Making Unskilled Workers: State Certified Eldercare Workers’ Struggles and the Exclusion of Co-Ethnic Migrant Workers in South Korea

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Is civil society a field for fair game for everyone? If so, why does feminists exclude migrant women care workers in their movement to revalue the gendered work, and why do labor unions abandon them, while making efforts to reach out those isolated South Korean workers in burgeoning elderly care industry? Scholars have pointed the South Korea’s tradition of “radical civil society” as a factor that propelled grass-root type migrant workers’ movement in Korea that burgeoned in the early 2000s, making it a unique case comparing other Asian countries. Yet the exclusion and the isolation of migrant eldercare workers in South Korea raises questions about the positive gloss in the literature, demonstrating the very selective affinity between the tradition of “radical civil society” and the movement for migrant workers.

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted with a South Korean-born eldercare workers organization and a Korean-Chinese ethnic organization, including in-depth interviews with workers, this study illuminates a case of South Korea where co-ethnic migrant women care workers from China are filling the informal care sector to meet the growing needs in eldercare yet their voices are unheard or actively degraded by South Korean workers and activists. Paid eldercare work has long been informal work, but the introduction of Long Term Care Insurance system in 2007 has produced state-certified elderly care worker employment for mid-aged South Korean women. Such state attempts to formalize and professionalize elderly care work, however, not only failed to produce decent jobs for South Korean women but also failed to meet the growing needs in eldercare, producing a large scale of informal thus unprotected eldercare jobs that are filled with co-ethnic migrant women from China. While the reliance on the informal co-ethnic migrant workers is growing, mobilized South Korean workers and activists do not include co-ethnic migrant workers in their struggles to improve their work, presenting the very ethno-nationalistic ideals of professional care and good care worker who deserve social recognition. By examining how organized South Korean eldercare workers and activists’ discursive strategies to revalue care work as professional work to improve care work unwittingly contribute to the exclusion of migrant workers, I argue that the interplay between publicly funded eldercare system and ethno-nationalism in the labour movement in South Korea reinforces the inequality between migrant and South Korean care workers in the burgeoning eldercare sector.