

**WHY DO YOUNG WOMEN LEAVE CONGLOMERATES?  
GENDER AND THE MILITARIZED WORKPLACE IN SOUTH KOREA**

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## Abstract

This study extends our understanding of gender inequality in the workplace by examining the reasons for early resignation of young women unaffected by motherhood responsibilities. Based on 22 in-depth interviews with young women who resigned from full-time positions at conglomerate firms in South Korea, complemented by interviews with 8 men who also resigned from these companies, I find that women resign because of the gap between their work expectations developed prior to employment and the *militarized* workplace culture. The militarization of the workplace is an overarching theme that emerged from interview narratives, which I engage as an organizing framework for analysis. Within the militarized workplace, rigid hierarchies and male-only informal networking marginalize women, and demand for overwork undermines women's possibility of long-term employment. Combined with sexual harassment, the work environment makes the job not worth keeping. Interviewees also suggest that their work experiences in the conglomerates inform their future work attitudes and planned career trajectories. These findings highlight the important roles of gendered organizational norms and practices in shaping women's discontinuous employment and their persistent underrepresentation in managerial positions in the workplace.

## Lay Summary

In South Korea, a large number of young adults employed at relatively high-paying, high-prestige conglomerate firms leave their hard-earned jobs within just a few years. Employing a gender approach to this puzzle, I ask: what are the experiences of young, childless women at these firms, and why, despite their high professional aspirations and lack of motherhood responsibilities, do they leave these firms so soon? Results suggest that women resign because of the *militarized* workplace culture that pushes them to the margins of membership. Within the militarized workplace, rigid hierarchies and male-only informal networking marginalize women, and demand for overwork undermines their possibility of long-term employment. I also find that women's gendered work experiences at conglomerates inform their future work attitudes and planned career trajectories. These findings further our understanding of the importance of gendered organizational factors that shape women's work and employment.

## **Preface**

This study was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) on March 26, 2018. The Certificate Number is H18-00183. The research proposal was co-designed by the principal investigator, Dr. Leila M. Harris, a Professor at the Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability (IRES) and the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice (GRSJ), and the co-investigator, Se Jin Um, a graduate student at the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice (GRSJ). The co-investigator collected in-depth interview data in South Korea from May to August 2018, and subsequently completed coding, analysis and writing.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Lay Summary .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Framing the Study.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1    Introduction.....	1
1.2    Thesis Organization .....	3
1.3    Literature Review.....	4
1.3.1    The Stalled Gender Revolution in the Workplace .....	4
1.3.2    Early Resignation Among Youths in Korea .....	6
1.3.3    Militarism and the Workplace in Korea.....	9
1.4    Methodology .....	11
<b>Chapter 2: Women in the Militarized Workplace .....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1    Women’s Expectations and Aspirations about Work.....	16
2.1.1    “It’s everyone’s dream”: Motivation to Apply to Conglomerates.....	16
2.1.2    “I’d bury my bones in this company”: Initial Aspirations about Work.....	18
2.2    Rigid Hierarchies .....	20
2.2.1    New Employee Training: A “Boot Camp” Introduction to the Workplace.....	20

2.2.1.1	Indoctrinating Minds with Motivation: Lectures, Workshops and Exams .....	21
2.2.1.2	Internalizing Corporate Ideals: Group and Physical Activities .....	22
2.2.2	Absolute Obedience: Talking and Acting Like Soldiers in the Office .....	24
2.2.2.1	Obedience as the Highest Virtue of the Ideal Worker .....	24
2.2.2.2	<i>Danaka</i> : Employees Talking Like Soldiers .....	27
2.2.3	Susceptibility to Abuse .....	29
2.3	Male-exclusive Informal Networking.....	30
2.3.1	Drinking: The Informal Hub of Workplace Politics .....	30
2.3.2	Smoking: When Men Get Their Work Done .....	33
2.3.3	Buying Sex: Where Men Learn Habits of Sexual Assault.....	35
2.4	Overwork and Its Gendered Outcomes on Young Women .....	37
2.4.1	Expanded Working Hours and Complete Availability .....	37
2.4.2	No Role Model, No Future .....	39
<b>Chapter 3: Resignation and Search for a Better Work and Life .....</b>		<b>42</b>
3.1	Resignation Under Consideration: Letting Go of the “Best Value” Career .....	43
3.1.1	High Income and Benefits .....	44
3.1.2	Social Status and Respect .....	45
3.1.3	Family Pressure.....	46
3.2	The Final Push: Ill Health and Workplace Mistreatment .....	48
3.2.1	Physical and Mental Health Problems .....	48
3.2.2	Workplace Mistreatment: Microaggressions, Sexual Harassment and Assault.....	51
3.2.2.1	Microaggressions: Female Difference, Emotional and Aesthetic Labor .....	51
3.2.2.2	Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault .....	54

3.2.2.3	Lack of Institutional Support .....	57
3.2.3	“It was just not worth keeping”: Failing to Find Hope .....	57
3.3	Breaking Away from the Ideal Track? Making Sense of Early Resignation.....	58
3.3.1	Stepping Outside the Box: What It Means to Resign .....	59
3.3.2	Moving into Unfamiliar Terrain: Searching for Authenticity.....	62
3.4	How Conglomerate Experience Informs Women’s Attitudes toward Work and Life..	63
3.4.1	“Finding my voice”: Working Freely, Assessed Fairly .....	64
3.4.2	“Time to be myself”: Work-life Balance .....	66
3.4.3	“More than just money”: Finding Social Meaning in Work.....	67
3.4.4	Rethinking a Good Life .....	69
<b>Chapter 4:</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>71</b>
4.1	Key Findings and Contributions of the Study.....	71
4.2	Limitations of the Study.....	72
4.3	Future Research Directions.....	74
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>82</b>
Appendix A	Questionnaire .....	82
A.1	Questionnaire (Korean).....	82
A.2	Questionnaire (English) .....	85
Appendix B	Consent Form .....	87
B.1	Consent Form (Korean) .....	87
B.2	Consent Form (English).....	90
Appendix C	Letter of Initial Contact .....	93

C.1	Letter of Initial Contact (Korean) .....	93
C.2	Letter of Initial Contact (English).....	94

**List of Tables**

Table 1.1 Profile of Respondents..... 14

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*To women who fought for a better life for their daughters' generation —*

*It is my greatest passion to follow in your footsteps.*

# Chapter 1: Framing the Study

## 1.1 Introduction

Scholars have long documented that gender inequality at work and at home affects women's work life and careers. Women's work aspirations, choices and experiences are influenced by the organizational structures that produce and maintain patterns of inequality (Acker 1990, 1998), competing demands of work and family (Gerson 1985; Stone 2007), norms of overwork (Cha and Weeden 2014) as well as broader cultural forces that assign gender roles in separate spheres (Hochschild and Machung [1989] 2012; Williams 2000, 2010). Work-family conflicts, observed even among women with managerial and professional jobs (Blair-Loy 2003; McBrier 2003), shape young women's preferences for future arrangements of work and family (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). However, because research has predominantly focused on women's work patterns in relation to effects of family and especially motherhood, reasons why a woman without the intentions of becoming a mother or yet to become a mother would experience discontinuous employment has been less well studied.

This study explores why young, childless women decide to resign from full-time employment at conglomerate firms in South Korea (hereafter Korea). Korea is an interesting case study not only because it has steadily represented the largest gender wage gap among OECD countries (in 2017, women earned 34.6% less than men, which is more than twice of the OECD average of 13.8%; OECD 2019), but also a considerable proportion of its youth workforce in permanent employment leave their jobs soon after they begin employment. In 2016, 27.7% left their jobs within a year, including 9.4% of those employed by large corporations, such as conglomerate firms (Korea Employers Federation 2016). This phenomenon is all the more perplexing given that getting a full-time job at an esteemed conglomerate firm in the country's

hyper-competitive job market is considered a huge achievement (C. Kim and Oh 2017).

Conglomerates offer significantly higher wages compared to small or medium sized businesses, job security, and associated social status that attract many job-seekers facing college graduation.

Why a significant number of young people leave their hard-earned jobs so soon, despite significant occupational privileges, has intrigued many Korean scholars. Over the past decade, they identified various structural and individual factors that inform their decision (C. Kim and Oh 2017; Y. M. Lee and Lim 2010; Y. rong Lee 2013; Park 2012; Shin and Kim 2016). Previous supply-side explanations tend to focus on the younger generation's cultural or generational motivations: new ideas of successful career trajectories and shifting definitions of a good life increase the likelihood of job-hopping (C. Kim and Oh 2017; Y. rong Lee 2013). I seek to add an institutional-level analysis through a closer examination of the gendered structures and practices of conglomerate firms and the particular experience of female workers in relation to the issue. In so doing, I connect resignation as a social phenomenon to the scholarship of gender and work. What are the experiences of young women at these firms? And why, despite their high professional aspirations and lack of family responsibilities and constraints, do they choose to leave these firms within just a few years?

Using 30 in-depth interviews with women and men who have resigned from full-time positions at conglomerates in Korea, I demonstrate that there are several notable characteristics of the conglomerate workplace that are key to shaping women's work experiences and future work attitudes. It is these characteristics that are also central to their decision to leave the workplace, in the absence of familial push factors. Key among the characteristics emphasized by interviewees is the *militarized* organizational culture manifested in the ways of communication, making decisions, and building relationships. Thus, I engage with the concept of the militarized

workplace as an organizing framework for analysis. While scholars have studied militarism as an ongoing social force that has shaped masculinity and gender relations in Korea today (Kwon 2013; Moon 2005b), how it manifests in the workplace has drawn surprisingly little attention. In this study, I find that young women resign because of the militarized organizational culture, whose rigid hierarchies and male-only informal networking marginalize women, and demand for long hours and complete availability undermines the possibility of continuing their career if and when they would become mothers. A combination of these organizational factors pushes women to the margins of membership, eventually leading to their early resignation.

## **1.2 Thesis Organization**

This thesis consists of four chapters, which I outline as follows. *Chapter 1: Framing the Study* provides an overview of the background of the study and the research questions. It is followed by a review of related literature on women and the stalled gender revolution in the workplace, early resignation and youth in Korea, as well as the effects of militarism on the workplace in Korea. Research methodology and methods used for this study are also discussed, including the process from data collection to coding and analysis.

*Chapter 2: Women in the Militarized Workplace* interrogates the organizational factors that counter-balanced the positive attributes of conglomerate employment and eventually pushed women out. I engage with the framework of the militarized workplace, a concept that emerged from interview narratives. Three distinct pillars of the militarized workplace are explored: rigid hierarchies, male-exclusive informal networking, and norms of overwork.

*Chapter 3: Resignation and Search for a Better Work and Life* illustrates the processes by which women navigate the militarized work environment and ultimately reach their decision to

resign. This chapter also considers what early resignation means for these individuals in the context of weakening traditional notions of happiness and success through which to understand the articulation of their personal formation as independent, autonomous adults. I argue that resignation from conglomerates can be understood to a larger extent as an act of breaking away from an idealized life course constructed by dominant socio-cultural standards.

Lastly, in *Chapter 4: Conclusion*, I close this thesis with discussions of the contributions and limitations of the study and some suggestions for future research directions.

### **1.3 Literature Review**

#### **1.3.1 The Stalled Gender Revolution in the Workplace**

While women's participation in higher education and public workforce has increased substantially in recent decades, scholars have repeatedly argued that the gender revolution in both the workplace and the home has "stalled" (England 2010; Hochschild and Machung [1989] 2012; Thébaud and Pedulla 2016). In varied cultural contexts, studies show that persistent gender-role attitudes at the societal level and gendered workplace norms and practices at the organizational level continue to create divergent work pathways for men and women (Grunow, Schulz, and Blossfeld 2012; Nemoto 2013b; Thébaud and Pedulla 2016). Unequal sharing of housework and childcare often further contributes to women's disadvantage (Hochschild and Machung [1989] 2012; Y.-M. Kim 2013; Leibowitz, Klerman, and Waite 1992).

Discussion on why the gender revolution in the workplace has seemingly reached an impasse has largely been organized around two distinguished social processes—namely, demand-side and supply-side processes. Demand-side explanations suggest that institutional factors contribute to gender-differentiated outcomes in career outcomes, such as employer

discrimination in hiring, promotion, pay and other workplace policies that perpetuate gender biases (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Kalev, Kelly, and Dobbin 2006). In Japan, for example, Nemoto (2016) finds that the workplace environment, including employment conditions, norms of overwork, as well as men's biased attitudes and behaviors against their female counterparts, accounts for why there are "too few women at the top." On the other hand, supply-side explanations point to individual factors such as personal preferences, expectations, and self-perceptions about their aptitude or performance (Polacheck 1981; Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999). Many such approaches posit that the choices and decisions women make and their low commitment to work create differentiated career outcomes.

Indeed, scholars have attempted to connect these two social processes. For instance, Pedulla and Thébaud's (2015) study finds that workplace structures fuel the supply-side process of preference formation about future work-family arrangement among young, unmarried men and women. One of the central findings of their survey-experimental study is that when institutional constraints are removed, these young adults, especially women, are more likely to opt for an egalitarian arrangement with their partner. Similarly, Bass (2015) finds that gendered anticipations of parenthood significantly affect the reproduction of differentiated work paths for women and men. Women's concerns about combining work with family in the future informed their tendency to change or downshift their present-day career goals according to what they expect about parenthood.

While these findings have significant implications for the interplay between institutional- and individual-level processes of inequality production, how other social contextual factors come into play in these processes has been underexamined. This study considers the role of militarization of culture, which interviewees repeatedly emphasized to have observed and

experienced within the workplace. Women in this study typically joined conglomerates in their early 20s, and resigned within four years of employment, well before they reached their 30s, the prime age for marriage or childbirth. As I shall explore in this thesis, women's overlapping narrative is that their experience as a young, female, entry-level employee in the militarized workplace alone provided sufficient reasons to leave their privileged occupations.

### **1.3.2 Early Resignation Among Youths in Korea**

Over the past 10 years or so, the growing visibility of the trend of early resignation in Korea has attracted much attention from both academic research and popular media. In this section, I explore the shift in analytic approaches in the studies on youth and early resignation in Korea.

When resignation among youth, particularly early resignation, initially surfaced as a social phenomenon and topic of academic inquiry, scholars studying Korea tended to approach it as a 'problem' accompanied by significant social and economic costs at organizational and national levels, often caused by malfunctioning or unfit individuals (Y. M. Lee and Lim 2010; Park 2012) This is based on the idea that early turnover of the youth workforce is closely related to the youth unemployment rate. These studies commonly address the lost costs associated with the government's endeavor to resolve youth unemployment, and with the organization's investment in employee education and training to facilitate their adaptation to the organization. Some scholars argued that, at the individual level, early resignation leads to negative outcomes in one's systematic career path. Park (2012), for instance, attributed the phenomenon to failed 'organizational socialization' (Feldman 1981) of individual employees. All told, early studies overlooked the structural qualities possibly involved with the phenomenon or alternative

perspectives on interpreting the individuals' choice to resign. Another important commonality is that resignation is understood solely as turnover; other trajectories, such as going back to school or opting out of the labor market, are not considered.

Noting this gap, more recent studies have analyzed the choice of voluntary resignation as an individualized strategy in the neoliberal work context. In this context, resignation can be a well-informed act of resistance to the contemporary neoliberal ideology (Y. rong Lee 2013; Yi and Sim 2016; C. Kim and Oh 2017). Far from problematizing the individuals' poor ability to internalize workplace norms, Yi and Sim (2016) view resignation as a “normally occurring life event” and a “strategy one adopts to improve life satisfaction” (331). Y. rong Lee (2013) argues that the severance between work and life created by neoliberalism shapes the decision to resign for the new generation, to whom workplace is a temporary “station” where they create “escape plans” for a life they genuinely pursue (8).

This shift in academic perspective to understanding early resignation goes hand in hand with a popular discourse. A newly emerging public discourse has challenged the long-held idea that career discontinuity is negative to the well-being of individuals and society. The discourse of a “healthy resignation<sup>1</sup>,” according to which resignation is a step towards a more authentic and fulfilling life. The publication of numerous non-academic books on how to prepare for a successful resignation is evidence of this.

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with *Hankyoreh* news, Suhan Jang, the CEO of *Toisahakgyo* (‘Resignation School’ in English), an off-line lecture platform, mentioned that “healthy resignation” should be encouraged in society. He noted that companies should no longer deny or hide the increasing number of resignations, and instead create programs to support employees who consider resignation. *Hankyoreh* news. [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society\\_general/747347.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/747347.html) (Published in June 8, 2016. Accessed February 19, 2018.)

The ‘healthy resignation’ discourse, in turn, is based on an older discourse known as *Hell Joseon*. *Hell Joseon*, a combination of the English word ‘hell,’ and ‘Joseon,’ the old name for Korea, quickly began to circulate widely on-line and off-line among the younger generation. It expresses the desperation and anger of the younger generation who perceive their country of birth as an unlivable ‘hell’ (W. Lee 2016, 109–10). Contemporary youth, burdened by neoliberal norms of ‘self-development’ (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009) are pressured into entering an endless competition for goals prescribed by society, such as obtaining an elite university degree, a permanent conglomerate job, and marrying a respectable partner in a timely manner. In other words, they are societally pressured to stay on the so-called “right track,” which, in fact, is systematically designed to accommodate a select few. It is against this backdrop that resignation is reinterpreted as a step one can take to exit the competition and follow what one truly wants for the first time in her or his life.

The abovementioned previous studies on early resignation, however, fail to take into account the role of gendered structures of organizations. In 2015, the sex ratio of male to female employees in top 30 conglomerate firms in Korea was 81 to 19, with those in the automobile and heavy industries being as skewed as 95 to 5 (Incrut 2016). Despite such gender imbalance in representation, due to the lack of a gender approach as well as definitive data on the gender differences in resignation rate, no studies to date have directly addressed the gendered dimensions of early resignation. As a result, we do not know how women’s experience of and perspective on resignation may differ from those of men. In my pursuit of addressing this issue, I argue that it is critical we bring in one historical clue that is missing in literature yet of paramount importance: militarism. In the next section, I trace the origins of militarism in Korea

and its legacies today, and why this concept is compelling when understanding contemporary Korean culture and society, including the workplace.

### **1.3.3 Militarism and the Workplace in Korea**

Korea's compressed development cannot be understood without considering the two military regimes that mobilized state-led economic development from 1963 to 1988. During this time of what Moon (2005a) terms "militarized modernity," citizens were mass mobilized as dutiful nationals devoted to the nation's economic growth and strong military, though in gendered ways. Men's citizenship was defined by their economic and military mobilization. The state established military service a national duty of all able-bodied men, and provided men with various vocational training to fill the heavy and chemical industries, establishing their status as breadwinners and responsible citizens in the modernizing state (Moon 2005a, 55–64). In contrast, women were incorporated into the nation as domestic reproducers and marginalized producers. They were monitored by the state to become mothers and wives, which relegated them to a lower social class financially and symbolically subordinate to men (68–92).

The institution of universal male conscription, which continues to date since its implementation in 1957, has far-reaching implications for masculinity and male socialization. In Korea, military service is a rite of passage for men—a commonplace expression in popular discourse, 'One becomes a real man after serving in the military,' indicates the inseparable relationship between soldiering and manhood. Solely united based on their sex, male conscripts undergo a shared experience of bonding and solidarity in the organization governed by hegemonic masculinity and marked by collective orientation (Kwon-Kim 2004; Moon 2005b). Hegemonic masculinity in the military requires constant denial of femininity and homosexuality,

and confirmation of sexual dominance and sexual urges through peer approval (Enloe 1983, 2007; Kwon 2013; Moon 2005a).

The labor market is one of the social spheres strongly affected by the gender hierarchy established during the height of militarization. One definitive evidence of the institutionalized returns to military service in the labor market is the Military Service Incentive System. In order to compensate for the male conscripts' lost time and potential economic gains, the state has employed the Military Service Incentive System, within which the awarding of extra points to discharged men taking civil service examination is one of the most well-known mechanisms. While the system was eventually ruled unconstitutional in 1999 on the grounds that it is a form of discrimination of women who are excluded from conscription, military service remains a key qualification in the job market in Korea today. Most employers require job applicants to provide their information on military service in the online application forms and CVs, and consider it a prerequisite for male job-seekers (Eom 2009).

More broadly, the labor market structure is rooted in the gendered citizenships consisting of men as breadwinning heads of the household and *protectors* of the nation, and women as homemakers, caretakers, and *objects* of protection (Moon 2005b). Within this larger landscape, women's increased participation in higher education has not been fully converted into labor force participation, as it has for men (Brinton and Lee 2001). One example is the popularization of the Marriage Retirement System, which refers to the workplace custom that forces a woman to resign upon marriage. While this custom was made illegal in 1987, patterns of women's withdrawal from paid economy for familial reasons still remain. The M-shaped curve, which indicates interruptions of women's labor market participation because of marriage, childbearing and child rearing (Song 2016), continues to characterize the labor market in Korea, along with

Japan. Such patterns of women's career interruption have sustained the overrepresentation of male workers in the workplace.

Taking into account that employers' discriminatory decisions favoring male workers are more likely to prevail in large, established organizations protected from market competition (Y.-M. Kim 2017), it is expected that conglomerates have substantial gender discriminatory practices and customs. *Chaebols*, large business conglomerates in Korea, have semi-monopolistic power on the national economy as well as significant influence on politics (Janelli and Im 1993; Steers, Sin, and Ungson 1989). The findings in this study, which demonstrate what militarization looks like inside the office, will explicate how this expectation holds true.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

This study is based on 30 in-depth interviews conducted in 2018. Participants are 22 women and 8 men, who ranged in age from 24 to 36 (mean=29). All but one woman and one man had resigned within 4 years (48 months) of employment from full-time office jobs at conglomerate firms in Korea (mean=32, median=31.5, mode=24). Because a research aim was to identify the reasons why young, childless women quit their jobs shortly after they begin their career, my standard for the number of interviewees was to recruit until I reached saturation. I purposefully recruited men in order to compare their work experience with women's, identify any issues pronounced or only found among women (or men), and obtain their insights about the parallels between conglomerates and the military. I used snowball sampling to recruit participants, beginning with four women with whom I had personal ties. Prior to meeting, the participants were provided with the Consent Form (see Appendix B) and the Letter of Initial

Contact (see Appendix C) to ensure that they are making an informed choice about taking part in the study.

Interviews were conducted in Korean and lasted from one hour to two hours, averaging about 90 minutes each. All interviews were semi-structured in format and carried out with a focused yet flexible interview guide consisting of 27 questions (see Appendix A for a full list of interview questions). I prepared broad, open-ended questions aimed to elicit personal stories, feelings, and insights about their work experience and probed whenever deemed necessary. Topics covered by questions are divided into four categories: (1) work expectations and aspirations; (2) perceptions of work tasks, workplace relationships, and organizational culture; (3) reasons, motivations, and considerations for resignation; and (4) choice of planned career upon resignation and definitions of good work and good life. I later translated selected parts of the transcripts into English for coding.

The 30 participants worked in 17 different companies across 7 industries: manufacturing, distribution, finance, logistics, Information Technology (IT) services, trading, and the service industry. Most of these establishments are affiliated with the country's top *chaebol* business groups. All participants had at least a bachelor's degree from a 4-year university, most of which are top-tier Korean universities. 7 women and 1 man had a postgraduate degree at the time of the interview, which they earned prior to, during, and after employment. All 8 male respondents had served in the military, as one of the following: army, public service worker, skilled industrial personnel, and ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps). I used pseudonyms for all respondents to protect confidentiality. Their profiles are detailed in Table 1.1 below.

I conducted inductive analysis from multiple readings of the transcripts to find common themes and narratives. For coding procedures, I used NVivo, a software package for qualitative

analysis. In the first cycle of coding, I used initial coding and In Vivo coding (Saldaña 2009) to organize the data in accordance with the abovementioned four topics, honoring the voice of respondents. Upon identifying multiple overlapping narratives, I conducted a second cycle of coding using focused coding methods (Charmaz 2006). I synthesized key emerging themes, including respondents' description and perception of organizational culture and behavior, which I then used to establish the framework of the militarized workplace.

**Table 1.1 Profile of Respondents**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Name (F/M)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Job</b>	<b>Employment Period (Months)</b>	<b>Marital Status &amp; Children</b>	<b>Educational Qualification</b>
1	Taehee(F)	26	Manufacturing	HR & Market Development	39	Married No children	Graduate
2	Heejin(F)	26	Manufacturing	Brand Management	23	Single	Graduate
3	Jina(F)	30	Manufacturing	Environment Development	37	Single	Graduate
4	Dora(F)	35	Manufacturing	Home Shopping Management	40	Single	Postgraduate (MA)
5	Minjung(F)	29	Trading	Trade	40	Single	Postgraduate (MA)
6	Yoojin(F)	25	Manufacturing	Sales	14	Single	Graduate
7	Yubin(F)	30	Manufacturing	Marketing	54	Single	Graduate
8	Seul(F)	36	Distribution	Sales Management & Project	24	Married No children	Postgraduate (MA)
9	Suyoung(F)	31	Manufacturing	Marketing	44	Single	Graduate
10	Gaya(F)	26	Finance	Product Development	24	Single	Graduate
11	Nayeon(F)	32	Distribution	Marketing	37	Married 1 child	Postgraduate (MA)
12	Taerin(F)	26	Manufacturing	Research	30	Single	Graduate
13	Yeji(F)	30	Logistics	Customer Service	42	Married No children	Graduate
14	Seoeun(F)	28	Manufacturing	Sales	44	Single	Graduate
15	Yeonhee(F)	30	IT Services	Sales Assistance	38	Single	Graduate

No.	Name (F/M)	Age	Industry	Job	Employment Period (Months)	Marital Status & Children	Educational Qualification
16	Heesun(F)	28	Manufacturing	Overseas Sales	21	Single	Graduate
17	Sana(F)	29	IT Services	Sales Assistance	39	Single	Graduate
18	Youngji(F)	32	IT Services	Marketing	48	Single	Postgraduate (MA)
19	Seongmin(F)	24	Distribution	Sales Management	14	Single	Graduate
20	Hyerim(F)	27	Service	Design	32	Single	Graduate
21	Hana(F)	30	Manufacturing	Sales	31	Married No children	Postgraduate (MA)
22	Dawon(F)	31	Finance	Customer Service	24	Single	Postgraduate (MA)
23	Byungmin(M)	26	Manufacturing	Safety Management	13	Single	Graduate
24	Jonghyun(M)	31	Distribution	Sales Management	48	Married 1 child	Graduate
25	Junmin(M)	29	Manufacturing	Inspection Management	7	Single	Graduate
26	Chanhoon(M)	30	Trading	Strategic Planning	20	Single	Postgraduate (MA)
27	Minho(M)	32	IT Services	System Management	72	Married 1 child	Graduate
28	Sunwook(M)	29	Distribution	Sales Management	26	Single	Graduate
29	Wonsuk(M)	27	Finance	Business Services	8	Single	Graduate
30	Inhwan(M)	28	Manufacturing	Sales	27	Single	Graduate

## **Chapter 2: Women in the Militarized Workplace**

The present chapter explores the central question of this study, “why do young, childless Korean women employed full-time at conglomerate firms resign early, despite significant occupational privileges and lack of family responsibilities?” The analysis of why women reached the decision to resign revealed that they experienced a sharp mismatch between their work expectations and the workplace culture, which they described as *militarized*. Respondents’ descriptions of the militarized workplace culture in relation to why they resigned converged into three main themes: rigid hierarchies, male-exclusive informal networking, and norms of overwork and full availability. Before unpacking each of these aspects, I first briefly discuss why women aspired to conglomerate jobs and what they initially expected about their life in the organization.

As this study focuses on identifying the workings of gendered norms and practices of the organization as experienced by female workers, I primarily draw upon women’s narratives and, to a lesser extent, those of men, for analytic and comparative purposes.

### **2.1 Women’s Expectations and Aspirations about Work**

#### **2.1.1 “It’s everyone’s dream”: Motivation to Apply to Conglomerates**

When asked how many and what kind of companies they applied to at the time of job search, almost all respondents replied that they submitted more than 20 applications, exclusively to conglomerate firms. A common rationale behind their wish for a conglomerate job was that it was highly respected in society and many of their peers were competing for it. As Yeonhee, 30-years-old, explained, “Most students in their final year want to get a conglomerate job. It’s everyone’s dream ... You get a lot of money and a business card that’s not embarrassing.” Seoul,

36-years-old, echoed the significance of social privilege the job provides: “It is the way to be properly recognized by society and treated with respect.”

These responses indicate that respondents were subject to the influence of socially dominant ideas about conglomerate jobs. These jobs promised high salary and high public status, two things largely considered as instrumental to leading a ‘successful’ life. As Taehee, 26-years-old, described, a conglomerate job is “the highest-level” and “the best value” job one can achieve with a bachelor’s degree, second to professional jobs such as doctors and lawyers which require additional years of training. Many respondents noted that their successful employment at a conglomerate was their parents’ pride and joy, who shared the news widely with acquaintances. Women in the sample had been well-educated during their life course and graduated from prestigious universities in the country with strong academic records. As such, working at reputable firms matched their expectations of a new status in the adult social life commensurate with their educational achievement and parental expectations. This point is illustrated by Gaya, 26-years-old:

When we make college applications, we choose our majors not based on what we want to study but based on our scores and what major they match with. It is the same with job applications. We follow the ranking of firms. We think that going to a firm that is famous and well-known is good. So I, too, wanted to go to a firm that, when I say that I work here, people say *wow, what a great achievement!* ... I didn’t know what I really wanted to do; I just followed what everyone else was doing.

Given such ranking of firms, as mentioned by Gaya, securing employment at a conglomerate was a sign of victory in the competitive job market and thus a source of pride for my respondents. All respondents replied that, at the time of their acceptance, they were elated as it was a desired outcome. However, as their goal was to get any job as long as it belonged to a conglomerate, none of them were able to provide reasons for why they sought employment at the specific firm they had worked for. One was lucky to get accepted to just one conglomerate firm—most respondents had no choice but to work for the firm as it was the only one that did not reject them. For a few respondents who had more than one option among conglomerate firms, comparisons of the salary and brand awareness of the firms guided their decision. It was natural, therefore, that they did not have any concrete expectations about what their work lives would look like within the specific firm. In fact, women's responses revolved around a strikingly consistent, highly popular, and idealized image of working in these firms: enjoying a cup of coffee while walking on the streets in the heart of downtown Seoul during lunch breaks, with their proud employee ID cards hung around their necks. Such monolithic description, again, points to the idea that the respondents' desire for a conglomerate job was largely driven and informed by how the job is viewed from the outside, rather than what living a life as an employee of the firm may look like in the inside.

### **2.1.2 “I’d bury my bones in this company”: Initial Aspirations about Work**

Given that the road to securing a conglomerate job was an extremely competitive and arduous one, women's initial plans at the beginning of their career were to stay as long as they can and climb the corporate ladder as high as they can. While they were well aware of the lack of representation of women in the organization, especially at the managerial level, women in my

sample were confident that they could break the glass ceiling. Taehee, a 26-year-old who got a job at a large manufacturing company as soon as she graduated from university, was one of the many women who expressed such optimism:

My basic attitude in life is that I want to excel wherever I am. So when I heard that this company was expanding into the Chinese market, I set my goal as becoming the director of the Chinese branch in the next 10 years. I wanted to become the first female CEO of the company as well.

Seul, a 36-year-old who got into the nation's top distribution company after obtaining her master's degree, echoed this sense of ambition:

When I started my career, I thought I'd bury my bones in this company, *when I didn't know anything about the company that is*. I wanted to become a board member at least, if not CEO, and I was so certain I could do that. [emphasis added]

Like Seul, many women hinted that, in retrospect, their initial goals at the company were unrealistic. When asked what kind of future they had in mind in the conglomerate, they responded they wanted to demonstrate agency, discretion and competence, develop knowledge and skills in the industry and become well-respected members of the organization. Such aspirations, as we shall see, are challenged by the workplace culture that my respondents found impervious to change. Throughout the following sections in this chapter, I delineate the features of the workplace culture and how they ultimately made women feel that their aspirations and ambitions were unlikely to be materialized.

## **2.2 Rigid Hierarchies**

In the present section, I provide a descriptive portrait of rigid hierarchies, one of the key components of the militarized workplace that critically informed women's decision to resign from conglomerates. The strict hierarchical culture comparable to that of the military overwhelmed my respondents' aspirations and ambitions soon after they began their career. As I shall demonstrate, rigid hierarchies are central to the production and reproduction of gendered workplaces. Male conscription provides a highly intensive and immersive military experience for males, who are discharged as individuals seasoned in understanding and navigating the organization marked by strict hierarchies. Men's experience in the military translates well into their experience in the workplace—they are aware of what to expect and what is expected of them in the workplace and thus perform accordingly. Women's lack of military experience meant that it was more difficult for them to navigate the workplace so heavily influenced by the military.

### **2.2.1 New Employee Training: A “Boot Camp” Introduction to the Workplace**

For many of my respondents, positive expectations about their future in the organization diminished upon the beginning of the training camp for new employees. All respondents except Heejin, who worked at a Korean branch of a foreign-owned transnational business conglomerate, were required to attend weeks of training camp before being assigned to respective departments. The training program followed a hectic schedule consisting of lectures, workshops, and group and physical activities. During lectures and workshops, new employees were surrounded by either patrolling senior employees or surveillance cameras. They were not allowed to consume

alcohol inside the training institute or to leave the area without permission from managerial staff. As many respondents noted, the training camp was an entrée into the militarized workplace.

### **2.2.1.1 Indoctrinating Minds with Motivation: Lectures, Workshops and Exams**

When asked what they learned from the lectures and workshops in the training camp, respondents answered that they learned some basic knowledge in finance or useful tips about business manners, such as how to exchange greetings and name cards. While they found these sessions to be practical, respondents unanimously pointed out that the main purpose of the program was ‘resocialization’ through ‘confinement’—to instill company values and ideologies into the minds of fresh college graduates and transform their identities as single-minded and devoted employees in a short period of time.

One of the most frequently mentioned themes was the indoctrination of company values through lectures about the history of the conglomerate group, the firm, or the founder. Respondents said that the purpose of the history lectures was intended to “brainwash” new recruits into believing in the greatness of the company and thus feeling proud of themselves for being a part of the organization. Youngji, 32-years-old, among many others, explained how the founder was idealized in the lectures:

We had to memorize all sorts of things—the year the founder was born, the year he did what, and when his company did what ... so that we can make a legend. We had to mythify the founder so that we could all endeavor to become someone like him.

In several cases, respondents noted that such information had to be memorized as they were regularly tested, and failing to pass the test would affect their evaluations and even be notified to the head office. This led to a highly competitive environment among the new employees. A few respondents added that some of their roommates secretly turned their flashlights on in order to memorize for the exam late at night, after all lights have been put out.

### **2.2.1.2 Internalizing Corporate Ideals: Group and Physical Activities**

The employees also participated in group-based physical activities, both indoor and outdoor, such as chanting, singing and dancing, and practicing for performances such as plays and musicals, with the slogans and lyrics parroting the company's core values or vision.

As with the case of exams as previously discussed, several respondents said they often stayed up all night for the practice as the performance was graded on a curve and influenced their individual evaluation and placement. For instance, Sunwook, a 29-year-old male, who worked in the distribution industry, explained that obtaining low marks at the evaluations was associated with the odds of being appointed at relatively smaller branches in the outskirts of Seoul or cities in other provinces. The hopes to work in key branches in the central districts of the capital city motivated him and his peers to perfect their moves.

While few believed that such approach was justifiable for effective control of a large population, most respondents expressed strong feelings of hostility and resentment. One of these was Yubin, 30-years-old, who believes that the intense practice of the company's dance routines was mentally damaging for employees: "The activities forced on us was really humiliating and worked in ways that sacrificed our dignity. We had to do them without knowing what they were for ... It was a traumatic experience for me." Seongmin, 24-years-old, showed similar sentiments

when she said, “I think that the company’s core values or culture should be internalized through experience and sharing them over time, not through indoctrination. But they were forcing them upon us, which just grew my animosity towards them.”

Some group activities were particularly physically demanding, which many identified as “military boot camps.” These intense physical activities include hiking all day, treasure hunting in the mountains, marching tens of kilometers without sleep, as well as group punishment such as running tracks at dawn and squat walks in the stadium. When asked why they think such exercises are programmed into the training camp, women commonly speculated that they are influential methods for the company to discipline the bodies and eventually the minds of the new recruits. As Youngji illustrates, “Fragile bodies are easy to break in; mind training is easier. It’s easier to infiltrate into those bodies, so to speak.”

Male respondents said in unison that it was as though they were “reenlisted” in the military. The abovementioned Sunwook had worked for one of the country’s largest conglomerates in the distribution industry after serving in the army during his undergraduate years. He recalled the time in military service during his all-day treasure-hunting hike in the mountains: “...[W]e had packed lunches and late-night snacks outdoors, in the mountains. It was the coldest time of the year. It reminded me of my time in the military; I used to do the same thing there.” Minho, 32-years-old, added, “It was officially called ‘teamwork,’ but really it was to brainwash us and make us obedient. It’s exactly the same in the military. In the recruit training camp, they keep you busy with all sorts of physical activities. You’re stunned. I still wonder, is that what they’re aiming at?”

Through mechanisms of indoctrination, discipline, and group punishment of the training program, respondents said they learned the unequal power relationship within the organization

between the high-ranking figures and themselves as entry-level employees. Strongly impacted by their experiences at the training camp, respondents continued to emphasize the similarities between the workplace and the military, often using the term *gundaemunhwa*—military culture—to describe the organizational culture. Throughout this thesis, I engage with this concept of the militarization of the workplace to illuminate the characteristics of the conglomerate work environment. As we shall see, the operating mechanisms in the military such as command and obedience, individual sacrifice for the group, and tough masculinity are upheld as effective ways of management in the workplace. These sets of ideas are employed to make decisions, manage and assess employees, and eventually saturate organizational behavior with military discipline. In the following discussion, I show how these organizational dynamics are gendered and create systematically disadvantageous situations for women workers and inform their decision to resign.

## **2.2.2 Absolute Obedience: Talking and Acting Like Soldiers in the Office**

### **2.2.2.1 Obedience as the Highest Virtue of the Ideal Worker**

Respondents frequently used expressions such as “expendable,” “accessory,” or “cogwheel of a machine,” to describe how they were viewed and treated in the conglomerate workplace. The work culture characterized by a strict order of ranks, associated with the lack of authority or discretion for low-ranking employees, was one of the biggest challenges faced by women. Compared with their expectations of taking initiative and developing capacities, in reality, they were expected to demonstrate their competence within the boundaries of completing tasks assigned from superiors. Respondents reported difficulty navigating such expectations, and their narratives converged into the following three themes.

First, women commonly noted that they were neither given systematic training in how to perform their work nor adequate information on the objectives of the specific tasks to which they were assigned. Several respondents cited the expression, “This is a workplace, not a school,” which they were told by superiors when they asked questions. Due to such an atmosphere that compelled new recruits to find answers on their own, women had to work while being unaware of what it was for or what they were expected to achieve. As a result, many were unmotivated and felt as though their time and effort were futile. Taerin, 26-years-old, was going through such feelings during the time she worked at a research institute within a manufacturing company. Uninformed of why her tasks were necessary or how valuable or applicable her outcome was, she felt her work was meaningless:

Once a week, the director, my boss, gave me the recording file of what the honorary president had said. I transcribed it. Then we had a meeting based on the transcript. In order to write the report, we had to analyze the honorary president’s speech word by word and had to use the words that he had used. I was never taught how to write an official report. If I didn’t use a certain word in the transcript, I was told that my thinking was not deep enough ... I had to get inside his brain and infer what he would have meant when he said this and that ... I didn’t feel that there was a vision in what I was doing, I couldn’t see my future ... I felt so useless.

Second, all respondents indicated that the company categorically squelched opinions of low-tier employees. The communication and decision-making process in the workplace was “vertical,” as many pointed out, in which rank- and age-based organizational norms determined whose ideas would be listened to and eventually adopted. As Heejin, 26-years-old, described,

“They silence issue raising ... It’s as if they took away my voice. They pose the frame that I am an incompetent, inexperienced junior ... Ways to offer opinions were closed off.” Taehee, 26-years-old, also illustrated the difficulty of voicing her ideas and opinions in the workplace: “When I expressed my thoughts, they would say I’m ill-mannered, tactless, and rude. I lived jettisoning my brain.” Minjung, 29-years-old, echoed feelings of frustration and disappointment: “The safest option was to do as I was told, without thinking ... I believe I became more stupid after three years of working there.” While Minjung’s expression may sound extreme, it allows us to understand the magnitude of the normative idea that superiors’ commands must be accepted by subordinates without question. Other narratives indicated that, even when they were asked to offer ideas, none of them were actually considered or adopted at the upper-level, leaving them with feelings of emptiness and skepticism. A few respondents who have actually presented their ideas for a new business item or plan to their superiors said that after finding them “disappear from above,” they eventually gave up.

The third common issue raised by respondents was the unsatisfactory level of discretion allowed to employees, especially those in the bottom of the organizational hierarchy. As they were expected to follow orders from above, they were provided with prescribed levels of authority and latitude. The lack of flexibility, especially with chronic overloads and time strains, combined with the nature of their jobs being non-professional, made them feel like components that could be readily replaced. As Heesun, 28-years-old, described: “Time and again, I felt like an expendable. *There is always someone else to fill your position—take it or leave it.* I felt constantly pressured to make this choice.” Many other respondents, both female and male, offered similar narratives of what it felt like to have little control over what they could do or

achieve in the workplace. They commonly indicated that their work performance was evaluated primarily based on how quickly and compliantly they followed orders from superiors.

Some companies, including Nayeon's and Sunwook's, offered higher starting salaries for male employees as military service was recognized as work experience, while having a postgraduate degree had no impact. When asked why they think companies do this, respondents noted that businesses adopt the operation mechanism from the military, and as such, consider the familiarity with the military organization as a valuable work-related skill. Central to this skill was the ability to follow orders as one would do in the army, says Sunwook, who believes that the ideal worker in the employer's eyes is an "obedient male who does whatever he is told without grumbling." Similarly, many noted that obedience is the highest virtue in the workplace, or that it is a more valuable capability than competence.

#### **2.2.2.2 Danaka: Employees Talking Like Soldiers**

One unambiguous clue that indicates the militarized ways of communication in the conglomerates is the use of *danaka*<sup>2</sup>, a specific way of speaking used in the military. A considerable number of my respondents, both male and female, reported either having to or feeling encouraged to talk like soldiers in the office. One example is Minjung, who explained that her superiors demanded that she talk in this particular way in the office:

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<sup>2</sup> *Danaka* is an unofficial term used by the public that refers to a way of speaking used in the military that ends with *-da*, *-na*, and *-ka*. Subordinates must end their responses with *-da*, ask questions with *-ka*, while superiors command using *-na* at the end of their statement.

The company strongly urged military way of talking—*danaka*. When I didn't use it, they said, 'Am I your friend?' I think they wanted to apply the military culture to the company. They would often tell me to "go to the army." I think that's what they wanted from me, to do as they say right away, without talking back.

Unsurprisingly, male respondents said that their fluency in *danaka* which they attained while serving in the military worked to their advantage in the workplace. In most cases, it was the high-ranking male figures in their mid 40s and 50s who particularly preferred young employees who used *danaka* over those who end their sentences with 'yo,' a polite figure of speech with a less formal tone. One respondent, Sunwook, noted that some of his supervisors even reproached low-level employees for not using the *danaka* language properly.

Jonghyun, 31-years-old, is a male respondent who served as a ROTC officer during and after his undergraduate years before he started working at a conglomerate in the distribution industry. He said that he has been using *danaka* for years prior to employment and thus it was natural for him to continue doing so in the company. He explained why he believes the military way of talking is replicated in business organizations:

*Danaka* is used in the military because it's good for clear communication. The purpose of the army is to win wars, right? You need precise communication and expressions for that. The ending of the word [-*da*, -*na*, -*ka*] connotes a vertical relationship, unlike 'yo,' which connotes a horizontal relationship. In order to command your subordinate to fire a gun at the enemy, you will need to have established a vertical relationship. That kind of culture is what you need in the organization between superiors and subordinates, that's why they use *danaka* I think. That kind of 'do-as-I-say' culture is considered efficient and has been critical to quantitative growth back then.

### **2.2.3 Susceptibility to Abuse**

In a work culture in which strong hierarchy normalizes unconditional obedience to authorities, lower-ranking employees are valued less not only as workers but also as people. Women and men in the sample reported that they were vulnerable to power-based harassment and violence. Many respondents revealed they were exposed to daily verbal, emotional and often physical abuse perpetrated by upper-ranking figures, mostly in situations in which their job performance or behavior did not meet expectations.

Male respondents noted the prevalence of such violence by male superiors, such as swearing, calling them “stupid” and “useless,” as well as throwing things and grabbing them by the collar. Female respondents were not immune. For example, Dawon recalled being routinely pinched by her superior for not typing fast enough, then being grabbed by her neck and dragged into a room for discussing the issue with others. Seo Eun was yelled at, told she was fired, and severely pinched in the cheek by the drunk CEO for hesitating to sing for him when he asked her to. In both cases, the “traumatizing” experience of public humiliation and violence, as Seo Eun put it, negatively influenced their job performance and mental well-being.

Respondents noted, however, that such aggressive language and behavior were not considered problematic as it was virtually impossible to question upper-ranking figures and their behaviors. More importantly, the ability to use coercive language was considered a normal communication method and what defined competence in the workplace. As Seul explained, “The company wanted employees to browbeat and create fear so that people will listen. One who is able to yell, threaten and insult is a competent worker. That was the organizational culture.” The preference of a domineering attitude over respectful manners and reasoned persuasion signifies the normalization of militarized forms of communication and the magnitude of masculinization

of the organizational culture. Many male interviewees mentioned that military service provided them with the necessary experience and tools to navigate the workplace, including the ability to withstand unjust and violent treatment. As Minho explained:

As us men [who are discharged] always say, we've been to the army, we've experienced nonsense to the extreme. And we survived. This is nothing!

### **2.3 Male-exclusive Informal Networking**

Informal networking activities are known as significant social resources that help members acquire and exchange information and services, build alliances, and gain power and reputation (Kanter 1977; Ibarra 1992). However, these seemingly innocuous interactions are gendered, producing and reinforcing gender inequality in the workplace (Brass 1985; McGuire 2002). Data from this study support these findings. Women not only perceived such activities as essential to claiming membership in the organization, but also acknowledged the difficulty for women to participate in them. I identified three categories of informal network mechanisms that markedly correspond with performing masculinity in Korea: drinking, smoking, and buying sex.

#### **2.3.1 Drinking: The Informal Hub of Workplace Politics**

Also known as “extension of work,” dining and drinking together plays a pivotal role in workplace socialization in Korea (Çakar and Kim 2016). All respondents had frequently participated in after-work drinks, ranging from once a month to everyday. Within an authoritarian environment where unconditional obedience is expected of subordinates, refusing to participate in such authority-sanctioned, group-based activities is considered unacceptable.

Beyond well-known ideas of socializing, building relationships and exchanging information, drinking served other purposes that were less explicit.

Alcohol allowed superiors to test the subordinates' willpower through pushing their limits of drinking capacities which are believed to correspond with their level of obedience and loyalty. As such, drinking was often prolonged and heavy to the extent that it was nearly torture for many respondents. The tolerance of physical pain is considered one of the virtues soldiers must demonstrate, and is thus part of the military program. Similarly, superiors put subordinates in extreme situations to break them into obedient followers of their commands, and to try their abilities to stay sober despite a heavy dose of drinking. As Minho, a male respondent, noted, the "sadistic" acts—whereby a superior "enjoys a feeling of satisfaction from wielding the power to make the other suffer"—were reminders for low-ranking employees that they were in powerless positions in relation to higher-ranking figures. Fully intoxicated, young women and men were forced to stay as late as midnight or dawn, often drinking lighter types of alcohol to "sober up" before going home. In almost all cases, the meeting was dissolved when the most powerful member decided to go home. The coercive atmosphere created by superiors compelled them to hide their actual physical conditions and feelings, and instead flaunt their drinking capacities. Minjung explained why she performed as though she enjoyed drinking:

*Don't bend-drink<sup>3</sup> ... He's giving you the glass, and you're not finishing it? The atmosphere is that you are complimented on how well you drink. If you're not good at it, you're bad at social life. If*

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<sup>3</sup> The expression 'bend-drink' is my translation. The original Korean expression is *kkeokeo mashida*, a combination of 'kkeokda' (to bend or break into pieces) and 'mashida' (to

you gain a reputation as someone bad at social life, then you become the weak. And when you become the weak, you are more prone to bullying. To pretend I wasn't weak, I said, 'Ah! Good!' I knew that, if I didn't drink, I would get into a more difficult position. I drank thinking it was work. Drinking was part of my salary.

Sunwook is another respondent who could not escape compulsory drinking despite serious physical pain. He said:

We did rounds<sup>4</sup> of drinking, ended up drinking 2 bottles of *soju* per person. I couldn't say 'No,' so I drank, puked in the bathroom, got back, drank, puked, again and again ... I couldn't refuse because I was only a lowly staff.

While both male and female respondents expressed substantial dissatisfaction over drinking, some of its ill effects were more clearly gendered. Drinking served to strengthen male bonds while excluding female members. Taehee, among all female respondents, explained the significance of attending after-work drinks and how she was precluded from further participation because of the "entertainment" drinking customs that were only allowed to men. As a result, she was unable to receive feedback on her job performance which exclusively happened within the drinking context.

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drink), which refers to finishing a glass of alcohol in multiple intervals as opposed to drinking the entire glass in one shot.

<sup>4</sup> 'Rounds' of drinking is my translation. The original expression, 'dolida,' means rotating or swinging. Rounds of drinking involve each person drinking one shot of glass (usually *soju* or mixed with beer) with each of the remaining members present at the table, forcing everyone to drink as many shots as the number of people.

In the second or third rounds [of drinking], there is a high possibility that men will go to places where they request female entertainers ... But the thing is that the seniors give feedback about your job performance *there* ... I did not receive any feedback before getting my evaluation results. Meanwhile, all my male colleagues received feedback from the team head while drinking with him.

Eventually, Taehee requested transferring to her previous team where “there was no career vision but at least women were the majority.” When asked why she left, she replied it was the discrimination of women in terms of exclusion from informal activities, which left her no choice but to ask her male colleagues about what the head discussed over her job performance. Accumulated feelings of disappointment, hopelessness, coupled with the humiliation of having to receive feedback through her male colleagues pushed Taehee to make the decision to leave the team after four short months.

### **2.3.2 Smoking: When Men Get Their Work Done**

Smoking was another important gendered networking activity noted by respondents. They unanimously said that it was a common behavior almost exclusively among men, who, several times a day, would leave the office to smoke in groups. Through smoking, men were not only able to do verbal reports to superiors, but also exchange information not readily available in the office, such as unannounced decisions and classified business information shared among high executives. They also used smoking time to forge intimate, private relationships with fellow smokers, especially powerful members. The significance of benefits of smoking is evidenced by

a few male respondents who, although being non-smokers, went after smokers to stand next to them, usually with a cup of coffee in their hands. Sunwook illustrates this point:

I'm a non-smoker, but I still went [to the smoking lounge]. It's the same in the military; non-smokers join the smokers to exchange information, things like there's a drill next week. In the workplace, they exchange important information ... It makes your life easier at work ... To listen, I would grab a drink or look at my phone ... My habits in the military made me go there.

Such advantages, however, were only experienced by male interviewees due to the double standard on smoking that negatively impacts the reputation of women who smoke. Because of the sexist attitudes that stigmatize female smokers as being vulgar (Nahm 2003; Woo 2018) prevalent in the office, women feared that disclosure of their smoker identity would hurt their reputation. Entering the company's smoking lounge or smoking in the vicinity of the office building was thus virtually off-limits to women.

Respondents noted that women hid their smoking habits either by completely refraining from smoking during work hours or walking to distant areas where nobody could identify them. As Yubin, one of the few female smokers in the sample, explained: "Nobody knew I was a smoker ... At the training camp, my cohort told me that it may be okay for me to smoke now, but it would be different in the workplace. When I went to the smoker's lounge [in the office], they were all men. For the first few days, I hoped to see some difference, but nothing changed. It was so cheap and dirty, I ended up not going." Women in the sample, although most are non-smokers, showed discontent over not being able to enjoy the perquisites that smoking offers. They were missing out on seemingly trivial yet profound opportunities to obtain organizational

resources: getting feedback on their work performance, acquiring up-to-date information about the company or industry, building relationships with high executives, and discussing the background details about the decisions they make.

### **2.3.3 Buying Sex: Where Men Learn Habits of Sexual Assault**

Along with smoking, purchase of sexual services as a recreational and business activity allowed men to establish male bonds beyond rank-based office relationships. Buying sex is illegal yet common in Korea—in 2016, 50.7% of men replied that they had paid for sex at least once in their lifetime (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2016). In Korea, a man is typically introduced to sexual services through the ritual of going to a brothel with his friends before joining the army, and the behavior continues during vacations in the army as well as after his discharge. Buying sex during casual team-based drinks or official business meetings is considered a part of social life of working men, accepted under the name of “reception.”

Indeed, in my interviews with 8 men, all were well aware of the prevalence of the practice in Korean businesses and 5 had participated at least once. While most men had approving views toward this behavior, all women regarded it as obnoxious and disgraceful. Like most of the women I interviewed, Seoeun expressed explicit disgust for men who buy sex. She said that her frequent observation of her many male colleagues paying for female entertainers and hostesses in karaoke rooms or room salons made her “lose trust in men and unable to date any men during the time working there.”

The majority of women also noted its ill effects by elaborating on how they believe it shaped men’s perception and treatment of female colleagues. As Jina, 30-years-old, illustrates:

At events where high-level executives attend, a few female employees are *extracted* and required to participate. One woman in my team was called to attend ... she felt she was there for entertaining them, laughing and singing for them ... When we really didn't want to go, we used to talk to each other, 'It's not like we're hostesses. Why don't they just go to those kinds of places and pay money to hire those women?'

The majority of women in the sample recalled being required to participate due to "extraction," as Jina called it, during team-based drinks or larger business-related occasions. It was based on an implicit seating plan that was usually facilitated by mid-ranking employees. Male respondents also replied they had frequently observed this arrangement.

Other women felt similar emotions of degradation caused by male behaviors that they believe stem from the habit of buying sex. For example, Gaya felt as though she was a gift between men when her boss told his colleague he could "take her away on his way home" and made jokes over her sexual harassment with other men. Similar narratives of many other women are accounts of how businessmen's group sexual activity sexualizes their female colleagues and marks their status as less worthy of respect. The association between these two seemingly independent activities are evidenced by what Minjung's boss told her when she was sexually assaulted by a business client— "His drinking habits are leaking!"

In sum, the two sides of relationship-building in the militarized workplace—rigid hierarchies in the official sector and male-exclusive network organizing in the unofficial sector—created systematically disadvantageous outcomes for women. Not only did they lack the experience to understand how the organization operates, they were barred from participating in activities that could help them minimize such disadvantage. For these women who had excelled

in school, had goals and ambitions for a successful career in the conglomerates, continuous devaluation of their worth and marginalization created feelings of frustration, humiliation, and disappointment. One common narrative shared across women is that maintaining good relationships, especially with powerful members, is more important than hard work or competency in creating favorable conditions for promotion.

## **2.4 Overwork and Its Gendered Outcomes on Young Women**

Another property of the militarized workplace in Korean conglomerates is overwork, a norm closely connected to the demand for employees' full commitment and unconditional loyalty. Korea is one of the longest working countries in the world. The compressed development that catapulted Korea into an industrial economy was possible due to the labor-intensive industry that fueled exports. *Chaebols* experienced rapid growth and established a dominant market power in the country, owing to the close ties with and substantial incentives from the government (Steers, Sin, and Ungson 1989). Their intensive growth was possible due to the long working hours of male employees who are dependent on their wives who shouldered homemaking and caregiving responsibilities. In return, these men were guaranteed job security and regular retirement, until the financial crisis in 1997. While Korea and its *chaebols* have accrued significant wealth and status, the expectation of full commitment from employees has not ceased.

### **2.4.1 Expanded Working Hours and Complete Availability**

All interviewees responded they were pressured to follow the unofficial yet binding working hours that frequently exceeded legal and company regulations. Such is documented in

other contexts, where employers equate commitment and productivity with long hours spent in the office (Moen, Kelly, and Hill 2011). They were required to demonstrate their presence and readiness for work beyond the prescribed working hours. They arrived at work earlier, and left work later than officially required either due to a heavy workload or basic expectations of employees, especially those of lower ranks. Suyoung, who had worked at a manufacturing company, had no choice but to work until 11pm every day under the pressure to complete all given tasks on time. Accumulated fatigue and stress caused serious mental and physical health problems which ultimately led to her resignation:

I had a panic disorder. The pressure to meet sales goals was huge, I had nightmares about my project going wrong. My heart was pounding, and I was always anxious. I thought I was going to get cancer if I continued living like this, so I even bought cancer insurance ... I thought I'd better find another path while I'm still young, so I quit.

Many other respondents who typically worked overtime reported having experienced similar symptoms such as chronic anxiety and depression. Unlike cases like Suyoung's where excessive workload kept workers from leaving work on time, some respondents spent additional hours in the office as they felt required to prove their commitment to the company. Their prolonged presence in the office was justified by the unspoken rules of the organization that demanded employees to demonstrate readiness and availability for superiors' commands. Leaving a superior behind, in this context, was regarded as a bold-faced act that could subject the worker to potential disadvantages. As Jina explained:

Work officially started at 8, but the atmosphere demanded we be there by 7. There was a relatively tough executive who prohibited us from leaving our desks from 7:00 to 7:40am. *Don't move. I could need you.* Half-jokingly, he would even say 'don't go to the bathroom.' That's how strict it was ... The general manager has to go home so that the deputy general manager can, and then one after another. So if the superiors didn't leave, I couldn't.

Although Jina was deeply unsatisfied with such tacit rules and prohibitions, she was unable to complain or raise objections. She explained that challenging them could hurt her in some way or another, such as having a reputation as lazy and rude, or receiving more workload. Respondents echoed the significance of working overtime as a core quality of an ideal employee. In all cases, they requested reduced overtime pay or, in most cases, not at all, as such demand was considered shameless within the organizational climate.

#### **2.4.2 No Role Model, No Future**

While all women in this study had worked overtime alongside their male counterparts, they were cognizant of the unsustainability of working long hours if and when they would eventually become mothers. In East Asia, and particularly Korea, lack of formal child care services requires informal support from kin, most notably grandmothers, for mothers to stay in the workplace (Y.-S. Lee 2011; Oh 2018). Due to disapproving views of maternal employment and men's significantly little engagement with domestic work (Y.-M. Kim 2013), women in Korea find it difficult to juggle work and family—they either have to become a “superwoman” who handles both by herself or choose one at the expense of the other.

However, the majority of women in the sample, who either did not have partners or plans of marriage in the near future, did expect to build their own families some time in their life and believed the job would be incompatible with their anticipated motherhood responsibilities. Competing demands of overwork and family is the primary reason why mothers quit their jobs and, my respondents had repeatedly observed female managers and older colleagues leave paid employment shortly after marriage or childbirth. They were also acutely aware of how motherhood influenced women's evaluations, promotion, and reputation in the workplace. In other words, even before these women received the motherhood penalty, they were expecting to receive it later in their working lives. Because women are seen as "potential leavers" by their male counterparts, as Minho confided, they were not considered for important relocations, job assignments, and promotions. Gaya's explanation captures this point:

There were four women in the same cohort who worked for 7 years in my company and haven't been promoted since. When they were finally promoted, they all got pregnant at the same time. They have been saving pregnancy for promotion all those years.

Among the handful of female superiors to begin with, my respondents couldn't find older women who stayed while simultaneously managing a family. They pointed out that women who manage to hold high-level ranks in the company are largely divided into two types—single women, or workaholic mothers with no family life—and that they did not want either of such lifestyles for themselves. This dichotomy suggests that the norm of long working hours not only exacerbate the structural inequality of gender in the workplace but also shapes women's career

paths into the bifurcated patterns of either imitating workplace masculinity or leaving the organization completely (Nemoto 2013a).

For some women, the absence of role models was the critical reason why they resigned. One example is Jina, who cited this very reason when asked why she left:

I couldn't picture my future here. I couldn't see my place in the next five or ten years, with no role models or precedents [of working mothers] in the company ... I'm going to work all my life anyway, I thought I should find a company where I can work for a lifetime.

All told, the observation and expectation of incompatibility of being a mother and a professional worker discouraged even the most well-educated women from staying in the organization. The lack or absence of women in managerial positions made it difficult for them to see their future in the organization. Women acknowledged that keeping their jobs would be a potential trade-off for family life, and believed that such arrangement was not worth pursuing.

### **Chapter 3: Resignation and Search for a Better Work and Life**

In the previous chapter, I examined the organizational features that were central to young women's decision to resign early from conglomerates, highlighting a distinct military character of workplace norms and practices. The strict rank hierarchy structure comparable to that of the army discouraged employees from expressing their opinions and instead demanded they unconditionally obey the superiors' commands. Compared with their seasoned male counterparts familiar with such organizational structure and culture, female employees were at a disadvantage navigating the workplace and establishing their place in it. In addition to these challenges, women were excluded from male-only networking activities in the informal sector—drinking, smoking, and buying sex—which are key to establishing one's insider status in the organization. This furthered the gender gap of organizational resources such as knowledge, networks, and the power that comes from possessing such assets, and ultimately pushed women to the margins of membership. Lastly, norms of overwork and complete availability compelled women to leave the organization well before becoming mothers, in both overt and subtle ways. Constant observations of other women who either quit soon after marriage or childbirth, or who were being reproached for staying as a mother not fully devoted to work, and the subsequent lack of role models made women feel they had no future in the organization. It was a combination of these organizational features, which constitute what I called the “militarized workplace,” that informed women to leave their jobs early in their career.

In this chapter, I turn to an investigation of the emotional, cognitive and normative *processes* by which young women navigate this work environment and ultimately reach their decision to resign. Among other themes, I examine their hesitation about and the decisive rationale behind the decision to carry out their long-held wish for leaving their jobs, and their

self-understandings of such experience of resignation. I also consider their definitions of good work, good life, and how these aspirations are reflected in their planned career trajectories.

As with the entire thesis, I particularly focus on women, although I also draw on interviews with men as relevant. Unless explicitly stated as male, all respondents noted below are women.

### **3.1 Resignation Under Consideration: Letting Go of the “Best Value” Career**

Recall the discussion in Section 2.1 that the motivations for getting a conglomerate job were largely constructed by the socially dominant idea that the job is highly rewarding in both material and nonmaterial ways. Also named “the best value” career choice by Taehee, conglomerate employment is one of the top career goals among young adults seeking employment upon graduation. Participants of this study, like many of their peers, have accepted the social norms of ‘success’ as represented by conglomerate employment. Their employment at these well-regarded firms symbolized their victory in the intense competition in the job market, as well as their hard work and competence. The high level of salary unmatched with other business organizations and the name value of the conglomerate were cited as the main reasons for seeking to work for the conglomerate. The job also represented the optimal career destination given the prestige and reputation of their undergraduate institutions. All told, working for a conglomerate job meant that they have successfully secured a highly respected position in society.

Such tangible and intangible rewards were the things respondents named as major reasons for hesitating to leave the organization. I identified three, closely related *values* that emerged in their responses that initially attracted them to the job and consequently caused them

pause in their decision to resign: high income, public status, and family expectations. In this section, I explore how each of these values factored into the respondents' decision-making process about resignation.

### **3.1.1 High Income and Benefits**

High financial rewards offered by conglomerates were cited as one of the key values that respondents found difficult to let go. Interviewees said they received substantially higher pay compared with smaller organizations or public institutions, and many perks such as a large bonus at the end of the year or an employee discount at company-owned online shopping malls, restaurants, department stores, and resort hotels. Leaving the job thus meant not being able to enjoy such satisfying financial situation. Several respondents noted that it was “crazy to quit” for this very reason. As Seoeun illustrates:

I have to say money was the biggest issue ... It's extremely hard to get a job these days. Even if I get a new job, it won't pay as much. A lot of people told me that I should stop complaining and be thankful for having a job that pays so well.

Concerned with the uncertainty of finding another job with a comparable salary in the increasingly competitive job market, respondents were afraid that they would be financially dependent on their families again or that they would not be able to sustain the standard of living they were accustomed to. Possibilities of a pay cut was an alarming concern not only for their lifestyle but also their pride.

### 3.1.2 Social Status and Respect

Another value that respondents felt reluctant to abandon was the public status conferred on employees by the brand name of the firm. A common narrative illustrated by respondents is that, in casual conversations, people instantly noticed their employers' names and commented on how "cool" and "lucky" they are to work for organizations with such high prestige and reputation. The brand name of the firm was an intangible yet significant capital for my respondents to easily and immediately gain social respect in encounters in daily life.

The brand capital of the firm not only affected the social status of my respondents as workers, but also spilled over into their perceptions of their general self-worth. They felt that their affiliations with prestigious business organizations increased their "value as a person" in society. Employment at a well-known firm was a sign of success, a reward for years of hard work, and an affirmation of their competence. The title of the firm thus symbolized the value of their newly gained, high social status. Respondents were thus apprehensive about the possibility of not being able to maintain such public status after resignation.

Minjung is one of the many respondents who pondered over the consequences of losing the conglomerate employee title before announcing the decision to quit:

It's not easy getting rid of the conglomerate title ... Unfortunately, there is a clear difference in social status between the 'conglomerate employee me' and 'just me.' I talked about this with my cohort. One colleague of mine really wanted to quit, but feared becoming a nobody if he actually did ... It's not easy to recover that kind of social status from anywhere else, you know.

Heesun echoed this point:

... [I] followed the typical Korean education. I went to good schools and a prestigious university where I got a high GPA and obtained high English scores. I then luckily got a conglomerate job. *I had to stay at this company rather than to choose some other career option that I know is of lesser value.* [emphasis added]

For most respondents, including Minjung and Heesun, working for a conglomerate represented the highest possible career option they could afford with their educational background. Voluntarily terminating their employment at the firm thus meant jeopardizing their high social status and instead engaging in yet another intense competition in the job market with no guarantee of employment and a low likelihood of recuperating the same level of public status.

### **3.1.3 Family Pressure**

Several respondents noted that their parents' apprehension about their loss of privileges such as financial security and high social status caused by resignation added to the pressure to stay in the organization longer than they wanted. For parents, conglomerate employment not only represented the proof that their children are leading a stable, successful life, but also marked their own success and accomplishment as parents. As such, their initial response was to ask their children to rethink their plans of resignation and discourage them from making risky choices that they could later regret.

For instance, Youngji noted that her parents initially strongly opposed her intent to resign because they were aware of how difficult it had been for her to get employment. Similarly, Yeonhee's parents disagreed with her plans to leave because of the unmatched financial package

offered by the conglomerate, among other perks. She added that, years after her resignation, her mother still misses being able to brag about her daughter's employment at one of the most well-known and high-paying firms in the country.

In order to persuade their parents about their plans of resignation, most women had lengthy discussions with them and prepared extensively for a promising new career path. While this was a difficult negotiation for many of my respondents, in all cases, parents ultimately approved and supported their daughter's decision to quit when they were finally convinced that the reasons for resignation were justifiable and that there was an alternative career plan to pursue.

The abovementioned three values that women were reluctant to abandon—money, status, and parental expectations—are undoubtedly some of the most important qualities associated with a job one would look for. This is especially true for young Koreans, who are sandwiched between the normative, neo-liberal ideas of self-development and individualized pathways to success (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009) and the structural problems such as the waning economy and shortage of jobs for the younger generation. For women in this study who have lived a life considered successful by social standards, as evidenced by their educational background in prestigious high schools and undergraduate institutions, staying in the conglomerate would be consistent with their personal histories. The question then arises as to why they left in spite of these key values essential to their identity and self-worth. What are the decisive rationales behind women's decision to leave these positive aspects behind and take unknown risks? In the next section, I discuss the final push factors that counter-balanced these attributes.

## **3.2 The Final Push: Ill Health and Workplace Mistreatment**

In the previous section, I discussed three key considerations that initially kept the respondents from quitting. Women spent a considerable amount of time reflecting upon the consequences of their resignation, including the loss of financial stability, high public status, and their parents' pride in their employment. Given these concerns, what were the factors that ultimately pushed them to carry out their long-held desire to resign? This is the focus of the present section.

I find that women faced diverse challenges during employment that weighed against the fear and anxiety regarding the repercussions of leaving their privileged occupation. While the militarized organizational culture formed the background of their intentions to leave, two distinct challenges worked as the tipping-point push factors for women to put their plans into action: physical and mental health difficulties, and sexist microaggressions and sexual harassment. As we shall see, without exception, women eventually reached the conclusion that the occupational privileges such as money and status did not adequately counterbalance the health difficulties and mistreatment in the workplace. In the following two sub-sections, I interrogate the processes by which these two final push factors eventually led them to resign.

### **3.2.1 Physical and Mental Health Problems**

Women in this study revealed that they faced physical and mental health challenges while working at conglomerates. Many of such symptoms were caused by frequent overwork and overdrinking, both of which were experienced by most respondents, both female and male, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Depression and panic disorder were the two common mental health symptoms experienced by interviewees. Overwork was a key element that they emphasized as being linked to these symptoms. With an exception of a few respondents who were typically able to leave as soon as 30 minutes after 6pm, the official hour for getting off from work, most respondents reported to have regularly worked more than 11 hours a day, in most cases from 9am to 8pm. Many also noted that they frequently worked in the weekends, either by choice or force, to catch up with the workload. One ringing phrase commonly used by respondents who illustrated the mental health effects of overwork is, “What am I doing here? Why am I here?” This poignant expression captures the psychological state they experienced at the time—the feeling of being overwhelmed, numb, and eventually, losing interest or motivation completely—which are common steps of burnout. In most cases, weekends were the only time to catch up with sleep, and the inability to do anything else added to the depression and lethargy. As Heesun, one respondent who worked overtime almost every day, illustrates: “All I did in the weekends was to lie in bed. I slept in until 10 or 11 in the morning and did nothing but eat ... Then I was in a bad mood throughout the whole following week.”

Overwork had physical consequences as well. Respondents attributed symptoms such as prematurely graying hair, hair loss, rashes, and eye infections to chronic stress and fatigue. Youngji, who experienced overwork to an extreme extent, developed a slipped disc while working at the conglomerate. While it had been years since she had an operation for her condition, she was still making regular visits to the hospital to receive physical therapy at the time of the interview.

Overdrinking also took a toll on the mental and physical health of many respondents. The most frequently reported physical symptom was neurogenic gastritis. Hana is one of many

women who was compelled to drink several times a week, both at lunch and dinner, to socialize with the field staff as part of her duties. She explained how frequent drinking caused gastritis, among many other symptoms:

... [I]t was very rough. Whenever I got sick, I would never heal. I had to live with stomach cramps, gastritis, and rashes all over my face and my body. My hair turned gray—look, I still have them. There were also digestive problems. You know lots of women experience constipation, right? Every time I drank, I experienced rectal fissure, always torn and bleeding ... Whenever I went to the bathroom there was just so much blood, I thought I had a fatal disease or something.

For some women, in addition to overwork and overdrinking, frequent exposure to abuse and bullying from superiors made them feel incapable of controlling their emotions and added to their ill mental health. For example, Minjung often broke down into tears at home or sank to her knees on the street. Dawon recalled wanting to be hit by a car or stabbed by someone on her way to work.

Such signals were one key consideration that eventually outweighed the positive attributes associated with staying in the organization. Indeed, respondents noted that many employees were similarly suffering from some kind of health difficulties and, as such, ill health was considered somewhat expected, if not normal. Within such environment, women felt as though they were “ungrateful” and “immature” for “making a fuss” about the issues they faced. Nevertheless, women concluded that their health could no longer be sacrificed for the rewards gained by keeping their jobs, which they judged were less important than their well-being. A few

women who suffered substantially from both physical and mental health difficulties cited them as the foremost reason for resignation. A ringing expression used by one woman, Dawon, is that she “had to quit in order to survive.”

### **3.2.2 Workplace Mistreatment: Microaggressions, Sexual Harassment and Assault**

Another decisive push factor that led to women’s resignation was workplace mistreatment based on their sex, which made them feel like second-class employees. All women in the study reported to have experienced feelings of discomfort, humiliation, or anger, and eventually, helplessness, because of how they were perceived and treated in the workplace, though varying in terms of frequency and magnitude. The mistreatment eventually made women feel that tolerating the militarized organizational culture was unworthy, as they discovered that there were little returns to such patience. I identify two types of workplace mistreatment—sexist microaggressions, and sexual harassment and assault—and how both shaped women’s choice to leave their workplace in ways that did not affect their male counterparts.

#### **3.2.2.1 Microaggressions: Female Difference, Emotional and Aesthetic Labor**

The particularity of their existence as female and full-time workers, two identities that remain an unusual pair in the male-oriented workplace, made young, college-graduate female workers such as my respondents stand out in the organization. The high visibility made them an easy target of attention, rumors, and special treatment. While some of the special treatment was positive, such as immunity from extremely heavy drinking or physical abuse, most had been negative. Respondents noted that they were doubly marginalized by virtue of their sex and ranking that were inconsistent with each other. On the one hand, among female workers in the

organization, which they commonly indicated as outnumbered by non-regular and secretarial workers, they were college-educated workers who officially had identical responsibilities and potential for promotion as did men. On the other hand, in their peer and upper-ranking circles, they were female in a predominantly male society. Taken together, women were experiencing the double minority status where they were isolated in the two gendered social spheres in the organization.

It was the latter sphere in which women noted to have experienced sexist microaggressions. They were treated as ‘women’ rather than ‘co-workers’—female difference was heightened in the male-dominated environment and thus whatever they did was often attributed to their being female, rather than their individual attributes. Male employees discussed their female colleagues’ appearances, body figures, fashion choices, and congeniality more so than their work performance or professional skills. This was especially true for many of my respondents who had been the only college-graduate female worker in the team throughout the entire period of their employment.

Women were also explicitly and implicitly required to demonstrate emotional labor in the workplace. Examples provided by respondents include constantly smiling in the office, being nice and kind to co-workers, engaging with conversations with male co-workers, especially the head of the team, whenever they want to talk to women. One common theme that encompasses these requirements is the idea that women “lighten the mood” in the office “full of cheerless men.” While such comment may sound flattering to some, all respondents strongly believed that the expectation that women should be office cheerleaders unfairly affected their authority in the organization. While men were encouraged and rewarded for demonstrating masculine traits such as being direct, determined, and aggressive, women were assumed to perform traditionally

feminine traits such as being kind, unassuming, and caring—all of which constrained their behaviors and weakened their authority. Women were aware that conforming to such gender roles would eventually put them in a more difficult position to survive and secure one's place in the organization run by masculine ideals.

Respondents also noted that they were required to perform aesthetic labor as well. They were pressured by their male colleagues, usually their superiors, to wear make-up, tight dresses, and high heels. Minjung was one of many women who felt they had no choice but to dress in a traditionally feminine way. In Minjung's workplace, wearing contacts instead of glasses was one of the informal yet unchallengeable requirements imposed exclusively on female workers:

... [W]hen I wore loose clothes, they told me that I dressed like an old woman, that I should dress like that other woman who wore a tight two-piece dress ... They made a gesture to indicate that I shouldn't wear glasses, that I look like a student or ugly wearing them. It's the same with asking women to wear make-up.

All told, the microaggressions described above, as trivial and innocuous as they seem, were enough to make women feel that, no matter how they proved their hard work and competence, the organization as represented by the majority of male employees would always see them as women who cheer and please men rather than as equal co-workers. The belief that they are second-class members in the organization, and that they cannot change the majority members who perceive and treat them as such, was critical in women's decision to leave.

### 3.2.2.2 Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault

In addition to these microaggressions, sexual harassment and assault were a common experience in the militarized work environment that pushed my respondents to carry out their long-held plans for resignation. 21 out of 22 women in the study had observed or experienced sexual harassment or assault first hand, while none of the 8 men reported having had experienced either.

Cases of sexual harassment include making sexual comments about the appearance, clothing, or body parts of women, obscene jokes, unwanted advances and touches, probing into their dating life, as well as degrading remarks about women in general. Taehee explains how she reacted to sexual harassment and feelings of powerlessness she experienced:

The team manager physically touched me a lot. He stroked my cheeks and my hair. He would send KakaoTalk<sup>5</sup> messages saying, ‘I miss you.’ He’s 42 or 43 years old, has kids, and he knew I was married ... I would respond saying, “I miss you too!” using lots of emojis. I used cute responses. I couldn’t dare say, “Are you crazy?” I couldn’t take it to the HR or anything, because I *was* in HR.

For Yeji, her supervisor’s comment about dating the madam in a *dabang*—a coffee house where the owner, usually female, performs emotional labor and often provides sexual services to male customers—made her uncomfortable, humiliated, and upset. “He was a married man. I could imagine what he would have done there, you know, having the madam sit next to you, who

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<sup>5</sup> KakaoTalk is a mobile instant messaging application with free text and call features. It is one of the most widely used tools of communication among Koreans today.

gets drunk with you and holds your hand and stuff ... I didn't understand him. It was very disappointing," said Yeji. While his behavior was neither directed towards Yeji specifically nor intended to harm her, she nevertheless regarded it as a form of sexual harassment.

Sexual assault was also commonly experienced by many of my respondents, though to a lesser extent than sexual harassment. Cases include forced hugs, kisses, and groping. Yubin is one of the many women who believed it was hopeless to stay in the organization after experiencing sexual assault. Before being dispatched to her company's Chinese branch, Yubin had worked in a unique, predominantly female marketing division within the traditionally male-dominated company. Upon her arrival in China, she found out that she was the only young woman in an office full of middle-aged Korean men, who she believes have "fossilized Korean corporate culture abroad." She was pressured to get to work 90 minutes earlier, forced to participate in after-work drinks for two weeks in a row, and had little privacy living within a small neighborhood with all of her co-workers and their families. Within the first few weeks, she experienced a deeply troubling incident at an after-work drink. One of the older men said she was like a daughter to him and hugged her—an incident unimaginable in her previous department in Seoul run mostly by women. She explained that this experience, along with other episodes during her time in the foreign branch opened her eyes to the true picture of corporate culture in Korea: "I have been oblivious to the reality of Korean large firms. I realized that this was my future, if I were to stay and climb the corporate ladder ... It felt pointless. I knew I had to quit." Yubin eventually left the company in 6 short months after her dispatch, despite multiple conciliatory measures offered by the headquarters in Seoul.

For Heesun, who felt compelled to stay because the company represented the best career option for her qualifications, sexual assault was also critical to her final decision to leave. During

a business trip abroad, an older male local employee touched Heesun's waist and hips while having a drink with her and her male supervisor at a bar. Heesun explained her feelings at the moment and how the incident pushed her to carry out her plan to resign she has been contemplating because of lack of courage:

... [I]t was really unpleasant. I remember turning away while looking at my boss. I believe he saw what happened, but I'll never know for sure because I didn't talk to him about it ... When I came back to Korea, I consulted a manager I was close to. I told her what happened and that I didn't know what to do. But she reacted as if it was nothing; that he's just always like that and that I'm young and pretty. When I heard that coming from a female manager I relied on, I thought, you know what, there is no solution here. So I told my parents that day ... and I resigned without having a clear plan in mind, because I just really hated the company.

A few respondents mentioned cases of sex crime that happened in their companies. For instance, Minjung talked about a male employee who broke into women's residence in the company's training institute in the middle of the night and stole an underwear from the room she slept in. When Minjung and her upset colleagues requested police investigations into the incident, the managers at the company disregarded their requests and instead suggested that they go home while their male counterparts stay to take the rest of the training course. Eventually, Minjung was told that CCTVs will be installed in the building, but she received no confirmation as to whether it has actually been done. Minjung told that the experience—both the disturbing incident and how poorly the company handled it—was a “turning point” for her to decide to leave her job. She explained:

The company did not protect us at all. No responsibility, no protection. How can you respect such company, right? I liked the work that I did, I wanted to learn more, but knowing that the company I worked for was like this ... I mean, what kind of company is this? I was so disappointed.

### **3.2.2.3 Lack of Institutional Support**

Except Seul and Heejin, women remained reticent to report to human resources due to explicit and implicit silencing from co-workers, fear of retaliation and bullying. It also stemmed from their deep-seated distrust of the company. They had heard of numerous cases of sexual harassment where the perpetrator stayed without any penalty or barriers to promotion while the victim soon left the organization after reporting the case. The repeated hearing of such discouraging stories, combined with their understanding of the rigid organizational culture, was enough to make women believe that it was not worth going through the demanding procedure of sexual harassment investigation. Women were well aware that, within the militarized workplace resistant to change, it would be difficult to make demands on the company and challenge its lack of response.

### **3.2.3 “It was just not worth keeping”: Failing to Find Hope**

When asked directly as to why they decided to leave, a sense of hopelessness coming from the judgment that their future will not be better-off in the organization was found in all respondents. The emotion came from the realization that their expectations and aspirations about their work will never be realized. Women were aware that their individual hard work or competence would not change the institutional context within which they worked. They didn't

feel valued or nurtured for their competencies, capabilities, and skills. They also believed that certain present favorable situations such as the availability of a few good-natured supervisors, female colleagues and seniors, would not last in the long term. The static nature of organizational culture that remained unchallenged due to rigid hierarchies, coupled with informal channels of workplace socialization closed to women, and lack of role model figures, created feelings of despair. Women ultimately realized that there was more to lose than to gain from keeping their jobs, and thus opted out to pursue an alternative career and life.

### **3.3 Breaking Away from the Ideal Track? Making Sense of Early Resignation**

This section investigates the respondents' self-understandings of their experience in working at a conglomerate and resigning from it. I find that resignation means more than just a change in their work status. Their narratives about resignation reflect changes in their perceptions of what is a good company, a good life, and how they want to live as individuals. As I shall illustrate, their decision to resign is a confrontation to the social and cultural norms of success and happiness which they have internalized for most of their lifetime. I argue that, for these individuals, resignation from a conglomerate is an important transition marker that speaks to their own maturation as an independent, autonomous individual capable of choosing what *they* want for themselves rather than what *others* think they should want. It is this shift of focus from extrinsic to intrinsic values and preferences as represented by resignation that I aim to explore in the present section.

### **3.3.1 Stepping Outside the Box: What It Means to Resign**

When asked what it means for them to have worked at a conglomerate, women commonly replied that the experience was an opportunity to learn how the world works; but more importantly, a “good spec” on their CV—it accorded them a fair level of reliability and competency as an adult. As Heesun, who resigned from one of the country’s most well-known conglomerate firms and now a law school student, described, “People at law school ask me all the time, ‘why did you leave such a good company?’ Leaving such a place and doing something else apparently makes them think that I really want this new career. They think that I’m a smart and competent worker, based on the name value [of the company].” Seoeun, who also resigned from a globally known Korean conglomerate to pursue a postgraduate degree abroad, explained that her work experience was positively received by the graduate admission committee. During interviews, the committee recognized her “big transnational corporate experience” and probed why she had left. Similarly, male interviewees, such as Sunwook, illustrated the significance of the employer’s name value in their responses: “I take pride in having worked at a large company that anyone living in Korea would dream of at least once in their lifetime.”

Notions of prestige associated with the name value of conglomerate firms spilled over into my interviewees’ accounts of what it means to have resigned from them. Resignation not only signified the abandoning of such social privileges provided by conglomerate employment, but symbolized an act of breaking away from an idealized life course constructed by dominant socio-cultural standards and moving toward an authentic life. Critical to this act was the notion that it was an independent, voluntary choice made based on the assessment of their surroundings and aspirations about an alternative work and life. Because the decision was often discouraged by economic, familial, and social pressure to stay, as well as their own fear of not being able to

sustain the same level of public status, making this ‘bold’ choice was a source of anxiety as well as pride and excitement.

Minjung quit her job in the trading industry to pursue a law degree abroad and was working at a public research institute in Korea at the time of the interview. She described what she calls the “ideal life track” and explained that resignation was an endeavor to opt out from it:

There is an ideal life track you have no chance but to take from an early age. Elementary school, junior high, high school, good university in Seoul without taking an extra year to take the college entrance exam, then a conglomerate job shortly after graduation—*this is the track you must take to be treated as human*. After employment, get promoted, get married, and have kids. This track grants you social respect; it shows that you are living a beautiful, genuine life ... I had always followed the track. But the problem is that I can’t do what I want to do; I have to adjust myself to it. *Resignation was an attempt to get out of the track*. I may have not left the track completely, but I did derail a little and was able to think about what I really want in life. [emphasis added]

Like Minjung, Taehee left a secure, high-paying job in the manufacturing industry, in the hope of becoming a tax accountant in the next few years. Concerned with the thought of joblessness, Taehee quickly searched for similar jobs in other firms upon announcing her resignation. She was soon offered an interview, but ended up not going. In her explanation, she illustrates the meaning of resignation as a departure from a familiar life course and an introduction to an alternative one:

Of course I was anxious. But if I took the job, I would continue to live the same, unhappy life. In my life so far, I have never taken a break. I have never applied for a leave of absence from

school. I got a job right after graduation. I played by the book. So I thought I deserved this break, this first vacation in my life, so that I don't have any regrets ... *Resignation was a chance to realize that I can make independent choice in my life* ... I was tired of my life like a squirrel on a treadmill—going to work 5 days a week, consumed by work, the anxiety ... *I realized that I am a person with the freedom not to choose that life.* [emphasis added]

Another woman whose response merits quoting at length is Dora, 35-years-old, who left one of the country's top IT companies in pursuit of graduate studies. While it had been nearly 10 years since she had left, she provided vivid descriptions of her experience and the meaning of her resignation:

Resignation had the symbolic meaning of breaking out of a preexisting framework. The maximum I could achieve was getting into a conglomerate, given my environment, my education, my culture. But instead of accommodating myself to the organization, I decided it was not right ... I tried to break out of the framework ... It was an expansion of my world, like opening a door and getting out.

In sum, the act of resignation demonstrates the materialization of the respondents' belief that there is another way to live than following the "ideal" life track defined by society and often reinforced by their families. It is a symbol of their maturity and independence as an adult capable of making their own decisions in life. In this sense, I argue that resignation is a marker of their transition to full adulthood, a stage they had to postpone for so long due to strong social standards of how one ought to live in order to be respected and recognized as successful.

### 3.3.2 Moving into Unfamiliar Terrain: Searching for Authenticity

Derailing from the ideal track was also a critical event which symbolized a step toward a different, more authentic life. Women saw this step as a sign of personal growth, often quoting phrases like “finding myself” or “recovering who I truly am.” Resignation was a turning point that helped them see the difference between the social conception of success and their own.

Heesun illustrates this point:

... [I] became stronger. In my life so far, whenever I had to make choices, I've always consulted with my parents, my older sister, and friends. But now I'm acutely aware that what others think of me working for the company and what I am actually like in there are two different things. Now, I make my own choices carefully. I have an idea about what choice will make me happy in the life ahead of me.

The notion of feeling a discrepancy between the socially constructed ideas of success and happiness and their own ideas of them was echoed by Youngji: “Resignation is like a barometer for making choices. Based on my experience there, I now know what's good for me and what's not. I became better aware of who I am, what I like and what I don't.” Many other respondents' responses centered around the notion of resignation as an opportunity to learn what kind of person they are, what kind of life makes them happy, and what kind of work they need to pursue to live that life.

Recall that the decision was not an easy one to make, and it required substantial courage and determination to take risks, particularly about maintaining a similar level of public status. Nonetheless, none of my sample showed any regrets about their decision at the time of the

interview. Even the few women who had no guaranteed employment, such as Taerin, who was studying for an exam to enter pharmacy school at the time of the interview, replied that her uncertain future is an exciting challenge she is willing to take. All told, women embraced new notions of success and happiness that are distant from those prescribed by society.

### **3.4 How Conglomerate Experience Informs Women's Attitudes toward Work and Life**

Toward the end of the interview, I asked my respondents how they would define good work and good life. These questions were intended to identify how their experience in the conglomerate and the more significant experience of resignation had altered their perspectives on such ideals that inform how they make choices in real life.

Women's definitions of 'good work' and associated conditions of a good workplace converged into three main themes: work that encourages one to display abilities with a sense of independence, work that allows balance with family life, and work that has social benefits and meaning. While these aspects may not be mutually exclusive, such categorization helps the understanding of the multiple aspects of women's aspirations about work.

Such aspirations were consistent with women's planned career trajectories. Women's post-conglomerate trajectories involved pursuing careers that are perceived to promise higher levels of freedom, professionalism and relative safety from gender bias and discrimination. Out of 22 women, 8 went on to enter graduate schools or law schools, domestic and abroad. 7 got a job in public enterprises, foreign-owned companies, or at a start-up company. 4 were preparing for national exams to become civil servants or pharmacists. 2 started a business of their own.

Only one woman, Gaya, chose to work for another Korean conglomerate firm, which is well-known for its relatively female-friendly public image<sup>6</sup>.

In sub-sections 3.4.1 to 3.4.3 below, I discuss each of the three themes of ‘good work’ as they relate to the abovementioned career choices. I then conclude in 3.4.4 with an illustration of how such ideals about good work are integrated into their views of a ‘good life.’

### **3.4.1 “Finding my voice”: Working Freely, Assessed Fairly**

Women who cited the organization’s rigid hierarchies—particularly the norm of absolute obedience and limited autonomy—as the main rationale for resignation commonly defined good work as work that encourages one to demonstrate a sense of independence and responsibility. Many women phrased this in terms of “finding my voice.” They wanted to develop professional capacities and expertise and to be properly recognized and valued for their worth.

They went on to describe the conditions of a good workplace where such work would be possible. A key component of a good workplace was the respect for low-tier employees and their opinions. This involved allowing them to feel meaning in their work, as well as a sense of achievement and competence, based on clear instructions on work tasks and sufficient authority. Seongmin is one woman who provided such accounts of good work. She worked in a firm notorious for its “more-military-than-military” organizational culture and was deeply unsatisfied with having to follow orders at her supervisor’s whim. After she resigned, she studied for a year

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<sup>6</sup> Gaya’s new company hires a relatively high ratio of females compared with other companies, but it has never exceeded one third of the newly hired population. According to a recent media report, the rate dropped to lower than 25%.

to take the law school admissions test. At the time of the interview, she was attending her first year at law school. She described:

Good work... I think it would be meaningful to work with some sense of agency, independence, and with some kind of initiative ... At the company, I did just the bare minimum, because the discretion and authority I had were fixed and restricted. I knew I needed a professional job where I can do *my own* kind of work. [emphasis added]

Another related aspect of a good workplace was the availability of a strong culture of fair evaluation and assessment. Women have witnessed female seniors being sidelined at important job assignments and promotions, often explicitly because they were not breadwinners of their households or because they had used maternity leave. Women who chose employment at public institutions emphasized this point when explaining the motivation for their turnover. Jina, who said the biggest reason for resignation was the absence of a female role model, is one of them. She searched for new jobs exclusively in the public sector, where the sex ratio of employees is believed to be more even and female-friendly policies are better observed than in the private sector. Although her income has declined substantially, she was pleased with her new employer. She explained that the job matched her expectations about the public sector:

My friends told me that public institutions have an even ratio of female and male employees, and that parental leaves available for women to use freely ... Here, both women and men seem to use parental leaves freely, and I don't feel discriminated as a woman. There is even a company kindergarten! The main dissatisfactions I had at the conglomerate are resolved.

### 3.4.2 “Time to be myself”: Work-life Balance

Another common definition of good work can be represented by the popular term women used, *wohlabel*, which is an abbreviated term for ‘work-life balance.’ Women who have extensively criticized the norm of overwork and its repercussions on their physical and mental health mentioned that good work should ideally guarantee some time for rest and reproduction of energy. This did not mean flexitime or taking long vacations, but simply keeping normal work hours of 8 hours per day.

Suyoung, who suffered from panic attack and feared getting cancer from overwork, chose to work as an administrative staff at a university. Throughout the interview, Suyoung repeatedly emphasized how unhappy and stressed she was at the firm that gave her too much work. While she humorously noted that her new job is “dull” and “too unambitious” given the prestige of her alma mater, Suyoung was very satisfied with the fact that she could leave work at 6pm and enjoy her hobbies and family time in the evening. She added, “When I’m at work, that’s not who I truly am, but who I am at work. When you overwork, there’s not enough time to just be who I am. It’s important for me to have time to just be myself.”

Heesun is another woman who emphasized the importance of work-life balance in her response. She typically slept four hours per day during weekdays due to working more than 12 hours a day and a long commute. The routine eventually led to chronic fatigue and frequent illness, and she had to spend most of her weekends in bed supplementing insufficient sleep. After taking some time off, she decided to follow in her sister’s footsteps and become a lawyer. She was attending law school at the time of the interview. While she admitted that she is pursuing yet another demanding and time-consuming career, Heesun explained that her view on work has

transformed dramatically, and that her life as a lawyer would be less career-focused than what would be usually expected of lawyers:

I think work that allows *wohlabel* is good work. Work is a means to spend happy time with your family. I certainly did not think this way before joining the firm. I wanted to become an executive. But now, my values have completely changed. My values are definitely leaned towards the “life” in “work-life balance” ... If I came to law school at the age of 22 [after university graduation], I probably would have wanted to get a job at the top law firm. But now, I have zero intention of working there; I want a relaxed career, even if it means I don’t earn much money.

### **3.4.3 “More than just money”: Finding Social Meaning in Work**

Lastly, women indicated that they want their work to have a positive impact in society. Often noting that their working in the conglomerate was only “exacerbating the gap of wealth between large and small firms,” women commonly expressed disinterest and disillusionment about working in the private sector. Instead, they wanted their work to reflect a value they uphold as important and meaningful to themselves and to society.

One example is Yubin, who started her own business after resignation. She was unhappy that her company was imposing a standardized beauty norm on its young, female clients. Now, she runs a business in the food and beverage industry that puts forward customization of individual taste as its mission. She hopes to further her beliefs in the creation and promotion of individuality and diversity through her business:

In the beauty industry, trends change quickly; you have to force customers to buy products. *You have to buy this! Orange is the trend now! You're not a woman if you don't get a manicure!* ... I wanted people to find their own taste ... I believe my company will change our society, pushing its direction toward a diverse one. I hope my work contributes to such ideal ... Work shouldn't just be about the money; it should also be about making a positive impact in society.

Similarly, for Seul, who said she resigned because the organization forced her to browbeat and create fear from subcontractors to get things done, good work meant more than earning money: "I want to accomplish more than just money. That's why I went to graduate school, to pursue the value I believe in. I want work that allows me to be true to my beliefs and values." Seul then added that she was disenchanted by several practices prevalent in the company such as accounting fraud, manipulation of data, and overuse of power when signing a contract with smaller firms or subcontractors. After finishing her master's degree, Seul applied for a job in a non-governmental organization. She now works as a public health officer in a developing country and prides in acting up to her beliefs about making a positive impact in society.

While the jobs mentioned so far may suggest that my respondents have not completely jettisoned the socially dominant norms of success, as reflected by the position of these jobs in the occupational hierarchy, their new career plans do represent their own choice based on a careful observation of their surroundings and understanding of their personalities and preferences. This is substantially different with the case of conglomerate employment, which mainly reflects their subjection to societal norms and peer pressure.

### 3.4.4 Rethinking a Good Life

How do women define ‘good life,’ and how do these definitions reflect the change in their ideas about desirable ways of living? Women gave numerous definitions of good life, but the overwhelmingly common idea was that they wanted a “normal life.” Since they had undergone physical and mental health difficulties, many involving hospitalization, constant medication and counseling, most had been burnt out by the end of their conglomerate career. Dawon, who was working at a local therapy center at the time of the interview described what she means by a normal life: “A few days ago, I realized what real happiness was. It wasn’t fancy. I don’t have a good house or a car, but I ate what I wanted to eat and bought a present for a person I thought of. I had enough sleep. I was respected at work. That’s happiness.” For them, success in the work sphere no longer meant the central goal of their lives; instead, it served as a means to enable a simple life where one can afford a family dinner in a restaurant or gifts for friends.

Central to this “normal” life was the idea of being true to oneself. Women had been socially pressured to aspire to working at conglomerates and to stay there. But they had been dissatisfied with the rigid organizational culture where they had to hide their true feelings and thoughts, and act in a certain way in order to fit in. Abandoning such false self and being their true selves was instrumental for them to living a good life. Seoeun, who quit shortly after receiving an offer from a graduate school overseas, noted the significance of authenticity in her definition of good life. She also expressed her doubts about the possibility for living such a life within Korean society:

... [I] want to do what I love to do; I want to be free. I don't want to feel the pressure from others. I want to be able to exchange opinions equally, but Korea is a monolithic society, it's suffocating ... Korean people follow the fixed framework too much, they don't know what they really want to do in life.

The aforementioned Suyoung, who emphasized the importance of work-life balance, provided a similar response. Her interpretation of good life was critically informed by her work experience and the rationale behind her decision to quit:

It's simple; if you have enough time and money to have a good time with the people you love, you're living a good life. So far in my life, I have done only two things—study and work. I thought that was the right way to live ... You know the marshmallow experiment, right? Some children wait for the second marshmallow; some just eat the first one. I was the kind to wait for the third, the fourth marshmallow, waiting for a bigger reward in the future. But then I realized, what if I die like this—just waiting? I decided to focus on my happiness in the present.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

### 4.1 Key Findings and Contributions of the Study

This thesis makes an empirical contribution to our current understandings of gendered workplaces by adding to our knowledge of why and how young women leave high-paying, high-prestige jobs early in their career, even in the absence of child-related obligations. I critically intervened in the sociological literature on gender and work by making salient women's experiences in the workplace and identifying the role of the *militarized* workplace norms and practices in the production and reproduction of institutionalized gender inequality in the workplace.

Findings in Chapter 2 delineate the militarized workplace culture and explain how it influenced women's decision to leave, even in the absence of motherhood responsibilities. Women's decision to resign is strongly shaped by the formal and informal organizational practices that fall under the rubric of what I called 'workplace militarization' that together push women to the boundaries of membership. Rigid hierarchies and male-only informal networking marginalize and isolate women, and norms of overwork and complete availability undermine women's anticipations of long-term employment if and when they become mothers. As a result, women develop feelings of frustration, disappointment, and eventually hopelessness about staying in the workplace. Despite significant occupational privileges, such as good salary, high social status and job security, women eventually felt it was worth risking their hard-earned employment to find an alternative career. Taken together, the results of this study extends the theoretical argument that gendered organizational structures and institutional conditions inform women's work experience and career decisions (Acker 1990, 1998). This study also furthers the line of work that identified why progress toward gender equality in terms of women's higher

educational achievement and labor force participant does not spill into their continuous employment, and why they are persistently underrepresented in managerial positions.

Findings in Chapter 3 show the emotional, cognitive and normative processes by which young women reach their decision to resign. Women in my sample underwent an intense process of weighing the repercussions of resignation against deteriorating health, sexual harassment and other types of workplace mistreatment. The analysis of women's self-understandings of resignation revealed that, resignation not only signifies the abandoning of social privileges associated with conglomerate employment, but also an act of derailing from an "ideal life track" constructed by dominant socio-cultural standards. In the hope of living an authentic life, led by one's own personal desires and preferences rather than the expectations of others, women chose alternative career options reflecting such aspirations. Many chose to resume their studies, prepare for national exams for a professional career, or continue to engage in paid work in other types of institutions.

The idea of workplace militarization draws our attention to the importance of cultural and institutional factors in broader society that may complicate the processes of inequality formation in the workplace. This thesis explored how universal male conscription, dating from 1957 and continuing today, provides highly masculinized and militarized socialization in an institutional context that is replicated in the workplace. I hope this study has initiated a critical inquiry into male conscription as a source of institutionalized gender inequality in the workplace in Korea.

## **4.2 Limitations of the Study**

This study has some limitations. First, while I acknowledge the importance of intersectional analysis across multiple social characteristics, I focused on gender as the key factor

in interrogating the differentiated experience of male and female employees in the militarized workplace. While this eased the illumination of gender hierarchy, masculinity, and militarized organizational behavior, it does not provide insights on how other social characteristics intersecting with gender may create divergent work experience and interactions for individuals with different sexual orientation, for instance. I did not ask respondents about their sexual orientation nor did they identify as members of the LGBT community. Future research could employ a within-subjects design to further examine how these social identities and axes of inequality shape distinct work experience and career outcomes.

Similarly, because of the limited sample consisting of full-time workers, the results cannot be extended to the experiences of female workers in part-time or non-regular employment. Further large-scale studies will be necessary to find out the differences experienced by these women to illuminate the dynamics of intersections between gender and position or employment type. Such research will overcome the limited generalizability of this study, which solely focused on a small segment of the youth population with significant educational privilege, campus brand capital, and skillsets that allow them to explore other prestigious career options.

Furthermore, as this study only investigated interviewees who resigned from conglomerate firms, the findings may not fully account for the particular cultures and practices present in small or medium sized firms or other organizations. Although firm size is not the only factor contributing to the formation of organizational behavior, it does inform the ways in which members communicate, reach agreements and make decisions, and certain practices and customs can be challenged or reinforced. The effects of firm size and associated aspects of organizational dynamics should be evaluated in future research.

### **4.3 Future Research Directions**

To my knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to adopt a gender approach to early resignation, and to incorporate the concept of militarization into a workplace setting. While scholars have investigated the gendered mechanism of militarization in Korea, how such force is adopted, maintained and transformed into a particular form in the workplace has so far been a black box. This analysis begs the question of the relevance of such practices to other contexts, particularly those that still practice male conscription, and how this might affect other societal dimensions, such as work life in large firms. I encourage future researchers to deepen our understanding of institutional dynamics by taking into account various embedded culture-specific cues, including militarization. One possible research question worth exploring is: is male conscription a social closure device to maintain and reinforce male privilege in the labor market? Militarization is a concept that, if conceptualized and measured thoroughly, could offer a promising complementary explanation of the gendered workplace in Korea. This study only provides preliminary grounds for such theorizing work.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A Questionnaire

#### A.1 Questionnaire (Korean)

#### 설문지

이 설문지는 두 파트로 구성되어 있습니다. 첫째 파트는 기본적인 인적사항과 관련된 질문이며 둘째 파트는 연구자와 대화 형식으로 이루어질 심층면담 질문입니다. 귀하가 제공하시는 정보는 이 연구를 위해 사용될 목적으로 수집, 비밀 보장되며 5년의 보관 기간 이내 모두 폐기됩니다.

이 연구에 사용될 귀하의 성함 또는 가명을 기입해주시요.

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#### 파트 1. 인적사항 질문

1. 귀하의 만 나이를 알려주세요.
2. 귀하의 학력사항을 알려주세요.  
① 대학교졸(학사) ② 석사졸 ③ 박사졸
3. 주거현황은 어떻게 되나요? (예: 1 인가구, 부모님과 동거 등)
4. 결혼여부는 어떻게 되나요?  
① 기혼 ② 비혼
5. 자녀가 있으십니까?  
① 네 (몇 명인가요? \_\_\_\_\_) ② 아니오
6. 아래 질문들은 귀하가 일하였던 조직에 대한 것입니다.  
6-1. 어떤 산업에 속한 조직이었나요?  
① 금융 ② 전기전자 ③ 건축/철강 ④ 자동차/기계  
⑤ 석유화학 ⑥ 서비스 ⑦ 물류/운송 ⑧ 기타 (\_\_\_\_\_)
- 6-2. 재직 기간은 어떻게 되나요? 최대한 정확히 기입해주세요.

6-3. 퇴사한 시기는 언제인가요? 연도와 월을 알려주십시오.

7. 현재 직업상태는 어떠한가요?

8. 현재 하고 있거나 계획 중인 일은 무엇인가요?

## 파트 2. 심층면담 질문

### 1. 대기업에서 일 시작하기

- 1.1 대학 재학 시, 졸업 후 원했던 진로나 직업은 무엇이었나요?
- 1.2 구직과정은 어떠했나요?
- 1.3 원했던 직업과 갖게된 직업이 일치했나요? 대기업 취직은 본인이 원하던 결과였나요?
- 1.4 취업한 회사에서 본인이 설정한 목표는 어떤 것들이었나요?

### 2. 대기업에서 일하기

- 2.1 동료들이나 선배들로부터 직무 수행에 대해 어떠한 훈련을 받으셨나요?
- 2.2 본인에게 주어진 일은 만족스럽거나 의미있었나요?
- 2.3 직장에서 동료나 선배들로부터 어떻게 도움을 받으셨나요? 그 도움은 충분했나요?
- 2.4 직장에서 멘토나 롤모델이 있었나요? 그렇다면 그들이 본인의 직무 수행이나 일에 대한 태도에 가졌던 영향은 어땠나요?
- 2.5 직장 동료들과의 관계는 어떠했나요?
- 2.6 주위 여성 동료들과의 관계는 어떠했나요? (비정규직 여성 직원 포함)
- 2.7 직장에서 일하면서 느꼈던 좋았던 점은 무엇인가요? 그 이유는 무엇인가요?
- 2.8 직장에서 일하면서 느꼈던 어렵거나 힘든 점은 무엇인가요? 본인이 힘들다고 느꼈던 공식적, 비공식적인 회사 문화, 관습, 제도나 행사가 있다면 최대한 자세하게 알려주세요.
- 2.9 다른 직원들과 다른 대우를 받았다고 느낀 적이 있었나요? 있었다면 어떤 일이 있었나요?
- 2.10 일하면서 개인적인 행복을 위해 한 일이 있다면 무엇이었나요?

### 3. 대기업에서 퇴사하기

- 3.1 퇴사하기로 결정한 이유는 무엇이었나요?
- 3.2 퇴사를 결정하게 된 결정적인 일이 있었나요?
- 3.3 퇴사를 주저하게 만든 고려 사항이 있었나요?
- 3.4 퇴사 이후 어떤 계획을 갖고 있었나요?
- 3.5 퇴사 이후 계획은 어떻게 준비하였나요?
- 3.6 퇴사 결정에 대해 가족이나 친구들은 어떤 반응을 보였나요?

#### 4. 대기업 조기퇴사 이해하기

- 4.1 퇴사 직후 어떤 생각이나 감정이 들었나요?
- 4.2 직장생활과 비교했을 때, 현재 삶에 대해서 얼마나 만족하시나요?
- 4.3 대기업에서 조기퇴사했다는 것은 본인에게 무슨 의미인가요?
- 4.4 현재 한국의 조기퇴사 현상에 대해서 어떤 생각이신가요? 왜 이런 트렌드가 있다고 생각하시나요?
- 4.5 귀하에게 ‘좋은 일’ 또는 ‘좋은 직장’이란 무엇인가요?
- 4.6 귀하에게 ‘좋은 삶’이란 무엇인가요?
- 4.7 회사들이 직장 환경을 개선하기 위해 무엇을 해야 한다고 생각하나요?

## A.2 Questionnaire (English)

### QUESTIONNAIRE

**Note: This questionnaire consists of two parts. Part 1 contains basic demographic questions and Part 2 contains in-depth interview questions in the form of a conversation with the investigator. Your information will only be used for this research and will be kept confidential and destroyed upon the end of the storage period of 5 years.**

Please write your name (pseudonym): \_\_\_\_\_

#### PART 1. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. What is your age?
2. What is your level of educational attainment?
  - ① Bachelor's degree
  - ② Master's degree
  - ③ Doctoral degree
3. Do you live alone or with your parents?
4. Are you married?
  - ① Yes
  - ② No
5. Do you have any dependents?
  - ① Yes (How many? \_\_\_\_\_)
  - ② No
6. Below are questions about the organization you used to work for.
  - 6-1. What kind of industry does the organization belong to?
    - ① Finance
    - ② Electronics
    - ③ Construction/Steel
    - ④ Automobile/Machinery
    - ⑤ Petrochemistry
    - ⑥ Service
    - ⑦ Logistics/Transportation
    - ⑧ Other (\_\_\_\_\_)
  - 6-2. How long have you worked in the organization? Please specify the total number of years and months worked.
  - 6-3. When did you resign from the organization? Please specify the year and month.
7. What is your current occupation status?
8. What are you planning to do or are doing now?

## PART 2. IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Beginning work in the conglomerate
  - A. What kind of job did you want to get after graduation?
  - B. What was the job-seeking process like?
  - C. Did your wish and the outcome match? Was your job at the conglomerate a desired outcome?
  - D. What were your initial goals in the company?
  
2. Working in the conglomerate
  - A. How were you trained to carry out your tasks by your peers and supervisors?
  - B. How satisfying or meaningful were your assigned tasks for you?
  - C. How were you supported by your peers and supervisors at work? How sufficient/insufficient was the support in your opinion?
  - D. Did you have any mentors or role models at work? If so, please identify their influence on your job performance or attitudes toward work.
  - E. How did you get along with the co-workers?
  - F. What was the relationship like with fellow female co-workers (including temporary workers)?
  - G. What were some of the things you liked about working in the company?
  - H. What were the challenges you found in the company? Please identify all formal and informal practices and events at the company that were challenging to you.
  - I. Did you feel that female workers were treated differently? Why or why not?
  - J. What were the things you did for personal happiness during your time there?
  
3. Leaving the conglomerate
  - A. What was the reason(s) behind your decision to resign?
  - B. Was there a turning point event for you to decide to leave?
  - C. What kind of considerations made you reluctant to leave?
  - D. What was your plan after resignation?
  - E. How did you prepare for your life after resignation?
  - F. What did your family and friends think about your decision?
  
4. Making sense of early resignation
  - A. What were your thoughts and feelings after resigning?
  - B. Compared to your life in conglomerate, how satisfied are you with your current life?
  - C. What does resigning from a conglomerate mean to you?
  - D. What do you think of the current trend of early resignation in Korea? Why do you think it is happening?
  - E. What does 'good work' mean to you?
  - F. What does 'good life' mean to you?
  - G. What should companies do to improve work environment?

## Appendix B Consent Form

### B.1 Consent Form (Korean)

#### 연구 참여 동의서

##### 이 연구는 누가 하나요?

책임연구자: Leila Harris, Associate Professor, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

공동연구자: Se Jin Um (엄세진), MA student, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

이 연구는 공동연구자인 엄세진의 석사 논문 연구의 일부이며, 이 연구를 통해 밝혀진 정보는 위 두 연구자에게 공개됨을 밝힙니다.

##### 연구의 목적은 무엇인가요?

본 연구는 여성이 겪은 대기업 조기퇴사 경험을 이해하기 위한 것으로서, 귀하와 실시한 심층면담을 분석한 자료를 토대로 여성들의 대기업 조기퇴사 이유와 그 후 인생 경로를 파악하고자 합니다.

##### 연구에 참여하면 어떻게 되나요?

이 연구에 참여하시게 된다면, 공동연구자는 면담 시간과 장소를 정하기 위하여 귀하에게 연락을 취할 것입니다. 면담은 최소 60 분에서 최대 90 분까지 진행됩니다. 면담 내용은 귀하가 일했던 조직과 그곳에서의 경험, 퇴사 이유, 그리고 지금 계획 중이거나 하고 있는 일 등으로 구성됩니다. 또한 귀하는 나이, 학력, 결혼여부 등과 같은 기본적인 인적사항에 대한 설문지를 작성하시게 됩니다.

면담은 두 개의 녹음기에 녹음되며, 공동연구자에 의해 글로 옮겨지고 영어로 번역됩니다. 연구와 관련된 모든 자료는 UBC 기관에 보관되다가 5년 이내 폐기됩니다. 면담 도중 답변하기 곤란한 질문은 답변하지 않으셔도 되며, 언제든지 면담을 중단하실 수 있습니다.

##### 연구가 종료되면 결과는 어디서 찾을 수 있나요?

이 연구의 결과는 공동연구자의 석사 논문에 보고되며 추후 학술지 논문이나 책으로 발표될 수도 있습니다. 연구보고서가 마무리되면 귀하에게 사본을 전달해드릴 예정이오니, 아래 두 방법 중 하나를 선택하신 후 받는이 주소를 기입해주시기 바랍니다.

1) 나는 이메일로 전달받기 원합니다. 내 이메일 주소는 \_\_\_\_\_입니다.

2) 나는 인쇄된 자료를 받기 원합니다. 내 주소는

\_\_\_\_\_입니다

### **연구에 참여하는 데 따르는 피해는 없나요?**

저희 연구자들은 귀하가 이 연구에 참여함으로써 피해를 입거나 부정적인 결과가 발생할 거라고 생각하지 않습니다. 일부 면담 질문들이 개인적이거나 민감한 주제를 다룰 수 있습니다. 이 경우, 원하지 않으시면 답변하지 않으셔도 됩니다. 연구와 관련된 다른 궁금하거나 우려스러운 점이 있으시면 연구자에게 알려주십시오.

### **연구에 참여하면 어떤 장점이 있나요?**

저희 연구자들은 귀하가 이 연구 참여를 통해 스스로 본인의 경험을 되돌아보며 과거를 보다 잘 이해할 수 있게 되고, 연구자와 대화하면서 과거 기억에 대한 감정을 정리하는 긍정적인 상담 효과를 볼 수 있을 거라고 기대합니다.

### **개인정보는 어떻게 보호되나요?**

귀하의 개인정보는 철저히 비밀이 보장됩니다. 귀하가 제공하시는 정보는 귀하가 선택한 필명으로 식별되며, 별도의 법으로 규정되지 않는 이상 귀하의 동의 없이 귀하의 신분은 밝혀지지 않습니다.

모든 서류는 귀하가 선택한 필명과 코드번호로 식별되고, 자물쇠로 잠긴 캐비닛에 저장됩니다. 녹음자료와 번역물은 비밀번호로 보호된 공동연구자의 외장하드에 보관됩니다. 위에 언급한 바와 같이, 모든 자료는 UBC 기관에 보관되다가 5년 이내 폐기됩니다.

### **연구 참여에 따른 보상이 있나요?**

연구 참여에 대한 금전적인 보상은 없습니다. 다만 귀하의 소중한 경험을 나누어주신 것에 대한 보답의 의미로 면담 중 음료와 다과를 제공해드릴 예정입니다.

### **이 연구에 대한 궁금한 점은 누구와 상의할 수 있나요?**

이 연구에 대한 질문이나 우려가 있으신 경우 책임연구자나 공동연구자를 연락해주시십시오. 연구자들의 이름, 전화번호와 이메일은 이 연구 참여 동의서의 첫 장에 나와 있습니다.

## 이 연구에 대한 불만이나 걱정이 생기면 어디에 연락할 수 있나요?

귀하의 연구참여자로서의 권리나 연구참여경험에 대해 우려나 불만이 있으신 경우, UBC 연구윤리센터 (Office of Research Ethics) 의 연구참여자불만접수번호 (Research Participant Complaint Line) 를 연락해주시십시오. 전화번호는 1-604-822-8598 이며, 장거리의 경우 [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) 또는 수신자 부담 번호 1-877-822-8598 을 이용해주십시오.

## 연구 참여자 동의서와 서명

이 연구 참여 여부는 전적으로 귀하의 선택입니다. 연구 참여를 선택하신 경우에도, 별도의 이유를 제공하지 않고 언제든지 연구 참여를 중단하실 수 있습니다.

- 귀하는 아래에 서명함으로써 이 동의서의 사본을 받았음을 확인합니다.
- 귀하는 아래에 서명함으로써 이 연구 참여에 동의함을 밝힙니다.

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참여자 이름

서명

날짜

## **B.2 Consent Form (English)**

### **CONSENT FORM**

#### **WHO IS CONDUCTING THE STUDY?**

**Principal Investigator:** Leila Harris, Associate Professor, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

**Co-Investigator:** Se Jin Um, MA student, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

This study is a part of the Co-Investigator's MA thesis. Both the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator will have access to the information provided in the study.

#### **WHY ARE WE DOING THIS STUDY?**

We are doing this study to understand women's experience of early resignation from conglomerates in South Korea. You are invited to take part in this study to help us learn about why they resign and where they go afterwards.

#### **WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU IN THE STUDY?**

If you choose to participate in this study, the Co-Investigator will contact you to set up an interview time and venue at your convenience. The interview will take 60 to 90 minutes of your time. During the interview, we will ask you about the organization you worked for, your experience there, why you decided to leave, and what you are planning to do or are doing now. You will also be asked to answer short demographic questions such as your age, educational background, marital status, previous and present occupation.

The interview will be recorded in two separate audio-recorders, and the recording will be transcribed and translated into English by the Co-Investigator. All data will be kept in a UBC facility and destroyed in 5 years. You will not be pressured to answer any question that may make you uncomfortable. You may remove yourself from the interview at any stage of the process.

#### **WHERE CAN I FIND THE STUDY ONCE IT IS COMPLETED?**

The results of this study will be reported in the Co-Investigator's Master's thesis and may also be published in journal articles or books. A copy of the research report will be either sent to you by email or mailed to your address. Please mark your option by providing your information accordingly.

1) I prefer an online copy sent by email. My email address is \_\_\_\_\_.

2) I prefer a hard copy sent to my mailing address. My mailing address is

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**IS THERE ANY WAY BEING IN THIS STUDY COULD BE BAD FOR YOU?**

We do not think that there is anything in this study that could harm you or be bad for you. Some of the questions we ask may be seem sensitive or personal. You do not have to answer any question if you do not want to. Please let one of the study investigators know if you have any concerns.

**WILL BEING IN THIS STUDY HELP YOU IN ANY WAY?**

Yes, hopefully by participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect upon and gain a better understanding of your experience.

**HOW WILL YOUR PRIVACY BE MAINTAINED?**

Your confidentiality will be respected. The information you provide will be identified with the pseudonym of your choice. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent unless required by law.

All documents will be identified only by your pseudonym and code number, and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Any file containing audio recordings and translations will be password protected on an encrypted external hard drive of the Co-Investigator. As mentioned above, all data will be kept in a UBC facility and destroyed in 5 years.

**WILL YOU BE PAID FOR YOUR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

We will not pay you for your taking part in this study. However, we will provide drinks and desserts during the interview to show our appreciation for your time spent to share your experience for this research.

**WHO CAN YOU CONTACT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?**

If you have any questions or concerns with this study, please contact the study investigators. The names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

**WHO CAN YOU CONTACT IF YOU HAVE COMPLAINTS OR CONCERNS ABOUT THE STUDY?**

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 1-604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND SIGNATURE**

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact.

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

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Participant Signature

Date

---

Printed Name of the Participant signing above

## Appendix C Letter of Initial Contact

### C.1 Letter of Initial Contact (Korean)

#### 연구 설명문

\_\_\_\_\_ 님께,

안녕하세요? 저희는 여성의 대기업 조기퇴사 경험에 대한 연구를 진행 중인 책임연구원 Leila Harris 와 공동연구원 Se Jin Um (엄세진)입니다. Leila Harris 는 University of British Columbia (UBC)의 Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice 의 부교수이며, 엄세진은 동 기관의 석사 학생입니다. 저희들은 이 연구를 위해 귀하와 같이 해당 경험을 하신 분들을 찾고 있습니다. 연구방법은 공동연구자가 진행하는 심층면담과 짧은 설문지로 이루어져 있습니다. 심층면담은 귀하의 경험과 생각, 감정에 대해 묻는 질문들로 구성되어 있으며, 60 분에서 90 분 소요되고 두 개의 녹음기에 녹음됩니다. 설문지는 귀하의 나이, 학력, 과거 및 현재 직업과 같은 기본적인 인적사항에 대한 질문들로 구성되어 있습니다. 귀하가 제공하신 답변에 대해 추가적인 정보 확인이 필요한 경우 후속 이메일을 받으실 수도 있습니다.

면담은 귀하의 집이나 직장 또는 근처 카페 등 귀하가 선호하시는 장소에서 진행됩니다. 녹음자료는 추후 글로 기록되며 영어로 번역됩니다. 모든 정보는 비밀이 보장되며 귀하가 원하시는 필명으로 식별됩니다. 또한 이 연구는 외부 지원을 받지 않은 관계로, 금전적인 보상을 드릴 수 없는 점 말씀드립니다. 그러나 귀하의 소중한 경험을 나누어주신 것에 대한 보답으로 면담 중 음료와 다과를 제공해드릴 예정입니다.

이 연구에 참여하실 의향이 있으시다면, 2 주 이내로 가능하신 날짜와 시간을 적어 회신해주시십시오. 유첨 ‘연구 참여 동의서’를 확인하시어 면담시 작성하실 부분을 숙지해주시기 바랍니다. 이 연구에 대한 질문이 있으시면, 언제든지 책임연구원나 공동연구자에게 연락해주시십시오. 연락처는 아래와 같습니다.

책임연구원: Leila Harris, Associate Professor, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

공동연구원: Se Jin Um (엄세진), MA student, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

그럼, 귀하의 답변을 기다리겠습니다.

감사합니다.

엄세진 드림

## C.2 Letter of Initial Contact (English)

### LETTER OF INITIAL CONTACT

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Hello, we are Leila Harris and Se Jin Um from the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice in the University of British Columbia. We are pursuing research on women's experience of early resignation from South Korean conglomerates. This research is a part of Se Jin's MA thesis, and we are inviting people like you who have the experience to help us. The research methods will involve one face-to-face interview and a short questionnaire. The interview will take 60 to 90 minutes and will be recorded on two recorders. The questionnaire contains basic demographic questions including your age, educational background, marital status, previous and current occupation. We may, however, send a follow-up email if we need clarification and/or additional information to the answers you have provided.

The interview will take place wherever you prefer, for example, your home, your office, a local café or study room. The audio recording will be transcribed and translated into English. All information you provide will be confidential and will be identified with the pseudonym of your choice. We also want to mention that as this research is not funded, financial compensation is not available. However, we are happy to provide you with drinks or desserts to show our appreciation for your time spent to share your experience for this research.

If you can confirm that you are willing to participate in the interview, please indicate your available dates and times within the next two weeks. Please find the attached Consent Form which you will need to fill in when we meet for the interview. If you have any questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact either Leila or Se Jin. Our contact information is as below.

**Principal Investigator:** Leila Harris, Associate Professor, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

**Co-Investigator:** Se Jin Um, MA student, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, The University of British Columbia (UBC)

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,  
Leila and Se Jin