

Understanding the Candlelight Demonstration and Women's Political Subjectivity through the Perspective of Changing Publicity*

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Abstract

What is striking in the candlelight demonstration in 2008 is that girls played a leading role in the inception period and thereafter the overwhelming turnout of diverse groups of women gave it a great impetus throughout. Considering that women accounted for about 70 percent of the participants, it is very important to understand their positionality clearly. This paper aims to examine the political identity of the women participants and analyze the characteristics of various groups of women who led the candlelight demonstration from the perspectives of global consumption culture and global food safety and the involvement of Internet communities. Then it compares their "action" of participation in the demonstration with the labor struggle mounted by married female nonregular workers of E-Land. The rapidly changing public sphere or publicity, together with the progress of neoliberalist globalization, provides legitimacy to this investigation and presents prospects on the future world in which "ordinary women" become the political agents to lead life politics.

Keywords: candlelight demonstration, neoliberalism, life politics, change of publicity, political identity of women

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Introduction: Commemorating the Second Anniversary of the 2008 Candlelight Demonstration

This year marks the second anniversary of the candlelight demonstration, which started as an idea of a high-school student in May 2008 and drew the participation of over a million citizens in the end. During the initial period of the demonstration held in the public square, the participating citizens took issue with the crisis of national sovereignty over the imports of beef at risk of mad cow disease and the crisis of consumer-citizens' health rights. But as the demonstration continued, the candlelight brought to light the anxiety, discontent, and fear that gripped the members of contemporary Korean society consciously and unconsciously in the era of neoliberalist globalization. The voices of opposition expanded into such issues as the construction of the grand canal, privatization of health insurance, deregulation of education, bipolarization of society, and media corruption. U.S. beef at risk of mad cow disease arose as a symbolic signifier against which all such resistance and struggle was mounted. This progression of the candlelight rallies disclosed the citizens' strong resistance against the authoritarian government which was engrossed in its role as the guardian of neoliberalist capitalism while at the same time was not being attentive to the demands for redistribution and other measures to realize social justice and was brushing away citizens' hopes for an eco- and bio-friendly life. The confrontation between citizens and the state triggered a variety of debates on the limitations of representative politics; on the possibility of an alternative democracy that can be initiated by direct speech and direct action; and on everyday life being the realm of practicing global relationships of consumption, work, and production, and life politics playing out from it. Further, poignant questions were raised, such as who is safe and who is not in the society of increasing risks, and also about the "non-citizens,"¹ completely excluded from the discourse on

1. The term "non-citizen" here refers to any person neglected by the government's realm of protection, despite holding citizenship, due to their low socioeconomic

safety and what “candlelight” means to them.

Analyses of the 2008 candle demonstration have been made in diverse viewpoints, such as highlighting the relationship between the neoliberalist state and risk society (S. Hong 2009), limitations of representative politics as the established politics (H. Kim 2008), middle-class consumption culture and life politics (T. Jeong 2009), revolution of a new form attempted by the multitude (Jo 2009), politics of identity (H. Choe 2009), and politics of style (D. Lee 2009). In interpreting the political significance of the demonstration, optimistic views were posited on the expandability of life politics, while critical stances were thrown in regarding the centrality of middle-class consumer-citizens in the rally. Despite the parallel presence of the dinner table safety issue and other agendas relating to neoliberalism, the candlelight demonstration failed to form a basis of discourse that could lead to the change of the existing neoliberalist structure (Baek 2009) and therefore, problems faced by people occupying the least safe positions in society—e.g., nonregular workers, migrant foreign workers, the poor, and dislocated people—were left out from the debate. It could be understood that those marginalized people did not participate in the candlelight demonstration as they had no time to or felt no need to (Eun 2009), but actually these were the people who could not easily be persuaded by the legal ideology touting order and stability (T. Lee 2009). This reasoning is based on the reflection that after all, the participants of the demonstration were citizens with relatively secure positions in society; they were mindful only of their own sustainable safety and neglectful of the safety of those driven to the status of non-citizens. What is striking in the critical reflections on the limitations of the candlelight demonstration is that the candlelight demonstration in the Gwanghwamun gate is often juxtaposed to the tragic deaths of dislocated people in Yongsan.² People repeatedly ask, “Why did the can-

status or other socially relevant factors. In this paper, such an unprotected status will be deemed “statelessness.”

2. The deaths of dislocated people in Yongsan and the E-Land workers’ struggle are dealt with in greater detail in the below chapter titled “The Changing Public Sphere and the Political Identity of Women Participants of the Candlelight Demonstration.”

dleight demonstrators not join the Yongsan protest?" The catastrophe of dislocated people in Yongsan is a representative case that debunks the current situation of people expelled to the least safe position in Korean society, namely, the state of "statelessness."

This paper purports to examine the political identity of women participants of the candlelight demonstration rather than the political significance of the demonstration per se. In my view, if an aforementioned type of comparison is attempted, it would make more sense and lead to a more productive discussion to compare it with the E-land workers' struggle. Among the women participants of the candlelight rally, many expressed concerns about national sovereignty from the status of mothers who are the primary caretakers of their families' health. The elongated strike of married female nonregular workers of E-Land, which lasted for 510 days, bears some unalienable association with motherhood. Further, their struggle shows succinctly the accelerated dismantlement of middle-class men and the resulting transformation of traditional relations of family-state-workplace and changing publicity that is underway in contemporary Korean society. The women participants of both the candlelight demonstration and the E-Land workers' struggle describe the process of their participation as that of awakening and growth. In both cases, they started as "ordinary women" or *ajumma* (middle-aged married women), not as activists, and developed political sensibility as their struggle continued and deepened. The process of cultivating social consciousness is keenly associated with life politics. Life politics is a process in which the intimate sphere of communications among community members expands into the public sphere (Saito 2000). In fact, a case in point that may be considered as an example of life politics in Korea is the coop movement, which has been led mainly by women (S. Jeong 2009; S. Ha 2009).³ Indeed, food safety was estab-

3. In the stream of the civil movement that actively practiced life politics in Korea are the feminist movement which attempted to create a political power group of women in the 1991 local elections, the consumer coop movement campaigning for the life politics movement based on the Japanese model of the life movement, the YMCA movement that advocated life politics as a means of promoting political

lished as a core agenda of Korean life politics long before the 2008 candlelight demonstration.

What is striking in the candlelight demonstration is that girls played a leading role in the inception period and thereafter the overwhelming turnout of diverse groups of women gave it a great impetus throughout. Considering that women accounted for about 70 percent of the participants, it is very important to understand their positionality clearly. This paper aims to examine the political identity of the women participants and analyze the characteristics of various groups of women who led the candlelight demonstration from the perspectives of global consumption culture and global food safety and the involvement of Internet communities. Then it compares their “action” of participation in the demonstration with the labor struggle mounted by married female nonregular workers of E-Land. The rapidly changing public sphere or publicity, together with the progress of neoliberalist globalization, provides legitimacy to this investigation and presents prospects on the future world in which ordinary women become the political agents to lead life politics.

Who Are the Women Who Participated in the Candlelight Demonstration?

If the candlelight demonstration touched off serious and fundamental reflections on the limitations of liberal democracy based on a representative system, such reflections must start with, before anything else, asking what the significance of direct speech and direct actions staged by women in the public square is. Women have been faced with many barriers to having institutionalized and equal relations with the state and representative politics and particularly, teenage girls have suffered injustice by being completely denied such opportunities. Women, who have experienced the injustice of being left out of the public sphere, which is physically symbolized by the public

education and political participation of citizens, and the citizens' movement which sought to realize civil movement and grass-roots democracy (S. Ha 2009).

square, acted as the main agents in the rally, armed with rare passion and innovative ideas. In this paradox, one can find the nature of the political identity of women who played a leading role in the candlelight demonstration.

Political Identity of the Women Participants under Suspicion

A political answer to “what happened thereafter?” which has been the hottest issue after the political development of the candlelight demonstration, may be found in the outcomes of the recent local elections held on June 2, 2010. This answer clearly shows that although the candlelight disappeared physically from the streets after 2008, it continues to flame in the political views and judgments of voters. In local elections, policy carries a lot of importance, because voters heed to policy promises of candidates as it is instrumental to bringing them a safe and sustainable life. When the neoliberalist state, being usually disinterested in the specific experiences of people, ramps up control and evades accountability (Sennett 2006), the importance of local elections heightens, as representatives who respect the local people's opinions and demands for the quality of living can be elected for self-government. In the 2006 local elections, more than half of the 10 policy promises submitted to the National Election Commission by each mayoral and gubernatorial candidate of the 16 metropolitan cities and provinces were concerned with growth and development. In contrast, in the 2010 local elections, distribution and welfare took up 60 percent, and growth and development, 40 percent. According to the results of a survey by the Korea Society Opinion Institute, women in their thirties paid most attention to the candidates' stances on the issue of free lunch for school children, while those in their forties focused on the issue of the Four-River Restoration Project.⁴ Clearly, the policy focus has shifted from development and growth to educa-

4. Refer to the roundtable talk in the 1086th edition of *Yeoseong sinmun* (Women's Newspaper) held under the title “June 2 Local Elections and Women: Women in their Thirties and Forties Cast Vote Based on the Candidates' Policy Position,” <http://www.womennews.co.kr/news/45535>.

tion, childcare, welfare, and distribution. Among them, free lunch for school kids was promised universally by nearly all candidates, regardless of their party affiliations. Free lunch is a key policy agenda in the light of just redistribution and is directly related to the issue of food safety, the flash point of the candlelight demonstration two years ago. The driving force of the demonstration called for change or expansion of the public sphere in view of everyday life.

On May 10-11, 2010, one month before the elections, *Chosun Ilbo* ran for two days articles reevaluating the candlelight demonstration on the occasion of its second anniversary in a very different vein. Undisputedly, the reevaluation, which was probably the most recent event relating to the demonstration, was an attempt for the conservative newspaper to declare once again its stance that “the candlelight demonstration was a disturbance caused by ideological groups over beef imports.” What is striking about these articles, however, is that *Chosun Ilbo* launched a concentrated attack on candlelight girls, *ajumma*, and bands of housewives who participated in the demonstration, wheeling baby strollers (so-called “baby stroller brigades”; hereafter BSB). Citing interviews with some participants in the reports, it apparently creates the impression that the candlelight girls were manipulated by masterminds behind the scenes and housewives believed horror stories of mad cow disease floating around on the Internet and acted recklessly, unable to exercise “scientific judgment.” The quoted people reacted fiercely to this coverage. Teenager Han Chae-min refuted, “I’m not low self-esteemed or stupid enough to recite what others say when I disagree with them. I’m not a puppet. I’m not that ignorant.”⁵ Ms. Yu responded, “The candlelight demonstration taught me a lot of things about politics. I really want to let adults know that young people are not ignorant or stupid.”⁶

5. “Two teenage girls who participated in the candlelight demonstration call the *Chosun Ilbo* report ‘distorted and unfair,’” http://www.ohmynews.com/nws_web/view/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0001380564.

6. “‘A puppet? My remarks were distorted for their intention.’ What is the truth of the *Chosun Ilbo* interview with a candlelight teenage girl?” http://www.ohmynews.com/nws_web/view/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0001380397.

BSB members held a “press conference on May 14, 2010 to condemn the distorted reports and urge *Chosun Ilbo* to reflect on what it did,” and criticized it for quoting their remarks out of context.⁷

Obviously, the BSB members who joined the rally with their babies in strollers, which caused controversy for child abuse at that time, did so being the primary caretakers of their children's health, which is as true now as it was then (Forty four of them were summoned to the Prosecutor's Office in 2009 for violating the Act on Assembly and Demonstration and the Road Transportation Act). Contrasting scientific knowledge with horror stories, conservative newspapers such as *Chosun Ilbo*, sought to portray the housewives' participation in the demonstration not as a rational behavior based on scientific evidence but as reckless and based on groundless horror stories. This suspicious view has persisted from the time of the demonstration two years ago to date. The use of “scientific discourse” and “scientific image” is not totally unrelated to ideological power struggle waged over who owns the truth. Besides, the suspicious view thrown at the housewives appears rather intentional, taking into consideration that although the fear people felt in 2008 “might have been exaggerated, judging from the pieces of scientific evidence, it was in nature social fear rather than existential” (Oh 2009). Taking on a superior and professional attitude, conservative groups, including conservative media, interrogated them on their role and position as caretakers of their families' health and on their decision and action on which they were grounded on, and sought to obliterate subjective agency from their action.

Meanwhile, both the teenage girls and housewives, including BSB, consistently say that they took to the streets voluntarily and learned a lot from the experience. They admit that they joined the demonstration out of voluntary will without being armed with sufficient scientific or politico-economic knowledge, and they learned and had personal growth politically and socioeconomically. Their voluntary choice might be based on romanticized belief in civil subjectivi-

7. <http://www.ohmynews.com>.

ty. Although they did not have sophisticated insight over how the government exercises governance in the context of neoliberalist globalization and what the nature of hierarchy among the citizens in terms of political freedom is, the fact that they chose to participate in the rally from voluntary will is very significant in the discussion of democracy. What is even more significant is that their voluntary action did not end after a single event and they experienced growth and development going through gradual personal change. There is no clear answer to the question of who has more political knowledge and to what extent. Moreover, there is no guarantee that those who have more political knowledge will be more passionate and active in political participation.

In this context, the suspicion on the political agency of women, who accounted for 70 percent of the participants of the candlelight demonstration, remains a very important political issue. Even the so-called progressive-reformist camp regards the identity of the women participants as a hard-to-solve puzzle—though not from a gender discriminatory or adult-centered perspective, unlike the conservative media. Who are those girls that participated in the candlelight rally? Which Koreans and which citizens are the women who changed the scenery of the democratic movement in Korea? What implications does their emergence have for the future direction of the democratic movement in Korea? These questions are easy to raise but difficult to answer. In dealing with those questions, we would probably have to answer them weighing diverse perspectives in consideration of the concrete reality of the present and the future and at the same time, ask the questions again and again, forging them in a new form. In the next section, I try to provide a preliminary answer to the questions by examining the real life of the women participants in consideration of their digital community activity and “glocal” consumption activity.⁸

8. I initially wanted to include a discussion on the “candlelight girls” in this paper, but I did not. In the context of semiology, “girls” are a signifier of sexuality and socioeconomic civil rights, seeming to have a different symbolic meaning from “women.” Writing this paper, I came to realize that analysis of the “candlelight girls” exceeds the scope of my work. Some studies have been made on teenage

*Political Identity of the “Band of Amazones”:
Between a Digital Culture Tribe and the Global Consumer*

The 2008 candlelight demonstration drew more attention for the fact that it was led by women, especially those who seemed to have no interest in politics. A report in the July 9, 2008 edition of *Kyunghyang Shinmun* wrote that “It is a prevailing view that the Band of Amazones (women warriors in Greek mythology) led the candlelight demonstration, just as the ‘necktie brigades’ inflamed the democratization movement of June 1987” (Yi, Yu, and O 2008). Some commented that it was “an experience that the typology of the feminist movement or what comes to mind first when you think of the feminist movement, gets broken. . . . This time, women who projected a completely different image from those who had been conventionally thought of as actors or subjects of movement up to that point arose as the agents. The high-heel shoes band showed us symbolically that they can really do it”⁹ (S. Ha 2008, 19). The women in their twenties who took to the streets wearing high-heel shoes without any fear of protesting through the night in the open square were the same ones who consumed global merchandise at ordinary times and whose main identity was that of consumers. They were joined by many mothers who want to buy good ingredients and prepare healthy and safe meals. Mothers of young babies and housewives in their forties and fifties alike voiced their concerns about school meals and military food to the government: “The power of the nation comes from

participants of the candlelight demonstration, mainly dealing with their experiences and symbolic meanings attached to it. But only a few of them address teenage “girls,” giving attention to their gender difference. This fact illustrates that the theme of the teenage girls’ participation in the candlelight rally requires profound study, thorough analysis, and extensive knowledge on the overall conditions facing them.

9. Among the photo files giving vivid witness to the candlelight demonstration, the one that I found the most daring and refreshing was a picture of a miniskirt-clad SoulDresser member who was reading a *Kyunghyang Shinmun* with her high-heel shoes trampling on an issue of *Chosun Ilbo* (Participatory Society Institute 2008, 148).

the citizens,” as the government was trying to negotiate with the United States on the mortgage of citizens’ right to health. Many of the women demonstrators were members of Internet social clubs, such as Satin, Miclub, 82cook, Lemon Terrace, and SoulDresser. That is, they were a breed of digital culture. In digital space, they share common interest in and information on cosmetics, food, interior decoration, furniture, clothing, and TV actors, and chatter extensively on their personal lives, forming loose ties of taste-based communities with a sense of belongingness but no binding obligation.

While predominantly male Internet communities do not usually deal with personal stories or stories beyond specific topics of their interest, women’s sites have a distinct characteristic of covering a wide range of themes and contents (W. Choe 2008). In this space, even political issues are talked about in the dictum of comfortable intimate chatting, like things of everyday interest, such as ornaments, food, and fashion. The power and influence of SoulDresser members, as was demonstrated in a fundraiser that raised 17 million won in just five days, derives from this lighthearted, mobile, and flexible voluntariness and play-like nature, which was absent in the political actors of Korean society of the past.¹⁰ Apparently, the fluid and light character combined with women’s traits of practicality and straightforwardness—as they are sensitive to everyday life, unlike men who are more normative and tend to focus on great cause—made possible the dynamic development of social agenda such as the import of beef at risk of mad cow disease.

In addition to their familiarity with the Internet space, we should also pay attention to the fact that the motive of their participation in the rally and the mode of the participation are closely connected with (global) consumption culture. 82cook, a cooking website whose main members are housewives in their thirties and forties and professional

10. Those traits of predominantly women Internet communities may be explained by the attributes of the multitude that is free to mass and disband, familiar with affective expression, communication and labor, and is no longer bounded by the framework of nation-state in their action (Hardt 1999).

women, managed to expand their everyday interest in cooking, child-care, and housekeeping into the arena of global consumption market. They took part in the demonstration, being aware that the purchase of safe beef was not just an issue of individuals. Calling for companies to not post their advertisements on conservative newspapers such as *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, and *Dong-A Ilbo*, they emphasized their legitimate rights and choice of (potential) consumers who are the real payers of businesses' advertisement fees included in the price of goods. On June 12, 2008, *Chosun Ilbo* branded their advertisement suspension campaign as cyber terror and issued to the website manager an official document saying that they "would be taken to court for civil and penal responsibility for it." Judging that *Chosun Ilbo* sent the document only to their site and not to other groups out of an intent to "ignore and slight housewives who are Korea's main consumers and pillars of families," 82cook members put up a strong protest by having a press conference in front of the newspaper company on June 22 (J. Kwon 2008, 63). Joining the demonstration for the consumption issue in the beginning, they kept showing up at the protest sites and realized that the beef issue must be understood in the politico-economic context of neoliberalist globalization, as well as those of privatization and deregulation of school uniform, and through this process they developed political sensibility. Breeding historical awareness, they came to realize "why so many people mounted struggle in the early-to-mid 1980s and the early 1990s" and visited historical sites to learn more about the Gwangju Democratization Movement. A prominent attribute of the 2008 candlelight demonstration is the evolutionary process of enlightenment and awakening experienced by the participants, especially women, as revealed in the comments of a female participant: "If it were not this, how would we have known the names of Agriculture Minister or Culture Minister? I feel proud of myself as I now understand how the world works and social structure operates. Before, I thought they were so complex" (Participatory Society Institute 2008, 196).

The making of electronic relationships in the space of Internet communities and their seasoned experiences as consumers gave a

great impetus for the women—who had developed no institutionalized relationship with the government and representative politics, nor did feel the need to think about the close relations between their daily life and sovereignty—to become the leading force in the open square. This fact indicates that the candlelight demonstration was a consumer-citizens' movement. The demonstration illustrates close connection between the expansion of life politics and consumption society, in which identity is constituted via consumption, culture, and leisure activity (T. Jeong 2009). However, when safeguarding the dinner table becomes a matter of food industry at the global level, the act of preparing food takes on a political nature, which restructures the boundary between state and family and between the public sphere and the intimate sphere. When one is able to think seriously about safeguarding the dinner table at the global level and think critically about the government being reduced to the status of manager of neoliberalist economic rationale and the global market, one activates life politics by asking questions regarding publicity from the standpoint of an “everyday agent” (Schutz 1964). This phenomenon requires more thorough analysis because the public sphere undergoes change along as the social state is rapidly shrinking in the neoliberalist economic system. Understanding the changing public sphere is essential to understanding the process that the so-called “ordinary women” or *ajumma* become political agents on the solid basis of everyday life.

The Changing Public Sphere and the Political Identity of Women Participants of the Candlelight Demonstration

The reflection that the candlelight demonstration was led by the new middle class in consumption-oriented society and thus had intrinsic limitations deepened further with the incident of the tragic deaths of displaced people in Yongsan, whose predicament began in January 2009 and had remained unresolved for almost a year. The fact that very few people were interested in and participated in the protest of

the displaced people in the heart of downtown Seoul made some people ask an emotionally charged question, "Why did you put out your candlelight?" (Y. Jeong 2009). Unlike the 2008 candlelight demonstration, passing citizens did not join the protest on the spot this time. On this, criticisms have been made that it was because the uncelebrated Yongsan struggle was too out-fashioned to the candlelight demonstrators who were "igniters of civil society" who had acquired the right to interpret social phenomena and because the "burning bodies" of displaced people who were burnt to death, protesting on the lookout on top of a building for their rights of survival, were too shocking and too earnest (J. Kim 2009, 266). The Yongsan catastrophe demonstrated a rule of civil society that when the property right of a few people competes with the residential right of a lot of people, legitimacy is bestowed on the former (Eom 2009). The action of people resisting on the lookout to secure their residential right is illegal and so, lies outside the protection of law.

This confirms to us once again the fact that the neoliberalist authoritarian state allows political freedom only to those who are financially solvent and therefore, anyone who is insolvent can slip into the state of "statelessness" (H. Kim 2009). The state wields governance power based on the order of neoliberalist globalization and plays the role of manager modeled on the free market turning a deaf ear to the demands of people for redistribution, welfare, and safety, and thus creating the condition of "statelessness" within the nation-state (Bulter and Spivak 2007). People who exist in the nation-state but have no other option but to live in the state of "statelessness" (being unable to demand legal rights or protection of the state), or those who have to live the life of the *homo sacer*, trapped in a categorically "exceptional situation" (Agamben 2002), are not just migrant workers, refugees, sex workers, or displaced people. In the neoliberalist state regime that gives political freedom only to financially solvent people, even natives and citizens are constantly prone to the structural risk of becoming the "surplus population" anytime.

Women participants of the 2008 candlelight demonstration real-

ized that the state gives priority to its role as free market manager at the global level rather than that of the provider of welfare and safety to citizens, and sympathized with the fact that all are equally subject to the threats of biopolitics of neoliberalist penetration. It is true that state-of-the-art media technology at the site created a fete-like atmosphere, but this does not need to be viewed entirely negatively. This is because the candlelight space was not merely a physical place of festivity, but a forum of peaceful and mutually beneficial open discussion in which affective energy influenced each other based on such sympathy. Even though it would not instantly turn them into political activists, their capacity of sympathy and exchange of affective energy that they experienced in the public square will, in a longer-term perspective, provide a crucial foundation to develop the idea of membership rights which cannot be curtailed by the logic of market economy in Korean civil society. As it was emphasized in the introduction of this paper, it is the learning, growth, and evolution that should be brought to light in the experience of the so-called “ordinary women” in the public space. The process of developing awareness through concrete experience rather than via abstract universal knowledge ensures the authenticity to become political agents. In this regard, the claim that the life of people who come to the open space and that of those who go back home are in contradiction (Baek 2009, 45) makes us reflect on the ideological and historical making of the notion of the public sphere.

The greatest limitation of the 2008 candlelight demonstration was that civil resistance in the open space did not expand or shift to the realm of production and reproduction of one’s own and consequently, it failed to achieve transformation and new constitution of mass subjects. Individual participants returned home after rallying in the public square. The demonstration in the public arena at night and the as-usual life during the following day remained separate and estranged, like water and oil. Due to this limitation, change in the public sphere was stuck in a fete and could not lead to liberation (Baek 2009, 48).

The view that the open square and home are unrelated realms or conflicting to some extent is based on the long-standing ideology of public-private distinction. Feminists have continually criticized the ways that the public-private dichotomy operates in connection with patriarchal ideology. Moreover, the sphere of publicity, which is changing under the influence of globalization, indicates that it is impossible to distinguish the two even ideologically. The Yongsan catastrophe and the struggle of married female nonregular workers of E-Land reveal that anyone can fall into non-citizenship, or homo sacer, at any moment in neoliberalist globalization, and no one is safe from the danger. The struggle of married female nonregular workers of E-Land, however, provides an interesting example of a concrete reality that change in the public sphere has generated in our contemporary era. Besides, the labor dispute, which lasted over an extended period of time, seems to lend important clues to understanding the political identity of women participants of the candlelight demonstration, in the aspects that the labor struggle was made by married female nonregular workers who were previously known to not participate in any struggles.

Relationship of the Public Square and the Home in the Context of the Changing Public Sphere

In the distinction between the public sphere and the private/intimate sphere established in the modernization process of the West, the “public” referred to the realm of pursuing the public good of collectivity, i.e., the state, whereas the “private” meant the realm of individual’s own right which is free from external interference. Meanwhile, civil society built on market economy meant the private sphere in relation with the state on the one hand and the public sphere in relation with family on the other hand. Generating the symbolic contrast of public men vs. private women, the public-private division naturally led to women’s exclusion from the public sphere and men’s dominance in the private (H. Cho 2002, 17-18).

To counter this, feminism has made strenuous efforts to expand

civil rights of women by promoting their economic activity and legislating laws and at the same time, to debunk the ideological historicity of the public-private distinction and reconstruct the relationship. As a result, laws relating to women's rights have been legislated during the 10-year period from the 1990s to the Participatory Administration, including the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act, the abolishment of the family headship system, and the Motherhood Protection Act. Yet, as a matter of fact, the average wage of women amounted to 66 percent of men's in 2007,¹¹ and 40.8 percent of female employees were engaged in nonregular work in 2008 (Yi et al. 2009). Entry into the public realm by a majority of women has not ensured them sufficient civil rights. In most women, their progression into the public realm has not provided them with experiences separated from the private realm; instead, they are still associated with it.

In modern days, "publicity" has defined itself by prescribing many themes as "private," based on a combination of social contract and gender contract. Employing the slogan that "The personal is political," feminists have raised questions on the boundary between public and private. Calling attention to housekeeping work and care work that had been excluded from publicity by the discourse justifying gender division of labor, they have managed to turn them into political issues (Barker and Feiner 2004; Folbre 2001). Care work, which is performed based on intimacy and communication, and needs and response to them, enables the continuity and reproduction of community, i.e., enables all other sorts of labor. Care work, performed mainly by women in the home, is rapidly commercialized on a global scale (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parrenäs 2001). Many women from poor countries migrate to rich ones to find care work, and so countries are beefing up the management system. In general, women's increased participation in the labor market and declining fertility rate shakes the traditional relationship between

11. Jeong Je-hyeok, "Women's Average Income 66% of Men's," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, September 29, 2008, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=200809291808325&code=940100 (accessed June 17, 2010).

family, market and the state at the national and supranational level. In those circumstances, if care work continues to be looked upon as women's work that is noneconomic and private, it would only delay proper response to it.¹² "Safeguarding the dinner table," which triggered the 2008 candlelight demonstration, too, belongs to the realm of care work, and family, market, and the state are all entailed in it.

The public sphere is under rapid change, with the shrinking of social state which was caused by the move in the 1980s-1990s to collectivize the risks of capitalism. The social state is, in theory, an imaginary community of people who do not know each other. Social solidarity required (or presupposed) by the social state was supported by the collective (national) identity. The sense of belongingness that they form as an integrated society of single nation had been the primary driving force of social solidarity. But this began to change as social or national solidarity was impaired due to estrangement between the economic and the social (mainly in the Anglo-Saxon zone from the 1980s). There was no longer one nation and it was divided into two, one that was economically productive and the other that was unproductive and depended on welfare. Risks bound to increase gradually in capitalism were shifted to the responsibility of individuals (Saito 2000). As close connection between voluntary activity and security was emphasized, the foundation of security no longer lied with the social state and was shifted to individual entrepreneurs or to self-government of intermediate organizations such as communities and associations.

Interest in social security has been replaced by that in public security (as illustrated by the policy of importing beef at risk of mad cow disease), and biopower that used to be concerned with protection and advancement of the life of all nations is now tuned to the protection of safety of specific social classes (Rose 1999). Globaliza-

12. Not just care work but all labor performed by women is stripped of public nature and this tendency has persisted until today from the 1970s when women began to enter the labor market in large numbers in Korea. An undisputedly clear historical example of this is the incident of female workers fired by Dongil Textile Company (1978), which remains unresolved to date.

tion makes it difficult to form a single class identity by generating various conditions in which nations, races, classes, and genders intersect with one another. Change in perceptions among middle-class men and increasing economic participation by women, which has resulted from growing nonregular work and a flexible labor market, transform the relations of marriage, family, and gender at the glocal level. There is no longer a clear distinction between workplace and home, or between the location of market work and that of housework, nor is women's identity defined along the line of a single class or a single role (Peterson 2003; J. Cho 2007).

In the next section, I review the occupation-strike of married female nonregular workers of E-land as an example illustrating the two aspects of the changing public sphere that result from neoliberalist globalization. The workers' struggle will show that the so-called middle-class women's street politics-movement—which was the leading force of the candlelight demonstration—and the labor movement—which is often categorized as class struggle—are not far apart, and it will also reveal contradictions entailed in the division of the public square and the home.

*Agency of Married Female Nonregular Workers at E-Land:
Caught Between Struggle and Livelihood*

The struggle of married female nonregular workers of E-Land, which went on for 510 days from June 2007 to November 2008, is a quintessential case which shows, firstly, that it is no longer possible to distinguish the public and the private under the changing public sphere, and secondly, despite all that, how gender discrimination based on the public-private distinction justifies the unfair treatment of female workers (especially, married female nonregular workers). The management regarded the married female nonregular workers earning 800,000 won per month as “*ajumma* who worked for pocket money” and did not recognize their workerhood, while the government judged that “none of them were a jobless household head.” But, in fact, they were not a homogeneous group of *ajumma*; some were a

virtual household head as their husbands were jobless, some became a household head after divorce, and some were working to earn a living together with their working spouses.¹³

The E-Land labor dispute garnered special attention as it was led by married female nonregular workers and it was a success case that all workers except twelve high-level union workers returned to work and acquired the status of indefinite-term contract employees. It is generally believed that married female workers tend not to be involved in collective action in the public sphere for their caring responsibilities at home, while nonregular workers cannot easily join organized resistance for their disadvantaged status in the labor market (Y. Kim 2010, 140).

Then, how could the E-Land union members who had dual limitations mount struggle over a prolonged period? First of all, they formed alliances with regular workers.¹⁴ Secondly, support from mass media and the public was helpful, too. Above all, however, it was the solidarity of the participants and the meaning that each of them attached to their action that allowed the *ajumma*, who even had to learn how to gesture their clenched fists and arms in protest, to pull through a long struggle. The core factors that worked in the process of signifying their action were love for and trust in their coworkers protesting next to them and responsibility as mothers (Y.

13. Film director Kim Mi-rye, who produced a documentary *Oebak* (Mamas Stay Out at Night) featuring the entire process of the E-Land strike, said in an interview with the *Hankyoreh*, "I wanted to take issue with the reality that their low wage and temporary work is justified on the pretext that they work to earn side-dish money." Considering the director's awareness of the subject, the title of the film *Oebak* conveys a symbolic meaning, as it deals with the situation that the workers put up a strike occupying the World Cup Stadium branch outlet of the discount retailer Homever, a subsidiary of E-Land. It points to the marginal condition of the workers in the context of changing publicity. When married male workers do not go home for a strike, people do not say that they "stay out at night."

14. Committee Chair Kim Gyeong-uk stressed that "Nonregular workers cannot win a struggle by themselves. They can win only when they get the support of regular workers in the same company," http://www.pressian.com/article/article.asp?article_num=60081113161612§ion=03.

Kim 2010, 145).

Hwang Seon-yeong: What made me persevere through the hardship was my family. My eldest child said to me, “Mom, for the ten days that electricity was cut off, I could concentrate better and read as many as ten books.” My second child wrote in her diary that “I did not believe that there are children who skip lunch at school as they cannot afford it. Now I know it is true. From now on, I will finish all my food and not leave any” (Y. Kim 2010, 14).

Jang Eun-mi: Even a few days ago, my son, a middle schooler, said to me, “Mom, you should win so that I shall not live my life as a nonregular worker” (Y. Kim 2010, 75).

Their motherhood did not stop at feeding and caring their children and developed into the determination and responsibility of older-generation workers to not let the future generation inherit the status of discriminated nonregular workers.

Here, we should note the fact that the discrimination of married female nonregular workers of E-Land is gendered. E-Land is a typical retail business that makes it a rule to provide unconditional service for its customers. Generally, at a large retailer, workers who receive orders from superiors are almost all women and those who give orders are 90 percent male and 10 percent female (Y. Kim 2010, 167). Women workers at the company are regarded as easily replaceable manpower, “Like changing wooden chopsticks, replacement is no problem at all” (Y. Kim 2010, 174). The service industry, which is a characteristic of the industrial form of the postmodern period, creates a hierarchy of feelings or service labor. The service and code of behavior for customers required of female workers is standardized and uniform to minute detail, often labeled as Fordism of service labor (G. Hong 2008, 261), and it is alienating and very humiliating to workers (Kwon, Kim, and Jin 2008, 18). Unconditional kindness and boundless service to customers is demanded, and even rouge colors, sock types, and earrings are controlled. When one is caught by a monitoring worker, one receives a 3-hour drill on how to bow to

customers in a tiny underground room. If cleaning workers are laid off, they should do the cleaning before waste piles up. "When a dissatisfied customer makes a complaint charged with hostility, they should endure it and cajole them with a smile, as they do to their misbehaving drunken husbands" (G. Hong 2008, 265). Married female nonregular workers in the retail business and those in small-and-medium-size manufacturing companies are both low paid, but the working environment of the former is more gendered than that of the latter.

Struggle for workers' rights waged by those who have to shoulder the double burden of housework work and nonregular work¹⁵ reveals that patriarchy, rationale of neoliberalist economy, and the state that is hostile to female workers (particularly, nonprofessionals) crosscut each other. A prominent feature of risk society is that the connection between family, market, and the state no longer operate in the way that they used to. As mentioned previously, the homo sacer generated by the governance system of the neoliberalist nation-state in the globalization era does not apply just to a small number of groups. The E-Land workers' struggle shows the dismantlement of middle-class men on the one hand and the results of increasing female workers in a flexible labor market and prevalent nonregular work on the other hand. As it is illustrated by the KTX (Korean Train Express) stewardesses, college-educated women are not guaranteed of a secure middle-class status. Many middle-class people are agitated with anxiety and fear, caught in between the homo sacer and a stable life, and between citizenship and non-citizenship.

15. Union member Jo Hui-suk works double shift in the home and at the workplace. She describes her typical day as follows: "My work starts at 4:00 PM and finishes at 1:20 AM after checking the daily balance. When I go home, it is usually past 2 o'clock. Then I wash myself and it is between 3 and 4. I have to get up at least at 6 or 7 o'clock to make breakfast and help my kids go to school and send my husband to work. After the meal, I clean, do the laundry, go grocery shopping, etc. When I feel very tired, I don't clean and go to bed. . . . Since I get short segments of sleep instead of long night sleep, I always feel tired and get sensitive. I'm in service industry and customers complain a lot, so I have to strain myself all the time" (Kwon, Kim, and Jin 2008, 21).

Seo Eun-ju: When will it change? Would it have changed by the time my son starts working? I wasn't particularly conscious that I was working even if I was. The Labor Ministry cannot exist without workers. They should heed to our concerns, but they have deserted us. We've been deserted by the police, too. They are supposed to protect mass people. We have been deserted by the Nation and the Government. We are not regarded as citizens. We are Koreans but are treated no better than migrant foreign workers. This makes me only grow distrust for the society. How many tears must I shed until I recover from this? I guess I'll be able to shed distrust as I gain my rights one by one (Kwon, Kim, and Jin 2008, 69).

Yun Su-mi: Before, I couldn't even differentiate between the Grand National Party and the Democratic Labor Party. I was an ordinary woman concerned only about my family and my work. But now I think about what is civil consciousness and realize I can't have a worthy life without a clear understanding of society. I want my children to grow the ability to discern what is right and what is wrong. This whole experience has changed the way that I think. That is the most valuable thing I get from it. Whether I win or lose in the struggle, I'll live a different life from now on (Kwon, Kim, and Jin 2008, 77).

The two quotations above are powerful witness to the growth process of "ordinary women" or *ajumma*, cultivating civil identity and political identity through participation in the E-Land workers' struggle. In the 510-day-long strike, they came to realize the social and political meaning of citizenship and motherhood. The process of understanding "workerhood" is not much different from that of understanding "non-citizenship."

Women Participants of the Candlelight Demonstration and Married Female Nonregular Workers of E-Land

While the candlelight rally was going on, the Vice Chair of the E-Land labor union said, "the candlelight never reached the Homever outlet store (the site of the E-Land strike)," referring to the fact that

the demonstration for food safety and the struggle for workers' rights, both issues under threat, failed to be connected (Eun 2009). As mentioned in the above section titled "Who Are the Women Who Participated in the Candlelight Demonstration?" women participants of the candlelight demonstration were very familiar with global consumption culture and Internet communities and had high interest in healthy food and children's safety. In the initial stage, they participated not from political consciousness of publicity, but out of anxiety over the danger associated with imported beef at risk of mad cow disease. With growing involvement in the activities of the prolonged rally, however, they developed socioeconomic and political awareness. The process of their growth and evolution is somewhat similar to that of married women at E-Land who turned into workers and comrades participating in the strike. The women's participation in political activity in the public sphere vividly shows the process of transformation undergone by these ordinary women, who had never before been involved in an activist group. Their participation in the collective action has important implications, especially, for the contemporary era when the distinction between the public and private sphere has become irrelevant. The candlelight demonstration is frequently cited as an example of life politics. In a sense, the action of mothers venturing out to the public square for food safety might be an outing in the struggle to ensure safe livelihood. In the era when the public-private division is disappearing, life politics, which is pursued from the perspective of everyday life, should be able to come up with a new alternative. Now that crafty strategies of capitalism have dismantled the life inside and outside of the workplace, it is high time that the schemes of struggle and solidarity expand their scope to include mundane life as a realm of engagement.

As it has been put forth by many researches conducted so far, the candlelight rally could continue for over 100 days because spurts of fear brought on by imports of beef at risk of mad cow were combined with anxiety over the rapid dismantlement of social safety nets with the progression of neoliberalist globalization, and also because people's anger against the state, the source of all that fear, touched

off widespread resistance of civil society. It is no more relevant to distinguish social movements in accordance with the identity of activist groups—for instance, the labor movement, the civil society movement, the (traditional) feminist movement, the migrant workers' movement, the movement of the poor, and so on. What is really important is to realize the structure which conditions our lives, to be aware of the necessity of action and solidarity, and to hold a critical perspective on publicity. What we need to do urgently is engage in critical debates on who is excluded from the public arena and why and who decides the boundary between the public sphere and the private sphere, and come together to act on it.

Reflecting on the locus of women who participated in the candlelight demonstration and the E-Land workers' struggle will allow us to understand the conditions of women workers who have to incessantly rotate their roles as unemployed/employed women, regular/non-regular workers, female workers at small businesses, marginal workers, unpaid family workers, older workers, women volunteers, etc., and to search for potential suitable actions to ameliorate their situations. While the candlelight rally awakens our awareness to pursue the "movement to constitute a different life" based on a comprehensive understanding of the right to life, the E-Land workers' struggle urges that "labor unions, community movements, and social organizations form multilayered networks in support of women-workers who move in and out of the labor market repeatedly in their lifetime" (Yang 2008, 195). The two agendas point to the future direction of life politics. For life politics to open a new arena of politics under the governance of the neoliberalist authoritarian state which allows political freedom only to the financially solvent, each individual should "get out of the market rationale" and participate as a multiple person, "producer-worker-consumer-citizen" (H. Kim 2009).

Conclusion: Toward New Biopolitics via Revitalization of Biopower

What the participants of the candlelight demonstration experienced in person in the public square is the realization that class difference is not very solid but relatively fluid, considering the life quality in risk society and the governance structure of the neoliberalist state and that desires of the intimate sphere can be integrated into a community-wide alternative agenda through communication. Further, through participation in the demonstration, they reaffirmed that the private sphere (home), where an individual's everyday life is lived, and the public sphere, where political decisions are made, penetrate each other, thus defining and transforming each other.

Feminists have continuously proved the inseparability of the public sphere (the realm of the politico-economic) and the home (the realm of housework), showing that, for instance, kinship cannot exist without the assistance or mediation by the state, nor can the state exist without the medication and support of family (Butler 2001). The trained sensitivity to the life of women—who perform the activities of homemaking or life-nurturing (such as caring and child-rearing) and disclose the falsehood of artificial ideological boundary between the political realm and the housekeeping realm—can bring a new phase to biopolitics by incapacitating biopower¹⁶ wielded by the neoliberalist state and reactivating it to generate a community-oriented safe life. To do this, life politics must establish new ideology and develop a suitable agenda for a new identity of biopolitics which revolutionizes the dull sense of life found in the current form of representative democracy.

Having unfolded as part of civil society movements, life politics seems to be more focused on the participation and self-governing of “everyday agents” than to the process of searching for applicable

16. I use the term “biopower” with double meanings: bio-political power and life-generating power, with reference to the term's Korean translation in Seo et al. (2005, 155).

alternatives against institutionalized politics or attempts to secure civil publicness. Nonetheless, what is common in all practices of life politics is that they start with an issue of mundane interest and then develop and seek to find an alternative consensus point for the ultimate public good. This transition was observed in the candlelight demonstration, too. Issues of life, environment, child-rearing, and education can strike alliance amongst different perspectives of classes, and issues like school lunch can connect private desire and public desire. Life politics cannot be regarded as an alternative if it gives sole importance to “self-government” and loses politicity. Likewise, it would be unrealistic if it only touts ideology without self-government or commitment to livelihood. At the same time, even if it is equipped with ideology, politicity, commitment, and self-government, the quality of life of the members can be lowered if the ideology fails to capture the changed reality. The changed reality shows that interdependence is the keyword both at the global and local levels (Giddens 1994). Also, it warns that anyone can fall into economic and political marginality, unless he or she overcomes capitalism-based economic ideas. A movement can be effective only when various groups of different identities (women, environment, workers, minorities, and others) participate in collaboration in any space or location based on shared ideas. Life politics, which puts it into practice, will develop as alternative politics by activating biopower and being activated by it. This highlights that the experiences of women participants of the candlelight demonstration should be understood in the context of life politics.

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