite years of human rights activists' efforts (Kim Y-S. 2007).²⁶ Thus, the authority of the commission is limited to advice. Even when it included the clause protecting sexual minorities, it had no legal authority. Although employers followed the commission's advice to re-employ affected sexual minorities, it was difficult for the employees because of the prejudice against them, and there was no way to take back the exposure of their identities. Activists for same-sex-loving women noted in my interviews that in general, working-poor lesbian women and "feminine-looking" lesbians were most pressured to marry. During the crisis, however, when the economic situation was dire, pressure was also put on many "masculine-looking" lesbians. Some agonizingly debated getting married in order to survive.²⁷ Chisu, who has a somewhat masculine appearance, confessed that during the crisis

I was paranoid that I would die of hunger when I was outed at work and to my parents. I was contemplating marriage, seriously. If I suppress my bodily suffering, choosing to marry and live with a guy (*kûnyang nun ttak kam ko salmyô nûn*), at least my body won't starve to death.

As lesbians, Chisu and Nani face particular difficulties in complying with conventional sexual norms and marriage practices. But all unmarried women living alone face challenges, regardless of their sexual orientation: they are treated as children or disabled people and their sexual security is threatened.

Chagyông is another private after-school teacher in her late thirties. Chagyông encountered invasive questions and harassment not only from her coworkers but from her students as well. Her students often offered to be matchmakers and teased her for being unmarried and living alone. She tried to rise above these moments by presenting herself as "hip single," a highly capable and self-sufficient single woman (*hwaryô han sing'gu'l ira pul'lo tao*), a discourse indebted to the mass media's heralding of professional women who live alone as a new cultural breed.

Chagyông also encountered discrimination in her social network of former student activists, many of whom were now married to each other. Some of them, the men especially, addressed her as an immature person, comparing her to a child, and condescendingly referred to her as a defective (*haja ka in nûn*) adult. Married men in the circle would demonstrate their authority by saying to her at gatherings that "children should go home" or "children shouldn't interfere with our adult business." She confronted them, saying, "Are you kidding me? Who is more capable here? You or me?" Over the last few years, she had stopped receiving invitations from her social

network of former student activists and was only notified formally about annual year-end parties.

The other single women I have already introduced relayed similar experiences of being treated as less than adults by their families. Chisu is a middle child, with an older sister and a younger brother, both married. Her parents and siblings consider her to be less mature than they are, to the point that she is left out of big family decisions and is merely informed after the fact. Wony's mother described her as "more pitiful" (*ni ka tō pulssang hada*) than the married women working at the bottom of the labor market that Wony was interviewing for her research. Her mother clearly considers her single household to be an unstable life. There was a similar context of pity in Hosōn's narratives.

These women are also heavily scrutinized during the process of looking for a place to live. Miyōng, a graduate student in her mid-thirties, is a private tutor and freelance writer trying to eke out enough money for her tuition, housing, and living expenses. When she entered a real estate agency office (*pudongsan chung'gaeso* or *pokttōkppang*) to look for a rental apartment, she noticed a pink highlight in a map of the district where she was looking for a place. When she showed interest in the highlighted area because it was close to where she worked, the real estate agent discouraged her. When she asked why, he explained that the area was *nagayo ch'on* (a residential village of bar hostesses), an area inhabited by women who worked in the red-light district or entertainment industry.²⁸ In describing the conversation, Miyōng chuckled and stated that the agent was a middle-aged man who genuinely seemed to want to protect her because, he said, her appearance (modest clothing and no makeup) did not look like a bar worker's. But both the agent's marking of the district as a ghetto and being judged by her appearance made her uncomfortable.

Miyōng also runs into her neighbors' judgments about her sexual morals. For instance, in monthly neighborhood meetings (*pansanghoe*),²⁹ neighbors always try to get her to talk about her job and her age. The housewife next door never fails to peek into Miyōng's unit when she is leaving her place and the door is ajar. Miyōng does not feel comfortable bringing in a lone guest, especially a male, because of the neighbors' constant surveillance.

Miyōng and others further spoke of "sexual safety" (*sōng chōk anjōn sōng*) as a primary concern and challenge of living by themselves. Although Miyōng was irritated by her lack of privacy around her neighbors, their surveillance was one of the only things protecting her from exposure to sexual intimidation. She cited, for example, her experience with male construction workers who were building a multiple-residence house just next to her apartment and who continually glanced over at her place, especially when male guests came over.

Miyông's concern for sexual safety was echoed by other research participants. Kyuri noted that the recent controversy about a serial killer (at the time I was doing the interviews) made her afraid to be out late.³⁰ Further, she felt uneasy about the way the media fuelled panic among women living alone. Although the serial killer was not necessarily attacking women living alone, Kyuri's opinion was that the media focused on this, criticizing the "careless" lifestyle of single women. Togyông, another interviewee, said her fear of theft and robbery was a side effect of the media emphasis on single women living alone as the most vulnerable targets of the serial killer.

Yoon is an interviewee who had lost her job and was living on her savings, along with wages from some occasional freelance work and from tutoring her sister's children. She told me about an experience of sexual harassment by a male neighbor who, whenever he was drunk, tried to open her apartment door. When she reported the incident to her landlord, he chastised her for not confronting the neighbor or reporting him to the police. She explained that she did not want to contact the police because it might have provoked the neighbor to harm her. She wanted to move but was unable to because of the difficulty of getting out of her lease, especially during the winter. Yoon noted that South Korea is not yet socially prepared to support sexual safety. She gave examples of obsolete suggestions for "how to prevent sexual violence" in a typical secondary school textbook: avoid unknown people at night, do not wear sexually stimulating clothes, and leave the door open when dating. These perceptions of sexual safety being focused on potential women victim's responsibility rather than the education of potential aggressors or the support of victims led her to feel that she could not rely on any social consciousness regarding sexual safety. She did small things to protect herself, such as leaving a pair of men's shoes or many pairs of shoes in her entrance so that strangers would not notice she was living by herself.

My research participants recognized the very different situation of men who move away from home before they marry. Chunhee noted:

If an unmarried man leaves his parents' place to live alone, he is respected as an independent adult. Whereas if an unmarried woman leaves her parents' place, she is suspected of giving up marriage or having some reason for not being able to enter the marriage market.

Moving out into one's own place is actually encouraged for men, with no concern for sexual modesty or safety; it is a sign of men's readiness to enter the marriage market. Both Hosôn and Minsô said that their parents endorsed their brothers living by themselves as preparation for them to get married. This is because of a conventional wedding condition: the bridegroom provides the residence for the newlyweds; the underlying meaning is

that women enter patrilineal households, not vice versa (Janelli and Janelli 1982; Kendall 1996).

This gendered perception and practice regarding dwellings for single people means that unmarried women are treated differently within their nuclear families. For example, Minsô said:

My parents were trying to separate my living place from my brother's. They said the son should have his own place. Otherwise, no woman would be interested in marrying him. Although I told them it was not because of him not having his own residence [but because he wasn't very romantic], they were persistent. They suggested I move out, with a proposal to give me far less cash than I needed for deposit money to get my own place. It flipped me out because of their obvious son preference and discrimination against me, their daughter.

Kyuri, whose family is poverty stricken (her father had died from Agent Orange, to which he had been exposed as a soldier in the Vietnam War), summed up the options available to unmarried women in comparison to unmarried men:

If unmarried women want to move out, their options are either poverty or marriage. For single men, though [chuckle], moving out is a less crucial choice. It means either the inconvenience of taking care of domestic chores on their own or marriage to resolve the inconvenience by letting their brides take care of domestic matters.

As the earlier part of this chapter notes, the fear of becoming homeless (with the historic precedence of Na Hyesôk and Kang Kyông-ae) has a practical basis, and marriage is the primary viable option if women do not want to be left in poverty.

The sexual regulation of single women in the family and in marriage is not just a matter of emotional support. The economic instability of unmarried women results in a heavy reliance on the family's financial support in order to acquire a place of their own.

Recurring statements in this chapter assert the power of money capital as the only option to replace social capital, which operates through the logic of reciprocity in the familial and kinship world and tends to be the primary source of receiving or borrowing lump-sum cash (see details in chapter 2). Pohûi, one of the single women who was pressured by her mom to date and get married, with nagging comments on her bodily shape and unjustified focus on her low-paying job, relays her mother's view: "If you are not going

to marry, make enough money to live by yourself.” Sojông, who also moved out and away from her family, said, “I wonder whether they would be more understanding if I made more money” [grin]. Chisu, one of the few single women who moved out from her parents’ place when they lived in the same area, echoes the power of money to pacify family pressure: “Especially after my parents found that this job I’m in pays well, they seem to think that I’m economically stable and do not mention marriage that much.”

Can individual unmarried women without sufficient money capital who do not want to rely on the familial network use bank loans? The next chapter answers this question by showing the way in which the heteronormative sexual and moral control of unmarried women is systematically embedded in housing, finance, and employment institutions.