

Infrastructure Aunties

Youbin Kang

The *emo* (이모, in Hangul) subway cleaner rides the subway to work late on a Friday night in Seoul as the city's debauchery subsides.¹ Dressed in colorful patterns deemed unfashionable by the young, and with a characteristic short-haired perm, her outward presentation is bold, in the style of a stereotypical aunty. She stands out as an anomaly in a crowd filled with young, alcohol-flushed faces and older men whose liver problems are betrayed by their greying complexions. She tends to stay home on weekend nights, brought up by a generation that had gender roles with clear spatial connotations. The husband is *bakkatsaram* (바깥사람), the 'outside person', and the wife, *ansaram* (안사람), the 'inside person'. The *bakkatsaram* traverses wider economic structures and contributes to matters of money and society, while the *ansaram* is symbolically and physically relegated to the domestic sphere of family and care. Riding the subway to work amongst drunk people are the *emos*, who I refer to as 'infrastructure aunties.' They are objects of discipline and fascination whose presence blurs the boundaries between inside and outside.

¹ 이모 (*emo*) is Korean for an aunt on the mother's side. This term is also used affectionately to refer to middle-aged women workers.

Arriving at the workplace, the *emo* changes into her uniform of navy polo and chinos bearing the logo of the Seoul Metro and waits in the closet-sized staff room for the crowd to disperse, snacking on cut fruit the cleaners prepare for each other. Middle-aged female workers, employed mainly on part-time, precarious contracts, have been cleaning the subway systems of South Korea since the 1970s. Accompanying the *emo* on their work shift, we discussed the time this one *emo* was on TV. She complained that she was ‘outed’ to all her family and friends as a subway cleaner; she enjoyed the fame but was also embarrassed. The ladies follow up with words of empowerment, reminding her that their work is an integral civil service.

When the last train pulls out of the station, the women put on rubber boots and the same [pink rubber gloves](#), or ‘mommy hands’ (마미손), used by housewives around the country to protect their soft hands from harsh detergent and salty marinades. They duck under the half-closed metal gates, and the team leader hoses the platform of grime while the rest of the workers use squeegee brooms to clear vomit and the detritus of urban life from the underground station. They are the first to wake and last to sleep, as housewives tend to do.

The *emo*, as infrastructure aunty, traverses the boundaries of public and private through invisibilized work. Their gendered labor has been considered supplemental, not worthy of focus and generally dismissed (Wijunamai 2022). However, the infrastructure aunty as liminal space-taker, equipped with the habitus of care and a solidarity sharpened throughout their life in modern Korea, scrubs derision into clean adoration – making the importance of this figure harder to camouflage or take for granted.

Conceptualizing infrastructure as labor emphasizes its socio-materiality, its “dynamic processes that both disrupt and reinscribe social positions across a range of scales, locations, and demographics” (Murton 2019: 2). This helps to foreground the ways that labor maintains, activates and embodies infrastructures. Infrastructure aunties are the workers who clean the subways in South Korea, but as a semiotic vehicle,² this term foregrounds the auntiness of infrastructure, departing from its common association with the masculinity of state-led projects. “As a form of kin, aunties blur the boundaries of the family[;] with the capacity to both surveil and sabotage its circumference,” notes Khubchandani, “aunties appear as figures of fascination, adoration, derision, and desire in public discourses” (Khubchandani 2022: 223). Like aunties, infrastructure is networked. It is not itself productive capital, yet is integral to the latter’s maintenance. The aunty is symbolic, ubiquitous and adored, yet derided and complained about; she traverses the public and private spheres. It is also the case that infrastructure aunties keep the metropolis moving. Their labor reproduces the glossy infrastructures of seamless mobility that characterize the modern cityscape.

² The poetics of infrastructure “take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function” (Larkin 2013: 327).

The Collective Agency of Infrastructure Aunties

“Obviously, they didn’t really think of us when building these stations,” a Busan subway cleaner told me during my fieldwork in 2021. “We have an unventilated closet to rest in. Sometimes we have to travel to another station to take a shower.” The neglect of laboring aunties’ bodies is reflected in the material infrastructure of subway stations. This



history can be traced to the gendered experience of compressed modernity in Korea, where the undervaluation of domestic labor was exploited to build the modern nation (Kim 1997; Koo 2001; Moon 2005; Chang 2020). The architectural layout of subway systems is material evidence of this reality; they were built under direct state supervision by the military dictatorship. The military corruption behind such outsourced cleaning work also meant that the infrastructure of train stations did not have cleaning workers in mind.

← **Protective gear.**

Photo: Youbin Kang, 2020.

→ **The grime of the subway platform.**

Photo: Youbin Kang, 2020.

Nevertheless, aunties have not been silent about their mistreatment – as evinced by the attention of the labor movement to cleaning and service workers, who are mostly middle-aged women (Korea General Labor Union 2014). The symbolic struggle for their work to be classified as formal and legitimate highlights the agency of aunties as key participants in the contemporary labor movement of Korea.

The strategies of aunties are informed by their habitus as mothers within a family unit. Many of the activists I interviewed were not student-turned-organizer types with the militant youthful bravado of typical Korean labor movements, but mothers. Some of them were out of the main workforce while raising their children, taking outsourced jobs on the side from nearby factories sewing buttons or embellishing boots with diamante. Others found that their old, retired husbands were no longer able to bring in the same monthly wages and so took the family's finances into their own hands. Some tried to save up for their children's weddings or escape more stressful, lower-paid restaurant work, preferring the stability of a public-sector job because subways are too important to go bankrupt overnight.

The habitus of care translates into the aunties' self-organizing and activism. When I asked one aunty why she was so involved when she could just take her pay home and retire in a few years, she answered that she spent her energy organizing in the workplace because she was a mother. Another explained that her concern for other precarious workers also came from an ethic of care: "These kids, you know, in their twenties and thirties, should be making at least three million won to be able to get married. But the most they get 2.4 million. I ask them because they are like sons to me." She went on to describe that her work as aunty-cum-activist benefits these younger subcontracted workers who she saw as much more vulnerable to employer repression compared to her. She explained, "When they organize, they terminate their contracts. [...] I always feel sorry for them." Aunties build solidarity by leveraging the liminal space in which they dwell as mother-workers.

Many of the women claimed that their disinterest in politics had transformed when they started their jobs. One aunty told me that she would always vote conservative because her husband was conservative, and she had previously thought trade unions only caused trouble. Now, she is head of the union for the Busan subway and appears on the news wearing her distinctive red headband with the word 투쟁! ('Fight!'), and a blue utilitarian vest, both symbolic of the labor movement in South Korea. Moreover, a group of aunties from the Busan metro are active participants in solidarity rallies, arranging cleaning-worker campaigns in universities and hotels through the aunty-networks they have built.



Akin to some of the processes and products of infrastructure itself, infrastructure aunties weave networks and build solidarity through relational gestures. Aunties often complain about the younger and more educated formal employees working as station agents who project a sense of superiority around them, and who also sometimes oppose attempts to regularize precarious contracts (Kang 2023). The women commented that these young people had 'dried hearts' (메마른마음). Yet, in picket lines and union meetings, the aunties are still quick to share snacks with everyone, unabashed in their

Aunty Triptych.

Photo: Jimmy Sert, 2021.

labor of weaving networks and crafting solidarity. Aunties readily build camaraderie with others; they always know whether someone has a strict spouse or is too busy outside of work to participate in the latest labor action planned for the weekend. Their solidarity and other-oriented behavior are intersectional with their gender and class positions (McGinn and Oh 2017).

Infrastructure is both ordinary and spectacular. As ‘inside people’ negotiating their roles as ‘outside people’ within a state-run infrastructure that maintains the behemoth economy, infrastructure aunties prompt us to think twice about the auntyness of infrastructures – which bedazzle cityscapes but only continue to exist through the banal and invisibilized labor of aunties.

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