

Househusband wears apron, not pants in the family

After shaking hands with a reporter, the interviewee handed out his name-card on which two lines are written: Oh Sung-gun, househusband.

Yes. Oh, 39, is a full-time househusband. Washing the dishes, raising the children and cleaning the house are part of his daily job, like any other housewife.

Oh's essay about his daily life was published by the Korean Institute for Gender Equality Promotion and Education recently as an example of gender equality in a marriage. In 2001, he won a prize for his efforts in recognizing gender equality by *The Woman's News*, a feminist weekly.

Defying preconceived notions about stay-at-home men, Oh, standing in front of a stove cooking soup in his apartment in Gwacheon, Gyeonggi Province, is muscular and manly.

It is 3 p.m. and on the dining table, the dishes have not been cleared yet. Oh explains that he has just returned from a cookie making class with his daughter. He juggles doing the dishes, wiping the table, soothing his whining 5-year-old daughter Da-hyang and tasting the seething soup. "I have a cold, so I made this soup with dried pollack and bean sprouts," he says.

Oh became a fulltime househusband quitting his job as a business consultant at a Chinese medicine center in 1999 before the birth of his daughter because his wife, Lee Jeong-hee, who worked at the Songpa-gu District Office, wanted to continue working after the child was born. "So I gave up my career," Oh says tersely.

However, it was not as simple a matter as Oh makes it sound. Oh's parents said he was crazy. "They still want me to go back to work. They are typical traditional Korean parents. They think that men have to earn money while women do the domestic chores at home," he says. "My parents think that their silly son is evading his own responsibility as the head of the family," he adds.

The wife's parents gave him the cold shoulder, too. Though more and more women continue to work outside the home after marriage these days, the majority of people in this society still regard household duties as women's obligations. Oh's parents-in-law are no exceptions.

"When I first left work, they thought that I gave their precious daughter much trouble though working outside was what she wanted," he adds somewhat bitterly.

"They never understood my husband. At first, when we visited my parents' house, they stayed away from home on purpose to avoid meeting him," Lee, Oh's wife, says with a laugh,

over the telephone. "Now their anger has subsided. However, they still cannot understand him." At Lee's office as well, many co-workers consider Lee's husband peculiar or ridiculous, she says.

Some people, quite mistakenly, think that Oh quit his job because his wife's salary is much higher than his. However, Oh says that he cannot understand why his acquaintances could not accept his explanations for the decision at face value.

"A man and a woman fall in love with each other and then celebrate it through a wedding. Household duties and childrearing after marriage are not just a woman's duties but the couple's common responsibilities," Oh says.

Oh does not draw a clear line between men and women's chores. Since he was newlywed, Oh has been making breakfast for more than 10 years, instead of his wife who enjoys sleeping in. "I go to bed early and wake up at dawn. Isn't it reasonable that the one who wakes up early prepares breakfast?" he asks.

Oh adds that treating him as a peculiar case reflects the fact that Korean society cannot guarantee equality between the sexes. He opened his eyes to gender discrimination after meeting his wife in 1992 at a public literature lecture.

"For the first two months, she just said 'yes' or 'no' in front of me. Whenever I asked what she wanted to eat, she just answered, 'Whatever.'" At first, Oh thought that she did not like him. However, a few months later, he realized why she responded like that.

"She grew up with two elder brothers in a conservative family. Her opinions were often disregarded or ignored. Finally, she came to restrain herself from voicing her feelings and wishes," says the househusband. He wanted to help her express her own wishes and thoughts. So he started studying feminism with his wife.

Before marriage, the couple established several principles together: First, share the household duties half-and-half. Second, don't leave their own child in other's care. Third, address each other honorifically.

"I think all parents must take care of their children by themselves until the kids are five years old because the parents' role is the most important during this period," Oh says.

According to the principle, one of the two must give up work. Oh respected his wife's desire to continue working and willingly became the househusband.

Now his life schedule is similar to other housewives'. Oh wakes up about 6 a.m. As soon

as he wakes up, he reads the newspaper because it is his only moment of free time. He sets the breakfast table about 7 a.m., sends his wife off to work and then takes care of their daughter.

As a full-time househusband, Oh has mastered some useful tips for housekeeping. Oh brews enzymes from plum, grape and sagebrush all through the year in the house. When his daughter was a baby, he made soybean milk at home. In one corner of the kitchen, there are dried orange peels for making tea.

"I came to fully understand housewives through my own experience," he says with a smile. Oh takes part in networks organized by fulltime housewives. He often consults with them and sometimes gives out advice.

"I see many hopeless couples. Many husbands still do not consider their mates life-partners. An elderly woman once burst into complaining about the mental and physical anguish inflicted by her husband," he says. "I always tell them to ask to be treated as equal by their husbands and stand up for themselves. Unless you do that, you cannot get what you want."

Of course, Oh has his doubts about his choice. Oh confesses that he is utterly frustrated when he meets his friends who have successful careers. Sometimes, he feels uneasy about his future, too.

However, he is generally satisfied with his decision. "If I and my wife both continued work-

ing, our daughter Da-hyang could not have grown up so healthy and full of life," he says.

He feels happy seeing his daughter growing up quickly. Unlike most children, her first word was "papa" not "mama." Oh says that he wants her to grow up without being restricted by social customs.

Once in a playground, he met a mother with a daughter wearing a cute mini skirt in spite of the piercing cold. Asked why she put such a short skirt on the kid, the mother answered, "She is a 'girl'." "I was really worried over the little girl's future. And I decided that I will never raise my daughter like that mother," Oh says.

Their daughter is sometimes teased by other kids. At first, she did not like going places with her father. But now, her attitude has changed. "Let them do what they want. I don't care," says Da-hyang.

Oh recently started writing fairy tales for children. His daughter provides materials endlessly. Though he did not seek success in the outside world, Oh and his family members are satisfied.

"If you have nothing, be satisfied with it. This is our family motto," he says pointing the phrase written on the signboard. "I think a happy family is one in which each family member's opinions are equally respected and harmonized at the same time. In this respect, my family lives in a happy home."

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