

Research Article

Understanding the Influence of Military Life in South Korea's Rising Solitary Death Phenomenon: Godoksa

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Article History	Abstract
Received: September 22, 2026 Accepted: October 12, 2026 Published: October 19, 2026	Lonely death, often called "Godoksa," is becoming increasingly common in South Korea. The term refers to cases where individuals die in their homes or apartments and are so socially isolated that they are not discovered for days or weeks. Rising from 2,412 cases in 2017 to 3,924 cases in 2024, this phenomenon shows an uneven distribution across gender and age range. In 2024, statistics recorded that 81.7 percent of all cases in 2024 were men, while individuals in their 50s and 60s made up 54 percent. Lonely deaths, in other words, are most likely to occur in older male populations. Existing scholars suggest gender and old age as risk factors for lonely death, but have not identified a specific factor for this unbalanced distribution. This paper argues that emotional trauma and conventional norms of masculinity constructed through experiences of mandatory military service account for the unusual gender gap and age range in South Korea's lonely deaths. The analysis draws on historical scholarship, film, and anonymous online testimony to reconstruct 1980s barracks life in South Korea. It then suggests that the experience, common to almost all South Korean men, inculcated specific norms of gender and care, and specific sorts of trauma, that followed this particular population into later life. Keywords: Godoksa, Lonely Death, Military Service, Masculinity, Social Isolation, South Korea.

Introduction

In Seoul, on June 9, 2013, a passerby made a terrifying discovery. On the uphill road near the Namsan Seoul Tower, they found a man who had been dead for hours. At the time of his death, he was a 64-year-old homeless male wandering shelters across South Korea. However, just six years before his death, he had been an elementary school teacher, with a stable job and a loving family. According to his former co-workers, his decline began after his wife died of cancer in 2007. Expecting nothing but grief at the funeral, his colleagues were surprised when the man held back his emotions, saying, "I should not cry because I'm a man." Following the funeral, he worked his job until reaching the mandatory retirement age of sixty-two years old in 2011. Within two years, he had spent all of his money before dying alone (EBS, 2014).

This phenomenon is known as Godoksa, defined as the death of "individuals who die alone and are discovered only after a considerable delay," a social phenomenon that has become an ordinary feature of contemporary South Korea (Bai *et al.*, 2025, p. 218). Godoksa cases are not equally distributed across the population. Women in their 20s show hardly any cases, for instance. Instead, it is more noticeable in one specific group: men over 50 years old with a low socioeconomic status. Out of 3,924 Godoksa cases in 2024, 54 percent of the cases were accounted for by individuals in their 50s and 60s, while men accounted for 81.7 percent of all death cases (Ministry of Health and Welfare [MOHW], 2025a).

While it is obvious that Godoksa is primarily a problem for older men, this phenomenon has not been explained in the literature. The main question this paper attempts to answer is the unbalanced numbers of Godoksa between two genders. There are many possible explanations, and the question has not been addressed by previous research. Hypotheses might include biases among care providers, the loss of networks and identity

in a community, or the neglect of healthcare programs by men. All of these likely play a role. This paper, though, will suggest that the skew of Godoksa to male is attributable to traditional cultural ideals of masculinity. To verify the argument, this paper will use tools of historical analysis to explore the particular generation of men who seem vulnerable to Godoksa: men who were in their 50s and 60s in the early 2020s, a generation who were born decades after the Second World War and grew up in the 1970s and 1980s.

What, I ask, is unique about this particular generation of men? What makes them different from older or younger generations, or from men of the same generation in other countries, who are not experiencing Godoksa at the same rate? Instead of presuming that Godoksa is the result of isolation and modernity, in the abstract, we will analyze it as a historical phenomenon that emerged in specific communities for specific reasons. The primary socializing factor that influenced men of this particular generation, and did not influence women, was the military. This paper therefore hypothesizes that specific norms about gender, health, and community were imbibed by these men during their years of military service in the 1980s.

Conscription in South Korea is a damaging factor for the minds of men. Existing academic literature reveals the significant impact of military service on the mental health of the men who served. Suicide is identified as the causing factor accounting for roughly 70% of all deaths in the South Korean military (Lee *et al.*, 2025). A study conducted on active South Korean soldiers serving in their one-and-a-half-year term showed that suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, impulsivity, and low self-esteem were more common in military groups than in comparison groups, suggesting an association between mental instability and military service (Lee *et al.*, 2025). Although this research only concerns only today's soldiers, conditions in the 1980s were much harsher, so it likely understates the true psychological toll on the generations examined in this paper. Therefore, this paper suggests a link between lonely death and emotional difficulties stemming from military service.

The connection between military service and Godoksa lies in the forms of masculinity and social behavior that military institutions cultivate among South Korean men. At the time, the South Korean military held conventions of violently abusing individuals within a hierarchy structure. Until an individual was promoted to a higher rank, which at the time normally took more than 20 months of service out of 30, they were targets of physical and verbal abuse, regarded as a part of "training." Soldiers were neglected by the military police or the public on the violence conducted toward them, alongside a stigma around mental health in the hyper-masculine environment. In turn, the severe hazing needed to be kept within themselves, suppressed and lacking care. Individuals are assumed to carry the trait of suppressing emotional and physical stress. These dispositions will not necessarily disappear after the discharge. As men moved into families and retirement, the same emphasis on self-reliance and emotional control could make it more difficult to develop relationships with others. In this sense, Godoksa could be understood as a possible consequence of institutional systems such as the military.

Background

South Korea is steadily becoming more vulnerable to Godoksa every year, due to vast demographic shifts. As the pool of old-age population expands and the young population shrinks, more people are left aging in isolation without family support. As of 2024, 20 percent of South Korea's total population are over the age of sixty-five, which it is expected to reach to 30 percent by 2036, and 40 percent by 2050, relative to France, which took 140 years to reach from 7 percent to 20 percent in old age composition (Draudt-Véjares, 2026). The median age is estimated to increase from 44.9 in 2022 to 63.4 by 2072, alongside an estimated increase of life expectancy to 91.1 by 2072 (Statistics Korea, 2023). South Korea's challenge of rapid aging becomes an example of what a super-aged society will look like, as in comparison with Western countries.

Accelerated aging creates governing challenges for the South Korean administration. As old age dependency ratio reached 29.3 in 2025, meaning that there were 29.3 people over the age of 65 for every 100 people of working age, and is estimated to more than double to 59.1 by 2040, there is no doubt that more elderly people will need caregiver support, or else fall into poverty (Statistics Korea, 2023). Within this context, lonely death has received public attention, as it reflects an extreme outcome of social insecurity (Bai *et al.*, 2025).

This phenomenon was noticeable in other nations before its emergence in South Korea. Godoksa originated in Japan, where it is called "Kodokushi," and became an increasing problem during the mid-1990s. However, recent statistics show that lonely death is more prevalent in South Korea than in Japan. Over the past seven years, the number of lonely deaths showed a dramatic increase from 2,412 in 2017 to 3,924 in 2024 (MOHW, 2025a). In 2024, Godoksa accounted for approximately 1.09 percent of all deaths, while the number increased by 7.2% compared to 2023 (MOHW, 2025a).

The following figure presents a significant set of data on cases of lonely deaths in South Korea. As shown in Figure 1, both the number and the rate of lonely deaths have been increasing for the past seven years, reaching 7.7 per 100,000 people in 2024 (MOHW, 2025a). This means that per 100,000 people, more than 4.8 people would experience lonely death. The gender differences become larger when age is taken into account. As of 2024, out of 3,924 deaths in total, males in their 50s numbered 1,028 deaths (26.2 percent), while females in the same age range recorded 141 deaths (3.6 percent). Meanwhile, males in their 60s recorded 1,089 deaths (27.8 percent), while females in their 60s recorded 147 deaths (3.7 percent) (MOHW, 2025b). In fact, lonely death is proportionally more common among men in their 50s and 60s than among men in their 70s and 80s. Thus, as the 2024 statistics suggest that 54 percent of all deaths were of males in their 50s and 60s, it is implied that lonely death occurs around middle-aged men.

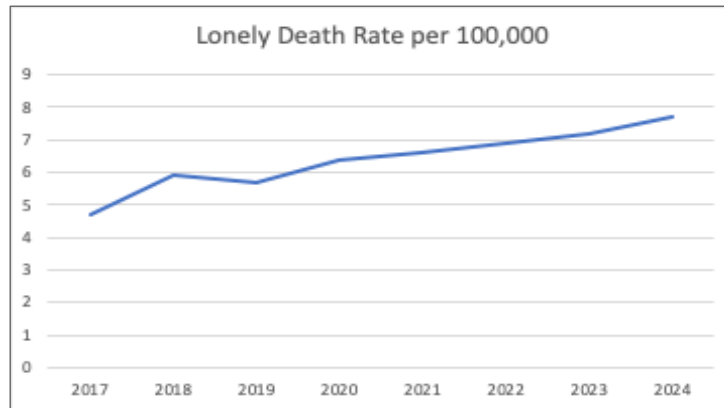


Figure 1. Lonely death rate per 100,000 population in South Korea, 2017–2024 (MOHW, 2025a).

State of the Field

The “lonely death” has only been a topic of public and scholarly conversation for about two decades, so the literature is not well developed. Much of the extant literature focuses, for reasons already explained, on Japan. Called “Kodokushi,” Japan’s term of lonely death was actually the origin of South Korea’s, as lonely death has historically been a prevalent case of death in history. In 2024, a group of scholars through a scoping review discovered in the Japanese case that solitary death is more common among those who are male, old, and poorer, as well as those with substance abuse issues (Cho *et al.*, 2025). In 2019, another group of scholars, through a retrospective observational study, evaluated the medical causes of solitary death in Yokohama, Japan, running down 349 individual cases. They discovered that being male, unmarried, and having liver disease were independent risk factors for solitary death (Kakiuchi *et al.*, 2019). The distribution of age and sex ratio of lonely deaths in Japan is similar to South Korea’s (Bai *et al.*, 2025).

Comparatively few scholars have explored Godoksa in South Korea, but the literature is growing. Existing research on the South Korean case suggests that the risk of lonely death is associated with several factors. Middle-aged and older adults are generally the most vulnerable population (MOHW, 2025a). Especially the age range between 60 to 65, which are usually the post-retirement age range, were the vulnerable targets of lonely deaths (MOHW, 2025a). Research also shows that lonely death happens more among men rather than women. In most studies, the proportion of men among total lonely deaths was between 55.1% and 77.9% (Cho *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, several studies show that lonely deaths are dominant among people with low socioeconomic status who are living in apartments. Lonely deaths seem to have an association with unemployment and education levels, as statistics show that unemployed individuals had a higher rate of lonely deaths (Cho *et al.*, 2025). A set of studies shows that people with limited social connection are tied to lonely deaths. People who are unmarried, divorced, widowed, and living apart from their families, along with people who experience less community attention such as less interaction with neighbors, are vulnerable to lonely deaths (Cho *et al.*, 2025). Lonely deaths also seem to have ties with poor health conditions, as evidenced by studies on the factors of lonely deaths. Some of the poor health conditions showing a strong association included liver diseases and alcohol abuse, the latter of which increased risk of lonely death by 1.5 times (Kakiuchi *et al.*, 2019; Miyamori *et al.*, 2022).

Existing research in the field has identified the issue of gender in the phenomenon of Godoksa in South Korea. There has not, though, been a research study that expressly tried to understand the gender gap. This paper will try to address that gap with a qualitative approach, utilizing historical analysis in combination with descriptive methodology to analyze the trend and statistics. Here we consider Godoksa as a social phenomenon shaped by both demographic change and culturally constructed gender identities.

Specifically, historical analysis will be used to identify how the 1980s South Korea's industrial period's conscription military services, which is a unique system in South Korea and exposes men to an environment characterized by strict hierarchy and punishment, constructed masculinity, and whether it is a factor that can explain the skew toward male.

Methods

In this paper, descriptive analysis will be used to describe the current trend of Godoksa in South Korea. Such analysis will be used to establish the pattern that Godoksa most commonly occurs among males around 50s and 60s, which provides the empirical foundation to examine why this phenomenon is more and more gendered in current South Korea.

Following the descriptive analysis, this paper adopts a historical approach to investigate the mechanism behind this gendered issue. We will focus on the single experience that was shared by almost all men in South Korea, and almost no women: mandatory military service. Men and women both experienced the challenges of South Korean industrialization and harsh workplace norms; they both experienced the difficulties and violence of a military dictatorship. But in this regard, men and women had very different experiences, and this paper will suggest that this difference was a crucial one. This paper therefore examines the role of mandatory military service in constructing masculinity, as military service demands values of self-sacrifice, following a hierarchy, and the submission of one's identity to a group for two years. Because the military service has been a widespread and shared experience among South Korean men, it represents one of the earliest and most influential experiences shaping their gender identities.

This paper draws on a wide variety of sources—from historical and anthropological scholarship to primary sources like films, interviews, and internet posts—to reconstruct the atmosphere of 1980s military service in South Korea. This is a challenging task. It is extremely rare to find an account coming from a book, newspaper, or any other form of written information regarding the 1980s South Korean military conditions, because the political influence under Park Chung-hee's and Chun Doo-hwan's terms formed a culture of propaganda and silence. Even when a little information leaked from the army and reached the civilians, the military denied what actually happened, and the government censored it. Films, books, and online accounts will be the primary sources that vividly describe the military life of 1980s South Korea. We collected quantitative data from the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), and collected qualitative data from existing historical monographs, academic works, and various forms of literature in Korea.

Analysis

In South Korea, unlike in many other countries, the military provides a crucial set of experiences for almost every South Korean man. Since 1949, and the Korean War, every South Korean man has been legally required to serve for at least two years in the Army. While this type of conscription is common in many societies, including Russia and Singapore, the South Korean Army was uniquely dehumanizing for its recruits—in ways, I argue, that would follow them for decades, and push some of them toward Godoksa.

If the roots of tolerating violence are to be explained, one must investigate the influence of the Japanese Imperial Army. Before South Korea's official birth and separation from the North, the nation of Korea was colonized by Japan, an imperialist country that covered large tracts of territory in world history, especially at the beginning of the 1900s. Their military, called the Japanese Imperial Army, was recorded in history multiple times for following rigid hierarchical structures and obeying commands – including radical ones like suicide plane attacks. These inhumane rules were achieved through harsh disciplines, which consisted violence. Their officers would severely beat soldiers and treat them without basic human respect (Moon, 2005, p. 47). Interestingly, the soldiers who experienced those treatments included many of the elite South Korean military, who pioneered the military systems of South Korea, such as Park Chung-hee, the political dictator who has later ruled South Korea for 18 years (Moon, 2005, p. 48). Therefore, these institutional legacies of Japan's army became more visible during the authoritarian period of the 1980s. Under Chun Doo-hwan, a military general who came to power after Park Chung-hee's death, South Korea remained shaped by anti-communist ideology and military authoritarianism. In the 1980s, the military played a central role in social life and was regarded as an important force to maintain the security of South Korea and social and political order.

Millions of South Korean men entered the military, for between two and three years during the impressionable years of their early twenties and beyond: they were also forced to be active in the Homeland Reserve Force until they turned 35, which required mandatory military training as well (Ministry of National Defense, n.d.). Some exemptions were possible, for reasons of disability or imprisonment, but for the most part every man,

including the wealthiest and most elite, had this formative experience. The majority of South Korean men served in the army after enrolling into college and before they graduated, as colleges permit military leave of absence while attending school.

This experience, unique to men due to the conscription laws, was a traumatic event affecting the emotional lives of millions, and its effect stays permanent for millions of South Korean men – the same ones who are vulnerable to Godoksa today. In the 1980s, their military experience was ruled by a rigid hierarchical structure in which soldiers obeyed those above their rank. The term “Sangmeyong-habok” – which was known to define the norm of the military – refers to the chain of command in the barracks life and was crowned as the ultimate rule all soldiers must had to follow. Granted with ultimate authority, individuals of higher rank exploited this system. Until a promotion, soldiers on the lower rank endured food deprivation, verbal abuse, and severe beatings (Moon, 2005, p. 50).

The malicious use of this mighty authority was, without a doubt, unethical, which raises a question if there were any designated methods to eliminate the corruption (Lee, 2019). Due to the 1980s South Korea's conventional norm of tolerating violence in daily life, requests to dismantle the system were ignored or rejected. Despite drastic events – such as suicide – happened and bullying continued, all of them were blinded by the roles – called the Gamchal-gwan – that were assigned with “auditing” the military, denying the use of radical violence in the camp. Presumably, such patterns caused abundant stress and emotional trauma for these soldiers, particularly those who have served in the 1980s. The habit of absorbing emotional stress in social isolation has set an unconscious mindset in these men to obey orders without question and keep the mentally-damaging incidents secretive – which follows even after they were discharged – until post-retirement. Thus, trauma of the barracks life cannot be disregarded as the factors of Godoksa, which mainly targets individuals around their 60s, the general post-retirement age.

Beyond the emotional damage these men experienced, the barracks life changed the way these individuals thought and behaved. The sociologist Seungsook Moon, in her 2005 study *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, describes the brutality and routine violence of military barracks in the 1980s. Moon insists that violence exploited male-gender identity to transform ordinary civilians into soldiers (Moon, 2005, p. 49). Once enlisted in the army, an individual living in the barracks goes through a series of physical disciplines and indoctrination. Moon explains that this is achieved by exposing the individual to a “cult of tough and aggressive masculinity,” which reduces the feminine traits within an individual, destroying them in the process of harsh discipline (Moon, 2005, p. 49). Additionally, disciplinary actions achieved through physical violence were combined with songs containing “implicit degradation of women,” which were also sung during marches, constructing a misogynistic masculine identity within these soldiers (Moon, 2005, p. 49). Honoring the status of a “real man,” military service transformed male civilians into more masculine human beings, reshaped with a new ideology.

Moon's description of the use of violence on these men, and its effect of transforming them into people with a strengthened masculine identity, is supplemented by personal accounts of the 1980s military published online. These personal accounts are from the biggest online military community in South Korea, founded under the Chosun Ilbo, a major Korean newspaper. The individuals who uploaded these accounts are anonymous and unverified, but their accounts do match the description we find from the Moon chapters.

Online personal accounts provide illustrations of the violence described by Moon. In a 2011 post, a user named “nogary” recalled his military service in the 1980s. He described severe beatings as so routine that days without violence felt unusual. He also claimed that he witnessed a soldier shoot himself after training (nogary, 2011). Another user, named “Gwan-San-Po”, who served in the Marine Corps in the early to mid-1990s, recalled being beaten during training, forced outside at night in his underwear, and doused with cold water (Gwan-San-Po, 2004). Each account from the 1980s and 1990s army matches Moon's description of the barracks life. Both individuals described an experience of violent treatment as a major part of the training method. In that process, the second account explains how songs were included as part of the training. These descriptions back Moon's statement that the army was a camp that constructed masculine values within individuals, whether through physical violence or songs.

The portrayal of barracks life was not limited to scholarship and testimony; it could also be seen on screen. Signs of violence can be sighted in the 2005 independent movie *The Unforgiven* (Yoon, 2005), a fictional movie filmed on the background of the mid 1990s South Korean military, directed by Jong-bin Yoon – who served in the South Korean military from the late 90s to the early 2000s. The movie won many awards – yet the most

notable fact is that the military objected to how the movie showcased its unethical aspects, as the production shot a different story from the version it proposed to the Ministry of National Defense for filming cooperation. Although this movie portrays military conditions that were supposedly reformed in the 1990s, it vividly displays the episodes of a man doing his service, exposing the harsh conditions of barracks life.

The film illustrates the imposition of hierarchical structures and violence in the military and the consequences of disobedience. There are three major characters in this movie: Sergeant Yoo Tae-jung, a man with only a couple more months of service left; Lee Seung-yong, a new recruit under Tae-jung; and Hur Ji-hoon, a recruit under Seung-yong. In this narrative, Seung-yong displays a character resistant to the conventional norm of obeying commands, for unethical ones. In one scene, his conviction to defy norms collides with the system when he was ordered to polish his senior's boots – a task taking significant time and effort – as a command. This friction is mediated by Tae-jung, who is later blamed by the seniors for how he instructed the soldiers below his rank. This exemplifies collective punishment, a common feature in which the soldier ranked above receives the penalty for the mistake a new recruit makes, to reinforce a familial identity. Due to this tradition, Tae-jung later assembles all juniors in the bathroom, including Seung-yong, and severely beats them. This phase of the narrative emphasizes the punishment that follows noncompliance with the system (Yoon, 2005).

Another notable characteristic of barracks life is the continuity of conventional punishment norms. Ironically, in the later phase, when Seung-yong becomes a senior, he begins to re-enact the violence on the soldiers under his rank, just as he experienced it. The reinforcement of violence can be examined between the relationship of Seung-yong and Ji-hoon, a recruit under Seung-yong. In this phase, Ji-hoon continually fails to perform fundamental and mandatory duties as a soldier, such as memorizing his seniors' names and cleaning his personal locker before roll call at night. In turn, Seung-yong receives the blame and notice from soldiers above his rank, as he is responsible for teaching Ji-hoon how to perform these tasks and fundamental duties as a soldier. Under immense stress, Seung-yong eventually calls Ji-hoon out to the bathroom at night and strikes him. The transformation of Seung-yong's behavior shows how violence circulates through the military hierarchy, turning the former victims into perpetrators (Yoon, 2005).

Conclusion

The military followed the lives of men institutionally, leaving a lasting imprint on the futures of men who served in the 1980s. For instance, in the labor market, military service was considered a prerequisite factor for employment, as it was recognized as work experience, giving veterans priority in securing a position, as Moon argues (2005, pp. 39-40). This implies that corporations would consist largely of male-veteran demographics, perhaps constructing an environment similar to the one that encoded these individuals who were encoded with military ideologies. Experiences of the military would remain with these individuals, because veterans were mandated to serve in the Homeland Reserve Force, a military force that could be called up in national emergencies, which required them to participate in a week-long training with an intensity similar to their two-year service.

The military followed men not only institutionally but also emotionally. Military life taught generations of men to endure hardship and suppress vulnerability. These habits could remain useful in a workplace that rewarded self-discipline and endurance, but they could become liabilities when men faced moments in which they needed social support. They might be less willing to disclose distress or seek help when encountering retirement, unemployment, and health issues. Therefore, the military service can be understood as one important institution and a representative example of how a social system cultivates masculinity among South Korean men. It also helps to explain why middle-aged Korean men are particularly vulnerable to severe social isolation. Godoksa, in this sense, can be seen as connected to a model of masculinity and the society that reproduces it. Therefore, military discipline and institutional expectations continued to accompany men long after they left active duty. However, this understanding leaves a gap regarding how to prevent lonely death. Military service taught men to suppress their emotional pain within themselves, an effect that intensifies over time when a man loses the companion who once sustained him. In turn, encouraging communication and intimacy, and creating spaces where a man can express vulnerability without stigma, may become a solution that counters the chain of effects leading to Godoksa.

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