

Raising a child alone in Seoul - *One single mother's story*

Annie Sirgey is an adopted Korean living and working in Seoul. She is a member of the group Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK). Korean Quarterly – Winter 2007/2008.
Reprinted with permission.

Eunjeong Park sat, tissue in hand, talking to an audience of about 20 people all gathered in the reception area of KoRoot, an organization in Seoul that helps connect Korean adoptees with their homeland. With gaze cast

downward, back hunched over, and legs tucked under, she quietly recounted the difficulties she has faced as a single mother raising a child on her own in Seoul today. Her interpreter, a compassionate woman in her early 20s,

Winter 2008

Adoption Australia

13

sat on her left, listening carefully to her every word. She interpreted slowly, her sentences carrying the slurs and monotones of a person who spent a lot of time in North America.

I could see the guest speakers and audience as I rushed toward the sliding glass doors of the building. I was late to this important gathering organised by Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK) and hoped I hadn't missed too much. I wanted to get a first-hand account of the trials and tribulations faced by single mothers in Korea.

Eunjeong was working in Changwon, a small city located near Pusan, when she discovered she was pregnant. She heard about Aeranwon, a home for single mothers in Seoul, through a friend. During her pregnancy, Aeranwon provided Eunjeong a place to stay, as well as numerous group therapy sessions and post-birth options. The women at Aeranwon ultimately decide whether to keep or relinquish their children after carefully weighing the pros and cons of being a single mom in Korea.

Eunjeong never thought of giving up her child while she was pregnant. She had decided early to raise her without the help of family and friends. Since then, six years have passed and her ideas about child raising abilities and resources have changed. At times, she said, she seriously thought about leaving her child at an orphanage, especially when she became financially or emotionally destitute, and had no one to turn to for help.

The discrimination she and her daughter have faced would be considered cruel and unjust, bordering on inhumane, by many in Korea and abroad. In one instance, when her daughter was still a baby, she interviewed for ten different jobs, and was not offered any of them. A few months later when she tried again, she was hired right away. The difference? In her second set of interviews, she did not reveal that she is a single mother.

When her daughter was two or three, Eunjeong noticed her scratching at the kitchen door like a cat who had been

locked outside. Unnerved by her daughter's strange behaviour, she decided to investigate what was wrong. She discovered that the mothers at her daughter's daycare center were locking her in a room by herself to keep her from interacting with the other children. The mothers knew Eunjeong was raising her daughter alone. Eunjeong quickly moved her daughter to a different daycare centre, this time lying about her marital status.

As Eunjeong spoke, the audience listened in rapt attention. We were mostly Korean adoptees living Seoul, and although we come from all walks of life and have different interests and personalities, we are all bound together by our status as adoptees. We discussed later how the story of a mother who decided to keep her child broadened our perspectives on the issues surrounding adoption.

To my surprise, Eunjeong's advice to other single mothers was to give their children up. Her reasoning was that, although Korea is a richer society today than it was when we were adopted, attitudes among Koreans was not that different. Korea people, in Eunjeong's view, are still traditional, and their social norms are supported by male-dominated Confucian principles. Prejudice about unwanted pregnancies governs society's response to the issue of single motherhood. Eunjeong receives no assistance from the government, nor does she get child support payments from the father of her child. Korean law states, but does not enforce, that unwed fathers are responsible for helping to raise their children.

Legal failures are compounded by social ones. Eunjeong said she never received any form of sex education until she went to Aeranwon, and to this day there are no centers or counselling hotlines for pregnant women. If there were, she said, most women would be too ashamed to utilise the resources.

Shame was a recurring theme in Eunjeong's talk. When asked about the number of women she had spoken with at

Aeranwon who had been sexually abused growing up, she said she thought more than 70 percent had. Not only had most been sexually abused, but many had also been victims of physical violence or other troubles within the family. "You cannot imagine the intensity of their stories," she said. "Their stories are worse than mine."

Eunjeong's own story begins with her mother, who was an orphan during the Korean War. She later married a farmer, became pregnant with Eunjeong's sister, and made plans to lead a quiet life in the countryside. Shortly after she became pregnant with Eunjeong, her husband died. With few resources and little formal education, her mother, now widowed and unlikely to be remarried, moved the family to a one-room apartment where she brought home men on a regular basis. Eunjeong, her sister, mother and the boyfriend her mother happened to be with at the time slept in the same bed. Eunjeong was sexually abused by one of these boyfriends.

The self-hate many unwed pregnant women feel is enough for them to choose international adoption as the best option for them and their babies. They feel their children will have a better life abroad and will be raised in a stable and loving environment. However, many come to regret their decision and wait (or hope) for the day, maybe 20 or 30 years in the future, when their children will return to Korea looking for them.

After Eunjeong finished her talk, not a single sound could be heard in the reception hall. No feet tapped, papers shuffled, pens scribbled, or throats coughed. The room was silent. Then, Eunjeong's daughter and a few other children began making noise in the back. I looked at Eunjeong and back at her daughter and felt immense respect for her. I saw her as a messenger that gave voice to single mothers in Korea, which with other voices can one day help in the struggle toward greater gender equality and improved rights for unwed mothers.