From Passengers to Drivers:
Status, Social Mobility, and Defining Female Achievement*

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Following advances in the stratification and social mobility literatures with the advent of multigenerational surveys and census data, mobility scholars have made enormous progress in our knowledge about social inequality. However, theories and empirical research have been dominated by the father-son linkage, leaving a gap in the literature about the lives of women and the mother-daughter linkage. Aiming to reopen the study on subjective experiences of upward mobility and on analyses of gender in the literature of social mobility, this paper examines how women experience mobility and seek status over the life course.

A compelling case in which to study the experienced social mobility and the female bond, especially between the adult daughter and her mother, is South Korea (hereafter Korea). After the Korean War in 1953, Korea experienced rapid modernization, which included industrialization, democratization, urbanization, and educational expansion. Nowadays, more than a quarter of the population resides in Seoul, the capital city of Korea, and the nuclear family has become the most dominant family form. As one result of such un-presented social change, a massive generational gap exists in women’s educational attainment levels. For the female population born in the 50s, only 18 percent completed tertiary education whereas for women born in the 80s, it is approximately 70 percent (OECD 2015). Additionally, the total fertility rate was 6.1 in 1960 and it has fallen dramatically, reaching 1.2 in 2010. One puzzling pattern is found in the lack of dramatic change in the female labor force participation rate, especially for women in the age range of marriage and childbearing. In this context of Korea's transformation, women’s daily lives are embedded in tensions and ambivalence of what it means to be successful and happy.

This study explores the role of family and culture in shaping how women make sense of their worlds in the face of the whirlwind speed of social change. The main purpose is to capture sentimentality, language, and desire of a generation – who are in their 30s - that was raised to be high achieving, yet lived in society that has been slow to change in terms of the status of women. Through the experiences and narratives of young mothers, I argue that families play a significant role not only in mediating the structural and cultural constraints and opportunities faced by
young women but also by shaping the definition of what it means to be successful as a woman, daughter, and mother.

Using 100 in-depth interviews with mothers who have at least one preschool child but have different family backgrounds, educational levels, and career trajectories, this paper shows how Korean women express what it means to be a successful a daughter, mother, and person in unsettled times. A majority of women describe their lives to be ‘stuck in between’ expectations to sacrifice their own desires for the family and expectations to always be high achievers in schools and workforce. Notably, the most important process is that adult daughters construct their career aspirations through their families, mainly their own mothers. Women define their achievement and interpret their experienced mobility in comparison to their own mother’s lives. Specifically, highly skilled mothers have relatively more financial support from their families of origin beyond young adulthood. However, for all women, the gap between the younger and older female generation shapes normative and symbolic meanings of being successful. Such evaluations are critical in developing career aspirations and in making work decisions after motherhood. Women who perceive themselves as more privileged and successful compared to their own mothers construct strong career aspirations. The main narrative behind their strong will to seek higher status in the public sphere is the sacrifice of their own mothers and the symbolic meaning of making their mothers proud.

In the end, Korea demonstrates a case in which contemporary women’s identities and subjectivities are affected by their close ties, mainly through their extended families. Findings empirically challenge stereotypical images of women as passive seekers of status who try to “marry up” or to raise a child who can maintain the family’s status by excelling in school. Instead, this study takes a new direction in the sociology of family and intergenerational mobility by demonstrating how women are not just passengers of the status seeking process but also one of main participants of families’ status seeking process.

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