

## Article

# South Korean Christian Communities Supporting Women in Need

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**Abstract:** Christianity does not have as long of a history as other monotheistic religions and traditional ideologies in Korea, but—especially from the end of the 19th century—its new concepts have had a huge impact on the basic thoughts of Korean society. This paper focuses on the effects of Christianity and the activity of Christian communities on women's lives. According to my preliminary findings, in the late 1800s, the Christian missionaries and their newly formed communities offered opportunities for girls and women to get education, a profession, access to better health care, and learn self-care. After the complicated decades between 1910 and 1950, South Korea was experiencing remarkable changes, and Christians were an active part of this rebuilding, helping the lives of those who were struggling with poverty, lack of daily necessities, education, and health care. This paper aims to examine the thoughts and actions of Korean Christian communities towards decisions on childbirth, children out of wedlock, adoption, and single motherhood. This study investigates the approaches of South Korean Christian communities towards women related to the above-mentioned circumstances, focusing on the early examples and the last five to six decades. It is assumed that even though South Korea is now considered a modernized country, the government sometimes fails to cope with current problems, and traditional notions are still strong in familial matters. Therefore, not obeying conventional forms may cause social conflicts, or the decisions are hidden because of taboos and stigmas. This research is based on the publications of Christian communities and involves documentaries and case studies, including the baby box operation and adoption. This paper contributes to the expanding studies on Korean Christian communities, highlighting the social norms and their changes generated by new religious thoughts, while giving an insight into the daily struggles of Korean women's lives when it comes to decision-making about their motherhood.



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**Keywords:** Christian community; Christian thoughts; Korean women; motherhood; adoption; childbirth; baby box; social stigma

## 1. Introductory Remarks

The history of Christianity on the Korean Peninsula reaches back to the 18th century<sup>1</sup>, with the first Catholic missionaries and the first Koreans<sup>2</sup> who decided to live their lives according to the Catholic principles. But the first Catholics in Korea faced various challenges in their faith, suffering torture and even condemnation to death. By the end of the 19th century, when the international atmosphere around Korea started to change and the way of thinking regarding the foreign relations among Koreans began to open new chapters, the newly arrived foreign missionaries, mainly representatives of Protestant churches, were able to grasp a more stable position for themselves on the peninsula. In the 1880s, there were numerous Christian communities as a result of successful evangelization; first, they secretly smuggled the Bible into the northern regions of Korea and then, reached many middle-class followers quickly. In 1901, a theological seminary opened in Pyeongyang; the first Korean pastor was inducted here in 1907 (Ahn 2011, pp. 122–25). But already before entering the 20th century, the missionaries had success in establishing new schools and medical centers, based on their belief about the involvement of members regardless of

social status and gender. Contrary to the traditional Confucian order (the idea of predominance of men over women 남존여비 男尊女卑), under God, men and women are considered equal (Choi 2009, pp. 1–3). According to Choi Hyaewol, the Western missionaries felt the obligation to rescue the unfortunate Korean sisters and bring them the blessings of Christian civilization (Choi 2009, p. 21). The present paper mentions some of the early examples (late 19th century and early 20th century), specifically related to women who could get involved in education and medical training as pioneers, thanks to the principles of Christians.

In the second half of the 20th century<sup>3</sup>, when the modernization process had already started nationwide, Christians were also present and getting more and more support and followers, partly thanks to their humanitarian work. Christian communities helped in various ways to find a temporary or a permanent home for orphans, and they were making efforts to make their living circumstances better in the orphanages as well. Many of the activists helped Korean prostitutes and unmarried young mothers because they faced hard criticism and strong stigmatization coming not only from their own society but, in many cases, from their own family members as well. It can be described as a tragic paradox how the country was dynamically developing in various fields like industrialization and urbanization with new facilities, technology, and infrastructure but still relying on principles of the past centuries, mainly the Confucian thoughts on men's and women's roles, social expectations, standards, and purposes in life. It is hard to grasp the precise details of numbers regarding orphans, adoptees, single mothers, prostitutes, divorced women before the 1990s, but after the 1990s, the statistics started to get more comprehensive and thorough. Even though we have now entered the third decade of the 21st century, the issue of single motherhood, children out of wedlock, and, sometimes, even adoption is treated with sensitivity, leaving Koreans with mixed feelings towards such topics.

Currently, there are more than 60 facilities helping single mothers in South Korea<sup>4</sup> and some baby boxes to embrace neglected children. These kinds of facilities are, in many cases, operated by Christian communities and volunteers because they approach the question of family and motherhood in a different way, compared to the conventional Confucian principals. Numerous online articles and forums are dealing with these topics, and many comments include harsh criticisms claiming that these facilities and newly adopted measures towards single mothers justify or even praise them as a form of enablement, even though they go against the 'normal'. Baby boxes are not officially operated facilities and are not certified or managed by any medical institutions, which is the basic assumption since the government could never come to a clear resolution on that subject. Questions on how to decide about a life, can a mother give birth and then leave the baby or should she have an abortion, have been triggered again in July 2023, because of the 'Suwon case of dead babies in the fridge'<sup>5</sup>. Korean society has a mixture of Confucian and Christians thoughts, conventional and modern approaches.

This study does not aim to go through the detailed history of Christianity on the Korean peninsula and in South Korea but attempts to look into some specific examples of how foreign Christian missionaries and local Christian communities offered help and influenced some changes in the South Korean society. Some might argue that this approach can be evaluated as a biased one, because other organizations and civil communities might have had and are currently having similar activities, to which the author agrees as well. The mentioned cases here are well-documented thanks to the reports of early missionaries and, later, as a result of documentaries and online platforms. These provide real life stories and tell the experiences of Korean women who had to overcome specific difficulties, in many cases, originating from their homeland's older traditions and thoughts. Through this examination, I argue that numerous Korean women not only had troubles with their fundamental needs related to birth giving and motherhood, but they also had to find alternatives and new approaches to be able to improve in the field of education, professional life, or self-realization. The cases mentioned here describe solutions which sometimes contradict the fundamental Confucian ideas and conventional social norms. We can also conclude in

the end how important the work of Christian communities is, because these challenges in women's lives are constant, yet to be solved by the government or other official authorities and yet to be re-evaluated or better accepted by average Korean people as well.

## 2. Material and Methods

The findings of the study are based on the reports of early missionary communities and research on their main figures in the late 19th and early 20th century. As for the later decades, controversial topics were understood through news portals and ministry reports, including statistical data and analysis on recent initiatives, as well as documentaries created by leading channels available on online platforms. Since the paper repeatedly mentions the tension between the new and conventional concepts, both well detected in modern Korean society, the usage and interpretation of online news portals and their comments sections are reasonable, give an insight into the personal opinion of South Korean citizens, and might put the questions in a different perspective compared to the governmental briefings or a Christian minister's speeches. Examining a controversial issue might be challenging and carries the risk of false evaluation, thus background information is also collected widely and is summarized, then blended into the descriptions of each section.

The examined period in this paper is rather long, with the purpose of presenting examples of Christians supporting activities towards socially vulnerable groups in different eras of Korean history (the beginnings of the Protestant mission, first decades of the 20th century, decades after the wars, and the 21st century). The spectrum of the research can be considered wide in the aspect of subtopics, because several separate issues are discussed, such as education, professional training, orphanages, adoption, unmarried mothers, and baby boxes. Each of those topics has their unique changing process and circumstances in Korean society, reflecting how conventional and strict thoughts shaped the people's approach towards those matters before and how modern and individualistic ideas slowly emerged in the thinking of the later generations. The descriptions and upcoming questions in the analysis can provide a base for an overall understanding about the impact of Christian efforts on women's lives and might lead to further detailed research in each topic separately.

## 3. Early Examples of Christians Helping Women

Although even the first foreign female missionaries agreed about the notion which describes the woman's ideal place in the domestic sphere<sup>6</sup>, their new initiatives helped to form some foundations for modernized womanhood in Korea. Opening schools for girls was a big step which provided a new way of self-realization for women who desired to be free from the strict Confucian limitations (Choi 2009, pp. 1–3).

The main example here would be the Ewha Hakdang (이화학당 梨花學堂, Pear Blossom Academy), opening its doors in 1886 to girls under the leadership of a Methodist Episcopal Church missionary, Mary F. Scranton<sup>7</sup>, as an innovation in the field of education. Girls, who had to accept their limited teaching for centuries, received a venue for learning not only about theology but algebra, geography, and English (Period of Ewha Hakdang n.d.). Scranton's figure and achievements made a huge impact on girls' education in Korea at that time. Even though at first, it was not easy for her to gain attention among Koreans, thanks to the new approaches of the Joseon leadership, such as promoting modern medicine and education among others, she could gain some validation from the government, and the number of attending children rose year by year. The teachers at Ewha did not intend to force Western learning material on young Koreans, and they also welcomed Korean teachers like Yi Kyöng-suk<sup>8</sup>, who taught *önmun* (언문 言文) and *hanmun* (한문 漢文) as well. Scranton also organized Bible studies sessions, and she was active with her evangelistic work outside of Seoul too.<sup>9</sup>

Western female missionaries had a quite dark view on contemporary Korean women at that time; they saw them as denied of education, living in subordination, and with lack of hygiene (Choi 2009, pp. 12–13) They strongly criticized their traditional techniques of

health care as well, saying, “the native physicians know nothing about anatomy, physiology, therapeutics” (Baker 1898, p. 169). Advancement in their home tasks and cleaning, plus improvement in their medical care was crucially needed. Dr. Metta Howard, a missionary physician, requested by Scranton, arrived in 1887 and helped her to open a hospital for women<sup>10</sup>, as a pioneering achievement again (*The Legacy of Mary Scranton n.d.*). The name of this institution was Bogu Yeogwan (보구여관 保救女館, Figure 1.), and it was established in a *hanok* building with *ondol*, keeping the traditional architectural style, with five patient’s rooms, a waiting room, storage room, and pharmacy room. The exam room was wide enough to be used as an operation room as well (Lee 2008, pp. 38–40). The missionary doctors<sup>11</sup> were sometimes accompanied by nurses<sup>12</sup>, who, at the same time, kept performing their missionary work, for example, via organizing prayer meetings here.



**Figure 1.** Picture: Hospital building in Seoul (Baker 1898, p. 171).

Moreover, some of them took on the role of teaching the next generation of nurses, or let us say, the first generation of Korean nurses, by initiating nurse training (간호원양성소<sup>13</sup>, officially opened in 1903). Since the demand both for female medical care and nurse training opportunity was rising, the facility had to be expanded. A new hospital facility was built in Dongdaemun<sup>14</sup>, so the nurse training was relocated there. Besides the professionals, there were helpers (both foreign missionaries and local Koreans) working in both institutions. They were not only assistants to the doctors and nurses, but they were also responsible for chores, and they read the Bible in Korean for the patients and taught them the prayers (Lee 2008, pp. 43–46). The successes of the Ewha Hakdang and the Bogu Yeogwan were connected in the first generation of female Korean–English interpreters. The young learners who could acquire English well in the school later became interpreters in the medical rooms to help communication between the foreign doctors and the local patients (Lee 2008, pp. 45–46). Some of them were not only trained to be assistants, but the doctors tried to broaden their teaching covering physiology and anatomy and, since 1883, also including pharmacology and basic treatment processes (Lee 2008, pp. 48–53). Actually, one of those girls became the first Korean female doctor, Kim Jeomdong (김점동, or Esther Park, Figure 2). She was a daughter to a missionary Korean father, and she was one of the first pupils of Ewha Hakdang. She was well-trained under Rosetta Hall, who later helped her to move to the US to complete basic Western education. She got a job in a children’s hospital in New York, plus she could study the Latin language, physics, and mathematics, while experiencing the American life<sup>15</sup>. Her aim was to enter the Baltimore Woman’s Medical College soon, which she graduated from in 1900. Later, she returned to Korea as a missionary physician; she worked in Pyeongyang and Seoul as well, and she



participated in the above-mentioned nurse training program, where she helped to develop its curriculum and took charge of classes. Beside the medical treatment, she provided her patients hygiene education, and in her free time, she continued her missionary and health education activities on the streets (Jung 2020, pp. 585–87).



**Figure 2.** Picture: Esther Park in her teenage years (Baker 1898, p. 172).

Another ‘occupation’ connected to these fields were the Bible Women (성경부인 or 전도부인). Their tasks were not limited to medical assistance or even prayer circles; they also visited sick people at their homes or family members who were mourning, advised housewives with household chores and basic hygiene, helped with infant care, travelled to countryside areas to teach about the Bible, and assisted the work of ministers at the church communities. Their presence was important, because, with their help, foreign missionaries could enter Korean homes. It was an important aspect for foreigners to get in touch with the female members of the Korean society, because they considered them equal to men, so they wanted to treat them also equally, whether it be evangelization, religious practices, educational approach, or medicine. But the local practice of ‘inside–outside rule’ (내외법 内外法)<sup>16</sup> made it impossible to easily get in touch with Korean women, especially from higher classes (Kovács 2016, pp. 163–66). On the other hand, hindrances with other processes also emerged from the still dominant traditional thoughts, that when a girl marries, she must quit her other activities to devote herself completely to her husband and family. Consequently, girls who were eagerly learning and gaining even medical knowledge left these institutions; therefore, American professionals in many cases preferred their Korean helpers to be either from older generations or younger widows (Lee 2008, p. 45).

Both Scranton and Howard, among other fellow female missionaries<sup>17</sup>, were the members of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society (여성해외선교회), originally established with the purpose of helping and supporting female Presbyterian missionaries to establish schools, homes, hospitals, and asylums in foreign countries, like, for instance, Brazil, China, Japan, and Persia. The society itself finished its operations in 1940 (Howard n.d.).

#### 4. Children without Parents

After the end of World War II, and the Korean war specifically, the lives of Korean children were not easy, especially for those who had lost one or both of their parents. Additionally, there were the so-called “G.I. babies”, the mixed-race children of an American (including Afro-American soldiers) father and a Korean (unwed) mother, who were rejected by the traditional Korean society at that time, because of the lack in the ‘purity’ of their blood and the lack of paternal family ties (Jang 1998). The number of orphans was high and their situation, including accommodation, food, family matters, education, opportunities, or support was not so manageable for the current government, and it was also not of priority among other challenges. One of the first initiators to solve this problem were

amongst the Christian missionaries. Christian Children's Fund<sup>18</sup> (미국기독교아동복지회) was founded in 1948 by Dr. J. Calvitt Clarke<sup>19</sup>, and its mission was to help the excluded and vulnerable children. Their active operations started in South Korea, where their representative, Verent Mills<sup>20</sup>, was sent from the Hong Kong office to help with the assistance of five orphanages in Seoul (for example, Salvation Army Hoosang School, Hyecheonwon, Jeolje Girl's House) and the nearby area, where they could accept more than 400 children altogether. For his great contribution to children's welfare, he got the nickname "father of orphans" (Lee 2021). Since there were no specific legislations or central measures towards these problems until 1960, their efforts played an important role. Their foundation related to Korea is called Green Umbrella (초록우산 어린이재단). In the 1960s, the numbers of orphans were still rising, and it was hard to keep up with the facilities to be able to take care of this many children. The organization started to take steps to help children to find a home where they can be raised, which meant finding relatives, foster parents, or new parents who will adopt, so they established the Appenzeller Children's Community. In 1983, the Centre for Finding Children (어린이찾아주기종합센터) was found with the aim of finding missing children, protecting their right of life and development. In 1987, they were entrusted with the creation of the Children's Charter, which was declared in 1988 (대한민국 어린이헌장) (History Green Umbrella n.d.).

According to Arissa Oh, a currently active and well-known researcher on the topic of Korean adoptions, this kind of humanitarian work has a strong connection with Christianity, and the immersion in the matter of adoption and its changes with law shows the reflection of Christian Americanism. Because of the one-drop rule<sup>21</sup>, Americans had controversial ideas on adoption from abroad, but the era of the Cold War created a special atmosphere regarding this matter as well. However, many American (white) couples preferred a child from South Korea because it was considered a partner to the Western countries, confronting communism. Moreover, even though American military actions helped South Korea a lot to achieve its independency, it had several side effects which had to be mended. Saving the children without parents and providing them a safe, permanent home was one way to do so (Oh 2005).

The high numbers of foreign adoption (or intercountry adoption) still did not decrease after the 1980s (in 1985, 8837 Korean children were adopted by foreigners), even though South Korea could achieve a stable and higher living standard by that time. The government had started to make efforts mainly because of the harsh criticism. The reason why mothers still choose it is the social stigmatization and the dominance of conventional family patterns; most unwed mothers face these difficulties, which made them decide on giving up their child. Of course, South Korean children were also adopted by South Korean parents, but usually, these adoptive parents do not want to have their friends and relatives know their child is adopted. The Confucian values and emphasis on son preference influenced the adoption law for decades, and its effects can still be detected in the 21st century. In the second half of the 20th century, many Korean families secretly adopted a nephew to keep their lineage and then reported them as their own, which is why even the statistics by official administrative institutions might not give us true data (Korean Women's Development Institute 2009, pp. i–vii).

In the current Korean society, the issue of orphans is often discussed. The main problematic argument is that children living in orphanages might not be actual orphans and that they are sent to these institutions because of divorce, economic challenges, or hardships of life. The decreasing numbers do not mean improvement in this matter, because the reasons behind might be worse. Sometimes, parents do not have the qualifications to raise their own child, and the matter of abuse or abandonment rises (Lee 2019).<sup>22</sup> According to the statistical report by The Ministry of Health and Welfare, there were 3756 children in the protective action system in 2022, which is lower compared to 5053 in 2020. The numbers have been gradually getting lower; in 2002, it was higher than 22,000 and dropped under 10,000 in 2010. Usually, more than half of them get into childcare facilities, and less

than half of them can live later on with adoptive families or foster families (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2022).<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Unmarried Mothers

In the Korean language, those mothers who raise their child outside of marriage are called *mihonmo* (미혼모 未婚母). With modernization and the dynamic development of South Korea in recent decades, the numbers of marriages are dropping, and the ratio of unwed mothers is increasing rather than decreasing. According to statistical information<sup>24</sup> from the Korean National Statistics Office, the non-marital birth rate was under 1% before 1990, and it slightly increased above 1% in the early 1990s. In the second half of the 1990s, it dropped again to 0.6%~0.8%, but went above 1 again starting from the beginning of the 2000s and is still more than 1.6% (Korean Women's Development Institute 2009, pp. i–vii).<sup>25</sup>

Compared to several OECD countries, the share of birth outside of marriage in South Korea is significantly low, less than 5% according to statistical data (2020).<sup>26</sup> Even though this number is not high, the women in these cases do not have an easy situation. There has been a social stigma towards women who decided to raise a child or more children alone. People can sometimes suspect unfortunate circumstances<sup>27</sup> in the background; in many cases, the woman was left alone and could get support from neither the biological father nor her own family. South Korean women often cannot rely on their social network because they are afraid to share the news about unexpected pregnancy with their close friends or relatives as well, so they must find solutions on their own, which includes medical care before and after birth, taking care of the infant, deciding about single motherhood or adoption. All of these have not only financial, but also mental and emotional, consequences, and both the system and society have their flaws. Documentaries report the difficult experiences of young women who must leave their home and get disconnected with their parents as well. Fortunately, there are some organizations and support groups who offer their help to assist with medical care, accommodation, and even part-time jobs for these single moms.<sup>28</sup> For Christian leaders or activists, the basic idea about unwed mothers is not focusing on the fact that they had their individual decision to give birth even though they were not in a stable household, but they respect these women who did not give up on a life and protect it despite all the circumstances. They should be embraced by the Jesus's love and acknowledged as a child to God, and therefore they should be helped with all the efforts needed (Changwon Church 2020).

One of those supporting institutions is Aeranwon (애란원, originally with the name Eunhyewon 은혜원), established in 1960 by an American missionary, Eleanor van Lierop (her Korean name was Ban Aeran 반애란). She arrived in South Korea in 1949, and after establishing schools both for young boys and girls, she was appointed as a professor at Yonsei University. With this institution, her aim was to help prostitutes, single mothers, young orphans, and runaway teenagers. She considered this as God's will to help others (Yu 2015). Based on her Christian belief, she found it important to give a chance of rehabilitation to sex trafficking victims and also offer maternity protection and respect for the embryos. Her views and activity were an important attitude towards the mentioned special circumstances, and it influenced, at least a little bit, how Korean people should think about women in those cases (Kang 2021, p. 210).

In the 2000s, the activities further expanded. New advisory centers and living facilities opened, their networking system developed, and they started online and offline helplines, organized meetings, focused on sex education to prevent possible next pregnancies, and published stories and a book titled 'Dreaming a world'. They help to prepare for events and celebrations such as first birthdays, organize experience programs, for instance, museum and gallery visits, outdoor tours, offer extra learning activities like musical instruments, religious studies, and also have one-to-one meeting sessions. As for childrearing, they help both with the prenatal care and infant care after birth and have personal discussions with the mothers about future prospects, including the option of single motherhood and

adoption ([Aeranwon n.d.](#)). The building offers a place to stay for about 40 women, but it is also supporting around 500–600 women outside ([Yu 2015](#)). Now, the organization is the biggest single mother and child protection facility, and it plays an important role to advance the social welfare in South Korea, because they support single mothers not only with protection but help them to get independent again, to return to school, or to get employed, and they help with childrearing issues and are making efforts to prevent child abuse ([Kang 2021](#), p. 210).

## 6. Baby Box

Public baby boxes (베이비박스 or 생명박스 in Korean) are now quite well-known alternatives in many countries to women who are not able or choose not to raise their newborn ([Jeong 2012](#)). In South Korea, the question arises from time to time: is it a safe alternative to help an unmarried girl or woman and her child so both can be safe in a way, or is it a method for neglect?

Either way, until 2022, these boxes welcomed around 2220 babies. The first one was installed by the Jusarang Christian Community<sup>29</sup> in Seoul. There is a passage from the Bible (Book of Psalms 27:10) written above the opening, saying “내 부모는 나를 버렸으나 여호와께는 나를 영접하시리이다”, which means “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me” (Figure 3). The Christian operators of this box believe that this is a last possibility a miserable mother-to-be can rely on, and the newborns are not “babies thrown away” but “protected babies”. Usually, anybody can leave a baby here anonymously, but according to the data collected by the Jusarang Community, 84.4% of the mothers were unmarried single mothers in 2023, having a baby without a spouse because of divorce, separation, or unofficial relationship as a foreigner. The majority of them are in their 20s, but almost 10% are teenagers. In general, their pregnancies are hidden so they must give birth secretly, not in a safe and clean environment with medical help but in unfriendly places with less hygiene ([Oh 2023](#)). The documentary videos show informative examples where the personnel of the operation staff go after the mother and try to get into a conversation with them. They approach with compassion and understanding and do not force anything. They offer both medical and mental help if needed and explain options. They try to understand the background situation of the person who left the baby, and even though they will not convince them to change their mind, there is an opportunity to write a goodbye letter. In the more positive cases, the parent-to-be stays or comes back to visit and will make efforts to form some kind of relationship with the child until they can be reunited. They are reassured that their newborn is at a safe place because these facilities are equipped with necessities for infant care, usually financed by donations and supporters. The staff working here is consisted of volunteers who are active members of the Christian community. Their actions are often followed with prayers ([Angel-like babies 2016](#)). The recent documentaries also reveal that many of these babies are born with permanent disease or disabilities, such as Down syndrome, visual impairment, incomplete body parts, or mental weakness ([Minister n.d.](#)).

It might be surprising to hear that there are only few baby boxes available in South Korea, one is the above mentioned in Seoul, the second appeared in Gunpo, installed by the New Canaan Church in 2014. Christian representatives sometimes form an opinion that even if it is a tough mission to save lives, they will do it according to the teachings of God. “예수님의 사랑을 실천하기 위해 온몸을 바쳤다”, which means “They devote their whole self to practice Jesus’s love.”. They state that it is the government who should be responsible for these cases, but the authorities are still far from real actions. They should prepare measures to help the infants who are without parents or who have to spend years in foster care and have an administrative background, so these children can get their official documents without problems when they get older. Also, when the children are placed in a permanent protective shelter because they are before adoption or their adoption process has failed, the employees work in shifts and cannot (or will not) show special affection towards the babies, and this can cause emotional damage for the infants. In contradiction



to that, volunteers in the Christian communities do not feel intimidated to have close emotional ties with the babies, and in some cases, they decide to adopt based on their personal feelings (Hyun 2023).



**Figure 3.** Picture: Front window of the baby box. (Yonhap News, 11 May 2023).

In the first years of the baby box operations, there were opposing voices which demanded the abolishment of the box, saying that it is an illegal operation and non-authorized to take care of a newborn, questioning the ethics and morality. On the other hand, later, there were some initiations to install them in other cities as well, but the idea was suspended due to the discussion about negligence, or whether she should be punished or not if the mother is caught in action. The ideal situation would be a country where the childrearing circumstances and social acceptance is so well-developed that no one would seek help from an unknown organization. However, in South Korea, even the legal structure is against it, because according to the Act On Special Cases Concerning Adoption (입양특례법), children must have a birth registration with correct data as an obligatory, or they are not considered as candidates for adoption (Special Adoption Act n.d.). Actually, the baby box centers also operate as support centers for pregnant women in crisis (위기임산부), which is now a term used to describe the phenomenon when a woman is in a critical position due to financial, social, or psychological reasons (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2023), and she will be not able to take care of her newborn, so she needs extra help with birth preparation, infant care, or she lacks a social network, such as family members, or even a place to stay<sup>30</sup>. These women can make a personal decision about the birth, whether they want to reveal their identity or not in the medical institution, and there is an option for anonymous birth, and they are informed of the consequences for the child in this case, how it is proceeded officially, and what steps will be taken so the child can be adopted by others. This is now called the protected birth system (보호출산제) (Briefing 2023). The details are specified by a new law (법률 제19816호: 위기 임신 및 보호출산 지원과 아동보호에 대한 특별법), to be enforced from July 2024 (Law no. 19816 n.d.).

It is necessary to note that concerns still remain about its possible effectiveness, because even though the mothers do not have to provide their names, there is documentation involved which might scare them off, so they will keep preferring the baby box, or even worse. It is emphasized that this issue should be mended as fast as possible, because compared to foreign baby boxes like in Germany, France, or Hungary, where they retrieve the baby from incubators placed in front of hospitals, check its health condition, administer, probably give it a name, and then enter it into a faster adoption process, in South Korea, these are not operated by health institutions, and the babies might spend not only

some days, but probably months there. Additionally, these Christian community centers are already offering emotional and financial help, plus consultation for pregnant women in crisis, thus they can be evaluated as a multifunctional facility for both the baby and mother (Park 2022).

## 7. Closing Remarks

This study on women and children in need, especially regarding self-development possibilities, motherhood, and adoption gave an insight into topics such as the results of early evangelization influencing Korean girls' educational and medical development, a brief history of adoption and its current scenario, difficulties emerging from single motherhood, and the controversial issue of baby boxes. All of these have a strong connection with Christianity, mainly, Christian communities, and their softer approach to women, compared to Confucianism. Expressing and practicing God's love, saving those who are in need, keeping themselves away from stigmatization, and helping with Jesus's love are some of their main motivations, which contradict even the current mainstream opinions of Koreans. Of course, this paper could not cover all the related issues and doubts, and it is important to be aware that many of those questions are not just unanswered but not completely handled officially either.

As we have obtained an insight into several aspects of difficult childrearing scenarios, we can at least get a confirmation about how important the initiatives and missions of Christian communities are currently in South Korea and how influential they have been in previous times as well. Even though many of their operations were started not by Korean Christians but foreign Christians residing in South Korea, their successors are following the way, and the new members of those communities are constantly working on the improvement and broadening of their scale of help. For example, as quite a new form of giving, now, in some places, the so-called 'mother box'<sup>31</sup> is provided, for example, by organizations such as the already mentioned Green Umbrella. In November 2023, they wrapped around 100 boxes, each valued at about 400 thousand won (~300 USD) (Sooyoung Church 2023). Usually, pregnant women can apply at their health care center (if it is provided locally), and they get a box delivered filled with useful tools and necessities during pregnancy and after childbirth (Mother Box n.d.). This is a little project compared to the anticipated changes in the legislation, and common social evaluation is not a big achievement but still shows how smaller communities are slowly making efforts and showing alternative ways to handle the abovementioned circumstances. On the negative side, we might still conclude that these complex situations need more consideration, because even this study could not immerse us in the matter of 'what happens after?'. What happens to the mothers who left their babies? How can they cope with the guilt, and will they be able to find their place in society after the trauma? Will they be able to become mothers and form a healthy family in the future? How will the children left in the baby box grow up? What are their overall options? To what extent can these Christian initiatives influence the common perspective of Koreans? Will the stigmatization fade any time soon?

The findings of this research intended to depict different segments of life, related to women's educational options, early employment opportunities, alternative lifestyle other than being a housewife, and complicated situations originating from a woman's role as a mother, including single motherhood and the decision on raising their own children or not. The above-listed questions do not have their exact answers yet, but some conclusions can be revealed. Christians based their activities on an ideology, which contradicted the Confucian social norms. They promoted gender equality and cooperation between men and women, not only inside a religious community, but expanded its understanding in general. This proves the idea that Christianity played a significant role in the early modernization processes of Korea. Furthermore, Christians brought new thoughts on human rights and freedom, opened schools and institutions which welcomed anyone regardless of social class and financial background, despite the strong awareness of hierarchy among Koreans based on Confucian ideas, even in the latter half of the 20th century. They used

and spread new methodology in education, medicine, hygiene, and household management among others. They criticized the hermit nature of Confucian households which hindered the family members from building social networks and experiencing more than their restricted personal roles and space. They strongly raised their voices against discrimination against girls' education and professional advancement. They urged the development of Korean settlements not only in the matter of infrastructure, such as electricity and modern facilities, but also in the cooperation of communities. This research focused on specific situations strongly connected to womanhood and motherhood, reflecting often on the Confucian expectations. Finally, the examination reached the current days, mentioning missions still in progress and not only supported but sometimes questioned and criticized. This might mean, in a way, that Christian communities' activities are welcomed, accepted, and in demand, but even today, they contradict with local conventions, or their operations are not legally resolved yet. From smaller efforts such as mother boxes to huge initiatives such as providing accommodation, support, and educational and professional alternatives to single mothers, now, Korean Christians are continuing the missions, facing the old challenges of traditional thoughts plus, sometimes, the new challenges of the legislative system.

The research of this paper, based on partly historical sources, partly modern information, includes depiction and analysis of different eras and circumstances and, in each case, points to the effective and positive influence of efforts originating from Christian communities. It is important to note that the timeline takes up more than a hundred years, but the challenges are constantly present in current South Korea, which means young girls and adult women often must find alternative solutions to their problematic life situations, because conventions and stigmatization hinder overall care, and official governments cannot handle them either, but the Christian communities offer possibilities. Additionally, these active communities prove the stable place of Christianity in South Korea, a well-developed Far Eastern country, and their efforts can emphasize the original helping and caring nature of their belief, in contradiction to recent scandalous issues with new Christian groups. Finally, the main figures in question are women, who were and are not only seeking help with their very fundamental mission, giving birth and being a mother, but struggling with their subordinated position in education and professional life, since even today, a well-educated Korean woman faces a wage gap and glass ceiling in companies. The remarks of the introduction opened up the topic of a surprising paradox: the remarkably developed country of South Korea and the double standards in social and professional life between men and women can be detected in various fields of life, as some examples illustrated in this paper detail.

This paper carries no personal opinion about the discussed matters and leaves several questions still open, which can be the main challenge of further studies, regarding single parenthood, both mothers and fathers raising their children alone, other family forms such as single households, children being raised by relatives, the foster system, multicultural households, pregnant women in crisis, abortion, and stigmatization towards unconventional ways.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This research does not cover the possible effects on women who live in North Korea.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed information about the early Christian missionaries to Korea, see (Rhinow 2013; Clark 1986; Buswell 2006).

<sup>3</sup> This study does not examine the decades of the Japanese occupation.

<sup>4</sup> (Reality of Unmarried Mothers 2023). This documentary posted by EBS on 3 October 2023 is a part of a series discussing the reality and difficulties of one parent households in South Korea (대한민국에서 한 부모로 산다는 건).

- 5 The mother had a baby in 2018 and 2019, gave birth without letting her husband know, left the hospital with the newborns, and then took their lives. She reportedly had an abortion as well before, and her intention was to terminate the following pregnancies as well, which she could not do because of the financial burden.
- 6 The female members of church organizations were in quite subordinate positions compared to the men in their own communities, as also in foreign cases.
- 7 Mary Fletcher Benton Scranton 1832–1909. She was born as the daughter of an American Methodist Episcopal minister. She served as a conference secretary of Methodist Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS). In 1884, her son was appointed as the Methodist Church's first missionary to Korea. In Korea, later, she was also called as *daebu*in 대부인.
- 8 이경숙 (1851–1930). She was the daughter of a poor scholar. She was married at the age of 15 but was widowed at 18. After her father's death, she still lived a poor life, even though she moved to the capital city. Living alone was also dangerous, and she felt threatened by unknown men. Luckily, she met Mary Scranton and moved to Ewha at the age of 38. Later, she was baptized and given the name Drusilla. She helped a lot in the process of resolving misunderstandings about missionaries. (Hwang 2020).
- 9 (The Legacy of Mary Scranton n.d.) Lausanne Movement. The fully published article can be found as Kwon, Andrea 2018. The Legacy of Mary Scranton. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 42 (2), pp. 162–70.
- 10 There was already an open hospital operated by the Christian missionary, Dr. William B. Scranton (1856–1922), who accepted both male and female patients, but because of the strict conventions, Korean men and women could not enter the same institution, and women could not be treated by a male doctor, so the medical care provided here could not really reach them. (Lee 2008, p. 38).
- 11 Description about their work in the first years can be read in detail in (Baker 1898, pp. 169–73).
- 12 For example, Ella Lewis, Margaret J. Edmunds, Alta I. Morrison, Naomi A. Anderson.
- 13 Description about its operation and teaching methods in detail in (Lee 2008, pp. 48–53).
- 14 Lillian Harris Memorial Hospital. In 1930, it was modified to East Gate Woman Hospital that was dedicated to dealing with obstetrics and gynecology.
- 15 During her years in America, even though she was accompanied by her husband, they had to live separately, so her husband could support her financially. She also lost their baby to a disease, and right before her graduation, her husband passed away.
- 16 A local custom which limited women's activity to their homes, prohibiting women in the public space and from accessing broadened education or alternatives to being a housewife, consequently hindering the successful evangelization of Christian churches. (Inside-Outside Rule n.d.)
- 17 Meta was followed by Rosetta Sherwood, Mary M. Cutler, Emma Ernsberger, Esther K. Park, and Amanda F. Hillman. The hospital closed its doors in 1913.
- 18 It is still an active organization under the name ChildFund Alliance, with its headquarters still in South Korea, but it has expanded its reach, missions, and advocacy level, including financial, physical, and emotional support, public awareness of child rights and child legal issues, and it has had a huge impact on the Korean welfare system. (ChildFund Alliance).
- 19 Dr. J. Calvitt Clarke (1887–1970) was an ordained Presbyterian minister who worked with several relief foundations in the Near East and in China as well. First, he founded the China's Children Fund, and it was renamed Christian Children's Fund. (Clarke 2018, pp. xvii–xix)
- 20 Verent John Russell Mills (1913–1996) was born in England, but he conducted his missionary work in different parts of China, Korea, and Japan. He became the third leader of the organization in 1970. (Stories for Telling: A Personal Journey through ChildFund's Archives, ChildFund International).
- 21 In 20th-century United States, the social and legal principle of racial classification existed regarding Afro-American citizens. Having any African ancestry led to being classified as second-class citizens, according to this one-drop rule. In some states like Arkansas, strict laws were based on this discrimination, but the principle and prejudice themselves rapidly became a nationwide trend and approach. (One Drop Rule n.d., Encyclopedia of Arkansas).
- 22 (Lee 2019) 매년 4000명의 아이가 시설로 보내진다. 세계일보.
- 23 (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2022) 2022년 보호대상아동 현황보고. 보건복지부.
- 24 The report indicated that these numbers might not reflect all the circumstances, since not every birth is reported correctly, dead infants at birth are not likely to be reported, and it is hard to know about the number of abandoned babies. Additionally, the situation of birth numbers has been more closely surveyed in the last two decades than before, so there are more data available to process. (Korean Women's Development Institute 2009, p. xix.).
- 25 Reviewing Issues on Unwed Mothers' Welfare in Korea: INtercountry Adoption, Related Statistics, and Welfare Policies in Developed Countries. Korean Unmarried Mothers Support Network. Seoul.
- 26 (SF2.4 n.d.), Share of births outside of marriage. OECD Family Database.
- 27 A part of the unwanted pregnancies start as a result of rape or sexual assault. Victims are prohibited from getting an abortion until a sufficient amount of evidence is collected to identify the attacker. If a woman is able to report the assault as soon as possible, the process with the authorities is faster, and they can get medical help at the proper time. (Unmarried Mothers n.d.)



The problem is that victims are often too ashamed to open up about the incident, so they miss the chance to get access to possible medical help with the termination.

- 28 The EBS channel had a documentary series with the title ‘Every family in the world’ (*All families of the world* n.d. 세상의 모든 가족), discussing the various family types in contemporary Korean society, supported with case studies. (세상의 모든 가족, EBS) Episodes can be found on the EBS Documentary (EBS 다큐) YouTube channel.
- 29 The founder was Lee Jongrak (이종락), a Christian minister. About her heroic efforts to save vulnerable babies and help hopeless unmarried mothers, there is a movie with the title ‘The Dropbox’ (premiered in 2015).
- 30 In Korean 한부모가족시설 is a facility for families led by single parents.
- 31 In Korean 마더박스 or more specifically 인산부마더박스.

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