

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, LAW AND  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Undergraduate Degree in  
Political Science, International Relations and Human Rights



"LIFE IS TO PROTEST": EVOLUTION OF  
KOREAN WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE AND  
CONTENTIOUS RESISTANCE

*Supervisor:* Prof. Lorenza Perini

*Candidate:* Mihaela Andronic

*Matriculation No.* 2042924

A.Y. 2023/2024



*—may your trials end in full bloom  
though your beginnings might be humble,  
may the end be prosperous <sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Agust D, *Snooze*.



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## **Abstract**

“Life is to Protest” captures the reality of women whose sole existence is resistance itself, highlighting the interconnection between the individual and systemic structures. As they choose to challenge conventional norms, women’s protests permeate thoroughly their lives and are not limited to the streets, but also occur in their homes, workplaces and interpersonal relationships. In recent years, the rise of 4B Feminism in South Korea has garnered international attention, revealing a radical turn in the Korean women’s rights movement and their contentious resistance to the patriarchal structure. The movement, with its provocative stance, has rejected heterosexual relationships, marriage, and children, becoming emblematic of a broader discontent among women. Simultaneously, over half of Korean men believe that gender discrimination is no longer an urgent problem. These two polarising positions draw attention to the widening gender divide and the growing dissatisfaction among Korean young people with gender equality.

Why are Korean women rejecting traditional constraints such as marriage and motherhood, while men in their twenties remain unsensitised and alienated from gender-based violence? This thesis seeks to address these questions by delving into the historical, social and political roots of Korean society, following the growth of women’s conditions as well as the feminist advocacy from its outset to its current radical expressions.





## Glossary

<i>'najunge' chǒngch'i</i>	'later' politics
4 非	4 no's
<i>ch'inyǒng</i>	male primogeniture hierarchy
<i>Ch'anyang-hoe</i>	Promotion Society
<i>chaashirhyǒn</i>	self-realisation
<i>chendǒ kaltǔng</i>	gender conflict
<i>ch'obulchip'oe</i>	candlelight vigil
<i>chôndo puin</i>	Bible women
<i>chǒngsindae</i>	( <i>lit.</i> ) labour volunteer corps
<i>Chosun Yeosung Dongwoohoe</i>	Korean Women's Association
<i>ch'ulsan</i>	marriage
<i>chunbidoen yǒsǒng daet'ongnyǒng</i>	prepared woman president
<i>Dongnip sinmun</i>	Independent Newspaper
<i>ewha</i>	pear-flower
<i>hannam</i>	Korean man
<i>hojuje</i>	family-head system
<i>hwaldongka</i>	activists
<i>hwanyang-nyǒn</i>	returned woman
<i>ianfu; wianbu</i>	military comfort women (i.e. enforced sex slaves)
<i>ianju</i>	comfort facilities
<i>idaenam</i>	men in their 20s
<i>Ilbe</i>	( <i>abbrv.</i> ) Daily Best
<i>kajǒng-p'ongnyǒk</i>	domestic violence
<i>kanggan</i>	rape
<i>kimch'inyǒ</i>	( <i>lit.</i> ) kimchi-girl
<i>kinyǒ; kisaeng</i>	female entertainers
<i>kkotpaem</i>	flower snakes
<i>kkwǒn</i>	activist feminist
<i>kungmin</i>	people of the state
<i>kungmin-gaebiyǒngje</i>	universal conscription system
<i>kungnyǒ</i>	palace women
<i>Kūnuhoe</i>	Friends of the Rose of Sharon
<i>kyoch'a p'emi</i>	intersectional feminist

<i>kyoje-sarin</i>	dating murder
<i>maech'un</i>	prostitution
<i>Megalia</i>	MERS + Egalia's Daughters
<i>minjǒng</i>	masses
<i>Minjǒng undong</i>	Movement of masses, or people
<i>Mǒdon'gǒl</i>	Modern Girls
<i>molka</i>	hidden camera
<i>Monakpye</i>	( <i>abbrv.</i> ) Joint Action for Reproductive Justice
<i>naesǒn il'chae ūi kkot</i>	flower of the Japanese Korean unity
<i>Naeuhun</i>	Instructions for Women
<i>naewoebǒp</i>	inside-outside rule
<i>namch'o</i>	male-only
<i>namsǒnghyǒmo</i>	misandry
<i>nanŭn-p'eminisŭt'ŭ-immnida</i>	I am a feminist
<i>no-hak yǒndae</i>	student worker alliance, or solidarity
<i>noryuchanghwa</i>	a courtesan like a flower that anyone can pick
<i>n-pǒnbang</i>	Nth Room
<i>pihon</i>	childbirth
<i>puryan sonyǒ</i>	bad girl
<i>redŭ-p'em</i>	radical feminist
<i>Samgang haengsildo</i>	Conduct of the Three Bonds
<i>sam-po</i>	3 give up's
<i>sangdamwǒn</i>	counsellors
<i>sanǒp chǒnsa</i>	industrial soldiers
<i>sanǒpyǒkkun</i>	industrial soldiers
<i>saranamatta</i>	survived
<i>seksŭ</i>	sexual intercourse
<i>shimin sahoe</i>	civil society
<i>Shimin undong</i>	Citizens' Movement
<i>shinsedae</i>	new generation
<i>Sin yǒja</i>	New Woman
<i>Sin yǒsong</i>	New Women
<i>Sirhak</i>	School of Practical Learning
<i>sǒng nodong</i>	sex work
<i>sǒng p'ongnyǒk</i>	sexual violence

<i>sŏngbyŏl</i>	gender
<i>sŏngch'abyŏl</i>	sexism
<i>sŏngmaemae</i>	the buying and selling of sex
<i>saedubu</i>	Scholar-officials, founders of the Chosŏn dynasty
<i>ssŭkka</i>	mixed feminist
<i>t'al-corset</i>	( <i>abbrv.</i> ) escape the corset
<i>t'ellebang</i>	Telegram chatrooms
<i>ŭinyŏ</i>	female physicians
<i>Unninet</i>	Sister Network
<i>yangban</i>	aristocratic
<i>yangban</i>	aristocrat
<i>yanggongju</i>	Western princess
<i>yangsŏng-p'yŏng-dung</i>	equality of both genders
<i>yŏch'o</i>	female-only
<i>Yŏja kŭllo chŏngsindae</i>	Women's Labor Volunteer Corps
<i>yŏjaman ch'aengginda</i>	women should only care for women
<i>yŏnae</i>	romantic relationships
<i>yŏsŏng</i>	women
<i>yŏsŏng hehang</i>	women's liberation
<i>yŏsŏnghyŏmo</i>	misogyny

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

USAFIK	United States Armed Forces in Korea
YWCA	Young Women Christian Association
AMO	Administered Mass Organisation
FKTU	Federation of Korean Trade Unions
KWAU	Korean Women's Associations United
KNCW	Korean National Council of Women
WID	Women in Development
SWAA	Soul Women Workers' Association
KWAAC	Korean Women Workers' Associations Council
EEL	Equal Employment Law
SAC	sexual assault centre
KWHL	Korean Women's Hot Line
KSVRC	Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre
KWDI	Korean Women's Development Institute
NCWP	National Committee on Women's Policies
PCWA	Presidential Commission for Women's Affairs
WBDA	National Women's Development Fund
MoGE, MoGEF	Ministry of Gender Equality, and Family
NHRCK	National Human Rights Commission of Korea
WBDA	National Women's Development Fund
GDPR	Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act
KFW	Korean Foundation for Women
NFGs	New Feminist Groups
UMGA	United States Military Government
KCIA	Korean Central Intelligence Agency
PFS	People's Friends Society
LCC	Lesbian Counselling Center
AA	Active Employment Improvement Measures
TFR	total fertility rate
WGDAW	Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls
GDC	Global Doctors for Choice
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
DSCVSC	Digital Sexual Crime Victim Support Center

# Introduction

“Life is to Protest” (or “Life is [a] Movement”)<sup>2</sup> emphasises the essence of Korean women’s experiences throughout history—a perpetual struggle and march for liberation, dignity, and equality. “To live is to protest” captures the reality of women whose sole existence is resistance itself, highlighting the interconnection between the individual and systemic structures. As they choose to challenge conventional norms, women’s protests permeate thoroughly their lives and are not limited to the streets, but also occur in their homes, workplaces and interpersonal relationships. The title of this paper also serves as a tribute and respect for all the generations of women who have fought with their lives for freedom throughout history, while facing various forms of violence and multiple obstacles. Therefore, this paper aims to offer a dynamic and ongoing depiction of the Korean women’s rights movement. Finally, the title reflects the enduring yearning for liberation that continues to resonate deeply by the younger generations who are becoming more radical in the current sociopolitical landscape.

In recent years, the rise of 4B Feminism in South Korea has garnered international attention, revealing a radical turn in the Korean women’s rights movement and their contentious resistance to the patriarchal structure. The movement, with its provocative stance, has rejected heterosexual relationships, marriage, and children, becoming emblematic of a broader discontent among women. Simultaneously, over half of Korean men believe that gender discrimination is no longer an urgent problem. These two polarising positions draw attention to the widening gender divide and the growing dissatisfaction among Korean young people with gender equality.

Why are Korean women rejecting traditional constraints such as marriage and motherhood, while men in their twenties remain unsensitised and alienated from gender-based violence? This thesis seeks to address these questions by delving into the historical, social and political roots of Korean society, following the growth of women’s conditions as well as the feminist advocacy from its outset to its current radical expressions.

I drew my research from my interest in two topics I am most passionate about, which are the commitment to feminism and Korean culture. Considering the global mediatic fascination with the 4B Movement, I sought to investigate beyond sensational or superficial headlines to fully comprehend the deeper forces at play and trace the broader picture of Korean women’s forms of resistance. This thesis thus explores not just Korean feminism,

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<sup>2</sup> It has the same meaning as the Western motto “Personal is Political”. Lee, ‘Bright Constellation. The Rise and Significance of Women’s Liberation Literature in 1980s South Korea’, 180.

but also the blossoming of women's militancy and the diverse approaches of several generations of women confronting system gendered inequalities.

I considered it necessary to utilise a historical approach to completely explain the development of the women's rights struggle because comprehending the current radicalisation of campaigns, such as *Megalia* and 4B, requires an in-depth study of the past. Context concerns include the Confucian cultural framework, the legacy of Japanese colonial rule, the military dictatorships, the fight for democratisation, the modern neoliberal society, and the struggle for human rights. By following the advancement of women's engagement, we can observe how different waves of advocacy were influenced by the challenges of their times, providing crucial insights into their strategies, victories, ideologies, limitations and criticisms of Korean feminism, as well as their approach to the state. This long-term perspective also reveals how female struggles are intertwined with larger social and political transformations.

I also adopt an intersectional feminist perspective by bringing forth and foregrounding Korean women's voices and insights. This study will investigate the complexities of women's experiences through an exhaustive review of Korean feminist and historical literature, news stories, reports from feminist organisations, arguments of feminist advocates and scholars, as well as academic publications. By considering their critiques of the structural framework and their unique and controversial methods of confronting intersectional oppression, this work will provide both a critical analysis of the systemic obstacles that women face and a reflection on the alternative paths they are paving for themselves.

I acknowledge that addressing a wide spectrum of social issues—like LGBTQIA+ rights, refugee and migrant women's rights, and labour rights—is essential for a truly inclusive feminist analysis. However, I also recognise that these topics necessitate dedicated research and attention, which cannot be fully provided within the scope of this thesis because to its limited focus on the women's rights movement and, particularly, its extensive historical coverage. It would result in ineffective and shallow to include every significant issue regarding marginalised individuals. Therefore, I prioritised subjects like gender-based violence, youth polarisation, intersectionality, social-political settings, and social and human rights movements concerning Korean feminist advocacy alone. By narrowing the focus of the research, I aim to present a more in-depth and nuanced study of the identified issues, thereby contributing to the ongoing international conversation about feminism in South Korea.

## CHAPTER I

### At the Origins of the Korean Patriarchal Nation

#### 1.1 Gendered Roles in Chosŏn Dynasty

According to the *saedubu*<sup>3</sup>, one of the main reasons for the collapse of the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392) was the deterioration of public morals, for which women were believed to be at fault. Because of this view, rulers introduced several restrictions affecting women's lives and lifestyles to establish a new social and political order. With the rise of the new Chosŏn rule (1392-1910), Neo-Confucianism assumed hegemony in both public and private life, prompting conformity to a rigid patriarchal and patrilineal feudal system.<sup>4</sup> For instance, The Confucian Five Moral Imperatives<sup>5</sup> and Three Bonds<sup>6</sup> have shaped the boundaries of womanhood, particularly women from the *yangban* (aristocratic) class who were expected to embody these virtues to maintain harmony within Confucian society and uphold the idea of male superiority.<sup>7</sup> These expectations were sustained through domestic education and societal norms. In the first place, in 1477, Confucian scholars enacted the Anti-Remarriage Law, which discriminated against the children of women who had remarried, in an effort to promote moral behaviour and virtue.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, from 1596 onwards, the Chosŏn dynasty upheld the notion of chastity to ensure the paternal lineage's purity and implemented a system of rewards and penalties to encourage proper behaviour. As a result, many women were often willing to make extreme sacrifices for their sons'

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<sup>3</sup> The scholar-officials class who founded the Chosŏn dynasty.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars indicate the Chosŏn period as the start of a strict patriarchal society. During the Koryŏ period, women were relatively free. For instance, women could perform shaman rituals, visit temple monasteries, and engage in popular festivals. Nyitray, 'Confucian Complexities', 274–81; Han, *Women's Life during the Chosŏn Dynasty*, 116; Uhn, *The Invention of Chaste Motherhood*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Published in 1475, Queen Sohye's *Naeuhun* (Instructions for Women) reinforced the traditional discourse on gender-biased Confucian principles and education. According to the Queen, the Five Moral Imperatives differ based on the yin-yang dualism, implying an unequal and hierarchal relationship. Thus, men as *yang* (heaven) were superior to women as *um* (earth). She stressed the separation of genders; hence, women were relegated to the private and domestic spheres, whereas men belonged in the public world. Whereas the Four Virtues of a woman were moral behaviour, proper speech and appearance, and the performance of womanly chores. She should be humble, chaste, and disciplined not to trespass upon men's superior rank. Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 39–40.

<sup>6</sup> Around the 15<sup>th</sup> century, King Sejong ordered the publishing of the *Samgang haengsildo* (Conduct of the Three Bonds), which set the three fundamental principles of human relations: loyalty between king and subjects, filial piety between parents and children, and female devotion for husbands. This text mandated women to remain chaste, saying that a virtuous woman should obey her husband alone, just as a faithful subject should not worship two kings. However, this was a harsh analogy because men had fewer opportunities to demonstrate loyalty, whereas women constantly practised chastity to their husbands. Han, 117; Choi, *Formation of Women's Movements in Korea: From the Enlightenment Period to 1910*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>8</sup> Until Sejong's reign (1418-1450), remarriage was not considered a sin, nor immoral itself; the actual concern was the third remarriage and the timing of a woman's remarriage after her husband's death. Uhn, 48-49. For a detailed account, see Kim, *Confucianism and Feminism in Korean Context*.

## Chapter I

success. Chaste motherhood was thus created “by linking the sexuality of mothers to the careers of their sons”.<sup>9</sup>

Another step toward instilling chastity in Chosŏn women’s consciousness was the *naewoebŏp* (inside-outside rule), a policy prohibiting inter-gender contact, thus requiring a rigorous separation between men and women. As women were prohibited from interacting with non-family male members and confined to the inner chambers, the consequent isolation perpetuated the idea of men’s superiority. The adoption of *ch’inyŏng* system<sup>10</sup> further increased gender inequality by discriminating maternal lineages and drastically restricting women’s capability to inherit.<sup>11</sup> The ruling elite confined *yangban* women’s role to solely child-rearing and household chores, denying them to conduct ancestral rites and perform shamanism.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, a woman’s worth was derived from her capacity to bear children, especially male offspring as male heirs were ideal to continue the family patriarch’s lineage;<sup>13</sup> whereas daughters were seen as no longer belonging to their families after marriage because the *ch’inyŏng* system required daughters to live with their husband’s in-laws and fulfil the filial duty. In other words, due to the restricted mobility of women, their sons’ accomplishments were their only way to advance in society. To be sure, *yangban* women were not completely monolithic and absent figures in the public arena. For instance, in the last period of the dynasty, elite women could nurture self-education and knowledge through access to literature at lending bookstores, while also engaging in reading, writing, and arts despite scholars’ disapproval.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we surely cannot deny the gender exclusion and the high standards upper-class women had to live up to,<sup>15</sup> however, we cannot conclude that noble women were subjected to an entirely unfavourable or restrictive position. For instance, *yangban* women reacted with hostility as the ground of agency grew

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<sup>9</sup> Uhn states that the remarriage ban was more about social status, rather than a concern about moral chastity. Sexuality became a political tenet for keeping government officials out of office and selecting the elite group. In fact, while lowborn women were granted “commoner” status and commoner families were exempted from corvée labour or taxes, aristocratic families were rewarded as “honourable”. Moreover, *yangban* women’s subjugation was not only based on Confucianism doctrine, but it also aimed at the elimination of their economic independence. Uh, 53-56.

<sup>10</sup> A male primogeniture hierarchy moral system governing family relations and ancestral rituals. Han, *t.*, 114–17, 127.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-117.

<sup>12</sup> Oh argues that the unique quality of Korean shamanism lies in its ability to provide solace to marginalized and uneducated people, especially women who had monopoly on its rites. It was believed that women were more likely to practice shamanism due to their lower educational level, whereas Confucian and Buddhist religions emphasized rationality, self-cultural development, and consolidation of political power. Oh, *Korean Shamanism - The Religion of Women*, 77–80.

<sup>13</sup> It was an essential prerogative and obligation of a patriarch to maintain lineage; the absence of an heir was regarded as most disrespectful to his ancestors, especially if he was of noble rank. Thus, the bloodline was preserved by adoption and concubinage. Kim, ‘Historical Review of Korean Family Life. *Korea Journal*’.

<sup>14</sup> Han, 137–38.

<sup>15</sup> Women were additionally subjected to the Seven Offenses (including lack of filial piety, adultery, and jealousy) and the Thrice Following (they were submitted to male family members). Nyitray, 276–77.



for lowborn uneducated girls. As I will elaborate in the next section, when commoners came to achieve proper education and touch upon better opportunities, aristocratic women preferred to maintain their elitist identity, acquiring a separate education, evidence that indoor seclusion was a privilege rather than oppression.<sup>16</sup>

As I mentioned at the outset, the institutionalisation of Confucianism as a “state ideology” led to the submission of women to men—confining them to predefined social categories—as well as to the reinforcement of the feudalistic land-holding system, resulting in disproportionate class conditions. Individuals within the hierarchical social system were essentially born into inherited ranks and had few prospects for upward social mobility. Indeed, as the Chosŏn ruling class sought social stability and the dynasty’s political survival, the elite maintained a restrictive caste system by tightly controlling the private sphere, establishing a patriarchal society and legitimising and naturalising women’s control and submission.<sup>17</sup>

That said, it’s essential to integrate class consciousness when analysing women’s condition, as elite women represented just a small reality. *Yangban* women were dedicated to domestic chores such as embroidery, cooking, and childrearing, whereas women of the lower class endured hostile living conditions, either working the land or serving as slaves for the nobility. Women excluded from the upper class were marginalized in social roles such as concubines, entertainers, physicians, palace women, shamans, and lowborn class, that is female slaves.<sup>18</sup> Despite the gendered division of work, the majority of Chosŏn women were involved in sowing and weaving clothes, the latter was essential to pay taxes. Just like *yangban* women, commoner and lowborn classes had to fulfil their task of bearing a son, hence it was a common custom for humble women to expose their breasts while proudly breastfeeding—a sign of a woman’s performed duty.<sup>19</sup> Similarly to house chores, women were invested in commerce, as well as palace work. In this regard, the royal family first employed commoner girls as *kungnyŏ* (palace women), but due to resistance, government slave daughters were used instead. They were to undergo a training program where they would be taught basic knowledge and palace etiquette appropriate to their rank and provided with the basic living necessities and a stipend.<sup>20</sup> Given the strict gender segregation in Chosŏn, female physicians (*ŭinyŏ*) were also common: they were

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<sup>16</sup> Choi, ‘Gender’, 48-49; Yuh, Korean Female Education, Social Status, and Early Transitions, 1898 to 1910, 274-75, 284-85.

<sup>17</sup> Kim, ‘Historical’, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Han, 114.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-42.

<sup>20</sup> Palace girls typically worked 12 hours every day, sometimes up to 24 hours straight. They were not allowed to wed or leave the palace, and those found guilty of adultery or lesbian acts were punished accordingly. *Ibid.*, 143-45.

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responsible for assisting women as their male counterparts were forbidden to come into contact with the opposite gender. Given that, they worked as midwives, treating infected areas, and performing acupuncture, but they were not in place to write prescriptions. Female physicians used to come from humble origins, they were either government slaves' or *kisaeng*'s daughters and were recruited from a young age to commit to intensive studying and practice. Some were eventually mobilized as entertainers at the palace celebrations.<sup>21</sup> As for female entertainers (*kinyō*), they were the only female figures allowed to interact with the opposite gender and perform their sexuality. For this reason, they were referred to as *noryuchanghwa* (路柳墙花), meaning "a courtesan like a flower that anyone can pick". Coming from low backgrounds, they were the state's property and used to acquire intellectual and artistic abilities such as dancing, singing and calligraphy. They were employed by the palace, local governments, or the troops, and were expected to entertain and offer sexual favours.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.2 Women's Education and New Opportunities

The arrival of Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries coincided with the beginning of the (Patriotic) Enlightenment,<sup>23</sup> as did the emergence of Western-influenced discourse on modernisation, civil rights, and gender equality. Precisely because the interaction between Koreans and American missionaries did not constitute a "colonial encounter" in the transnational paradigm, the West was perceived as an alternative and progressive model that should be emulated to achieve modernisation and dethrone Chinese cultural hegemony.<sup>24</sup> For both Korean intellectuals and American missionaries, the oppressed and underprivileged condition of indigenous women was evidence of Korea's backwardness; for this reason, they aimed to strengthen Korean nationalism and spread Christianity. That is why the new modernity mandate, imported from Japan and upheld by American Protestant missionaries, called for formal education for young girls to advance the nation's innovation. Within the discourse of civilisation, missionaries' equal rights rhetoric served to justify and support the respective agendas of Christians and Korean enlightened intellectuals.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-48

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-50

<sup>23</sup> Korean (Patriotic) "Enlightenment" dates back to the 17th and 18th centuries with the *Sirhak* (School of Practical Learning). However, as Korea opened its doors to outsiders in 1876, the term began to be associated with the emergence of a modern nation-state. The terms "enlightenment" and "civilisation" were adopted as catchphrases promoting civil rights and national sovereignty by the 1890s. Choi, '*Gender*', 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Enlightenment intellectuals argued that the family's wellness, therefore of the nation, depended on women's roles as advisors and teachers. They stressed the value of women's sacrifice, education, and knowledge for the

When missionaries first attempted to integrate Korean women into the church, the deeply entrenched inside-outside rule presented them with numerous difficulties; in fact, it proved challenging to accommodate and balance between Korean standards and the Christian mandate in the public arena of the church.<sup>26</sup> Despite this, Protestant missionaries overcame social and cultural hurdles and reached the indigenous female community because Christianity represented a path of liberation for women.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Choi contends that Korean women received social and cultural skills and a “widening sphere” through the religious activities and outward presence of Western women missionaries who opened their inner chambers. Indeed, the Gospel provided Korean women with solace and a way to leave their homes, acquire new knowledge, play an active role in “women’s work for women”, and eventually travel across the country to pursue higher education.<sup>28</sup>

Missionaries’ inventiveness lies in their ability to identify the tangible needs of the native population and to disguise their evangelisation efforts as the implementation of modern intervention measures. In order to draw in more female followers, Protestant missionaries undertook to introduce a comprehensive curriculum, taking into account the critical role played by Korean women evangelists and the rock-bottom literacy rates among women.<sup>29</sup> Thus, alongside theological teachings, native women were taught practical life instructions such as hygiene, cooking, medical care, writing and teaching techniques.<sup>30</sup>

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prosperity of their families. They also argued that Korea could become a civilised country by treating women with care and respect, though ensuring they do not abuse their rights or oppose men’s will. Whereas missionaries condemned and demonised Confucian philosophy, glorifying the alleged incorporation of gender equality into its core moral ethics, a sign of their superior civilisation. In other words, touching on Christian morality and Western liberalism, Korean intellectuals asserted that, although women should be treated equally under God, they should also be protected as the weaker sex by keeping them indoors. For instance, intellectuals did not approve of women’s suffrage as politics was a male domain. Choi, *‘Gender’*, 21–23, 36–38.

<sup>26</sup> Korean women initially attended missionary training programs that placed a strong emphasis on theology, womanly arts, domestic science, and home economics. Their involvement in church events and gatherings with men, however, was regarded as a serious transgression of societal norms. For instance, early Korean converts suffered harassment just for attending church, thus men were reluctant to defy social conventions and bring their wives. Taking into account the rooted seclusion of Korean women, missionaries adjusted the sharing of public spaces by placing a paper divider and separating doors to allow both female and male presence in the church. In addition, women missionaries were assigned to evangelise and convert cautious Korean women who were confined inside. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

<sup>27</sup> Testimonies report that Korean women felt valued and dignified as human beings, particularly during the baptism: receiving a name allowed women to establish their own identities, while previously their whole persona had been associated with their male family members. *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–65, 181.

<sup>29</sup> Choi, “Wise Mother, Good Wife”, 8–9.

<sup>30</sup> The active participation of Korean Bible women (*chôndo puin*) was essential due to language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. Under the guidance of foreign women, Korean female evangelists were committed to diffusing Biblical literature and knowledge. For instance, they had to visit churches and mission hospitals to share God’s word with their fellow Korean women. Therefore, windows were preferred as the devotees had to be Christian women without any domestic duties. There were about 200 devotees in 1919, and most of them came from lowly and troublesome backgrounds. Korean women started to perform leadership in the Evangelical mission: out of 89 Bible courses, 75 were taught to 2,248 students by Korean women by 1908. Nonetheless, prejudice discrimination against Korean women was prevalent as they were prevented from decision-making and undertaking high roles. Summarily, the male-dominated church hierarchy promoted women’s involvement while routinely excluding them from higher leadership positions. Choi, *‘Gender’*, 65–69.

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The following step led to the foundation of the first (missionary) school for girls in Korean history in 1886. Ewha Girls' School<sup>31</sup> paved the way for the following 174 missionary schools to open in the country as the institution was successful in drawing a sizable student body despite Koreans' hesitation.<sup>32</sup> Ewha offered a broad curriculum that included advanced courses in English literature, physics, chemistry and physical education, all taught in vernacular Korean.<sup>33</sup> While the school originally provided free education to children from missionary and modest families and widows, in 1907 it switched to a paid system, covering both tuition and dorm expenses; further, it introduced higher education becoming the leading institution for women's education.<sup>34</sup>

In the case of *yangban* women, they advocated for a selective curriculum suitable for aristocratic duties and etiquette to honour family customs and protect the nation's sovereignty; given that upper-class women did not engage in public work and preserved elite status by maintaining modesty, they contributed to the gendered construction of their corresponding roles.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in response to the advent of missionary schools and the necessity to incorporate the curriculum with Western-style elements, in 1898 the elite group Promotion Society (*Ch'anyang-hoe*)<sup>36</sup> demanded the establishment of the first Korean girls' education institution.<sup>37</sup> According to historians, this event marked the beginning of the Korean women's rights movement. However, the establishment of elitist female education was clearly not about emancipation but rather about upholding power inequality.<sup>38</sup> For instance, The Independent Newspaper (*Dongnip sinmun*) harshly

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<sup>31</sup> King Kojong bestowed the name Ewha ("pear-flower"), as a symbol of national distinction and respectability, granting Scranton trust and authority to carry out her educational project. The Korean elite was not interested in Protestant missions, but they supported the establishment of a girls' school because it was in line with their strategy to reform the country through new terms of womanhood. *Ibid.*, 87-90.

<sup>32</sup> Kwon, "'The New Women's Movement' in 1920s Korea", 386. Choi reports encounters such as the one between the Korean intellectual Pak Yong-hyo and Methodist Missionary School founder Mary F. Scranton fostered gender equality discourse, therefore facilitating the introduction of formal education for girls. Pak's 1888 Memorial, which combined Western concepts with Confucian principles was the first manifestation of changing gender relations. He challenged gender and class-based hierarchies by advocating for equal rights and opportunities, the elimination of the concubinage, and the ban on early marriage and widow remarriage for the prosperity of the country. Likewise, Scranton thought that women ought to attend school spread the Gospel and learn how to build Christian homes to improve the nation. *Ibid.*, 31-33.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed account of *Han'gul*, see Kaff, 'How Women in Chosŏn Korea Legitimized Han'gul'; Choi, 'Gender', 107-20; Kim, 'Women's Legal Voice'.

<sup>34</sup> Choi, 'Gender', 90-91.

<sup>35</sup> Yuh, Korean Female Education, Social Status, and Early Transitions, 1898 to 1910, 274-79, 284-85.

<sup>36</sup> Although initially exclusive, The Promotion Society was a pioneering women's organization which transformed later women's activities, promoting cooperation and urging involvement in civil rights movements. For instance, they showed great spirit by taking part in the National Debt Compensation Campaign and the March 1<sup>st</sup> Movement, asserting that women were as equal citizens as men. Choi, 'Formation of Women's Movements in Korea: From the Enlightenment Period to 1910', 7; Kim, 'Under the Mandate of Nationalism'; Molony, 'Frameworks of Gender', 527.

<sup>37</sup> Yuh, 279-80.

<sup>38</sup> Korean women sent a memorial pleading with the king to address gender-based disparities in order to improve the Korean nation's status, believing that they might attain equality through equal access to education.

criticised the organisation for its exclusivity.<sup>39</sup> In the meantime, the political turmoil after the 1905 Protectorate Treaty with Japan drove an ulterior shift in Korea's modernisation efforts, placing a major priority on female education, as it was essential to the nation's survival; that is why intellectuals invited the female population to fulfil their patriotic duties by pursuing education. Subsequently, private Korean girls' schools emerged, embracing all women regardless of social status—a reflection of the historical background and the pressing necessity for the mobilisation of the Korean population.<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, the rise of modern Korean nationalism built up a stable framework within which the notion of new womanhood was further solidified. The “good wife wise mother” construct evolved to “wise and prudent professional housewife with bourgeois norms of efficiency”<sup>41</sup> as both conservative men and women called for domestic education, supplemented by scientific and practical knowledge given the instrumental role women played in nation-building as advisers. Nevertheless, “anachronistic”, evangelist and conservative schooling would eventually backfire by the 1920s due to the emerging awareness and practices among educated women.<sup>42</sup>

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However, Sunseong Girls' School had to be funded by the upper class in 1898 owing to a shortage of government resources. *Ibid.*, 289-92; Choi, *Formation*, 6-7.

<sup>39</sup> Yuh, 291. Founded by Sō Chaep'il, The Independent editorial was an innovative means through which enlightened intellectuals sought to reach everyone, regardless of class and gender. The newspaper impacted Korean society through innovative ideas and advocating for equal rights. For instance, writers believed educated women would make competent companions and advisors for state administration. For a thorough analysis, see Kim, 'Under the Mandate of Nationalism'.

<sup>40</sup> Choi reports that one state school and twenty private schools for girls were founded between 1905 and 1910, in addition to thirteen new mission schools. Choi, *Gender*, 91-94, 99-107; Yuh, 293-98.

<sup>41</sup> Choi, *Gender*, 42-44, 83-84, 101-102. For a detailed account of the “good wife wise mother” framework and womanhood, see Choi, “Wise Mother, Good Wife”.

<sup>42</sup> Choi, *Gender*, 104-107. With the Japanese occupation, education witnessed further adjustments to internalise imperial loyalism and promote conformity. For a full description, see Yoo, *Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea*, 64-73.

## 1.3 Under Japanese Colonial and Patriarchal Rule

### 1.3.1 Liberal Feminism and Socialism

Given the racial colonialism and patriotic nationalism, i.e. the “double colonisation” structure,<sup>43</sup> emerged a new political and social category that is “New Women” (*Sin yōsong*). Newly graduated Korean women ambioned to reshape their self-identity and sexuality inspired by Western liberal individuality; thus, they challenged the “very root of patrilineal” society by producing innovative visions for Korean women, calling for their self-awakening by writing and operating in the public arena.<sup>44</sup> As the range of opportunities broadened, women defied traditional appearance adopting Western-style looks, breaching conservative feminine etiquette, and providing their interpretation of womanhood and beauty—although still restricted in terms of capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal frameworks.<sup>45</sup> Their form of resistance was advocating for divorce, free marriage, celibacy, and free love, resisting national interest for their individualist aspirations and desires, and standing up to chastity and modesty.<sup>46</sup> For instance, pioneer liberal feminist Na Hyesök rejected purity and challenged moral obligations as she wrote “it’s merely taste...chastity depends on our will and practice”.<sup>47</sup> With the expansion of mass media in the 1920s, numerous feminist journals devoted to radical issues on womanhood, contributing to the self-awakening of Korean women by promoting equal socioeconomic and political rights, female education, birth control and liberation from feudal relationships.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the settler framework prevented women from exercising their full right to self-determination because, as Choi argues, the fundamental characteristic of nationalism relies on its specific feature that “suppresses individuality and essentialises group membership”.<sup>49</sup> Correspondingly, in the face of imperialist and capitalistic modernity and

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<sup>43</sup> Under the social power system known as “double colonisation”, Korean women were subjected to double oppression by both foreign and fellow citizens patriachs, who placed native women at a lesser status than Japanese and Korean men. Chungmoo Choi, 1998, in Choi, ‘Examination of Korean Feminism from the Intersections of Colonialism, Modernity, and Nationalism in Colonial Korea (1910–1945)’, 17–18, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Korean women were inspired by the newly nascent enlightened progressive Japanese magazines and translated Western works such as Henry K. Ibsen’s “Nora: A Doll’s House”. Kwon, 382-89.

<sup>45</sup> For instance, they opted for more comfortable, convenient and hygienic pieces of clothes and hairstyles, inspired by Western fashion and trends, including looser clothing, bobbed or short hair and gendered ambiguous appearance. Yoo, 74-77.

<sup>46</sup> To be sure, some of those liberated women who publicly opposed Confucian principles did not entirely reject the idea of a “good wife wise mother” and displayed contradictions. For instance, Kim Wonju, the founder of the first feminist editorial, *Sin yōja* (New Woman, 1920), advocated for women’s emancipation and motherhood. In the second place, New Women were criticised for their lack of class consciousness and patriotic loyalty as they acknowledged Westernized influence and performed bourgeois lifestyles. Kwon, 383; Choi, “*Wise Mother, Good Wife*”, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Na Hyesök, 1935, as cited in Choi, *New Women* 147.

<sup>48</sup> For a collection of New Women writings on these matters, see Choi, *New Women in Colonial Korea*.

<sup>49</sup> In Korea, nationalism was an entrenched mindset that valued the collective as sacred and above any other sociocultural projects. This exclusivity resulted in a lack of critical examination of different concerns, such as

instability, the “Other” resorted to a defensive strategy, polarising womanhood in a two-dimensional categorisation according to literacy levels: the “New” opposed to the “Old-Fashioned” Woman. This further set up a new class and gender hierarchy that stereotyped and scrutinised the former group in favour of the more traditional and modest latter category.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the New Women category, previously associated with literate activist women, was replaced by the “Modern Girls” (*Mōdon’gōl*) construct in the mid-1920s. This term became derogatory for wealthy transgressive women who engaged in squandering consumption, representing social decadence and depravity, as well as neglect towards the nation’s economic struggles.<sup>51</sup> In addition, as the masculine gaze held hegemony and ideological power on women’s caricature and representation in the media, the fetishised and objectified representation of women’s bodies intended to deride and condemn their free sexuality and appearance, ridiculing them for being irresponsible, provocative, extravagant, easily tempted, and lacking ethics.<sup>52</sup> Just like Jayawardena states, feminism was accused of being a byproduct of Western capitalism, alienating women from traditional roles and, simultaneously, drawing away the attention from immediate nationalist or socialist struggles.<sup>53</sup>

It is noteworthy that upper-class women’s mundane lives were indeed a privilege in comparison to the wretched conditions of factory workers and peasant women. Industrialisation brought new employment opportunities during the colonial era (1910-1945), with women becoming “the largest and cheapest reserve army of labour.”<sup>54</sup> Female children under fifteen made up 46.1% of the child workforce in 1925 and younger women represented the majority in the urban migration trend, accounting for 40% of the total workforce; hence, this suggests that women’s labour was crucial to modern development.<sup>55</sup> Eventually, by the 1940s, women began working in heavy industrial jobs outside of traditional gender roles.<sup>56</sup> The introduction of Socialism presented and prioritised the

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women’s rights. Choi, ‘Gender’, 15; Suh, ‘The “New Woman” and the Topography of Modernity in Colonial Korea’, 18–19.

<sup>50</sup> Suh, 13, 15–17.

<sup>51</sup> Jeong, ‘New Women and Modern Girls’, 508; Suh, 21–22; Choi, ‘New’, 11–12.

<sup>52</sup> Suh, 24–25; Jeong, ‘New Women and Modern Girls’, 513; Yoo, 80.

<sup>53</sup> Jayawardena, 2. For instance, the socialist magazine *Pyōlgōn’gon* described the Modern Girl, or *puryan sonyō* (bad girl), as a “prostitute selling her body to the Modern Boys who were the prodigal sons of capitalists and descendants of the private-propertied bourgeoisie”; as such, liberal feminists were also blamed for the deterioration of the traditional Korean family in the name of their selfish independence, diverting the attention. Kwon, 24; Raymond, ‘The Female Experience with Nationalism, Feminism, and Han in Post-Choson Korea’, 4; Jeong, ‘New Women and Modern Girls’, 515.

<sup>54</sup> Jayawardena, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Kim argues that young women who experienced transitory roles in late colonial Korea make up the generation that shaped society’s progression in the second half of the twentieth century as their experiences led to new possibilities. Kim, ‘The Varieties’, 136–37.

<sup>56</sup> Kim reports that, from 1937, Japan led employment and imperialization campaigns, aiming to maximise

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discourse on class struggle within the women's movement, taking into account marginalised, exploited, and peasant women who represented the majority of the female population. In contrast to the indulged and extravagant bourgeois women's demands, Socialist female writers called upon enlightened women to pass on their education to the nation's illiterate women "hunger for knowledge", helping them to "develop class consciousness and learn social civility".<sup>57</sup> On the same note, Chŏng Ch'ilsŏng fiercely criticised New Women for boasting about their wealth, highlighting their hypocrisy and indifference towards proletarian women's struggles:

Regardless of any progress made in our civilization, proletarian women have always been sentenced to lives of poverty and subjected to excessive contempt. They have a miserable destiny in which they simply cannot survive, not even for one day, without having to perform the brutal chores that most people would find unbearable. [...] Those who have fallen into this unfortunate situation are not just women factory workers and peasant women. Haven't we already learned about and seen the misery that many women experience as prostitutes in redlight districts, as servants in wealthy families, and as work-slaves in other sectors of the community?<sup>58</sup>

Whereas Kim Ŭnhŭi condemned women's call for suffrage, claiming that the working class's fundamental needs persist to be neglected:

What we need first are food and clothing, not knowledge about cooking or embroidery. We do not need lessons on how to care for our children. We need the milk and food with which to nourish them [...] The laborers have to work themselves to death, from the break of dawn to late at night, for their meager wages. [...] We women have to work in factories, shops, and rice fields to support our families. We cannot even dream about being the "wise mother, good wife," a role that the bourgeois class glorifies and demands.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, although Socialist women's writings rejected the purely feminist struggle and prioritised class issues, they nonetheless offered a more authentic female experience; furthermore, despite their differing viewpoints, Socialism and Feminism were intertwined in the Korean women's movements.<sup>60</sup>

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human resources. For instance, in the last years, male and female students worked in military arsenals and hospitals. Kim, 'The Pacific War and Working Women in Late Colonial Korea'. Park, *The Proletarian Wave*, 27; Kim, *The Varieties* 138-39.

<sup>57</sup> Hŏ Chŏngsuk, 1925, as cited in Choi, *New Women* 53.

<sup>58</sup> Chŏng also criticised men for their "empty rhetoric" on equal rights as they "look down on women as spectators" while they are struggling on their own. Chŏng Ch'ilsŏng, 1929, as cited in Choi, *New Women*, 200-202.

<sup>59</sup> Kim Ŭnhŭi, 1925, as cited in Choi, *New Women*, 210-12.

<sup>60</sup> Kwon, 948-49, 975-76. At first, Socialist ideologies divided women between liberal bourgeois Christians (Young Women Christian Association; YWCA) and Socialists (*Chosun Yeosung Dongwoohoe*, or Korean Women's Association). Nevertheless, women's efforts culminated in 1927, within the greatest countrywide



### 1.3.2 *Comfort Women and State Violence*

From 1934-35 onwards, the colonial regime enforced a rigorous assimilation program, mandating that Koreans participate in Shinto ceremonies honouring Japanese imperial ancestors, speak Japanese in formal settings and adopt Japanese names. The colonial rule intensified the imperial propaganda by reducing freedom of the press, closing independent media pushing for greater war mobilisation, and encouraging patriotic labour.<sup>61</sup> Female students and young girls were recruited through enlistment campaigns and hiring procedures of the patriotic labour union Women's Labor Volunteer Corps (*Yōja kullo chōngsindae*)<sup>62</sup> which admitted a broad range of people drafted for work.<sup>63</sup> As such, women volunteering for the empire, whether for patriotic ideals or egoistic empowerment, were celebrated as the “flower of the Japanese Korean unity” (*naesŏn il'chae ūi kkot*).<sup>64</sup> They were employed in all fields of work, from textile to military factories, sometimes in stations across China and Southeast Asia.<sup>65</sup>

The vast Japanese wartime state's exploitation extended beyond labourers and military personnel to include the so-called “military supplies”, or military sex slaves.<sup>66</sup> Throughout history, *chōngsindae* women have been erroneously associated with wartime “military comfort women” (*ianfu*; *wianbu*)—whether out of generalisation, lack of data or nationalist expediency and symbolical decision—to denote women who were abducted and brought to military camps under the deception of employment opportunities.<sup>67</sup> Scholars contend that, following the Nanking massacre (1937), the Japanese fascistic and paternalistic empire put in place the comfort system, i.e. an apparatus of military-run brothels inspired by European structures.<sup>68</sup> The military brothel system was meant to provide troops with

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organisation; *Kūnuhoe* (Friends of the Rose of Sharon) was the “most important women's organisation in terms of scale, ideology and activities”. As such, Korean women advocated for eliminating gendered discrimination, united by the same innovative objectives. The association fought for better conditions for female workers, supported labour movements, raised class consciousness and supported independence movements. Nevertheless, internal conflicts led to its dissolution in 1931. Kim, 'Nationalism', 69–71; Molony, 527; Choi, 'New Women', 7; Park, 'The Proletarian Wave', 21–31.

<sup>61</sup> Clark, *Korea Briefing, 1993 Festival of Korea Edition*, 235–40; Kim, 'The State, Family and “Womanhood” in Colonial Korea', 182.

<sup>62</sup> It literally translates as “volunteering body corps” or “offering up one's body”. Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 57–58.

<sup>63</sup> Kim reports that, during the Pacific War, the Women's Labor Volunteer Corps provided women with a diverse range of employment opportunities and higher wages. They were recruited through teachers, school administrators, district leaders and village headmen or individually through regional employment offices and training centres. Kim, 'The Pacific', 89–92.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–92.

<sup>66</sup> Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 225.

<sup>67</sup> *Ianfu* refers to “military comfort women”; whereas *wianbu* is a “masculinist euphemism” to indicate prostitutes working for under the American military in South Korea, and thus evokes a negative image. Soh argues that according to data collected on Korean survivors, majority of them (76.8%) were recruited between 1930-1943, i.e. before the establishment of the *chōngsindae* system. Soh, 54-61, 68; Kim, 'Mothers of the Empire', 196.

<sup>68</sup> Soh, 112–13; Hirschauer, *The Securitization of Rape*, 78.

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state-regulated access to leisurely sex in order to prevent acts of sexual violence against native women and safeguard troops' health; thus, "rampant, undirected mass rape then became directed and institutionalised mass rape."<sup>69</sup>

Men reclaimed gender power and control through intercourses with women who exhibited feminine submission; correspondingly, women's "quasi-maternal" and sexual services enabled men's vulnerability by providing comfort and stress relief and fulfilling their duty to support men's psychological safety. Consequently, sexuality served both to manifest and manage masculine aggressiveness.<sup>70</sup> Soh argues that the origins of military sexual slavery had roots in the military hypermasculinity<sup>71</sup> and the masculinist idea of female duty to satisfy and comfort—thus naturalising and institutionalising women's gendered exploitation and violence. The comfort system embodied paternalistic and racial state policy and considered women as "gifts" for the empire's war heroes, upholding the masculinist ideology of men's superiority and right to "public sex" enabled by the totalitarian war project and the long history of institutionalised entertaining prostitution both in Japan and Korea.<sup>72</sup> The data provided by Soh reveals the extent of structural gendered violence and Koreans' involvement in human trafficking and coercion against their female youth compatriots. For instance, Korean state administrators and local elites, as well as families and school teachers, were all complicit in the systemic recruiting, either for financial benefit or to hold onto authority.<sup>73</sup> Although there was no lack of similarities and ambiguous distinctions, Soh classifies the comfort facilities (*ianju*) according to the organisational motives ranging "from commercial profit (by civilian entrepreneurs) to paternalistic accommodation (by the state and military leaders), to criminal self-gratification (by soldiers on the battlefield), both individually and collectively."<sup>74</sup>

In particular, Soh connotes "criminal *ianju*" the facilities run by troops on battlefields, constraining local women to sexual slavery through abduction and coercive recruiting. Soh further categorises the military brothels according to the historical wartime phases (1932-45), placing the criminal *ianju* during the final years, adding that this ruthless and vicious system was the product of the "violent military heterosexual hypermasculinity" and the sex crimes committed against native women.<sup>75</sup> These improvised stations embodied the most

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<sup>69</sup> Hirschauer, *The Securitization of Rape*, 78–79; Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 36–37. Soh reports that rapes were not actually prevented as troops continued to commit sexual crimes due to insufficient number of comfort facilities, lack of supervision or financial hardships. Soh, 140.

<sup>70</sup> Ahn, "Taming Soldiers", 224–27.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 214–218.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–117.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–142.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 130–136.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 117–119.

aggressive and violent military hypermasculinity and, unlike the commercial brothels, they were not subject to health or hygienic regulations, resulting in the complete dehumanisation and objectification of native women.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, women living in combat camps faced greater risks because of their proximity; for instance, in extreme circumstances near the end of the war, Korean women were abandoned in the camps or executed in mass graves. Concerning military manhood, Ahn illustrates how the comfort system reconciled the paradoxical contradiction between extreme aggression and submission, upholding a sense of “muscular patriotism”. The misogynistic construction of military masculine identity implied the over-sexualisation of violence, thus women were both seen as mere sexual objects and repudiated as feminine. Racism and xenophobia further entitled the routine sexual violence and brutality against native women from other Asian colonies. Furthermore, the pseudo-familial military system reproduced hierarchical relationships reflecting the patriarchal household where common soldiers were positioned inferiorly to high-rank officers, determining their order of sexual access, whereas comfort women reflected the obedient wives and daughters.<sup>77</sup> It's estimated that 80 per cent of the Japanese troops visited comfort facilities, including Korean soldiers, and the approximate number of comfort women is between 20,000 and 400,000.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, as Soh notes, women's experiences were not monolithic and, although politically incorrect and controversial, literature on individual survivors offers a variety of complex transnational power dynamics of private sexual encounters that cannot be denied.<sup>79</sup> Paid sexual work provided by low-class women has historically been stigmatised and disregarded, while also considered necessary. For instance, long after the Japanese occupation ended, the adult entertainment industry for foreigners and the Korean American comfort system persisted in exploiting women's sexual services, whether to strengthen the economy or endorse the power in force.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-132.

<sup>77</sup> Lim and Petrone, 214–16.

<sup>78</sup> Veteran soldiers declared that they made use of comfort facilities naturally or due to a lack of other means for recreation. Whereas the ones who did not attend comfort houses out of pity towards women or due to poverty or war-related fears. Soh, 192-94, 22-23.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 195, 200.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-224. Although criminalised in law, the Korean regime upheld the regulated prostitution adopted by US Armed Forces in Korea (USAFIK), thus assimilating the Japanese comfort model “in the name of protecting respectable women and rewarding for their sacrifice”. Korean government's efforts to respond to Allies forces' demands, took the form of 104 districts and consistent policy to support and consolidate camptown prostitution. Höhn and Moon, *Over There*, 41.

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In this regard, Moon writes:

The emergence and consolidation of regulated military prostitution in Korea reveals that prostitution is an essential component of expanding and maintaining the American empire, as were the cases with European colonial empires, and it is sustained through the collaboration of local elites, at the expense of lower-class women, to serve their political and economic interests.<sup>81</sup>

The Korean sociopolitical culture rooted in feminine chastity and maternity contributed to marginalising and sexually stigmatising former comfort women as “defiled” until the Redress Movement took off in the 1990s. Rape is a tool of domination and repression,<sup>82</sup> therefore sexual violence and humiliation were linked to the country’s subjection to Japanese racial and colonial rule.<sup>83</sup> Thus, both self-righteous nationalist and feminist rhetoric overemphasised women’s experiences presenting them as sole victims or “heroic symbols of national suffering under colonialism”, instrumentalising the question of sexual slavery for international conflict.<sup>84</sup> Then again, the Redress Movement opened Pandora’s box by enabling both public and transnational discourse on sexual violence, uplifting female survivors’ voice and agency, advocating for eradicating social stigma and historical neglect and ultimately demanding for to reparations for the survivors.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 23–24.

<sup>83</sup> Hirschauer contends that conflicts used violence and abuse, forced nudity, and rape to humiliate and exploit enslaved women to symbolise the powerlessness of the defeated state and depriving both individuals and states of their rights. Hirschauer, 65–67, 77.

<sup>84</sup> Soh, 97-106, 168; Sim and Koh, ‘Voices That Did Not Fit’.-169, 204, 224.

<sup>85</sup> Ahn, ‘Uncomfortable Truths’; Koh, ‘Korea’s First “MeToo” Movement’.

## CHAPTER II

### Female Participatory Citizenship for Democratisation

#### 2.1 Militarised Modernity and Gendered Division of Labour

The nascent postcolonial Korean state has been defined as “militarized modernity”,<sup>86</sup> i.e. the outcome of the nation’s militarisation to the scope of reaching an advanced and consolidated state. Inheriting the Japanese colonial policy and practices, the dictator Korean rulers implemented a series of laws and practices rooted in anti-communism to maintain discipline and order in the country.<sup>87</sup> Against the backdrop of national division, the Korean War and the postcolonial call for modernity,<sup>88</sup> Park Chung Hee’s government (1961-79) imposed authoritarian rule and instituted a novel political subjectivity (*kungmin*, or “people of the state”) that was expected to sacrifice for the nation. Park’s adopted interventions built an anti-communist national identity, such as resident registration, compulsory military service, normalisation of violence, systemic surveillance and discipline spread in all aspects of life, from schooling, mass media and work, to gender-shaped mass mobilisation of *kungmin* with the objective of depoliticising the grassroots population.<sup>89</sup>

The fascist and misogynistic framework of military conscription was accompanied by a rigid hierarchy that mandated obedience and the cult of tough, aggressive masculinity and militarised patriotism to reduce effeminate traits and homogenise the body of the militia to inculcate a sense of solidarity and equality.<sup>90</sup> In this regard, Moon points out that martial service did not guarantee full citizenship for men. On the contrary, it deprived them of

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<sup>86</sup> Moon contends that South Korea’s universal conscription’s peculiarity lies in its long-standing military conflict with North Korea since the Korean War (1950-53) that led the instrumentalization of anticommunism as national doctrine for nation-building policy. This led to pervasive propaganda and fierce persecution of dissidents labelled as “communists”. Moon, ‘*Militarized Modernity*’, 4–6, 10, 21.22.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-33.

<sup>88</sup> The South Korean state was established in 1948, under U.S. Army Military Government (UMGA), relying on coercive means, suppression and anticommunist ideology that led to the extinction of organised opposition. Under Syngman Rhee’s regime (1948-60), the Korean War furtherly intensified the national identity moulded against left-wing ideology, serving as strong justification and acceptance for militarised national security. The anticommunist ideology would erode and loosen only in mid-1980s. *Ibid.*, 24-28

<sup>89</sup> For instance, Park reformed school curricula to promote anticommunist consciousness while also incorporating traditional values of loyalty and filial piety, as well as calling for unity and patriotism. Additionally, the introduction of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (1961-99) was instrumental in population’s surveillance, punishment and suppression of dissidents endangering national security. The KCIA represented an omnipresent monitoring means, persecuting individuals through frequent abuse of violence and torture. Nevertheless, this will backfire in the mid-1980s. *Ibid.*, 7-10, 19, 22-23, 34-39

<sup>90</sup> Conscription’s hegemony has been possible because military and civilian elites utilised the homogenising rhetoric to bring together all male nationals, making their experiences relatable and common, thus creating a false sense of belonging and fairness that justified and legitimised the physical hardships. Moon, ‘*Trouble with Conscription, Entertaining Soldiers*’, 71–72; Moon, ‘*The Production and Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity*’, 89–91.

freedom of thought and body, creating a differentiation between male subjects who fit into society and the “others” who are excluded, thereby impeding and preventing the rise of collective awareness and activism. In this sense, the military system has remained uncontested due to class isolation and disparity of rights and interests within the civilian and labour movements led by educated urban middle-class men.<sup>91</sup> The government successfully transformed the long-standing negative perception of militarisation through indoctrination and acceptance of military service as men’s national duty, aided by a string of culminating events that established universal conscription as inevitable and necessary in public opinion.<sup>92</sup> The key foundation for the legitimisation of military modernity has been the “universal conscription system” (*kungmin-gaebbyŏngje*) that mobilised its male populace on a mass scale and institutionalised conscripts as workers and researchers, “remoulding them into instruments of the nation-state”.<sup>93</sup>

In the early 1960s, the completion of military service became a precondition of employment with the newly introduced system of extra points that uniformed military service and strengthened its authority, rewarding veterans and penalising evaders. In accordance, the military economy employed men as “industrial soldiers” (*sanŏpyŏkkun*) and permanent workforce in heavy and chemical industries, reinforcing their subjectivity as providers within the heteronormative family structure; this practice resulted in marginalisation and gender-based seclusion of female workers in light sectors.<sup>94</sup> Although the number of economically active women increased exponentially between 1960 and 1989,<sup>95</sup> the state's aggressive emphasis on the industrialisation of masculinised sectors demonstrated how the employment of conscripts for economic purposes and female segregation in the labour market were interdependent. This phenomenon was further exacerbated by the lack of public training programs targeting women.<sup>96</sup> In other words, militarisation was inextricably

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<sup>91</sup> Moon, *'Militarized Modernity'* 49-50, 124-30

<sup>92</sup> The failed assassination attempt of President Park in 1975, as well as the shift in international relations in the 1970s and the withdrawal of US Army, sustained the need of a well-established national defence. Additionally, Park’s regime introduced military subjects in secondary schools and colleges, promoted military drills to prepare the youth for military training, tightened supervision of potential conscripts and imposed harsh punishments on deserters. *Ibid.*, 45-51

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 24

<sup>94</sup> Under the Military Service Special Cases Law (1973), military conscription was requirement for applicants in recruitment advertisements, resulting in the exclusion of female applicants from major corporations with better working conditions and salaries. This was accompanied by a series of vocational training programs and a technical license system to attract male youth in the industrial sectors. The adoption of rewards served to normalise universal military conscription and minimize discontent. These strategies had the effect of militaristic principles and practices penetrating the organisational and hierarchical culture of corporations. *Ibid.*, 38-42, 55-61; Moon, *'The Production and Subversion'*, 93.

<sup>95</sup> Women’s economical participation grew from 26.8% to 46.6% between 1989 and 1989, to be more exact, from 2.2 million to 7.3 million. Nevertheless, the number contracted between 1975 and 1985. Moon, *'Militarized Modernity'*, 69-70.

<sup>96</sup> The governmental training programs directed at women were primarily targeting prisoners, and poor single

intertwined with, if not the origin of, the normative gender division of labour. In fact, “the continuing symbolic location of women within the domestic” did not permit the growing job opportunities to translate into a change of femininity perception as work was often considered a temporary or mere supplement to husbands’ income.<sup>97</sup> This, in turn, upheld and extended the unequal relationship between the two genders in the private sphere with further impact on the heteronormative household.<sup>98</sup>

In terms of female mass mobilisation, the sole national interventions involved family planning and the constraint of women’s social roles as breeders and housewives.<sup>99</sup> Due to a complex web of racial, cultural, and patriarchal constructs, the national perception of Korean women as submissive and docile Korean women legitimised their discrimination and strengthened the narrative of ‘authentic Koreanness’.<sup>100</sup> This was possible on account of the collaboration between several AMOs and publicly funded civilian voluntary organisations, which realised a series of interventions, gender-specific training camps and class programs aimed at manipulating domestic subjectivity, controlling fertility rates and population growth, and depoliticising young unmarried women employed in exploitative conditions.<sup>101</sup> For instance, from the 1970s to the 1980s, the official practice of female sterilisation was vigorously promoted and accompanied by economic incentives, which resulted in sterilisation mania and a rise in the use of contraceptives among women. The average number of children declined to 1.6 by 1988, and contraception use rose to 77.1% in the late 1980s, suggesting that women’s scope to decrease pregnancies aligned with the patriotic commitment to observe their national duty as mothers was critical for the sustainment of the modernised state.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, the state exerted control over household management, requiring middle-class wives not to hire domestic helpers to boost the supply of cheap female and young workforce

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mothers to teach gendered skills; thus, they were not taught any technical training that was considered masculine. Therefore, female trainees were involved in as weaving, spinning and dressing hair. *Ibid.*, 70-75

<sup>97</sup> Despite the shift in gender relations, the contestation of the ideological construct of ‘femininity’ did not lead to a shift in society: popular and media representations, impregnated with consumerism, depicted married women as “super-women”, or successful individuals who self-sacrificed for the sake of the husband and the household, elevating the idea of feminine suffering. Elfving-Hwang, *Representations of Femininity in Contemporary South Korean Women’s Literature*, 25-26, 66–67.

<sup>98</sup> Moon, ‘*Militarized Modernity*’, 64-67.

<sup>99</sup> The family planning strategy was launched in 1963, aiming for a \$2 billion gain by 1971. To meet the population growth rates set for each period, the state used extensive propaganda to change public opinion and persuade married couples to use contraception. *Ibid.*, 75-83.

<sup>100</sup> Elfving-Hwang, 21, 44-45.

<sup>101</sup> The national network of conservative women’s organisation included: the Korean National Wives’ Association, the Central Association of National Housewives’ Classes, the New Village Women’s Association, the Korean Federation of Housewives’ Clubs, the Mothers’ Clubs for Family Planning and the National Women’s Welfare Center, Korean National Council of Women’s Organisations, Business and Professional Women, the Korean Association of University Women. Moon, ‘*Militarized Modernity*’ 78-80; Jung, *Practicing Feminism in South Korea*, 18.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

that supported light industry expansion and economic growth in the 1960s. These campaigns promoted “wise” and modern family management, emphasising women’s national duty to live as frugal housewives to minimise inflationary effects. In other words, women were appointed the burden and responsibility of the failing state’s social welfare policies.<sup>103</sup>

Early in the 1990s, conscriptions’ hegemony was questioned by the mass media exposure of unfair exemptions and the removal of the extra-points system in light of the nation’s transition to democracy and the youth’s growing individualism. The new generation (*shinsedae*) of young men was growing critical of compelled enlistment given that the standard of barracks living fell short of advanced and dignified standards.<sup>104</sup> As such, a 2002 survey revealed that slightly more than half of male high-school students viewed military service as optional.<sup>105</sup> In the first place, upper-class men have been regularly spared from severe military duty in place of “supplementary service”, that is office work. This practice was particularly the centre of debate during the 1997 election when it was revealed that high-ranking government officials and presidential candidates had exempted their sons using connections, wealth or system loopholes.<sup>106</sup> Second, in 1999, the Constitutional Court ruled that the extra-points system was unconstitutional and discriminatory against marginalised minorities, in response to grassroots civil society efforts to address human rights violations, conscientious objections and alternatives. Consequently, due to these growing matters of the new millennium, the elites in post-Cold War South Korea have struggled to restore the legitimacy of mandatory service.<sup>107</sup> Third, in violation of international human rights law, the state failed to appropriately respond to the requests to introduce alternative services for conscientious objectors, given that the official interventions turned out to be just as punitive and severe as imprisonment.<sup>108</sup> Finally, barracks living has long been raising concerns about the systematic exploitative

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<sup>103</sup> For instance, mothers and wives were strongly advised and instructed to food saving given the rice shortage caused by the economic strategy to prioritise manufacturing over agriculture that caused a drastic reduction in self-sufficiency in grains. As the state pinpointed consumerism on women, their interventions attempted to introduce savings and thrift as their sole national duty. Nevertheless, the effectiveness lost its hold with the emergence of the consumer society in late 1980s. *Ibid.*, 90-93.

<sup>104</sup> Moon, ‘*The Production and Subversion*’, 95-96.

<sup>105</sup> More specifically, 54.5% of students believed military service was voluntary, 9.5% stated that they could get exempted via “help”, and 34.0% considered military service as their duty. Moon, ‘*Trouble*’, 69-71; Moon, ‘*Militarized Modernity*’, 38-55, 103,

<sup>106</sup> In 2008, 11.2% of high government officials’ sons did not serve in the military. Moon, ‘*Militarized Modernity*’, 72-73; Kim, ‘*Are Chaebol Scions*’.

<sup>107</sup> Moon, ‘*Trouble*’ 74-77.

<sup>108</sup> In 2018, the Supreme Court and Constitutional Court ruled the right to conscientious objection. Nevertheless, the alternative service requires objectors to work in prisons for 36 months, almost double the time of a usual enlistment. In fact, this former response disregards men’s human rights to the freedom of religion, conscience, religion and belief. ‘*South Korea: Alternative to Military Service Is New Punishment for Conscientious Objectors - Amnesty International*’.



and violent conditions that conscripts face, including bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment. Nonetheless, the justice system continues to overlook this kind of mistreatment.<sup>109</sup> Despite the UN Human Rights Committee's concerns about human rights violations, the Constitutional Court has repeatedly upheld Article 92-6 of the Military Criminal Act (1962) which prohibits same-sex relationships.<sup>110</sup> On top of that, it is difficult for victims of abuse and discrimination even to report anonymously considering the power dynamics, the low chance of indictment and the fear of prosecution and penalisation—because criminalisation further legitimises targeted segregation based on identity.<sup>111</sup> With all that said, it explains why fewer people are favourable to compulsory military service, with 62% of young males considering it a “waste of time”. However, men are still held back from questioning the legitimacy of the system as a whole due to the deeply rooted belief that enrolment is an essential rite of passage. Therefore, men have taken a stigmatised and hostile attitude toward those who vehemently object because it defies the constructed notion of “fairness” and camaraderie.<sup>112</sup>

### 2.2 Minjŏng Movement and Working Women's Citizenship

The “economic miracle” transformation of South Korea was possible because of the exploitation of young women as dutiful daughters willing to sacrifice for the nation.<sup>113</sup> Female workers were highly vulnerable and manipulable because of gender socialisation, lack of experience and subordinate positions in the hierarchical work environment.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Since the establishment of the Office of Human Rights Protector for Military, there have been 147 military deaths between July 2022 and June 2023 66 were suicides, i.e. 44.9% of the total. In 2021, the Defense Ministry Help Center received 24,713 complaints from enlisted soldiers: 45.08% of cases of soldiers struggling with their duties, 5.67% of cases of suicidal thoughts and mental health issues, and 10.69% of human rights violations. *BBC*, ‘Soldiers Jailed’; *BBC*, ‘Two More South Korea Conscripts in Apparent Suicides’; Ji, ‘Inside Barracks’.

<sup>110</sup> Article 92-6 punishes sexual relationship between men with up to two years in prison for “indecent acts”, both on and off base and/or duty. For instance, in 2017, more than 20 conscripts were sanctioned for engaging in same-sex sexual intercourse. Guinto, ‘South Korea Court Upholds Ban’; Amnesty International, ‘Serving in Silence’, 6–7.

<sup>111</sup> Amnesty International, ‘Serving in Silence’; The Korea Times, ‘Panel Recognizes’; Kang, ‘Staff Sgt. Byun Hee-soo’s case’; Oh, ‘New Defense Ministry proposal’; Park, ‘In the Military, My Existence’.

<sup>112</sup> According to public opinion, an all-volunteer armed force cannot be put in place because it would translate into the exploitation of the most disadvantaged social classes. Moreover, due to low birth rates, it is predicted a decrease in military conscripts. This indicates that, until the state offers improved living conditions, the abolishment of compulsory service would never be a realistic option because no man will voluntarily enrol. For a detailed account, see Roy, ‘Population Crisis’. Guzman, ‘Inside South Korea’; Amnesty International, ‘Alternative to Military Service’; Song, ‘In South Korea, a Quiet Debate’.

<sup>113</sup> The cheap and productive labour of young women in factories was crucial for Park’s program of export-led development, as such the government propaganda pushed for a positive image of factory jobs, portraying female employers as “industrial soldiers” (*sanŏp chŏnsa*). In fact, the textile and garment industries were the driving force behind Park Chung Hee’s rapid economic growth that ensured South Korea’s entry into overseas export markets between 1961 and mid-1970. As a result, there were over 1.5 million female employees in the light sector, primarily in the garment and textile. Kim, *Class Struggle*, 7–8, 57–58; Chŏn, *They Are Not Machines*.

<sup>114</sup> Firstly, women occupied solely low positions, while men held managerial and supervision positions. Second, the bonus system promoted competition among female employees. Third, factories used night schools to control

They performed low-paid highly productive, unskilled and repetitive tasks because employers capitalised on the predetermined life cycle's expectations of women's short-term employment—women's careers were considered temporary, as a transition phase before their definite roles as wives and mothers. For instance, in 1985, women's salaries were 53.2% lower than men's, despite working six to seven hours more.<sup>115</sup> These circumstances generated a vicious cycle where women were discouraged from continuing their jobs due to the persistently large gender salary disparities. Instead, they sought out other strategical paths to achieve social mobility, i.e. heterosexual marriage, “trading off being a good wife and mother for economic support”.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, young women workers were driven toward marriage to avoid cultural stigma, as failing to marry at a fixed age resulted in both economic repercussions and social humiliation.<sup>117</sup> To be sure, the option of breaking free from labour exploitation was only realistic for a few women whose husbands owned well-paid jobs in heavy industry; whereas low-income households, as well as divorced and widowed women, would have to return to work under even harsher conditions than before.<sup>118</sup> To put it briefly, women have been relegated to the patriarchal family structure due to the hierarchical fragmentation of labour and the state's militarisation, where marriage was the crucial factor that determined a woman's lifetime status.

With everything previously presented in mind and turning attention to the labour movement, this appealed to the masses (*minjŏng*),<sup>119</sup> particularly in the late 1970s, following the introduction of the *Yushin* Constitution (1972-79) that installed Park Chung Hee's

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and manipulate workers, discouraging young women from joining labour unions and engaging in political movements. Additionally, the New Factory Movement (1973) sought to strengthen labourers' identification with factories to indoctrinate them into submission to enterprise authorities and loyalty to their new “family”. Kim, *Class Struggle*, 12, 14, 30–32, 48–49, 50–55, 93–95; Chŏn, *They Are Not Machines*; Cho, ‘The Position of Women in the Korean Work Force’, 87–89; Louie, *Minjung Feminism*, 418.

<sup>115</sup> Kim, *Class Struggle or Family Struggle?*, 2–6, chapter 6; Chŏn, *They Are Not Machines*; Moon, *Militarized Modernity*, 76; Janelli and Yim, ‘Gender Construction in the Offices’, 120–21.

<sup>116</sup> Kim contends that the narrative of social mobility was reproduced among women workers as a source of comfort and strength allowing them to imagine a better life in the near future. Nonetheless, this myth caused political weakness because women saw their working conditions as temporary and did not feel compelled to fight for reforms. Young women prioritised dating and savings for their dowry in hopes of marrying into wealthier families. According to Kim's research (1986-94), nearly 90% of single female interviewees planned to leave factory work for marriage due to their perception of these two spheres being incompatible. Kim, *Class Struggle*, 12-14, 17, 66-69, 79-80.

<sup>117</sup> Chŏn, *They Are Not Machines*; Moon, *Militarized Modernity*, 77.

<sup>118</sup> Even if women had wanted to return to work because the household was alienating, there were no childcare services provided and women would have received objections from their husbands. On the other hand, many women preferred staying home to take care of their children and escape the factory's intolerable conditions. Furthermore, mid-twenties married women were disadvantaged and discriminated against in the work market. Kim, *Class Struggle*, 13-14, 83-87, 95-96.

<sup>119</sup> The *Minjŏng undong* (Movement of masses, or people) was a radical opposition movement between the 1970s and 1980s that brought together and merged the injustices and sufferings of all people in a single appeal for democratisation, ultimately contributing to the fall of the militarised modernity. In the 1980s, it became ideologically rigid, combining Marxist theoretical concepts with indigenous Korean folk culture with the scope of raising awareness and mass mobilisation uniformly. Moon, *Militarized Modernity*, 101-103.

dictatorship in the wake of social turmoil—leading to suppression of labour activities.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, the government union institution, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (1946), and the newly emerged male-led Ch'onggye Union (1970) targeted and occupied primarily male workers, women's struggles translated into spontaneous collective activism, although with episodic and little impact on national politics. Paradoxically, the state's segregation and fragmentation of industry sectors, along with the hostile and chauvinist alliances of former unions with managers, all contributed to the expansion of women's grassroots movement.<sup>121</sup> Women's unions have been acknowledged for leading the *minjŏng* movement during the 1970s—despite underestimation of the young single female leading figures, and criticism of their inability to advance the labour movement due to their lack of political consciousness and isolation from other democratic unions.<sup>122</sup> It is noteworthy that the state and fellow male workers have used repressive tactics to minimise and disparage women's struggles, as demonstrated by the historical and emblematic events such as the takeover of the Incheon Tongil Textile Company's union in 1972, the police brutality during the “nude demonstration”, and the disruption of the 1978 union election proceedings.<sup>123</sup> In the same vein, 200 female workers of Seoul Y. H. Company occupied the headquarters of the opposition New Democratic Party where a 21-year-old woman was killed amid violence and arrests. The female worker's death sparked public indignation and ignited large-scale anti-government demonstrations, which ultimately led to Park Chung Hee's assassination in 1979 and the regime of his successor.<sup>124</sup>

Chun Do Hwan's martial law first unfolded in the Kwangju Uprising in May 1980, when several students were wounded and murdered by the state armed forces backed up by the

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<sup>120</sup> In 1970, a 23-year-old male worker immolated himself to criticize work conditions. This episode gained national attention on factories' mistreatment practices, fuelling the labour movement and bringing in new allies. These efforts converged in the foundation of the first democratic trade union, the Ch'onggye Union. Kim, *'Class Struggle'*, 99-100; Chŏn, *'They Are Not Machines'*.

<sup>121</sup> Kim, *'Class Struggle'*, 15; Chŏn, *'They Are Not Machines'*.

<sup>122</sup> Although men headed the Ch'onggye Union, women were significantly involved in the strategic decisions, providing the motivation and driving force behind the union's efforts and accomplishments. Additionally, the Union introduced educational programs for women in the textile and garment sectors, teaching academic subjects and political education. Chŏn, *'They Are Not Machines'*, chapter 9.

<sup>123</sup> In 1972, Tongil Textile Company's female workers massively voted for their union delegators and presidents, establishing the first union led by women, although for a short time. In 1976, following the demise of the democratic union and the imprisonment of its president, women staged nude protests that left many workers injured by police brutality. Two years later, in the 1978 union election, male employees harassed militant women and interfered with the ballot. Ultimately, all union officers and 124 workers were blacklisted and fired. Kim, *'Class Struggle'*, 103-107; Chŏn, *'They Are Not Machines'*.

<sup>124</sup> The mass outrage, accompanied by the expulsion of opposition political leader Kim Young Sam from the National Assembly, ignited the uprisings in Pusan and Masan, asking for the overthrow of the *Yushin* regime and the institutionalisation of democracy. In the midst of internal discords, the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), Kim Jae Gyu, murdered President Park ushering in 6 months of sudden collapse of restrictions on militant actions and an optimistic political atmosphere (“Seoul Spring”). Nonetheless, Chun Doo Hwan seized control of the army and the presidency in 1980, resorting to brutal use of force and calling for tightened national security. Kim, *'Class Struggle'*, 55, 107-08; *'They Are Not Machines'*.

tacit consent of the U.S. Army in Korea, and further escalated into a repressive dictatorship in which all forms of opposition were suspended, and militants persecuted and sent to “purification camps”.<sup>125</sup> Although civil society’s mobilisation appeared weakened, the *minjŏng* simmered in fact beneath the apparent dormant surface and, eventually, imploded in June 1987 bringing the direct presidential election of Roh Tae Woo (1988-92).<sup>126</sup> Consequent national uprising and solidarity were made possible by the introduced reforms and the lifted bans, forging the working-class identity of militant female labourers who actively participated in strikes and demonstrations in light of the culminating political awareness and radicalisation.<sup>127</sup> On the other hand, the “implicit consensus” of both established and developing social movements, which prioritised working-class struggles, posed a threat to the issues facing women. For instance, the rise of the mainly middle-class *Shimin undong* (Citizens’ Movement) did not initially carry gender sensibility, despite the movement’s promotion of specific reforms regarding wide diverse concerns, including environmental protection, human rights and participatory democracy.<sup>128</sup> With regard to this, we might take into account Moon’s argumentation, which underlines that the violent relations between the state and civil society under military authoritarianism and the “accentuated masculinisation of the public sphere” are to blame for women’s marginalisation.<sup>129</sup>

### 2.2.1 Modern Working Women After Democratisation

Following the establishment of democracy and on account of the advent of liberalism and globalisation, the state mass media representation, consumerist trends and dearth of child-care options forced women to come to terms with their vulnerability due to deep-rooted values and constraints.<sup>130</sup> On the one hand, this generation of “modern wives” prioritised individuality and aspired to self-realisation (*chaashirhyŏn*) against the backdrop of economic and societal support shortages and patriarchal boundaries. Although they meant

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<sup>125</sup> Kim, ‘*Class Struggle*’, 56, 102-03. Students have been politically active in the democratisation and labour movement, remarkably since the April Revolution in 1960 against the Rhee Syng Man’s regime. They played key roles in building labour opposition when thousands left universities to work in disguise in factories, forming a vast network and spreading ideological awareness and political training, in what is called the *no-hak yŏndae* (student-worker alliance, or solidarity). Kim, ‘*Class Struggle*’, 99, 103, 132-33. Kwangju women were involved on a large scale in the democratization and labour movement. Employing female organisation Songbakhoe, the night schools for local workers and the labour organisation Young Christian Workers, worked altogether for sociopolitical reform and participated in street demonstrations. Nevertheless, they eventually ended up marginalised and excluded from official leadership organisations. Kang, ‘*Women’s Experiences in the Gwangju Uprising*’, 196–97; Louie, 419. See Flat Team, ‘*May 18 Sexual Violence*’.

<sup>126</sup> Moon, ‘*Militarized Modernity*’, 100-101, 106; Kim, ‘*Class Struggle*’, 102, 108.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-113

<sup>128</sup> Jones, 70–72.

<sup>129</sup> Moon, ‘*Carving Out Space*’, 482; Moon, ‘*Redrafting Democratization*’, 123–26; Moon, ‘*Militarized Modernity*’, 138-142.

<sup>130</sup> Cho, ‘*Korean Women in the Professions*’, 58–60.58-60.

to pursue careers after college graduation, they were eventually forced to live as modern housewives, emotionally and economically dependent on their husbands.<sup>131</sup> While they were highly interested in their appearance in their twenties due to heterosexual relationships and social pressures of the consumerist postmodernity,<sup>132</sup> in their early thirties they became preoccupied with childbearing, showing son preferences and contradictory attitudes, reflecting an inclination toward neoconservatism and fervent consumerism as economic growth stalled. Consequently, middle-class women found self-fulfilment in managing childrearing, which reinforced patriarchy's hegemony as they came to admit that "it is wiser to adapt to the existing system than to resist it".<sup>133</sup> Married women acknowledged the narrow social space at their disposal, and the burden of balancing work and domestic chores due to the unequal gender division of labour that placed greater responsibility on wives and lower expectations on husbands.<sup>134</sup>

On the other hand, as non-regular women employees had scarce opportunities for advancement and benefits, the highly competitive and extremely individualistic culture emerging after the IMF Crisis put pressure on highly educated women—eager to enter the workforce—to put marriage on hold and focus on their careers.<sup>135</sup> For instance, the female economic active population grew from 41.9% in 1985 to 50% in 2005 but remained lower than the male population (74.6%). Consequently, they shifted the average age at first marriage from 25.5 in 1996 to 28.3 in 2008 and reduced the fertility rate from 1.65 to 1.08 births per woman in 2005.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Cho, 'Living With Conflicting Subjectivities', 179–81; Cho, 'Korean Women', 58–59.

<sup>132</sup> The cultural representation of sexuality in the 1990s was centred on male sexuality, depicting women as passive bodies that had to be "conquered". Whereas female sexuality was twisted through the consumerist lens, idealising the perfect body to reach success in various aspects of life and placing a great deal on appearance. This was promoted by both the labour market and the marriage economy ("sexy housewife"). Thus, women's bodies became objects of consumption and male gaze, with significant demands on sexy appearance, rather than sexual subjectivity. Elfving-Hwang, *Representations of Femininity in Contemporary South Korean Women's Literature*, 137–40; Cho, 'Living With Conflicting Subjectivities', 186–88.

<sup>133</sup> In the 1990s, the consumerisation of Korean society strengthened the idealised image of motherhood, exploiting women's aspiration to fit in the social standards. The "mother-power" figure was portrayed within the patriarchal framework as sacrificial and totality of womanhood, reflecting the masculine fantasy of maternity. *Ibid.*, 98–99.

<sup>134</sup> Childbirth was the reason for withdrawal, with 69% of the 30–34 female class leaving their jobs for childcare. Furthermore, only 12% of double-income families divide household chores fairly, with working women handling most of the housework and childcare (3:29 hours) compared to men's 32 minutes per day on average. It is also noteworthy that, while 81% of unmarried men and 66% of married men preferred their wives to work by the 1990s, this desire still implied an unequal division of house labour. Cho, '7. Living With Conflicting Subjectivities', 179–85; Cho, 'Korean Women in the Professions', 60; Kim, 'The Change', 9, 30–32; Jones, *Gender and the Political Opportunities of Democratization in South Korea*, 216–18; Moon, 'The Production and Subversion', 82–85.

<sup>135</sup> Cho, 'Neoliberal Governmentality', 27–29; Kim, 'The Change', 25.

<sup>136</sup> Cho, 'Neoliberal', 9; Kim, 'The Change', 23–24.

### 2.3 Women's Associations in the Neoliberal Framework

As previously illustrated, women's liberation (*yösong hehang*) has been rooted in the struggles of young female factory workers and flourished in the late 1980s *minjöng* street demonstrations within the androcentric civil society (*shimin sahoe*). The restoration of electoral democracy and the 1993 civilian regime permitted the flourishing of various voluntary and autonomous transformative organisations.<sup>137</sup> The emerging radical and fervent wave of militant women expanded beyond the constraints of the student and labour movements, giving rise in 1987 to the progressive, intellectual and liberal women's national coalition, the Korean Women's Associations United (KWAU).<sup>138</sup> With twenty-eight member organisations by 2000, the umbrella association challenged the presumed neutrality of the hegemonic civil society, availing of feminist criticism and a few devoted veteran activists to unveil the forms of violence that women were subjected to.<sup>139</sup>

Although women's middle organisations pre-existed under authoritarian regimes, they lacked critical feminist consciousness and focused mainly on religious charity work and job training in feminised occupations as they have never questioned the regime nor the prescribed feminine roles. For instance, the Korean National Council of Women (KNCW) founded in 1959, and representing over two million members, employed a Women in Development (WID) approach to advocate for women's integration into the state's socio-economic development process, closely working and following the military authoritarian state's policies. KNCW's agenda uniformed and merged women's identities into a single unitary member of the nation, neglecting marginalised individuals and condoning the oppressive structure for the sake of economic development.<sup>140</sup>

By contrast, the KWAU firmly advocated for a "gender perspective", establishing a counter-public space in the gender-neutral and male-dominated civil society despite its small membership reach. At the outset, the organisation posed itself as an oppositional force outside the state, playing a key role in advocating for the needs and interests of diverse

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<sup>137</sup> Roh Tae Woo's government (1988-92) used the rhetoric of "social development" as democratisation was incorporated in former policies to respond to the marginalised civil society's demands, focusing on national health insurance, minimum wage and national pension. With Kim Young Sam (1993-98) and Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) particularly, the state emphasised goals such as social development, strengthened social welfare, and equity in taxation. Nevertheless, the results were symbolic rather than substantive. Moon, 'Militarized Modernity', 117-18.

<sup>138</sup> The formation of the KWAU was preceded by a series of rallies against the chauvinist dictatorship and state sexual harassment against female activists, college study groups and seminars on Women's studies at Ewha Woman's University. These efforts were backed up and accompanied by the progressive Christian Academy's interventions and programs. Louie, 420-21; Moon, 'Carving Out Space', 420-21, 483; Hur, 'Mapping South Korean Women's Movements During and After Democratization', 186; Jung, 'Practicing Feminism', 10-13, 23-24, 82-83.

<sup>139</sup> Moon, 'Carving Out Space', 481.

<sup>140</sup> Hur, 184; Jung, 'Practicing Feminism', 79-81; Jones, 53-54.

groups of women. As such, the KWAU utilised a non-hierarchical structure reflecting its commitment to eliminate all oppressive realities as it resolutely asserted that gender equality was crucial for democratisation.<sup>141</sup> One of the main central projects of the KWAU was the achievement of women's "right to equal labour for a lifetime". In the late 1980s, along with the Korean Women Workers' Associations Council (KWAAC) and the Soul Women Workers' Association (SWAA), the KWAU supported women workers' struggles, fighting repression, exploitation and layoffs, provided educational training programs, protests, mass media publication, case studies on labour union activities, and group discussions to increase women's participation in labour unions.

As women's concerns remained non-hegemonic and reduced to "exceptional" or "specific", the autonomous organisations shifted their approach to build their collective agenda on women's issues—such as maternity, childcare, sexual violence, harassment, and discriminatory employment practices—calling for the reform of the Equal Employment Law (EEL) in 1989, and its revision in 1999 demanding sexual harassment to be recognised as an obstacle to women's equal employment.<sup>142</sup> Redrawing the boundaries between private and public space, these organisations fought against economic marginalisation by redefining citizenship as active participation in democracy and pointing to undemocratic structures as the primary causes of women's dehumanisation.<sup>143</sup>

In the same vein, the first professional counselling sexual assault centre (SAC) was founded in 1991. This took place in response to the growing body of feminist scholars and Women's studies,<sup>144</sup> notable cases of sexual violence and human trafficking, growing awareness of sexual violence among activists (*hwaldongka*) and counsellors (*sangdamwŏn*), and the establishment of the Korean Women's Hot Line (KWHL)—which has been offering services to victims of all forms of gendered violence since 1982.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Moon, 'Carving Out Space', 489-90, Moon; 'Militarized Modernity', 111-2, 121; Louie, 51-52; Park, 'The Crucible of Sexual Violence', 23.

<sup>142</sup> The coalition of women's associations managed to guarantee regulation of sex discrimination, and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as equal pay, equality in recruitment, hiring, training and promotion and unpaid child-care leave. Following this, KWAU's local counselling branches provided services for working women affected by work discrimination, establishing the People's Friends Society (PFS) and the Equality Hotline of the KWAAC. At the same time, voluntary members monitored state compliance with the EEL and publicised a series of reports. The PFS' 1998 survey revealed that 84% (of 673) women and 85% (of 613) men experienced sexual harassment, and the number of people contacting the Hotline increased from 28 to 237 between 1998 to 2002. On a positive note, PFS' annual survey indicates that women's awareness of their rights and protection rose from 1,273 to 2,494 from 1999 to 2002. Moon, 'Militarized Modernity', 148-60, 169.

<sup>143</sup> Moon, 'Militarized Modernity', 119, 166-67, 170.

<sup>144</sup> Similarly to the KWAU, the KSVRC was established by nearly all department academics, graduates and researchers at Ewha Woman's University that implemented a series of Women's studies and introduced the first Master's and Doctorate programs in the field in Asia. They published the first academic research on rape, revealing the necessity of establishing a SAC for sexual violence victims. Jung, 'Practicing Feminism', 23-26.

<sup>145</sup> While KWHL had been active since 1983, the KSVRC was established by a group of intellectuals in 1991, receiving significant attention and validation from public opinion. Nevertheless, the professionalism of KSVRC

Playing a pivotal role in the women's movement, the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre (KSVRC) aimed to overcome the social stigma, challenge the myths, and eliminate and prevent sexual violence (*sōngp'ongnyōk*) by providing counselling, support, information, legal advocacy for sexually harassed women and children. By utilising feminist practice and ideology accompanied by reform initiatives on behalf of survivors, campaigns against the state's direct involvement in the perpetuation of violence against women, and special training on the matter, the KSVRC redefined the gender-blind approach of public authorities and activists that overlooked the gendered nature of sexual violence cases framed as human rights issues.<sup>146</sup> The KSVRC had also set a precedent by permitting male members to work and volunteer within the Centre activities appealing to a greater public membership; although men could not take calls from female victims, the KSVRC offered training for both female and male students, involving them in street demonstrations, study groups, workshops and legal advocacy.<sup>147</sup>

In accordance with the Confucian beliefs of family honour and chastity, the legal system categorised sexual violence as a “crime concerning chastity”, whereas the media described rape (*kanggan*) as a “violation of chastity” and sexual offenders were just “home breakers”. In light of this, the KSVRC activated to challenge the prevailing taboo, and the lack of public discourse, on sexual violence through a series of public speak-out events for survivors, calling attention to the structural and unequal social power relationships.<sup>148</sup>

The matter of sexual violence brought together the fragmented factions within the progressive movement as well as liberal and conservative women's associations when, in 1991, KSVRC and KWHL specifically formed a committee to demand the introduction of special legislation on sexual violence. The campaigns during the 1992 elections were pushed by the two mediatic murder cases, gaining public and political support.<sup>149</sup> In 1994, the government finally enacted the Act on the Punishment of Sexual Violence Crimes and Protection of Victims to address the shortcomings of the prior laws about sexual violence

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raised concerns and divisions among fellow humble activists. For instance, the Korean Women's Hot Line disapproved the appropriation of KSVRC's appropriation of the “first organisation to address sexual violence” title; furthermore, initially, some Women's studies graduates did not consider sexual violence to be relevant and urgent, preferring to focus on major questions like female workers and rural women. Jung, *'Practicing Feminism'*, 23-27.

<sup>146</sup> For instance, from 1991 until late 2010, the Centre offered counselling for 44,303 cases and received 66,868 calls. Jung, *'Practicing Feminism'*, 6, 12-16, 28-32, 41-44, 56-58.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-55.

<sup>149</sup> Feminists criticised that sexual violence was defined as crimes against women's chastity and required to be reported directly within six months for legal protection. Furthermore, victims' credibility was questioned, and trials focused excessively on the definition of rape as they over-analysed the amount of force and threats implied to abuse the victims. For this reason, only a few cases of rape were reported, exactly 2.2%. Jung, *'Practicing Feminism'*, 61-65.



crimes, with additional legal revisions and changes in the following years.<sup>150</sup>

The changing political context in favour of civil movements and women's organisations marked the beginning of a series of progressive initiatives to boost female representation in politics and provide financial support for women's projects and programs led by women's organisations. Roh Tae Woo's government founded three national institutions—the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), the National Committee on Women's Policies (NCWP), and the Presidential Commission for Women's Affairs (PCWA)—to handle women's affairs in response to pressure from both domestic and international organisations, including the UN Decade for Women (1976-85). Nonetheless, many saw these initial measures as token actions focused more on the welfare of women and children, ultimately, they were deemed insufficient.

A change in the dynamics was brought about by Kim Young Sam's civilian regime (1998-2003), which permitted the blooming of alliance between the state body and women's movements. Whereas until the 1990s the state represented the head oppressor, the radical civil society loosened its clutches to mark the beginning of “politics of engagement” as they built a cooperative relationship with the former institutions to achieve their interests. As such, women's organisations employed the national bodies as platforms for activism to achieve gender equality and promote feminist calls on public policy agenda by directly participating in women's policy-making process and reaching official positions. The National Women's Development Fund (WBDA, 1995) put a seal on this coalition as the women's movement was in desperate need of financial assistance and former legitimisation to foster gender equality projects.<sup>151</sup> The women policies of Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo Hyun (2004-08) replaced “women” (*yŏsŏng*) with “gender” (*sŏngbyŏl*), thereby implying gender mainstreaming and gender perspective and further implementing the Ministry of Gender Equality (MoGE, 2001) and quota systems.<sup>152</sup>

On the other hand, researchers have questioned the effectiveness of the positive legislation developments—like the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act (GDPR, 1999)

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<sup>150</sup> Initially, the legislation focused specifically on strengthening punishment and regulating new types of sexual violence. Nonetheless, most women's organisations' requests were ignored as the government did not recognise marital rape. Following feminists' lobbying, additional acts were introduced such as the Domestic Violence Law (1997), anti-sexual harassment legislation (1999), the Juvenile Sexual Protection Law in 2000, and the Act on Procuring Prostitution in 2004. Jung, *Practicing Feminism*, 66, 69-72.

<sup>151</sup> Jung, *Practicing Feminism*, 98-100; Hur, 186-88; Moon, *Carving Out Space*, 493-4.

<sup>152</sup> Whereas women accounted only for 1.9% of the National Assembly, in 2004 they achieved 13% of seats and four women were appointed ministers. Nevertheless, this result was still low: 24% of local former positions were taken by women in 2003, but less than 5% occupied decision-making roles. Furthermore, women were mostly relegated to “caring”-related and “soft” ministries, making up 29.5% of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare staff. In fact, only a few women could be classified as “femocrats”. Jung, *Practicing Feminism*, 83-88; Jones, 56-57, 61, 165, 196-205; Moon, *Carving Out Space*, 481-83, 492.

and the *Dogani* Bill (2011)—and the government registration of the KWAU (1993) due to the persistence of secondary victimisation as well as lack of appropriate educational programs and the overemphasis on medical and social welfare-oriented services. For instance, since 2005, the government ceased welcoming activists as experts, turning to professionals, social workers, and government agents, leading to the medicalisation of services and implementations.<sup>153</sup>

## **2.4 Rising Questions of Depoliticization and Intersectionality within the Women's Movement**

The growing of “femocrats” in the system and the assertiveness of women’s associations, paradoxically, sparked controversies and identity crises within the progressive female militancy. Academics and activists questioned the efficacy of government-funded services, voicing concerns that institutionalisation and negotiatory dynamics would erode the radical and autonomous nature of the women’s movement and undermine solidarity, diverting focus from the movement’s primary objectives. For instance, organisations like KWAU, KWHL, KSVRC and Womenlink have been criticised for leaving behind ideological struggles, uplifting unnecessary competition between feminist organisations and making compromises with the conservative government in exchange for public support and legitimacy, as well as public funds. As a result, by the end of 2012, these organisations were facing a critical survival crisis in light of the state’s marginalisation and silencing of feminist groups and the framing of social issues to the private and individual spheres, abandoning the gender approach.<sup>154</sup>

In the early 2000s, the de-politicization, de-radicalisation, and professionalisation of the KWAU and its members tore apart the “old and institutionalised” agency from the emerging “young and autonomous” and confrontational feminist groups. Many young and self-identified militant feminists distanced themselves from the mainstream movements as they lost integrity and failed to challenge the heteronormative structure neglecting unappealing and controversial issues such as abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights. The KWAU was committed to mainstream stances and liberal legal reformist activities, marginalising and disregarding minorities’ demands, such as those of lesbians, disabled women, irregular

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<sup>153</sup> Jung, *Practicing Feminism*, 71-76, 84.

<sup>154</sup> The election of Lee Myung Bak in 2008 led to the downsizing of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MoGEF), including fewer opportunities for femocrats and worsening conditions for women’s organisations as the government adopted an oppressive approach to deal with civil dissidence. Jung, *Practicing Feminism*, 78, 89-90, 94, 117-20; Hur, 189-90; Moon, *Carving Out Space*, 491; Park, *The Crucible of Sexual Violence*, 21-22.

workers, poor people and sex workers who were underrepresented or treated as victims.<sup>155</sup> In the first place, KWAU and the MoGE pushed for the Anti-Sexual Traffic Act until it finally passed in the National Assembly in 2004, with the purpose of ending prostitution (*maech'un*) and implementing support services for women who had been prostitutes. As a result of the criminalisation of “the buying and selling of sex” (*sōngmaemae*), women were either victims needing protection or voluntary prostitutes. While this policy had sparked attention on the issue, raising intense debates over the necessity or morality of “sex work” (*sōngnodong*), the women directly involved demonstrated against the social stigmatisation and penalisation of their living.<sup>156</sup>

The mainstream women’s movement was criticised for invalidating militant sex workers’ perspectives within the conversation, ignoring the diversified experiences and life circumstances, including the portrayal of prostitutes as merely victims, to ensure widespread political support. As public policy scholar Lee Kyung Jae pointed out the inconsistency of the Act, the legislation targeted only certain types of prostitution business, ignoring same-sex prostitution or female buyers. Along with Sister Network (*Unninet*) and the Women’s Cultural Theory Research Institute, several other younger feminist organisations acknowledged and assisted sex workers’ mobilisation. They offered a new theoretical feminist paradigm, advocated for women’s livelihood and rights to sex work opposing the abolitionist approach of middle-class women’s groups, and finally established the Democratic Sex Workers Alliance in 2005.<sup>157</sup>

Secondly, in 2005, the KWAU was backed by other organisations in abolishing the family-head system (*hojuje*), which had determined a patrilineal family and restricted the lives of family members by maintaining a gender hierarchy. Nonetheless, the KWAU did not offer a critique of heteronormativity in its gender politics agenda, whereas lesbian activists opposed “heterosexual kinship” and called for an “individual identification registration”. This ambivalence sparked tension and conflicts that further grew when the Korean Foundation for Women (KFW) denied funding to lesbian groups.<sup>158</sup>

When the first lesbian organisation Kkiri-kkiri (1994)<sup>159</sup> attempted to join the KWAU, it was rejected in 1997 because middle-class women repeatedly excluded lesbians from the

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<sup>155</sup> Jung, 'Practicing Feminism', 91-92, 123; Moon, 'Carving Out Space', 490-92; Hur, 187-88 191-96.

<sup>156</sup> The term has been introduced and popularised in 2005 through the webzine of *Unninet*, a young feminist organisation. Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women's Movement and the State*, chap. 3.

<sup>157</sup> Kim and Kim, chap. 3; Lee, 'We Are Workers Who Sell Sex'.

<sup>158</sup> Moon, 'Redrafting Democratization', 127-31; Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women's Movement and the State*, chap. 4; Park-Kim (Park Tong), Lee-Kim (Siro), and Kwon-Lee (Yuri), 'The Lesbian Rights Movement and Feminism in South Korea', 177.

<sup>159</sup> Initially called “Kkiri-kkiri, the Korean Women Sexual Minority Rights Organisation”, the organisation changed its name to “Lesbian Counselling Center” (LCC) in 2005. (<https://lsangdam.org>)

category of “women” and minimised their struggles as sexual minorities. Declining any possible alliances. As a consequence, homosexual women found themselves isolated and alienated from both the women and gay<sup>160</sup> movements due to the patriarchal nature, heterosexism and stigmatisation of lesbians referred to as “abnormal” identities imported by Western culture. Lesbians finally announced their split from both groups in 2005, forming the Korea Lesbian Rights Movement United, whose campaigns aimed to prevent outing and sexual violence within the community, establish its own identity and gain legitimisation from civil society by redefining their feminist gender agenda as sexual politics, moving from the binary and heteronormative framework.<sup>161</sup>

In a final analysis, the mainstream middle-class women’s movement displayed insensitivity and suppression of divergent positions on women’s rights due to circumstances and interests differing from the conventional norm. Although both sexual minorities assumed more negotiating power, intellectual women’s dominant voices have persistently undermined their positions, unwilling to acknowledge and embrace alternative standpoints, and refused to eradicate their prejudices and preconceived beliefs rooted in internalised misogyny and homophobia. As such, the leading movement had difficulty confronting surfacing critical challenges due to the transformation of the traditional framework following the IMF crisis that revealed a growing specificity and complexity of diversities and inequalities. According to scholars, because women’s organisations emerged within the confines of academia, they place more emphasis on theoretical conceptions of women’s rights, which implies inherent limitations.<sup>162</sup>

In response to these concerns, the KSVRC collaborated with the lesbian and gay rights groups and other social movement coalitions to launch a campaign against various forms of sexual violence to raise public awareness of sexual harassment in different public spaces and the military and broaden their political agenda as they moved from the heteronormative scheme. KSVRC sought to diversify its funding sources to maintain autonomy by putting in place a series of thorough strategies to guarantee company investment, as well as an easier online membership and donation process<sup>163</sup>

On the other hand, the New Feminist Groups<sup>164</sup> represent the first self-defined “feminist” generation, that aims to reshape women’s identities and overcome the previous

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<sup>160</sup> Choo, ‘The Transnational Journey of Intersectionality’, 4–8; Park-Kim (Park Tong) et al., 160–70, 174.

<sup>161</sup> Park-Kim (Park Tong), et al.

<sup>162</sup> Cho, ‘Intersectionality Revealed’, 13–17, 21–22; Park-Kim (Park Tong), et al, 179.

<sup>163</sup> Jung, ‘*Practicing Feminism*’, 110-12, 121-22, 126.

<sup>164</sup> Kim Suki adopted this denomination in opposition to the demeaning label “Young feminism”, which misrepresented, minimised struggles, and infantilised the membership, while also standardising different groups within a single category. Hur, 190.

homogenous membership. Building on the newly emerged cyber platform, NFGs embrace a great range of social issues and adopt transversal politics and communication between sociopolitical groups.<sup>165</sup> They argue that personal political practices and resistance are the key solutions for radical transformation and prioritise the politicisation of individual experiences as a “crucial space for achieving feminist goals”. NFGs recognise the essentiality of inclusive alliances and dialogues between communities beyond the limitation of identity politics, placing great emphasis on dialogue and intersectional solidarity.<sup>166</sup>

### *2.4.1 Regression of Women's Policies and Femininity without Feminism*

The advent of Lee Myung Bak’s conservative leadership (2008-13) revealed the critical fragility of women’s “politics of engagement” approach. His election marked the end of a decade of progressive rule as formal policies undermined women’s political opportunities and civil activism by implementing detrimental interventions and resorting to oppressive means to reprime civil opposition.<sup>167</sup> For instance, during the largest anti-US and anti-beef demonstrations in 2008, the state targeted and penalised key organiser activists and arrested mothers unreservedly. It is noteworthy that 70% of women attended the 2008 candlelight vigils (*ch'obulchip'oe*), specifically middle-class mothers who serve as the primary health caretakers for their families. Their involvement in voluntary anti-government collective actions in the public domain was facilitated by online social networking, leading to a political awakening and sensibility. Despite the growing involvement of the civil society, the contestants’ mass protests failed to transform the neoliberal capitalist system as they neglected social, and welfare injustices claimed by marginalised individuals.<sup>168</sup>

The state hostility toward progressive women’s organisations and NGOs resulted in a significant reduction of funding and severing of all close connections with the women’s umbrella organisation. Other measures taken included abrupt women’s service closures, increased state supervision, the reduction of the MoGEF, and the requirement that victims’ personal information be disclosed to the national social welfare system. In addition to excluding feminist militants and scholars from the policy-making process and denying political opportunities, the administration drastically shifted the attention from gender

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<sup>165</sup> In the early 2000s, a new form of activism emerged with the Internet, i.e. the “networked social movements”. The civil society found a fertile ground where they built spontaneous collective actions that blossomed into large-scale candlelight protests, involving people of all kinds in terms of age, gender, occupation and militancy experience. The novelty of this form of demonstration was the heterogeneity and freedom of social networks that amplified people’s voices. Shin, ‘*Changing Patterns of South Korean Social Movements, 1960s-2010s*’.

<sup>166</sup> Hur, 181-82, 191-96.

<sup>167</sup> Lee and Jalalzai, ‘*President Park Geun-Hye of South Korea*’, 605–6.

<sup>168</sup> Kim, ‘*Understanding the Candlelight Demonstration and Women’s Political Subjectivity through the Perspective of Changing Publicity*’, 40–49.

violence to child sexual abuse adopting a discourse of victim and child protection.<sup>169</sup> Similarly, Park Geun Hye's government (2013-17) brought Korean society to a regressive, quasi-authoritarian politics with restrictions on freedom of expression, media, assembly and protest. In the neo-liberalist framework, Park's election marked a significant shift as her campaign gained support from international and national women's organisations in the hope of contributing to women's rights advancement and social transformation. Park's *Saenuri* Party strategically monopolised democratisation and welfare issues as well as feminist rhetoric. Her slogan "prepared woman president" (*chunbidoen yösöng daet'ongnyöng*) successfully drew a sizable percentage of conservative women voters.<sup>170</sup> Park's "biological femininity", or "femininity without feminism" presidency, divided the women's movement: while the right-wing women were satisfied simply with her rank advancement, the progressive feminists called for improving rights and conditions for all women, opposing Park's candidacy due to kinship with dictator Park Chung Hee, which reflected authoritarian nostalgia and dynastic politics. As a matter of fact, the *Saenuri* Party did not thoroughly embrace women's interests and policies, and Park excluded women's organisations from the policy-making process, positioning her governance between "politics of ideas" and "politics of presence".<sup>171</sup>

Following the corruption scandal involving Park and her advisor Choi, women's associations held a joint gathering to express disapproval of Park's leadership and their concerns about subtle misogynistic remarks surfaced during the anti-Park wide-scale rallies. Feminists further contended that Park's demise stemmed from her tight connections with large corporations as well as the persistent existence of patriarchal and traditional gender norms in her administration.<sup>172</sup>

Despite Park's campaign pledges and enacted measures for working women, such as increased government spending on public childcare programs and extension of maternal and paternal leave, her rule failed to ameliorate gender inequalities. For instance, in 2014, only 55% of women were working, with female full-time employees accounting for 16% fewer than men; the gender wage gap was 36.3%, and women's representation in high-ranking governmental positions remained minimal.<sup>173</sup> In other words, although Park's conservative regime relatively revitalised women's policies, the substantial differences and

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<sup>169</sup> Jung, 'Practicing Feminism', 117-119.

<sup>170</sup> The presidential election attracted the vastest number of female voters since the democratisation (76.4%), with 52% of women and 48% of men voting in favour of Park's government. Lee, 'A Trailblazer or a Barrier?', 763.

<sup>171</sup> Mun, 'Femininity without Feminism', 250, 253-58; Lee, 'A Trailblazer or a Barrier?', 768-69; Jeong, 'How Did the Slogan'.

<sup>172</sup> Ramirez, 85-87; Lee, 'A Trailblazer or a Barrier?', 763.

<sup>173</sup> Lee and Jalalzai, 609, 611-12.

improvements remained minimal. It is also noteworthy that Park's collapsed presidency and impeachment legitimised the persistent and rampant misogyny, affecting voters' scepticism and bias toward female candidates and contributing to a "gradual erosion of women's political representation".<sup>174</sup>

### *2.4.2 The Idaenam's Rejection of the Self-Declared Feminist Government*

In the 2017 presidential election, the progressive Democratic Party candidate, Moon Jae In, secured significant support from the younger generation, a trend that continued until 2020.<sup>175</sup> His characterisation as the 'feminist President' emerged amid the candlelight protests in 2017. In 2018, the approval rating for Moon's presidency was 29.4% among men in their twenties, while the highest rating (63.5%) was detected among young women. Following his victory, he appointed the first female head of the election headquarters and pledged commitment to gender equality. The Moon administration's embracing of feminism was attributed to women's movement lobbying and protests, the rise of digital feminism, and the rebirth of feminist action and campaigns, all of which were viewed as critical for elections. He pledged five main women's policy tasks, including strengthening women's representation, eliminating violence against women, closing the wage gap, helping single female households and developing a gender equality committee under the presidency.

Nonetheless, he was not without criticism as he fell short of expectations. Despite setting goals of achieving 30% representation in ministerial-level posts and high-ranking bureaucracy responsibilities as part of the gender equality policies, they faced obstacles caused by entrenched male-centric paradigms. There was a lack of substantial work and effort to implement policies that promote gender equality and feminism was solely used as a tactic to secure votes. As a result, the relatively focused women-centred policies instilled a perception of 'reverse discrimination', losing favouritism among male young people, along with factors such as high housing costs, work precariousness, and more generally, the youth distanced themselves after a couple of former mayors from the Democratic Party were found guilty of sexual harassment.<sup>176</sup> Along with Tak Hyun Min's highly controversial and misogynistic affirmations, Moon's political establishment not only failed to answer demands for accountability regarding his return to the Blue House, but it also

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<sup>174</sup> Ock, 'Anger at Park Brings out Misogyny, Sexism'; Lee, 'A Trailblazer or a Barrier?', 757; Jung, "'Gender Wars" and Populist Politics in South Korea', 6.

<sup>175</sup> In 2018, the approval rating for Moon's presidency was 29.4% among men in their 20s, while the highest rating (63.5%) was detected among young women. Jung, "'Gender Wars" and Populist Politics in South Korea'; Seori, 'I Have a Question for Moon Jae-In'.

<sup>176</sup> Jung, "'Gender Wars" and Populist Politics in South Korea'; Seori, 'I Have a Question for Moon Jae-In'.

remained silent in response to accusations of sex crimes against three of his allies, which further damaged the leftist side, particularly the women who have been left betrayed and devastated.<sup>177</sup>

Furthermore, although a legislative framework was adopted to respond to gendered violence, the backlash against feminism persisted and substantial interventions were required to secure abortion rights, as well as regimentations against the crime of rape. The gender wage gap slightly decreased by 2019, but the administration failed to address and comprehensively intervene regarding the precariousness of single female workers and missed the opportunity to adopt assistance for gender-tailored jobs during the pandemic. In addition, although Moon did not establish a Gender Equality Committee, he implemented gender equality policy offers in eight ministries, spreading a gender mainstream approach through state affairs.<sup>178</sup> To summarise, as the feminist scholar Kwon In Sook explained, President Moon did not come up with a solution for the structural problems and his interventions were insufficient.<sup>179</sup>

The combination of economic uncertainty, youth unemployment, the popularisation of digital feminist groups, compulsory military service and affirmative action measures to help women enter the workforce sparked a backlash from young men who perceived it as “reverse discrimination”.<sup>180</sup> Scholars argue that the gendered consciousness of the *idaenam* (men in their 20s) has evolved, translating into resentment and dissatisfaction with the government. It is interesting to note that in 2019, some members of the Presidential Commission on Policy Planning attributed the declining support rate among men in their twenties<sup>181</sup> to the diffusion of feminist, or “collective egoism”, claiming that “misandry culture” occurrences, such as protests against femicides, and women-biased policies, have distanced young men from the state establishment.<sup>182</sup> However, a senior researcher disputes this narrative, pointing out that, although men in their 20s and 30s share similar opinions regarding gender issues, the approval rating dropped only for 20-year-old men.<sup>183</sup> One of the main points of contention for men is the mandatory military enlistment; in fact,

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<sup>177</sup> Seo and Hollingsworth, ‘South Korea’s President Says He’s a Feminist’.

<sup>178</sup> Lee, ‘Moon Jae-in Government’s 5 Years’.

<sup>179</sup> Lee, ‘Moon Jae-in Government Did Not Confront Gender Conflict Head-On’.

<sup>180</sup> Certain young men, for instance, claimed that they are the ones who break through the glass ceiling and that it is impossible to blindly and precipitously project the gender discrimination endured by previous generations into the future because, 20-year-olds, they have not yet entered society to experience it and, thus, they believe, it does not exist. Debates, ‘Two Divides Redefine South Korea’s Politics’; Bong, ‘65.6% of 20-Year-Old Men Say, “The Moon Jae-in Government Only Cares about Women.”’

<sup>181</sup> To be sure, although policies were insufficient, positive achievements have been made in high-ranking governmental positions, such as maintaining female representation in the cabinet at over 30% and appointing women in key positions. Lee, ‘Moon Jae-in Government’s 5 Years’.

<sup>182</sup> Kim, “‘Women in Their 20s Are Armed with Group Egoism Such as Feminism and Are Spreading Misandry’”.

<sup>183</sup> Lee, ‘Gender Conflict, When the Government “Laughs It Off”’.



65% of men want women to be conscripted into the military, while 72% believe that the male-only draft is a form of gender discrimination against men.<sup>184</sup> It is worth noting the contradictory rhetoric: despite widespread dissatisfaction with the military system, a certain percentage of men believe that women should be required to serve in the military in order to eliminate gender discrimination.<sup>185</sup> Simply put, men perceive an attack on their manhood resulting from the emancipation of women who resist the patriarchal family, deconstructing established and traditional patterns that oppress women and constrain men in highly demanding roles. On the other hand, men lament the military draft as gender-based discrimination, therefore eradicated in a toxic and patriarchal system. Anti-feminists single out women as scapegoats, guilt of “escaping” the military system—while completely ignoring to acknowledge that military conscription embodies the very culture they so fiercely defend and embrace (see [Section 2.1](#)). In short, men do not oppose the military structure itself but rather condemn it as the only “privilege” that women attain to in the patriarchal society.<sup>186</sup>

It is also necessary to point out that, young men assume that both men and women should equally bear responsibility for military service and urge for the “democratisation of suffering”. Choo’s analysis reveals that, while men support female military service, they strongly disapprove of the expansion of female representation in the male-only system. Their calls for reforming the system conclude with demands for more compensation and equal distribution—rather than questioning the system entirely—as well as an equal share of suffering and sacrifice associated with military duty; however, they do not push for equal opportunities to participate in the economic market regardless of gender. The underlying problem is the growing female participation in the labour force, which would leave men behind.<sup>187</sup> As Chan argues, the neoliberal system removes any traces of gender discrimination, which leads young people to adopt “self-protective strategies”, such as demanding women to undergo similar hurdles or relying solely on male identity politics. Therefore, “the demand for fairness has been weaponised...[and] reduced to punishing those who put in less effort” although there is no common understanding definition of what fairness entails.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Kwon, ‘Why South Korea’s Young Men Are Angry’.

<sup>185</sup> Yoo, ‘Conflict between Men and Women Surrounding Conscription System’.

<sup>186</sup> While women in their twenties are united and gain ‘subjectivity’ through feminism, men become ‘subjects’ only where they are employed. Anonymous student cited in Song, ‘Why Are 20s Men Angry at the Moon Jae In’s Administration?’

<sup>187</sup> Choo, ‘The Spread of Feminism and the Silence of Gendered Militarism in the Neoliberal Era’, 487-490.

<sup>188</sup> Chan, ‘Unveiling Gender Polarization’, 243-49.



## CHAPTER III

# Radicalisation of Feminism Amidst Escalation of Gendered Violence

### 3.1 Resurgence of Women Militancy and Media Polarisation

#MeToo opened a whole new world to people like me, giving us the voice, the language, and the experience of solidarity... we can't go back to the past now. We'll keep marching forward.  
—Blue Butterfly, as cited in Jung Ha Won, 2023<sup>189</sup>

From 2015 onwards, Korean society witnessed the emergence of a novel phenomenon, known as the ‘Feminism Reboot’; it marked the outset of a different form of activism that spread online and gained popularity among ordinary girls and young women. The term ‘reboot’, which Sohn borrowed from film literature, describes the distinctive nature of the movement and its disruptive action of the consumerist mindset that rose with the IMF crisis-related misogynist popular culture and post-feminist practices.<sup>190</sup> The 1998 Korean Financial Crisis marked a turning point in the country’s history, as it led to the adoption of neoliberalism and the subsequent transformation into a hyper-competitive society. The shift from traditional collectivism to neoliberal capitalism (or “survivalism”),<sup>191</sup> unsettled the identity of the ‘*Sam-po* Generation’<sup>192</sup>, particularly young men who saw their roles as providers crumbling. Men in their 20s “experienced rapid changes that resulted in a crack in the traditional and hegemonic masculinity and have strong anti-feminist and hostile gender bias tendencies”.<sup>193</sup>

Since the 2010s, they have begun to target and blame women, rather than the economic model, considering themselves as casualties of women’s empowerment and turning to misogyny (*yösŏnghyŏmo*) to vent their discontent and crisis of manhood, including financial shortcomings. This contributed to the lonesome masculinity that proliferated online afterwards. For instance, anti-feminist men often use mandatory military conscription as an argument for their feelings of victimisation, while their resentment in fact stems from the loss of their sense of entitlement to sexual relationships in the face of real or perceived rejection from women.

As Lee contends, “Under the conditions of neoliberal competition, some men perceived the

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<sup>189</sup> Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, 320.

<sup>190</sup> Sohn, ‘Feminism Reboot’.

<sup>191</sup> Kim, 2015, in Park, ‘Misogyny in Hell-Joseon’.

<sup>192</sup> *Sam-po* translates to “3 give-ups” indicating the generation that had to give up to dating, marriage and children.

<sup>193</sup> Choi, ‘Half of Men in 20s’.

growth of competitive women as the emergence of rivals and attempted to resolve their neoliberal anxiety by insulting and objectifying women”.<sup>194</sup> For instance, anti-feminist men’s arguments often revolve around mandatory military conscription, amplifying a sense of victimhood, while their resentment originates from the loss of their sense of entitlement to sexual relationships given women’s real or perceived rejection.<sup>195</sup>

Significantly, with the advent of digital media, the popularisation of hateful and misogynistic rhetoric has become commonplace in politics worldwide. In fact, contrary to hopes for emancipation, gender politics and solidarity were completely excluded from the hierarchical, gendered online. Due to a lack of regulations, the rise of social network services upheld the growth of extremist sexist ideologies and anonymous conservative male groups—which prompted women to turn to feminism and anti-misogyny activism.<sup>196</sup>

In communities like *Ilbe*<sup>197</sup> and DC Inside, the collective online performance of misogyny fostered a sense of camaraderie that transcended the growing economic division, granting a sense of solidarity and reaffirming masculinity by means of violence. Their controversial actions were not restricted online but rather transferred into offline hatred performances, such as trolling the families of Sewol Ferry’s victims who were on hunger strikes, or burning women’s post-it notes left at the Gangnam subway station to mourn a victim of femicide.<sup>198</sup> Park described this male-centred (*namch'o*) community as the outcome of the “surplusages” male subjectivities that failed to create socioeconomic value and were unable to live up to social norms, ultimately resorting to online forums to project their distorted rage towards politics and society. Moreover, a characteristic that sets apart users of *Ilbe* users is their belief that gender equality already exists, contending that women are destined for a number of privileges that marginalise men, like the existence of the MoGEF.<sup>199</sup>

Park points out that Korean misogyny is eradicated in colonialism and nationalism: men regard Korean women as morally inferior to foreign women, drawing criticism for their failing to fulfil their duty to contribute to the nation. For instance, the most common misogynistic insult is *kimch'inyō* (lit. kimchi-girl) used to describe Korean women as shallow and squanderers, to particularly emphasise, and therefore denigrate their “Koreanness”.<sup>200</sup> For instance, they are frustrated because women do not pay for the

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<sup>194</sup> Lee, ‘A Critical Study of Identity Politics’.

<sup>195</sup> Jung, “‘Gender Wars’”; Kim, ‘The Resurgence’.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ilgan* + Best’ that means Daily Best.

<sup>198</sup> Koo, ‘South Korean Cyberfeminism and Trolling’.

<sup>199</sup> Park, ‘Misogyny in Hell-Joseon’; Jung, “‘Gender Wars’ and Populist Politics in South Korea’.

<sup>200</sup> Park explains that one of the first offenses used to denigrate Korean women as immoral was *hwanyang-nyōn* (returned women). This term derives from the Qing invasion of Chosōn in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Chosōn people returned home after being abducted for forced labour. Female survivors were shamed and excluded from the

nation's security provided by men enlisted in the military. And again, men justify their hatred because Korean women's body proportions lack sexual appeal failing to meet their desires, and they are to blame for not sharing enough economic burden in dating or marriage, being like "parasites leeching off men's earnings".<sup>201</sup> In other words, Korean misogyny developed from the intertwining of nationalism and colonialism as men identify their masculinity with the same dignity of the nation, projecting the colonial mentality inherited from traumatic experiences and reflecting it onto the field of gender. Therefore, they contend that the nation is inferior to Western countries because of "uncivilised" and "primitive" Chosŏn women who deserve to be "beaten every third day".<sup>202</sup>

Considering the escalation of rampant misogyny rhetoric online, feminist informal groups emerged in the mid-2010s to appropriate their own spaces. They established a framework of actions and solutions to address gender issues online, increase accessibility, and distribute information on sexual violence. These responses took place on cyber-feminist-endorsed websites (like *Unninet*) or commercial websites (like *azommaa.com*), where they gradually succeeded in building safe and inclusive spaces. They then moved to more independent communities in an attempt to emphasise and demonstrate themselves as autonomous and wise consumers, however, they failed to acknowledge and question the internalised neoliberal patriarchy and validation seeking that upheld the status quo.<sup>203</sup> Subsequently, the advent of social networking services allowed alternative actions and heterogeneous subjects as well as diversification of feminist agendas and transformative approaches, providing mobilisation and organisational opportunities.

Women's rights advocates employed feminist spontaneous discourses and practices that proliferated on social media platforms and female-dominated (*yŏch'o*) forum communities to fight back against misogyny.<sup>204</sup> They popularized the hashtags #IAmAFeminist (*nanŭn-p'eminisŭt'ŭ-immnida*)<sup>205</sup> and #EscapeTheCorset (*t'al-corset*)<sup>206</sup> which were instrumental in reclaiming feminist identity and resisting the surrounding social stigma. They challenged

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society because they were blamed for losing their chastity to the invaders. Similarly, *yanggongju* (Western princess) was utilised to denigrate prostitutes who serviced members of the American military during the period between 1950s and 1980s out of shame and embarrassment, nevertheless the same reproaches were not addressed towards men who befriend Western soldiers. Park, 'Misogyny in Hell-Joseon'.

<sup>201</sup> Koo, 'South Korean Cyberfeminism and Trolling'; Park, 'Misogyny in Hell-Joseon'.

<sup>202</sup> "*Sam-il-han*" refers to an old Japanese saying that used to be used to denigrate *Josenjin* (Chosŏn people) during the colonialism. Korean men use this expression to joke or self-mock themselves to portray the "hellish" contemporary Korea. And in particular, misogynists accuse Korean women for being the reason to the country's ruin, considering them just as inferior as Japanese considered Chosŏn people to be. Park, 'Misogyny in Hell-Joseon'.

<sup>203</sup> Sohn, 'Feminism Reboot'.

<sup>204</sup> Jung, "'Gender Wars'"; Kim, 'The Resurgence'.

<sup>205</sup> Kim, '#iamafeminist as the "Mother Tag"'.  
<sup>206</sup> See also Lee, '#EscapeTheCorset Movement'; Kuhn, 'South Korean Women "Escape The Corset" And Reject Their Country's Beauty Ideals'.

patriarchal discourse through the rejection of beauty standards<sup>207</sup> accompanied by symbolic practices such as cutting their hair short and removing make-up. The *t'al-corset* movement has been revolutionary in Korea's hyper-consumerist society and the intensification of the beauty industries because it provided the tools to rebel against unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards, encouraging women to resist the values traditionally assigned to them. In fact, "beauty norms involve not only a myriad of codes and rules for personal appearance but also multiple codes of attitudes and values"<sup>208</sup> that portray women as passive and harmless. In other words, women resisted the male-centred perspective—representing the dominant narrative of femininity—as well as social conventions and the perpetuation of male validation by hyper-sexualizing and dehumanising the female body. Nevertheless, symbolic gestures such as cutting their hair short have sparked controversies among anti-feminists: while on the one hand, it represents a sign of liberation, on the other hand, short hair makes (feminist) women more vulnerable to gendered discrimination. For instance, at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics An San, a female archer, was targeted by anti-feminists who flooded her social media accounts with slurs for being a *femi* due to her short hair. Whereas in 2023, a man attacked a female clerk after assuming she was a feminist based on her short hair and hence deserved to be beaten up, procuring her severe injuries including irreversible impairment of hearing.<sup>209</sup>

Pivotal in the online "gender wars" was *Megalia*,<sup>210</sup> a forum where women took refuge from the manosphere that subjected them to misogynist hate-speech, as well as denigration and bullying. The Megalian movement stood out from previous online communities because of its widespread popularity and adoption of radical and hostile tactics. Their strategy involved deliberate provocations against conservative men by using the 'mirroring' approach, which is a sarcastic and antagonistic echoing and reversing of misogyny, inverting power roles with the scope of pointing out the absurdity of sexist slurs.<sup>211</sup> In other words, female users "began to imagine themselves as subjects, objectifying men as objects".

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<sup>207</sup> On a detailed account, see KWDI, 'Current Status of Stereotypes about Gendered Bodies'.

<sup>208</sup> Yun, 'Escaping the Corset: Rage as a Force of Resistance'.

<sup>209</sup> Yoon, "'Short Hair Means Feminism' Attacker Gets 3 Years in Jail"; Jun, 'Women Bracing to Defend Short-Haired Archer'; Yun, 'Escaping the Corset: Rage as a Force of Resistance'.

<sup>210</sup> *Megalia* (MERS + Egalia's Daughters) was created in response to the prevailing and rampant misogynist storms on *Ilbe*, one of the male-only communities. The hatred speech intensified particularly following the misinformation about a female MERS patient breaking quarantine measure.

<sup>211</sup> Jung, "'Gender Wars'".

This strategy faced harsh criticism and accusations of promoting misandry (*namsŏngghyŏmo*) and sexism (*sŏngch'abyŏl*) toward men.<sup>212</sup> For instance, the offence that was first felt as genuine sexist was the pinching hand gesture (or ‘crab hand’) used to deride and body-shame Korean men’s genitals. In response, men started to raise absurd allegations and adopted the tendency to target anyone indiscriminately and accuse them of endorsing feminism, which is interchangeably referred to as misandry. In fact, this argument has become their stronghold: any grain of doubt or assumption leads to disproportional uproar and backlash, accompanied by a violent and threatening witch-hunt. Regardless of the intentions or credibility of the allegations, the sole suspicion of displaying a feminist sign is enough to trigger a strong hate sentiment in a way to prove their powerful presence online and reclaim their space of agency.<sup>213</sup>

However, while agreeing that this tactic was controversial and counterproductive in some respects—it does not aim to initiate a confrontation but to offer a counterattack—to accuse this practice of misandry is a stretch. In fact, unlike the allegations, feminists have reversed their own experiences of gendered discrimination with the sole aim of instilling a sense of discomfort in others to offer an insight into their daily lives and problematise a pervasive phenomenon. In fact, by means of mirroring, “Megalian reclaimed misogynistic expressions, taking back their power and turning them into means of resistance against misogyny”.<sup>214</sup> Whereas in the case of pre-existing male-dominated forums, they have been built on the denigration and exploitation of women’s non-consensual material with the main intent to entertain themselves and shame female victims. As Yun points out, “the more complicated the situation gets, the higher the tendency gets for young men to just blame everything on ‘selfish women’ and ‘feminists’”.<sup>215</sup>

In light of the numerous incidents of cyberbullying and misandry allegations pertaining to feminist slogans or pinching hands, I contend that Korean men have weaponised trivial issues to paint themselves as victims of ‘reverse discrimination’. They rationalise their engagement in stalking harassment, threats, and hate speech against innocent individuals by turning to victimisation based only on unfounded assumptions and misplaced entitlement. The truth is that while women are viciously attacked, sexually assaulted, and murdered simply for their gender identity (see [Section 3.2](#) and [3.3](#)), men use presumed

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<sup>212</sup> For instance, a man in his 20s strongly opposed the “mirroring” strategy because it affects the whole society. He claims that the inversed “kimchi girl” insult, that is “*hannam*” (Korean man) is more serious because it eradicates in racial discrimination. Song, ‘Why Are 20s Men Angry at the Moon Jae In’s Administration?’

<sup>213</sup> Jung, “‘Gender Wars’”; ‘South Korea Gaming’; Bae, ‘Police Reopen Case Involving Controversial Hand Gesture in MapleStory Video’; Jung, ‘Pointing out “Those Fingers”’; Kim, ‘Trembling at the Pinching Fingers’; Seo and Choi, ‘Why Korean Feminism?’

<sup>214</sup> Yoo, 2016, as cited in Jung, *Flowers of Fire*.

<sup>215</sup> Yun Ji Yeong, 2024, as cited in Yoon, ‘Korea’s Two-Finger Salute’.

“crab hand” gestures as their stronghold to claim discrimination on a gender basis. Therefore, I argue that, by resorting to fictitious problems, men justify their animosity against women to reclaim dominance. The anti-feminist backlash, in fact, reflects the attempt to reassert the control they feel slipping away because of the growing female visibility in both the public and private spheres, as well as online and offline. In other words, they do not act out of genuine concern or injustice, but rather out of deep-rooted fear of losing power within a society that is slowly deconstructing gender norms.<sup>216</sup>

For instance, regarding men’s allegations of “reverse discrimination”, Park reports that women are the majority victims of gendered discrimination and violence in Korean society, meaning that men’s perception of vulnerability based on gender is unfounded. However, society has been supporting their arguments “regardless of the rationality of the claims”; in fact, the state has been responsible for inciting hatred and gender conflict by amplifying extreme incidents.<sup>217</sup> For instance, during the 2018 Hye-hwa rallies, the self-proclaimed ‘feminist’, President Moon, drew criticism for referring to women’s activism against digital sexual crimes as “resolving women’s bitterness” and characterising them as “hateful”. Scholars contend that instead, their sentiments were sparked by bottled-up painful anger and a desire to change social structures and eradicate sexual violence. Feminists pointed out the double standards with posters saying, “Are the candlelight demonstrations a ‘revolution’ but the Hye-hwa protests ‘bitterness’?”<sup>218</sup>

In fact, online feminist militancy represented political potential and extended beyond cyberspace. It stimulated and popularised activism, eradicated traditional gender norms and upheld conversations on violence against women on the internet. Thus, the convergence of online and offline grassroots actions built the foundations of contemporary feminism in South Korea. For instance, Megalian feminists pressured the shutdown of *Soranet*, the largest website with illegal and non-consensually materials. Feminists launched an online group to monitor the forum and record the sexual abuses, documenting the practice of ‘invitation’ where unconscious women were raped in real-time while users were sharing “reviews” of the abuse. Women also spread infographics and stickers condemning spy-cams in public restrooms, warning readers to be aware of these heinous crimes, and raising donations for the cause. As they gained 100,000 signatures for a petition calling for the confiscation of *Soranet*’s servers, the website finally closed in 2016.<sup>219</sup>

In May 2016, a femicide occurred in a public restroom near the Gangnam subway station,

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<sup>216</sup> Cheon, ‘Men in their 20s, who are they?’

<sup>217</sup> Park, ‘Who Fostered Idaenam’s “Misandry”?’

<sup>218</sup> Choi, ‘Calls for gender-equality continue as demonstrations target President Moon’.

<sup>219</sup> Jung, “‘Gender Wars’”; Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, chap. 5.



in Seoul. A man murdered indiscriminately a woman only because of her gender, claiming that she “looked down on him”, but the police concluded the investigation by deeming it wanton murder. The heinous incident and the consequent lenient sanctions sparked a wave of online and offline campaigns to mourn the victim and address the pervasive nature of misogyny, addressing the incident with its proper name. Thousands physically flocked to Gangnam Station Exit 10 to commemorate the victim. They voiced their testimonies of gendered violence experiences, discrimination and maltreatment, as well as misogynist episodes and negligence of authorities. They filled the place with post-it notes with messages and hashtags such as “I have #survived” (*#saranamatta*) to emphasise the collective fear, anxiety and anger this incident evoked. This femicide particularly became a turning point in Korean feminism’s history as it symbolised and revealed the vulnerability of Korean women against gendered violence. Consequently, women started to mobilise for the definition of ‘femicide’ as a hate and misogynist crime, demanding public spaces exclusive to “biological” women. Following this protest, many young women’s associations emerged such as KSRVC, Femimonsters, Flame Femi Action and other informal online groups.<sup>220</sup> However, the powerful wave of female empowerment triggered even a broader anti-feminist backlash, deepening the “gender conflict” (*chendō kaltūng*).

As Perini argues,

a backlash movement is most expected to appear when the movement it opposes grows large or enjoys success in the pursuit of its objectives, coming to be perceived as a considerable menace to material and status interests.

Because feminist movements challenge the status quo and structures of privilege, opposing reactions both deny and justify social inequality with the scope to “return to aspects of an idealised past” where unequal power relations were accepted.<sup>221</sup>

The 2016 was revolutionary from different aspects. First, it was the first time that *Megalia* and *Ilbe users* had a face-to-face confrontation, considering that anti-feminists held their own rally on-site to deny the accusations of the murder as a misogyny-driven incident. Second, the Gangnam station’s femicide established the feminist principle of taking direct action and organising as a single united body.<sup>222</sup> The feminist strategy of collective sharing of the personal played a pivotal role in revitalising women’s rights activism and paved the way for the widespread success that is the #MeToo movement.

In January 2018, the procurator Seo Ji Hyun reported her sexual harassment by the head of procuracy, bringing light to one of the most taboo and stigmatised topics in the country,

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<sup>220</sup> Lee, ‘Digitalpolis and “Safe” Feminism’; Seo and Choi, ‘Why Korean Feminism?’; Jung, “‘Gender Wars’”.

<sup>221</sup> Perini, *Giving Feminism a Bad Name*, 26–28.

<sup>222</sup> Lee, ‘Digitalpolis and “Safe” Feminism’.

that is sexual violence. She has been considered the pioneer of the #MeToo movement in South Korea following her testimony and revolutionary speech of encouragement on mainstream television. As Seo's "It is not your fault" resonated with thousands, women deflected their pain and rage in spontaneous activism. The incident triggered hundreds of subsequent revelations and accusations of sexual harassment, rape and assault from male superiors, including prominent figures from different industries, and high-profile politicians.<sup>223</sup> The movement gained important mediatic coverage and ultimately reached the homes of ordinary women.<sup>224</sup> However, following their testimonies, the internet overflowed with personal attacks that labelled survivors with pejorative terms such as 'flower snakes' (*kkotpaem*), that is women who seduce men for money and ruin their lives, to shame, intimidate, bully and stigmatise women who report sexual violence. In March 2018, 305 civic groups organised a '2,018-talkathon' to promote the #MeToo campaign and expose the pattern of misogyny, objectification and abuse across various social fields. Their militancy flowed into the subsequent rallies where protesters marched carrying slogans like #MeToo and #WithYou in solidarity with survivors. According to a survey, 88.6% of Koreans were favourable to the campaign, supporting women's efforts to give strength to victims of sexual abuse.<sup>225</sup>

During the same period, the Yonghwa Girls High School's female students became pioneers of the #SchoolMeToo movement widespread outrage and actions to call out teachers' sexism and stereotypes within books and guidelines. Students igniting the movement were bullied by peers and school authorities for making a stir, which resulted in only 5 testimonies. However, a survey revealed that 340 students accused nearly twenty teachers of misconduct, leading to investigation and disciplinary action, with fifteen teachers being suspended or having reduced pay. Their efforts represented a significant disruption of the culture of silence in the school system and a courageous fight against harassment and sexism. In other words, #SchoolMeToo changed the education field, bringing to the introduction of the first protocol on handling sexual violence at school that offered a definition for abuse and outlined specific measures of protection.<sup>226</sup> By means of the internet, feminism has undergone both a renaissance and radical transformation, broadening its reach and achieving heterogeneous leadership. In fact, from the mid-2010s women's activism stopped being predominantly organised by professions and intellectuals.

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<sup>223</sup> For instance, stage director Lee Youn Take, progressive politician Ahn Hee Jung, poet Choi Young Mi. Seo and Choi, 'Why Korean Feminism?'; Jung, *Flowers of Fire*.

<sup>224</sup> Seo and Choi, 'Why Korean Feminism?'; Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, chaps 7-10; Jung, "'Gender Wars" and Populist Politics in South Korea'.

<sup>225</sup> Hyun, '88.6% of citizens support the Me Too movement'.

<sup>226</sup> Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, chaps 13-14.

Ordinary girls and young women armed with online expertise and social media started to engage in spontaneous discussions online.<sup>227</sup>

With the #MeToo movement, *molka* (hidden cameras) crimes finally became the centre of the debate, receiving the needed attention and concern as feminists successfully shifted the public perception and naturalisation of illegal recording. They underlined the pervasive problem of digital sexual violence and non-consensual filming and distribution of images, questioning the impact of new technologies on gender issues.

From May to October 2018, six protests were organised in Seoul for the punishment of spy-cam crimes, decriminalisation of abortion, government accountability, a raise of budget to enhance safety for women, and eradication of misogyny.<sup>228</sup> The protests were organised by the online group “Uncomfortable Courage” triggered by Hongik University’s *molka* case which saw a woman filming illegally a male model. This incident exposed the unfairness of the justice system and the disinterest of the administration regarding female victims of digital sexual crimes. Women dressed in red express their rage against the double standards and disproportionate reaction of authorities towards female perpetrators of *molka* in comparison to the lenient punishments given to male offenders of serious misogyny-related offences. Their signs saying “my life is not your porn” became a catchphrase and their demands shifted from legal impartiality to elimination of everyday threats of spy-cams, drawing criticism to the institutionalisation of gender discrimination.<sup>229</sup> The gatherings saw women shaving their hair in solidarity accompanied by cheering and applause, asking for harsher punishments in light of the acquittals of male suspects of sexual assault, and demanding the introduction of laws against misogyny.<sup>230</sup> The third date in July saw rallies taking place simultaneously at different locations: the Black Protest for decriminalising abortion at Gwangwamun Plaza, and the Red Protest demanding measures against *molka* crimes at Hyehwa Subway Station. Subsequently, in August 2018, approximately 70,000 young women gathered at Gwangwamun Square, the iconic place where the mass demonstrations against Park Geun Hye had taken place one year earlier. This event sparked the “Candlelight Revolution of Women”, the largest feminist rally in South Korea’s history.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Jung, ““Gender Wars””.

<sup>228</sup> In May 2018, a *Woman* user posted a nude photo of a male model taken with an illegal spy camera. The authorities investigated and arrested the woman immediately, finding her guilty with a sentence of 10 months in prison. Women perceived the processes as extremely speedy and the sentence as unfair in comparison to the way of operating male perpetrators for the same crimes who usually get away with no prison time and receive only a suspended sentence or a fine. Jung; Seo and Choi, ‘Why Korean Feminism?’

<sup>229</sup> Lee, ‘Largest Ever Women’s Rally Protests Spy-Cam Pornography’.

<sup>230</sup> ‘South Korean women are mobilizing in unprecedented ways’.

<sup>231</sup> Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, chap. 9.

One participant said:

Our protest is not the tip of a spear threatening the daily lives of men, but a demand for the rights that all men have enjoyed as a natural right until now. If society continues to ignore these demands, the women's awl pointing at the bathroom holes (used for illegal spy cams) will soon point at you.<sup>232</sup>

Finally, the last rally was joined by over 110,000 participants in the Gwangwamun Plaza, asking for harsher punishments and criticising the acquittals of male suspects and the introduction of laws against misogyny. They bombarded members of the National Assembly's legislation-judiciary committee and heads of political parties with text messages to pass laws against misogyny.<sup>233</sup> Contemporarily to the Red Protest, the Black Protest was happening to demand the decriminalisation of abortion.<sup>234</sup> In August 2024, women once again protested at Gangnam and Hyejwa Stations to call out the state's downplaying of the severity of deepfake sex crimes, adopting the hashtag #YouCan'tHumiliateUs and urging severe punishment for perpetrators, victim protection and eradication of sexual crimes.<sup>235</sup>

Concerning digital feminists and safety, Lee notes that Korean women are overwhelmed by the anxiety that their personal boundaries may be invaded by spy cameras hidden in public spaces and the inability to control media exploitation. Therefore, 'digital fourth-wave feminism' has adopted measures of "online vigilantism" and activism based on call-out culture and direct punishment, as well as exclusionary approaches.<sup>236</sup>

### 3.1.2 *The Exclusionary and Gatekeeping of Feminist Communities*

More women are taking part in the movement because they've realized that only women can truly stand up for women  
—Hyejwa station protests, 2018<sup>237</sup>

*Womad* (woman + nomad), the successor of *Megalia*, saw the circulation and popularisation of trans-exclusionary rhetoric since its origins. In fact, the feminist circles split over the issue of intersectionality and solidarity with gay men in 2015: radical feminists restricted gay men to exclusively their gender identity and accused them of being sexually promiscuous.<sup>238</sup> *Womad's redū-p'em* (self-identified radical feminists) have gatekept feminist circles and women's movement to the biological female sex. By

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<sup>232</sup> Yi, Seon, and Yi, 'Red Wave of 70,000 Women in Gwanghwamun Square'.

<sup>233</sup> Jung, 'Largest Anti-Gender Discrimination Rally Held'.

<sup>234</sup> Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, chaps 8–10.

<sup>235</sup> Hwang, 'Gangnam Station and Hyejwa Station Protests Revived by "Deepfake Incident"'; Oh, 'Women Gathered Again at Gangnam Station Exit 10'.

<sup>236</sup> Lee, 'Digitalpolis and "Safe" Feminism'.

<sup>237</sup> Hong, Yu, and Chung, 'Rallies against Spy Cams, for Abortion Show New Feminists'.

<sup>238</sup> The issue occurred when an intensive debate rose on *Megalia* over whether sexual minorities, particularly gay men and transgender women (MTF) should be the targets of mirroring.

establishing biological sex as the basis of their identity (biological essentialism) and resorting to female-only and first politics, they have been advocating for female superiority and ignored any issues regarding people who do not qualify.<sup>239</sup> *Womad* community received criticism for abusing the practice of mirroring to produce shocking content for attention and popularity rather than criticism of abusive behaviour. By resorting to hatred trolling and ridicule and adopting exclusionary politics, Korean radical feminists reinforced the 'us-versus-them' rhetoric along the gender lines, as well as racial and sexual inferiority accusations against Korean men. Furthermore, their transphobic ideology has been reproducing a heterosexual gender dichotomy based on biological notions of male and female, which had been long questioned and rejected.<sup>240</sup>

In 2019, Korean radical feminists introduced the concept of 'political *lesbianism*' (not *queer*) as a form of female solidarity, acknowledging lesbian women's biological identity. Moreover, they argued that feminists should adopt lesbianism to broaden their experiences outside the constraints of patriarchal heterosexual relationships. Subsequently, they founded a political party, the Women's Party, centred on the idea of the biological woman, thus excluding men, queer, non-binary, marginalised genders, and intersectional feminists.<sup>241</sup>

Although Korean feminism has been centred primarily on cis women, feminists did not originally exclude biological men, refugees, or transgender people based on their biological sex. In fact, this practice rather occurred at the outset of social network services and the novel perspective that tended to accentuate the "female body" in relation to the biological sex, thus excluding any other category that does not fit in.<sup>242</sup> Thus, feminists embracing intersectionality (*kyoch'a p'emi*) are derided as *ssukka* (mixed) or *kkwŏn* (activist) feminists to distinguish them from the "real feminists".<sup>243</sup>

According to Lee, the online hegemony of the male gaze has reaffirmed the representation of women as primarily sexual bodies via the biological dichotomy, reducing women to their genitals and bodies. Women's reactions, however, have not altered the framework of sexual dualism because their liberation movement is rooted in identity politics. Therefore, instead

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<sup>239</sup> Koo, 'South Korean Cyberfeminism and Trolling'; Kim, 'The Resurgence and Popularization of Feminism in South Korea'.

<sup>240</sup> Kim, 'The Resurgence and Popularization of Feminism in South Korea'.

<sup>241</sup> Women's Party is listed under the Women's Human Rights Campaign opposing the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities within the women's movement. This organisation also includes *Womad*, Women's Human Rights Plus, Sookmyung Women's University, Incheon Women's Hotline, and Open Books. These groups have been advocating against the enactment of legislation against gender identity's discrimination, arguing that it would overshadow and condone the violence against women committed by other social minority groups, such as transgender people. WHRC'; Koo, 'South Korean Cyberfeminism and Trolling'.

<sup>242</sup> Lee, 'A Critical Study of Identity Politics'.

<sup>243</sup> Choo, 'The Spread of Feminism and the Silence of Gendered Militarism in the Neoliberal Era', 492; Kim, 'Feminism, the 20 Years of Research'.

of confronting the performative nature of masculinity, radical feminists promote the prevailing misogynistic rhetoric by homogenising specific feminine characteristics.<sup>244</sup>

To better comprehend this controversial approach, we must consider the competitive framework that induces women to treat the “Other” as an inferior competitor and privileged member within the “gender caste”, excluding any possibility of solidarity. According to scholars, radical feminists built the female identity in terms of victimhood, viewing women’s struggles as critical to their survival and success in the current system. As a result, the women’s rights movement is solely concerned with retrieving “women’s pies” stolen by men and pursuing self-improvement in the neoliberal society, even if it means resorting to cruel and cynical means and breaching “political correctness” like men. In other words, radical feminists seek to assert their own subjectivity rather than to deconstruct the current dichotomy.<sup>245</sup>

Although feminism provides tools and language for empowerment and responding to discrimination and violence, this narrow identification leads to the absence of consideration of a more complex structure and the necessity for solidarity and resistance beyond the “essentialised identity politics”. In essence, radical feminists weaponize feminism “as a way of succeeding ‘just like men’, focusing on only ‘females’ or ‘women’”. For instance, the saying ‘women should only care for women’ (*yōjaman ch'aengginda*) implies a refusal to stand in solidarity with other social and sexual minority groups, which is contrary to the ethical solidarity eradicated in feminist and social movements. Radical feminists thus fail to acknowledge that they are situated within intersectional power relations, such as cisgender privilege and heteronormativity.<sup>246</sup>

By treating transgender women as a threat to the notion of a “real woman”, they have been endangering and restraining women’s empowerment. For instance, during the 2018 protest rallies against non-consensual filming, the gatherings were exclusive for “biological females” reason of safety. The leadership of Uncomfortable Courage disapproved, in fact, the participation of men and male children, and made official requests to report any person that “seemed transgender”.<sup>247</sup>

In this framework, we introduce the 4B (4 ㅂ; 4-No’s) Movement, which emerged on Twitter in 2018 as a result of critical discussions on economic inequalities and independence. The 4B movement involves a group of radical feminists who reclaim the voluntary and

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<sup>244</sup> Lee, ‘A Critical Study of Identity Politics’.

<sup>245</sup> Lee; Koo, ‘South Korean Cyberfeminism and Trolling’; Lee, ‘Digitalpolis and “Safe” Feminism’.

<sup>246</sup> Koo, ‘South Korean Cyberfeminism and Trolling’; Kim, ‘In age of misogynist crisis, Korean feminism must reconnect with broader struggles’.

<sup>247</sup> Koo, ‘South Korean Cyberfeminism and Trolling’; Lee, ‘Digitalpolis and “Safe” Feminism’.

subversive refusal of romantic relationships (*yŏnae*), sexual intercourse (*seksŭ*), marriage (*pihon*) and childbirth (*ch'ulsan*). They seek to deconstruct the patriarchal system, rebel against the “phallic economy of desire and meaning”, change normative femininity, and disrupt the status quo. Their form of contentious resistance is aimed at dismantling the patriarchal structure and denouncing the “masculine violence” behind the idealistic representations of the marriage system that naturalise the submission of women to men and justify work exploitation, as well as gender discrimination. As Yun describes it, “Korean women’s indignant rage creates a disobedient body that destabilises both oneself and the order of reality” to promote a new form of knowledge and values.<sup>248</sup>

4B feminists’ indignation is the result of the pervasive misogyny of Korean men and the social structure that failed to properly respond. In fact, both the society and the administration have yet to define thorough solutions against gendered violence. According to radical feminists, the practice of 4-nos offers the alternative to pursue a life in “safe” and closed communities along with other women.<sup>249</sup>

To be sure, this exclusivity is not characteristic of the whole women’s rights movement, in fact, several feminist activists and scholars, as well as mainstream civic organisations, have stood in solidarity with minority groups, including transgender and gay activists.<sup>250</sup>

Contrarily to radical feminists’ misinformation regarding the privileges of transgender people, and in general the queer community, the debate over LGBTQIA+ rights swings back and forth between conservatives and liberals. While conservatives openly categorically oppose social change, liberals tend to delay the recognition of human rights in the name of being temporarily premature in granting full dignity to gender and sexual minorities (*sŏngsosuja*), for example through ‘later’ politics (*‘najunge’ chŏngch’i*) initiated by President Moon.<sup>251</sup> Additionally, according to research on transphobia and discrimination in 2020, the NHRCK revealed the struggles of transgender people with recognition and hate received: over half of respondents experienced discrimination for their identity including transphobic remarks and expression online and in popular media, as well as in the public sphere such as education, employment and public restrooms, including

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<sup>248</sup> Yun, ‘Escaping the Corset: Rage as a Force of Resistance’; Lee and Jeong, ‘The 4B Movement’; Jung, *Flowers of Fire*.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> For instance, Workers Solidarity, Disability Women’s Empathy and Sexual Violence Counseling Center, KSVRC, KWAU KWHL, and Anti-Discrimination Law Enactment Solidarity, Mong, ‘Alking about the “right to Safety” in the Name of Feminism’; Seong, ‘The Reality of the Discrimination Faced by Transgender People’; Women’s Union, ‘We Are Stronger When We Are Connected’.

<sup>251</sup> Han, ‘The Politics of Postponement and Sexual Minority Rights in South Korea’; Chen, ‘Queer Feminist Assemblages against Far-Right Anti- “Anti-Discrimination Law” in South Korea’. Jeong, “Don’t Let Them Die Anymore”.

difficulties in accessing medical institutions.<sup>252</sup>

On the positive side, the court ruled a landmark decision in 2023, stating that same-sex couples should enjoy the same benefits as heterosexual couples, ordering the National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) to provide spousal coverage. Although it did not recognise de facto marriage between homosexual people, the court upheld the principle of equality and non-discrimination.<sup>253</sup> Whereas in 2024, the People Power Party's councilwoman Hwang proposed the revision of 'gender equality' to 'equality of *both* genders' (*yangsǒng-p'yǒng-dung*), clearly a direct attack on the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly nonbinary people, as Hwang publicly opposed the "third gender" in Korea.<sup>254</sup> With all that said, it is clear that digital media Korean feminism must reconsider its approach and embrace intersectionality in order to deconstruct the patriarchal structure because, as Lee contends, "the orientation of feminism is solidarity among vulnerable people who have been victimized under a binary gender order".<sup>255</sup>

### 3.2 Institutionalisation of Anti-Feminist Rhetoric

"I'm not even fighting the patriarchy; I've decided to walk out of it"  
—Kim Jina<sup>256</sup>

In the wake of women's feminist renaissance, sexist discourses were strategically exploited in the 2021 presidential election campaign in an attempt to secure the support of the *'idaenam'* demographic, i.e. men in their 20s. People Power Party's chairman Lee Jun Seok and former chief prosecutor Yoon Suk Yeol were on the front lines of these campaigns, marking the beginning of the polarisation of right-wing politics and anti-feminism. The weaponisation of anti-feminism stems from the "big brother culture" (*hyǒngnim munhwa*) that neglects and devalues female voters, Ahn argues.<sup>257</sup>

Against the backdrop of the hostile climate grown from the entanglement of inequalities, Lee actively capitalised on young men's feelings of inadequacy and their dissatisfaction with mandatory military service to propagate a hard line against gender equality and young women who "seek female supremacy" and threaten men's existing privileges. In the mercifully competitive and individualist society that does not know how to slow down the

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<sup>252</sup> NHRCK, 'Transgender Hate Discrimination Survey'.

<sup>253</sup> 'South Korea Court Recognizes Equal Benefits for Same-Sex Couple | Human Rights Watch'; Kang, 'Behind-the-times gender change regulations leave trans Koreans in the lurch'.

<sup>254</sup> Yoon, "'Equality of Both Genders', Not Gender Equality?"

<sup>255</sup> Kim, 'In age of misogynist crisis, Korean feminism must reconnect with broader struggles'. For example, sexual minorities are not included in the government's suicide prevention measures, which further isolate and discriminate and stigmatise them despite transgender people's suicide rate is high and suicidal thoughts are common for sexual minority youth.

<sup>256</sup> The Economist, 'Meet the Incels and Anti-Feminists of Asia'.

<sup>257</sup> Park and Yoo, 'Politicians Who Turn Discrimination'.



pursuit of success, young adults must halt at the very onset of their future to enter the military barracks falling behind their female competitors, whose opportunities appear to be blossoming. In the midst of economic shortcomings, the predominance of precarious jobs, and exorbitant costs of housing, the positive progress and results of women in employment and educational fields represent a threat to young men's masculinity. As many men see their financial prospects jeopardised, they vehemently reject the feminist calls due to frustration and preconceptions of an already established egalitarian society.<sup>258</sup>

By the time the young representative intensified the anti-feminist stance and positioned as a men's rights advocate who stands up for a more equitable society, approximately 80% of men in their 20s thought they were victims of "reverse discrimination".<sup>259</sup> In the past, Lee dismissed those calls for actions and policies to eradicate gender violence and stalking crimes as "feminist incitement", accusing of generalisation and delusion of women's safety-related concerns. He further defined feminism as "unconstitutional", comparing it to fascism and extremism. What is more, Lee fostered a fandom-like relationship with his voters and upheld rampant cyber misogynist pages and groups.<sup>260</sup>

When it comes to candidate Yoon, in addition to denying the existence of structural gender discrimination, he held accountable feminism for the nation's low birth rates and the crumbling relationships between men and women. To pander to men voters, the conservative candidate also pledged to severely strengthen the punishment for false accusations of sexual crimes,<sup>261</sup> injecting and edifying the misconception of women as "gold-diggers" (*kkot-paem*). Due to the instrumentalised "reverse discrimination" and condemnation of women as primary enemies and scapegoats of structural problems, the populist rhetoric furtherly intensified the social discrepancies and escalated hate-driven speech<sup>262</sup> that "perpetuated historical and cultural systems of domination"<sup>263</sup>.

Jung contends that the exploitation of anti-feminist discourses and the transformation of dissatisfied men into "politicised collective identities" fostered community and

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<sup>258</sup> The Economist, 'Meet the Incels and Anti-Feminists of Asia'. See also De Guzman, 'Seoul Politician Blames Rising Male Suicides'.

<sup>259</sup> In 2021, less than half of men interviewed in their 20s and 30s considered serious the discrimination against women in Korean society, by contrast to women agreeing for more than 82%. On the other hand, more than 70% male surveyors affirmed that they felt threatened by gender discrimination against men, making the only group by age and gender to answer in the affirmative. Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, 303–11; The Economist; Park, 'Men in Their 20s Who Say'.

<sup>260</sup> Kim, 'Lee Jun-Seok and the Rise'; Kwak, 'Lee Jun-Seok: "Some Korean Feminists Are Provocative"'.

<sup>261</sup> When compared to the number of cases that were prosecuted for sexual violence (71,740), the indictment rate for false charges from 2017 to 2019 was only 0.78%. It is also note to worth that, in addition to the non-consensual act, the Korean legal system recognises the crime only if assault or intimidation can be proven. Therefore the number of "non guilty" or "false accusations" rulings are not conclusive evidence of the victim's statement's invalidity. Park, 'The Common Belief'.

<sup>262</sup> Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, 307–11; Rashid, "'Devastated'"; Jo, Lee, and Shim, 'Representative Lee Jun-Seok'; Yoo and Yoon, 'Strategic Voting'; Jung, 'South Korean Feminists Brace'.

<sup>263</sup> Harris, 'Symbolic Erasure as Gendered Violence', 523.

oppositional consciousness that eradicated the perception of victimhood, which encouraged men to politically engage and fight against the dominant system, that is women or feminism.<sup>264</sup> As a result, Yoon secured 48.6% of the total votes (by a margin of 0.7%), and a notable surge came from young male supporters, whereas the group of women under 40 cast more than half of the votes for the Democratic Party's candidate.<sup>265</sup>

In light of the multiple attempts to undermine women's sufferings and alienate a significant portion of the population from gender sensibility, the next sections will explore the ordinary and pervasive nature of misogyny and gender violence in society, as well as the state's (un)responsiveness.

### 3.2.1 Working Women and Inequalities at Work

“Even the best female employees can cause many problems if they don't  
have the childcare issue taken care of. I'll have to make sure her replacement  
is unmarried”

—Cho Nam Joo, *Kim Jiyoung, born 1982*<sup>266</sup>

In 2023, it was found that 811 enterprises violated the EEL, with over half of those violations occurring in the part-time sector.<sup>267</sup> For instance, the Shinhan Card Corporation was found guilty last year of rejecting female candidates despite their high scores and intentionally manipulating the gender ratio at 7:3, which resulted in 82.5% of successful applicants being male. This common practice was put in place, particularly since the early 2010s and was observed, over the same period (2015-2018), in other well-known bank groups such as Hana Bank and Kookmin Bank, as well as in public companies such as Korea Gas Safety Co., Korea Coal Co., Seoul Metro and Dong-A Pharmaceutical Co. Although the Ministry of Employment and Labour announced a plan to significantly strengthen sanctions for gender discrimination, these measures had not been taken as of 2023. Therefore, the Joint Action on Employment Gender Discrimination urged the government to eradicate gender discrimination and enact active labour supervision along with universal gender ratio disclosure, as well as stricter punishment provisions to be applied proportionately to the income of the companies to exert actual influence on their practices.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Jung, “‘Gender Wars’ and Populist Politics in South Korea”.

<sup>265</sup> For a detailed account, see Kim, ‘The 2022 Election in South Korea’.

<sup>266</sup> Cho, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*.

<sup>267</sup> To be more specific, 78.4% of EEL violation cases were found in part-time advertisements. Jang, ‘We’re Looking for a Warm-Looking Guy’.

<sup>268</sup> Jang, ‘We are looking for’; Han, ‘92 applicants were eliminated because they were women’; Joint Action to Eliminate Gender Discrimination in Employment, ‘Only a 5 Million Won Fine Is Imposed’.

The Presidential Job Committee<sup>269</sup> convened by Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) conducted research on 1,425 recruitments in 2018. The results revealed that 216 (77.7%) of public entities were suspected of indirect discrimination as female employees in large-scale and market-type public companies were only 14-23% and the female share for local corporations covered by Active Employment Improvement Measures (AA) accounted for 37%.<sup>270</sup> Similarly, the Kyunghyang Shinmun conducted a study between 2019 and 2022 on the acceptance rate of 314 public enterprises and found that 3 out of 10 public firms were practising gender discrimination. Despite the increase in the number of female applicants, the acceptance rate was only 57.2% for women, significantly lower than the 80% male acceptance rate. The data provided suggests that women encounter implicit discrimination during the CV screening stage and have a harder time getting into the interview process itself.<sup>271</sup> The consequences can be observed in the percentages of the economically active population: by 2023, the male employment rate stayed relatively unchanged at approximately 76%, while the female employment rate climbed slowly to 61.7%. Nonetheless, because of systematic gender discrimination in the workplace, particularly against young women in their 20s, the proportion of women in the workplace is still beneath the average of OECD members and countries with comparable economic growth.<sup>272</sup>

In the first place, women are more likely to be hired for non-regular jobs, which often translates into lower wages and fewer opportunities for promotion and advancement.<sup>273</sup> Secondly, opportunities for advancement are greatly impacted by gender segregation. As seen by the data, for instance, 40-50% of women work in social ministries while only 10% hold roles in economic ministries. This phenomenon confirms and perpetuates the conventional roles and assumptions that confine women to positions and responsibilities pertaining to family, children, and healthcare.<sup>274</sup> What is more, nearly 60% of female respondents believe to be pressured to quit their jobs due to marriage, childbirth or childcare because of the conjunction of various barriers such as gender discrimination and mistreatment, working conditions, prejudices, and housework.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> MOEL, 'Employment Policy'.

<sup>270</sup> The Affirmative Action (AA) was introduced in 2006 by the government to boost female employment and eliminate gender discrimination. Companies must submit annual reports on their employees and reach the 80%, otherwise they must submit an improvement plan. Kyunghyang Shinmun, 'What Is the Gender Pay Gap at Your Company?'

<sup>271</sup> Kyunghyang Shinmun, "'Feminine' Work for Women?'

<sup>272</sup> World Bank Gender Data, 'Gender Indicators for Rep. Korea'; OECD, 'Employment Rate'; Statista Search Department, 'Gender Pay Gap in South Korea'.

<sup>273</sup> 2019 saw a 45% of female share of non-regular workers compared to a 29% male share. KWDI, 'Statistical Handbook: Women in Korea 2020', 43; Kyunghyang Shinmun, '3 out of 10 Public Institutions Suspected'.

<sup>274</sup> Kyunghyang Shinmun, "'Feminine' Work for Women?'

<sup>275</sup> Jung and Books, 'Flowers of Fire', 268; KWDI, 'Statistical Handbook: Women in Korea 2020', 48; MoGEF, 'Gender Equality Awareness Has Improved'.

On this note, in terms of service-related jobs, women suffered a fallout in the labour economy as the employment share abruptly fell during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for face-to-face services related to care and education. According to the KWDI, 75% of the 1,096 domestic workers and childcare providers saw their income reduced. Even though South Korea's female tertiary education attainment exceeds 60% and ranks among the top OECD nations, the majority of women were non-regular workers without contracts or part-time employees, and as a result, gender inequities intensified. It is notable that, in the same year, South Korea's female temporary labour was three times higher in the OECD, despite the downturn in recent years.<sup>276</sup>

As for equal economic participation and opportunity, South Korea ranked 112<sup>th</sup> as of June 2024. Whereas the wage gap is 31.2%, meaning that for every million won earned by men, women only receive 687,600 won.<sup>277</sup> For instance, it is estimated that women reach their "peak wage" around 2.5 million won between the ages of 30-39, whereas men have an *average* wage of 2.59 million won between the ages of 28-30. Women's earnings drop to half of men's by the age of 50, whereas men's salaries continue to climb even into their 40s, reaching an average of 4.67 million won at their peak.<sup>278</sup>

There is no denying that the persistence of systemic gender discrimination and sexual violence in the workplace necessitates the enforcement of state policies and company interventions to improve the working environment and address the structural culture that disregards and minimises sexual harassment.<sup>279</sup> For instance, a 2019 survey by the Seoul Women and Family Foundation found that 87% of women and 67% of men had encountered gender discrimination at work, with comments on marriage and childrearing standing out. Although a corrective action system was implemented in 2022, allowing employers to request corrective measures in case of gender discrimination in employment, the Labour Relations Commission had not been issued any remedy orders, failing to provide effective support to the victims; of violations of sexual violence, the corrective order rate was only of 27.6%.<sup>280</sup> Therefore, employees abandon the idea of reporting out of fear of repercussions and retaliation, and even when they do, victims are not given the proper protection or justice.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> In 2023, men worked for an average 164.4 hours per month, compared to women's 148.2 hours. Dynan, Kirkegaard, and Stansbury, 'Why Gender Disparities Persist in South Korea's Labor Market'; Statista Search Department, 'Average Monthly Working Hours'; KWDI, 'Current Status and Policy Issues'.

<sup>277</sup> Kusum, Kim, and Zahidi, 'Global Gender Gap Report 2024'.

<sup>278</sup> Kyunghyang Shinmun, 'The Wall That Women Cannot Overcome'.

<sup>279</sup> Kwak, '7 out of 10 Office Workers'.

<sup>280</sup> Lee, 'Experienced Sexual Discrimination at Work'; Jang, "'Wash My Coffee Cup with Your Bare Hands'".

<sup>281</sup> According to the KWDI, the number of legal cases on gender discrimination has remained evidently lower than the number of complaints of sexual harassment, which further confirms that investigation into gender

When a premeditated femicide occurred at Seoul's Shindang Station in 2022, the nation was left astonished to learn that the suspect had been sued twice for stalking in the previous three years by the victim. The former male employee had been fired and sued for illegally filming and blackmailing the victim, and a day before his charges being sentenced, he stalked and cruelly stabbed the female subway station at a restroom. Finally, the perpetrator was sentenced to 40 years in accordance with the proportion of suffering and anxiety the victim experienced.<sup>282</sup> Following the incident, the Seoul Metro President was under fire for denying any responsibilities from the incident and announcing a reduction in the number of female employees on duty in response to follow-up measures aside from providing safety equipment; this was significantly alienating for the employees given the station's history of sexual harassment and gender discrimination.<sup>283</sup>

The amplified public attention on the matter of stalking certainly put pressure on the authorities who proceeded to enact new implementations and revise the anti-stalking laws to safeguard the victims. A policy was put in place requiring suspects accused of stalking crimes to wear an electronic tracking device and permitting perpetrators to be sentenced without the victim's consent. In addition, it has been noted that in 2023, 37% more stalking offenders have been prosecuted, public defence attorneys and counselling services were offered to victims, and online stalking was included. Nonetheless, the state did not evaluate the necessity to put in place a series of measures with consideration to workplace violence prevention and safety. The Stalking Punishment Act has failed to provide effective measures for the prevention and punishment of repeat offenders<sup>284</sup> and, particularly, failed to adopt a worker perspective as it does not provide paid leave for victim protection and support. Moreover, as of the current Labour Relations Act, it is not considered a sexual crime in the workplace if it does not result out of hierarchy status, besides other limitations. In conclusion, this case was crucial as it revealed the poor and lacking management of stalking crimes in terms of punishment and protection, as well as the level of insecurity women experience at their workplace. The subway station workers emphasised that the

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discrimination in employment has not entered common use yet. What is more, with regard to legal judgements about discriminatory practices, the structural nature has been often overlooked and it has been placed more value on the employer's intent. KWDI, 'Determining and Addressing', 2-3, 6.

<sup>282</sup> Lee, 'Sindang Station Murder Suspect Unmasked'; Lee, 'Top Court Upholds Life Sentence for Sindang Station Killer'; Kim, "'Sindang Station Murder'".

<sup>283</sup> In 2021, a cleaning worker in her 60s had been sexually harassed in a Seoul Metro subsidiary. As of 2024, it has been covered that a man in his 30s installed a hidden camera in the subway station's female breakroom to film his female employees. Lee, 'Station Worker Arrested for Installing Hidden Camera'; Jeon, 'First Anniversary of the "Sindang Station Incident"'.  
<sup>284</sup> Before the Stalking Punishment Act took effect in January 2024, more than 7,000 stalking suspects were detained in 2023, and 65.5% of them faced legal action, police reports. Out of 636 rulings made between 2021 and 2023, just 11.2% of alleged stalkers were sentenced to prison, with the majority serving less than eight months. Jun, 'Fear of Stalking Remains'.

Shindang Station incident was a case of workplace gender violence and criticised the lack of provisions and laws on safety and businesses' responsibilities.<sup>285</sup>

Due to women's forced decision-making between family and career, the labour market, and fertility patterns are intrinsically linked as many women take time off work to care for their children before returning in the hopes of finding employment. Therefore, marriage is a key factor in defining the employment rate for women, particularly if they have children. A large share of mothers drop out of the workforce or reduce their hours due to the difficulty of working long hours, as well as the pressures that come with working out of designated hours, attending dining and drinking sessions with their colleagues and leaving the office after supervisors depart.<sup>286</sup> For this reason, women's labour participation follows a *M*-shape pattern: their peak arrives in their late 20s, right before dropping in their 30s when they take absence for childcare, then catching up from their 40s.<sup>287</sup>

Parental leave policy entitles women to 90 days of maternity leave and men to 10 days, but income replacement rates are drastically insufficient and lower than in many other OECD countries. This implies that both parents must choose between short-term financial incentives or long-term career repercussions if they draw on 12 months of paid parental leave. Consequently, 70% of eligible mothers took maternity leave in 2024, with fathers accounting for only 6.8%.<sup>288</sup> In fact, according to the KWDI survey, 88% of respondents agree that men should be more involved in childcare than they are already.<sup>289</sup> Therefore, in order to encourage fathers to actively participate in early childcare and enhance working conditions, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration intends to double paternity leave to 20 days and substantially increase parental leave allowances.<sup>290</sup>

South Korea's fertility exceeds the mortality rate—which had not been shackled either by the pandemic—whereas the total fertility rate (TFR) plummeted to 0.72 by 2023 as fewer and fewer Koreans plan to have children. According to the MoGEF, 40.5% people of in the 15-49 age group in 2022 did not plan to have children (34.6% of women and 45.4% of men). The reasons are found in the burden of child-rearing and education expenses (42.0%),

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<sup>285</sup> Cho, 'More Stalking Suspects Prosecuted'; Jeon, 'First Anniversary of the "Sindang Station Incident"'; Jang, 'Poor Response to Workplace Sexual Violence'; Kang, 'Sindang Station Stalking Murder Case'.

<sup>286</sup> Dynan, Kirkegaard, and Stansbury, 'Why Gender Disparities Persist in South Korea's Labor Market', 3–4; Statista Search Department, 'Number of Married Women'; Yoon, "'Hoesik" Can Help Blow off Steam'.

<sup>287</sup> Dynan, et al.

<sup>288</sup> For instance, in 2022, 17.5 thousand women and only 2 thousand men reduced their working hours to dedicate on childcare. Statista Search Department, 'Number of Employees'.

<sup>289</sup> KWDI, 'Pursuing the "High-Road Strategy" for Care Jobs', 6.

<sup>290</sup> Men's paternal leave saw a growing as it went from 0.4 in 2013 to 6.8 in 2022, more specifically from 4,498 to 54,250 fathers. Despite the positive increase, women are the majority who benefit of maternal leave as they accounted for 145,736 in 2022. KOSIS, 'Parental Leave Use Rate'; KOSIS, 'Total Parental Leave Users'; World Bank Gender Data, 'Gender Indicators for Rep. Korea'; Dynan, et al.; Lee, 'Paternity Leave to Double to 20 Working Days'; Lee, 'Male Parental Leave Takers Reach One-Third of Total, Record High'.

and women's belief that it would interfere with their career (14.9%). This evidence establishes a shift in attitudes and a change in values as fewer women indicate marital intentions and reject conventional traditional gender roles. It is also important to take into consideration that the golden era of "marriage surplus" terminated in 2015, and the public opinion toward children born out of wedlock has not shifted yet (approximately 65% is reluctant about it, whether because of legal discrimination or social stigma), and as such they make the clue factors that critically condition the birth rate.<sup>291</sup> Moreover, in light of the projection of an extensively growing share of the elderly population (therefore of the old age dependency ratio), it is expected that women will shoulder the majority of chores and needs of elderly relatives—unless the government allocates higher resources and funds for long-term care insurance.<sup>292</sup> On a thorough account, unmarried women in 2019 spent slightly more time (58 minutes) than married men (56 minutes) taking care of household chores such as cleaning, ironing, shopping and cooking, whereas married women cared for the household disproportionately, or 4.3 times more (239 minutes) than their husbands. This practice is reflected in public opinion: the year 2022 saw 68.9% of surveyors report that wives bear the entire or most unpaid housework burden, a tendency that does not differ from dual-income couples. Despite a positive alleviation in gender stereotypes regarding "feminine" progressions and women's economic independence, a different study published in 2023, revealed that perceptions differ from reality: although 63% of respondents agree that couples should split household work equally, more than 70% admit that the primary caregiver is the wife and only a discreet share of interviewers (24%) distribute household duties equally. On the brighter side, people in their 20s and 30s display a stronger propensity for their spouses to fairly divide up home labour, suggesting an apparent potential future growth in gender equality awareness in private life.<sup>293</sup> That being said, it is clear that "enhancing gender equality within families is an important factor for boosting the fertility rate, in particular for the subsequent second child" given that the overwhelming unequal sharing of domestic labour determines plans and intentions for having children.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> In 2023, around 190,000 marriages have been recorded, 40% fewer than 2013. As for second and subsequent births, they dropped by 40%, from 153,656 from 2018 to 12,448 in 2023. Additionally, 97.1% of children were born after marriage, asserting that marriage and birth rate are tightly correlated. Lee and Kim, 'In South Korea, World's Lowest Fertility Rate'; KOSIS, 'Views on Marital Culture'; MoGEF, 'Gender Equality Awareness Has Improved'; Ahn, 'Marriages nosedived 40%'.

<sup>292</sup> Dynan, et al

<sup>293</sup> KWDI, 'Statistical Handbook: Women in Korea 2020', 12; World Bank Gender Data, 'Gender Indicators for Rep. Korea'; World Bank Gender Data; MoGEF, 'Gender Equality Awareness Has Improved'; Lee, 'Married Families' Right to Share'.

<sup>294</sup> KWDI, 'Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women & Families', 23; Hankyoreh, 'When the choice is kids or career'.

### 3.2.2 Tackling the Crisis of Fertility Rate

“Instead of demanding that people have children, we need to ask whether our world is fit for having children in.”  
—Cho Hyung Keun<sup>295</sup>

“In short, it is a society that we do not want to pass on to future generations, a society that is not suitable for giving birth and raising children in, and a society that is not sustainable.”  
—Oh Gyeong Jin, as cited in Park Ju Yeon, 2024<sup>296</sup>

In June 2024, President Yoon Seok Yeol declared a “population national emergency” at the Low Birth Rate and Aging Society Committee meeting where proposals to reverse the natality rate trend were presented, but none of the projects touched the essential questions at the core of the problem. As previously mentioned, these policies aim to increase parental leave for childcare, as well as housing incentives prioritising newlyweds and families with newborns. Not only do these strategies reflect the same economic approach as the previous measures, treating “children as discount coupons for buying a house”,<sup>297</sup> but the target demographic is solely regular employers, middle-class individuals and dual-income families. Consequently, the state received criticism for overlooking the labour conditions of women, migrant caregivers and young adults—the actors involved in the structural foundation of the dramatically low birth index.

As Professor Yoon mentioned, unequal access to welfare services and policies is only going to further escalate gender and class conflicts, ending up being a privilege of the few because “low birth rates are the result of a failure to fundamentally consider how to produce the public good of care, how to distribute responsibilities and obligations, and how to resolve the resulting disadvantages”.<sup>298</sup> Another reproach pointed to the failure to reduce working hours and to address improvements in employment quality in the work market to substantially improve work-life balance; in fact, not only do Koreans’ annual working hours exceed the OECD and European average hours, but the Yoon government has also increased the weekly limit to 52 hours.<sup>299</sup>

Yoon’s motions have been under fire as his government has severely downgraded the progress made toward gender parity. In the first place, he threatened to eliminate the MoGEF and eventually cut the budget for programs preventing gender violence and

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<sup>295</sup> Cho, ‘Maybe Korea would be better off’.

<sup>296</sup> Park, ‘You Can’t Raise the Birth Rate’.

<sup>297</sup> Activist Ji Soo, 2024, as cited in Park, ‘You Can’t Raise the Birth Rate’. See also Kim, ‘Free Housing If You Have Four Children’.

<sup>298</sup> Yoon Ja Young, 2024, as cited in Park, ‘You Can’t Raise the Birth Rate’.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.



supporting victims. Subsequently, Yoon postponed the appointment of the Minister of Gender Equality and Family (leaving it vacant for over five months and jeopardising its normal activities) and abolished funding for private employment equality counselling centres that were primarily supporting female victims of gender discrimination and violence.<sup>300</sup> At last, Yoon implemented a novel department, the Ministry of Low Birth Rate Counter-planning, to tackle the national declining natal rate, population, youth and family policies, raising harsh criticism from women's associations.<sup>301</sup> It goes without saying that the latter measures consider only the traditional heterosexual concept of 'family' and invalidate any non-conforming marriages and kinships, thus preventing couples that cannot or do not comply with the conventional idea of heterosexual legal marriage from accessing common resources.<sup>302</sup>

Evidently, the authorities ignore systemic major issues as they do not acknowledge the biased socio-cultural structure and focus on short-term measures. The Seoul Metropolitan Government has also been under public scrutiny after the capital offered compensation for those who have undergone vasectomies or had tied their tubes to reverse the procedures in order to address the low fertility rate—an initiative applied in over 30 local governments already, but which has no actual potential to boost the birthrate according to specialists.

In its press release, the KWAU denounced the local administrations' narrow perspective and methods, drawing attention to the inability to grasp the complexity of social structural factors that have been oversimplified to solely economic and reproductive matters. They underlined as well the heteronormative and patriarchal society's discriminatory repercussions and demanded the eradication of structural gender inequality and the establishment of a sustainable society.<sup>303</sup> As the KWAU's General Secretary argued, "attempts to solve the low birth rate problem without gender equality will only reiterate the regression of narrowly viewing women's reproductive rights as a reproduction issue".<sup>304</sup> As a matter of fact, South Korea is still at the dawn of reproductive rights, having only recently secured them but already facing shortcomings and endangerment.

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<sup>300</sup> KWHL, 'The Minister of Gender Equality and Family Has Been Vacant for Six Months.'; Yeung, Stambaugh, and Seo, 'South Korea's Birth Rate Is so Low'.

<sup>301</sup> In a detailed account, the Interior Minister Lee Sang Min announced that the Ministry will operate as an economic planning ministry, leaving fertility, child care and elder issues to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, while the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family will work on policies regarding work-life balance. Kim, 'Korea to create dedicated'.

<sup>302</sup> Yeung, Stambaugh, and Seo; Park, 'You Can't Raise the Birth Rate'.

<sup>303</sup> Ables and Yoon, 'Seoul to Offer Cash'; Yoon, 'KWAU: Gender Equality Policy Is Needed'.

<sup>304</sup> Oh, as cited in 'The Keyword for the General Election'; Kim, 'The Root Cause of Low Birth Rates'.

### 3.2.3 *The Legal Vacuum on the Reproductive Rights System*

If abortion is a crime, the state is the criminal.  
—slogan from the 2017 Black Protest<sup>305</sup>

As mentioned in the previous Chapter, although abortion was *de jure* illegal, the family planning policies provided wide access to pregnancy interruption services, contraception and sterilisation.<sup>306</sup> Nonetheless, people who benefited from these services suffered challenges of different natures such as social stigma, induced abortion, health issues, as well as vulnerability to gender violence and intimidation, particularly once it became criminalised in 2005 following the slump in the fertility rate.<sup>307</sup> Despite efforts by women, workers, social injustice advocates and progressive organisations to reclaim the approach to unwanted pregnancies, they were unable to issue a joint agenda nor make any progress as they stumbled into the pro-life versus pro-choice paradigm, eventually ceasing activities. Building on the reproductive justice discourses of United States' women of colour and marginalised populations, the Women with Disabilities Empathy<sup>308</sup> organisation launched a Planning Group (or Forum) in 2015 to guarantee women's reproductive health and rights by acknowledging and addressing the experiences of forced sterilisation and induced abortions of women with disabilities and the government's neglect and violence.

As they moved from the traditional dichotomy and built a new framework, they asserted the conflict between women and the state.<sup>309</sup> Nayoung claims that the state has criminalised the interruption of unwanted pregnancy with the sole prospect of controlling and regulating women's sexuality and upholding social, heterosexual and gender binary norms, as well as legislating and denying reproduction of socially and economically marginalised individuals. Referring to Abortion Crime as a violation of the state's demands for customary behaviour and non-compliance with sexual norms, the activist called for the eradication of the hegemonic and gender-blind structure that places an overwhelming

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<sup>305</sup> Nodongja Yondae, '2017 Black Protest'.

<sup>306</sup> For instance, there have been estimated 50 million abortion cases annually by 2009, from 30 million in 1989. Kim, Young, and Lee, 'The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements in Challenging South Korea's Abortion Ban', 99.

<sup>307</sup> In 2012, the Constitutional Court reiterated the constitutionality of the Abortion Crime, attributing priority to the fetus's rights. This decision endangered teenage girls' and women's lives as they were met with severe repercussions if they sought an illegal abortion procedure, as well as the loss of their lives. For instance, the criminalisation of abortion had facilitated intimate violent partners to control and oppress women by threatening to report and sue them. In fact, while the Court indistinctly punished women with fines, male partners' domestic violence was completely omitted and disregarded. What is more, the spousal consent clause in the Maternal and Child Health Act required the man's consent for a legal practice, but in the case of illegal interruption of pregnancy, the man was completely exempted from any responsibilities. Kim, Young, and Lee, 99–100; Nayoung, 'Demands More than Rights'.

<sup>308</sup> 'SHARE History'.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

amount of blame and responsibility on women.<sup>310</sup>

Following the persistent attempts to criminalise and stigmatise abortion in 2016, public opinion mobilised and organised across the country and online to condemn the government's responsibility to protect sexual and reproductive rights regardless of socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and ability. In 2017, the Planning Group rebranded and established itself under a larger coalition (Joint Action for Reproductive Justice, or *Monakpye*) upheld by an extensive number of feminist associations, including KSVRC, KWHL, and KWAU, as well as progressive, doctors, workers, student and social injustice organisations. They welcomed new subjectivities such as queer and transgender women, young girls, women with disabilities and women with HIV/AIDS, transforming the hegemonic discourse by adopting an intersectional and social justice paradigm aiming to liberalise abortion.<sup>311</sup> In light of the widespread favourable public support for abortion's legalisation,<sup>312</sup> the grassroots efforts of social justice advocates managed to bring attention to sexuality and reproduction<sup>313</sup> and reach a joint consensus from national institutions (such as MoGEF and NHRCK) and international entities (such as WGDW, GDC, and Human Rights Watch).

The Constitutional Court lifted the ban on abortion in April 2019, ruling the “constitutional discordance” of the Articles 269-70 and pledging to revise its anti-abortion law by December 31, 2020. The Court recognised and guaranteed women the fundamental right to self-determination and autonomous decision on their pregnancy, acknowledging the socioeconomic constraints and the harsh consequences of the abortion ban. It also underlined the state's essential role in removing any barriers that may lead to abortion and emphasised the need for significant actions to be taken to protect women's reproductive and self-determining rights, including adequate sex education.<sup>314</sup> Taking into consideration the National Assembly's inadequate observance of the deadline to revise the country's legislation, the Constitutional Court decriminalised abortion in January 2021 ushering in a long and arduous period of “legal limbo” that sees the persistence of restrictions within the

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<sup>310</sup> Nayoung and Network for Glocal Activism, ‘Demands More than Rights’; See Choi, ‘Is a country that tries to give birth to “normal” citizens’.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 101–2.

<sup>312</sup> In 2017, an anonymous petition reached a wide consensus, surpassing the average 200,000 signatures, and by 2019, 58.3%, that is 6 out of 10 people, thought that the Abortion Criminal Code should be abolished, regardless of ideology, gender, or party affiliation. Kim, Young, and Lee, 102; Realmeter, ‘Abolition of Abortion Crime for 52%’.

<sup>313</sup> The Joint Action held large national rallies to demand the abolition of Abortion Crime and advocated for the implementation of abortion pills and contraceptives, legal and safe termination of unwanted pregnancy, comprehensive sex education, and eradication of stigma and discrimination. Kim, Young, and Lee, ‘The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements in Challenging South Korea's Abortion Ban’, 102–3.

<sup>314</sup> Kim, Young, and Lee, 104; Kim, ‘From Population Control to Reproductive Justice’.

Criminal and Mother Child Health Acts.<sup>315</sup>

Nevertheless, the reproductive rights system is still creaking, if not completely non-existent. Given that abortion is still referred to as “neither legal nor illegal”, and services are provided “covertly”, there is no effective legislative framework ruling its practice and accessibility. The female public has been left in a state of uncertainty and unsafety: in the absence of official regulations, the need for male partners’ permission to access legal procedures, and the removal of abortion pills from the market, women prefer to turn to illegal and hazardous means and extreme choices.

The so-called “legal vacuum” resulting from the National Assembly’s negligence exposed doctors to possible suspension and penalisations, and women to serious health risks and repercussions as they resort to unsupervised pills due to the high price charges for abortion surgery. Moreover, the lack of guidelines and financial constraints associated with the procedure negatively weigh on the shoulders of the single person because pregnancy interruption is not covered by the national insurance system. Contrarily, the head of the Korean Association of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists disapproved of this appeal and discouraged from allowing abortion to be covered by health insurance. He questioned whether this would facilitate the medical procedure given that women prefer not to leave official medical records and demanded that doctors have greater authority on the matter of the legislative process surrounding abortion as well as the safeguarding of conscientious objection.<sup>316</sup>

The factors just enumerated jeopardise as much women’s health as their safety in intimate relationships: the combination of shortcomings and constraints accompanied by the entrenched social stigma surrounding abortion expose women to defamation and intimidation from their partners who threaten to disclose their personal information following grudges they hold over arguments or separation. Therefore, for this to see an end, the state must introduce a reproductive rights system to explicitly guarantee and recognise the right to legal, safe, autonomous and affordable pregnancy termination procedures. It is required to implement a health care support system that prevents the decision on abortion from being unnecessarily postponed and increases the accessibility of information about childbirth and childrearing to expectant parents on a universal and comprehensive basis.<sup>317</sup>

Although previously defined “last option”, the state has preventively instituted the

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<sup>315</sup> Passed in 1973, the laws define and specify the conditions under which a pregnant woman may undergo an abortion: hereditary diseases or disabilities, cases of sexual assault or incest, and life-threatening situations. Kim, ‘Not Illegal but Not Legal’.

<sup>316</sup> Yoon, ‘South Korea’s Constitutional Right to Abortion’; Lee, ‘Abortion Remains Stuck’; Kim, ‘Not Illegal but Not Legal’.

<sup>317</sup> Hwang, ‘Threatening and Demanding Money’; Lim, ‘Interview with Yoon Jeong-Won and Nayoung’.

Protective Birth Policy<sup>318</sup> in order to prevent the interruption of abortions and infanticide cases resulting from inadequate circumstances and “crisis pregnancies”. Contrary to expectations, this measure has not enhanced the situation, rather it merely succeeded in “legalising anonymous child abandonment”. In addition to failing to address pressing concerns, it has deliberately denied non-citizen women access to basic childcare services, fostered the delay of health care assistance, and left women on their own until the very last minute, ultimately worsening newborns and pregnant people’s rights and conditions. It is also striking the government’s altogether disregard for the biological father’s responsibilities, who abandons both the mother and the child, expecting women to bear entirely the burden. Consequently, the combination of these fundamental barriers (hospital rejection, unaffordable fees, violent situations, and lack of awareness) exacerbates the precarious status of pregnant individuals who are left powerless and unable to make thorough decisions, and ultimately, leads them to resort to drastic measures.

Ironically, while reproductive rights advocates contend that women need medical guidance and assistance to avoid going to extremes, the National Happiness Card only provides one million won for 10 months of pregnancy medical expenses.<sup>319</sup> The state should intervene in the social factors and primary shortcomings that culminate in anonymous pregnancy, such as the stigmatisation and prejudice of youth and unmarried mothers,<sup>320</sup> inadequate childrearing, poor child protection policies and restricted access to safe reproductive services. Activists criticised that, in place of directing the budget to implement a universal counselling service for single and young mothers, the state introduced the Protective Birth Policy with the intent to facilitate childbirth, even if that would mean abandoning the newborns in state facilities where they would be exposed to vulnerable circumstances and cut off from their parents. To summarise, this series of inconsiderate implementations is only preventing and postponing the decision to terminate the pregnancy, lashing a long-term burden both on women and newborns. Furthermore, the policy enables informal and dangerous abortions and increases infant mortality without removing substantial obstacles leading to “crisis pregnancies”.<sup>321</sup>

The reason for the absence of progress in discussion and social awareness on sexual and reproductive rights is due to the country’s history of population policies that centred on

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<sup>318</sup> The Protected Birth Bill is meant to protect the identity of women who give birth but do not intend to raise the newborns, in response to the missing birth registrations of 2,236 infants and the two infanticides caused by financial difficulties. Lim, ‘Birth Notification System and Child Protection System’.

<sup>319</sup> Choi, ‘Support for Women’.

<sup>320</sup> Oh, the head of the Korean Unmarried Mothers Support Network, argues that young mothers are perceived as “irresponsible” and “selfish”, a bias eradicated and upheld by the international adoption industry. Choi.

<sup>321</sup> Lim, ‘Interview with Yoon Jeong-Won and Nayoung’; Choi, ‘Support for Women’; Human Rights Watch, ‘South Korea’.

population development and disregarded the human rights framework, Nayoung argues. By force of circumstances, SHARE introduced a counselling guidebook for medical professionals and counsellors in 2020 along with a public website. It has additionally been working on a basic training program for abortion advocates and activists to provide a comprehensive counselling and support service.<sup>322</sup>

In short, when it comes to reproductive issues, women are largely imposed upon and held accountable by the government, which views them as either criminals or procreating machines to solve the national crisis. Whereas systemic sociocultural elements at the grassroots level are generally overlooked, the demands of childrearing are often too great for an individual to meet and solve as it does not solely depend on one's will and responsibility. Furthermore, the absence of sex education and basic knowledge about contraception, as well as accessible pregnancy termination resources, prevents people from realising they do have options.

In this sense, the administration should provide an extensive awareness campaign on issues like contraception, pregnancy and childbirth, and abortion, along with a legislative framework that guarantees and protects human rights in all spheres of life, including labour, education and health care. Moreover, a multilevel governance structure for health care and thorough guidelines for each stage of pregnancy should be implemented and provided. Finally, in order to contend with the decline in the birth rate, the family policy needs to overcome the traditional model of the heterosexual, patriarchal family and adopt a long-term, sustainable system capable of responding and adapting to the needs and circumstances of each individual.<sup>323</sup> In other words, the nation's views on the family, gender equality, and reproductive rights have not yet undergone a cultural systemic transformation.

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<sup>322</sup> Lim, 'Interview with Yoon Jeong-Won and Nayoung'.

<sup>323</sup> SHARE, 'Now Is the Time to Ask'; KWDI, 'A Study for Enhancing the Effectiveness', 16–19, 21-23

### 3.3 Pervasiveness of Rape Culture and Victimising Rhetoric

#### 3.3.1 *The Ordinary Reality of Digital Sexual Crimes*

“Objectification of women is central to the maintenance of this culture...  
Women are objectified to strengthen male relationships”  
—Dahye Chang, as cited in Human Rights Watch, 2021<sup>324</sup>

‘Nth Room’ refers to the cybersex crime case that took place on the messenger application Telegram, between the half of 2018 and March 2020, that involved almost a hundred girls in a sexual exploitation and sextortion scheme. The young women were coerced to record compromising videos after being drawn in by job postings of phishing scams; their footages were eventually spread across the platform by means of chat rooms closed behind a pay wall, where the most graphic content was sold up to 1.5 million won. The leaders used a “new form of modern slavery” that involved cruel and sadistic requests in order to take advantage of the girls’ vulnerability and maximise profits. Despite an estimated 260,000 users in the group chats, the journalists pointed out that it is challenging to gauge the extent of illicit materials because the scale of cybersex crimes spreads like wildfire.<sup>325</sup>

The Telegram chatrooms (*t’ellebang*) were first discovered and investigated by Team Flame (a pair of two female college students) as part of a journalism competition in which they had to write an article that eventually caught the attention of authorities. The *Hankyoreh* coverage sparked a coalition of feminist groups to investigate the chatrooms, raise awareness online using the keyword Nth Room (*n-pōnbang*), and assist in gathering 100,000 signatures to call for tightened sanctions. While the national media coverage was relatively absent, women took over the internet to stop secondary victimization and continue the conversation on the case. Contrary to expectations, these horrifying crimes persisted after media exposure. A number of new male users joined the groups and ridiculed the journalists for apparently “helping” to make the chatrooms more popular. The prevailing belief was that they were not innocent as they merely watched the shared material and were not involved in producing any illegal image. Some even claimed that they had been consuming child exploitative media, normalising and perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and desensitisation.<sup>326</sup>

When the primary suspects of the sex blackmail ring were finally caught in March 2020, the public urged to reveal the abusers’ identities and demanded that their gruesome offences

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<sup>324</sup> Barr, ‘My Life Is Not Your Porn’.

<sup>325</sup> De Souza, ‘The Nth Room Case and Modern Slavery’.

<sup>326</sup> Joohee and Chang, ‘Nth Room Incident in the Age of Popular Feminism’; Yoon, ‘The Spark That Ignited the “Nth Room” Fire’.

be appropriately punished. The mastermind operators (*'Paksa'* and *'Godgod'*) were consequently given sentences of 40 and 34 years in prison, respectively, and 245 of the 3,757 suspects—whose average was 21—were imprisoned.<sup>327</sup>

Nonetheless, the outcome was bittersweet because almost all accomplices who had paid for images and videos and engaged in dehumanising chat sessions aimed at humiliating and abusing the victims were able to get away without facing any legal consequences. In addition, the majority of those who committed digital sex crimes only receive fines, which are insignificant in comparison to the long-term physical and psychological harm that the survivors must endure.<sup>328</sup>

To be sure, the public debate opened the process for a series of legal reforms in 2021, known as “anti-Nth Room”, to impose relatively tougher penalties on online sex crime perpetrators and offenders who purchase or distribute illegal content. The measures require cloud storage and internet providers to regulate and prevent the distribution of unauthorised content, with fines of up to 30 million won three years in prison. Nonetheless, the regulations faced strong criticism because they proved to be obsolete due to their restriction to local platforms, and inefficient to respond to concrete phenomena.<sup>329</sup> In fact, another digital sex crime emerged in 2022 on the Discord server, this time targeting child sexual exploitation materials.<sup>330</sup> And again, a study conducted on camera-based crimes that occurred between 2011 and 2020 found that the number of perpetrators accused has been steadily rising. Perpetrators were nearly all male, with the majority in their twenties and thirties, while 93% of the victims were female.<sup>331</sup> In other words, digital sex crimes like phishing and blackmail have persisted in the absence of strong penalties and gender-based education. As Kim contends, “Korean men have grown up within a culture of sexual exploitation and have been desensitized to it”, creating ideal conditions for perpetrating such atrocities.<sup>332</sup> For instance, nearly half of male adolescents are apathetic towards cyber sexual harassment, while the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency reported 662 cases of juvenile sexual violence.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Kim, ‘Everything to Know’.

<sup>328</sup> Park and Lee, ‘Cho Ju-bin’s sentence’.

<sup>329</sup> The forthcoming reports redacted by the Supreme Prosecutors’ Office estimated that 28% (of 17,495) digital sex offenders were caught in 2021, but there were no measures taken about Telegram because the legislations operate only with local services. Rosen, ‘In South Korea, Women Are Fighting’; Yoon, ‘“Anti-Nth Room” Legislation’.

<sup>330</sup> Lee, ‘New Digital Sex Crime Raises’; Park, ‘The “Third Nth Room” Spreads on Discord’. In 2022 it was published that almost all *molka* victims in 2020 were female, and more than half of the offenses targeted minors. Jung-Youn, ‘6 out of 10 Digital Sex Crimes’.

<sup>331</sup> The perpetrators were strangers (73%), partners (47%), acquaintances, friends and coworkers. Park, Park, and Lee, ‘Analysis of the Current Status of Illegal Filming Crimes’.

<sup>332</sup> Jung, ‘Welcome to cyber hell’; Lee, ‘Threatening Emails’; Cho, ‘Another Teenager Sentenced to Prison’.

<sup>333</sup> Kim, ‘Nth Room 3 Years Later’; Choi, ‘Sex Crimes Using Deepfakes’; Park, ‘Her SNU classmates tormented her’; Choi, ‘Sex Crimes Using Deepfakes’.



Another emerging trend, notably in South Korea, is the distribution and sale of deepfake exploitative material. Offenders take satisfaction in demeaning victims' dignity by digitally distorting videos and images.<sup>334</sup> Significantly, the profit-driven structure of chat groups indicates the high demand for nonconsensual material, and the fundamental reason for this is the social attitude that minimises sexual offences.<sup>335</sup> August 2024 saw the surfacing of a different Telegram chatroom that, similarly to the Nth Room incident, revealed a widespread exploitative web that distributed deepfake media on a large scale across the country. The perpetrators were identified as minors, college students, teachers, and military personnel, while the victims were found to be female acquaintances from work and school as well as relatives. A couple of these chatgroups had between 220,000 and 400,000 members, while several others had at least 1,000 participants. The offenders stunned everyone by threatening reporters and making fun of the victims by stating, "We will never close it", in response to President Yoon's promise of severe countermeasures. On the other hand, given that Yoon's administration trimmed the MoGEF's 2024 budget plan—which included the education and prevention program for digital sexual crime—it is not uncommon for offenders to carry out their wrongdoings without worrying about facing repercussions.<sup>336</sup>

Several associations and organisations have emerged over the years to delete nonconsensual content surfacing on the internet, including regular investigations to remove spy cameras in public restrooms and locker rooms.<sup>337</sup> However, despite the fact that technology facilitates 30% of sex crimes, the administration has not done enough to address this issue or to take into account the dreadful consequences for survivors who must live in perpetual fear owing to the uncontrollable dissemination and resurgence of compromising material. The removal of the content does not in fact guarantee its complete disappearance from the internet because of its widespread reach; consequently, women suffer secondary victimisation on multiple occasions while seeking justice, which frequently results in excruciating trauma that consumes their lives.

In the first instance, authorities frequently decline to proceed with the complaints or require a single person to gather the evidence, subjecting survivors to unnecessary agonising and humiliating experiences—followed by inappropriate, abusive and insensitive

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<sup>334</sup> In 2022, 264 cases of deepfake cases were reported but only 121 of them were arrested Kim, 'Korea Is the Top Country'; Lee, 'Sex Crime Chat Rooms Resurface'; Security Hero, '2023 State Of Deepfakes'.

<sup>335</sup> Park, '220,000 People'; Yonhap, 'Fear of Deepfake'; Lim, 'Following the 220,000'.

<sup>336</sup> Park, 'Despite the Announcement'; KWHL, 'No One Is Unaware That Deepfake Sexual Exploitation Is a Crime'.

<sup>337</sup> Digital Sex Crime Victim Support Center, Project ReSET, and Santa Cruise are some of those involved in detecting and removing explicit content. Rosen, 'In South Korea, Women Are Fighting'.

interrogations. Women may also endure discouragement from proceeding with the complaints as they are warned of defamation charges<sup>338</sup> or made accountable for the incidents. Before the court, the situation is not so much better as “the justice system is focused on the defendant, not the victim”.<sup>339</sup> Despite the magnitude of harm inflicted, nearly half of the cases involving cyber-sexual offences in 2019 were dismissed, while the convictions were frequent, and sentences were usually light. This spectrum of constraints and high stigmatisations prevents survivors from reporting the crime or seeking assistance and, as a result of having to live in constant fright, stress and anxiety, several women believe that suicide is their only alternative.<sup>340</sup>

Secondly, experts have reported the absence of specific legislation to regulate digital sex crimes, highlighting the necessity to allow victims to withdraw consent from consensually recorded materials that have then been illegally spread. Also, they drew attention to the fact that survivors frequently experience financial hardships as a result of these violent episodes—a fact that is often overlooked as the legal system prioritises criminal cases over civil lawsuits. Additionally, they noted that the psychological damage and weariness of dealing with appeals for years deter survivors from seeking financial compensation.<sup>341</sup> Whereas in view of a possible implementation of stringent controls on online content, Human Rights Watch warns of the risk of escalating censorship and restricting the freedom of speech.<sup>342</sup> At last, researchers have also called for the introduction of a thorough sexual and digital education with the scope to eradicate the deeply rooted sociocultural values that tolerate and condone the culture of rape and desensitise the younger generations to online offences.<sup>343</sup>

Not only it is estimated that students receive only 15 hours of sexuality education per year up until high school, but the Ministry’s 2015 curriculum sparked concerns about the lack of classes on teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, gender identity, and gender orientation. Instead, the program centred primarily on abstinence and provided inaccurate information,

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<sup>338</sup> Laws against defamation and false accusations are severe and can be punishable by prison time. Furthermore, a person can receive charges if they state the truth but, while doing so, they damage the reputation of others. Sexual violence survivors are victims of numerous defamation charges, including insult, coercion, blackmail and perjury, which can further target their families, friends and acquaintances. For instance, between 2018 and 2019, there were 150 lawsuits or criminal accusations against sexual assault victims. In fact, many perpetrators use threats of legal action to force women to drop the accusations or punish them, which explains why only 1.9% of survivors report to the authorities. Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, chap. 15.

<sup>339</sup> Lee Ye Rin, as cited in Barr, ‘My Life Is Not Your Porn’.

<sup>340</sup> Barr.

<sup>341</sup> Barr; KWHL, ‘The problem is online male culture’.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> The government-established Digital Sexual Crime Victim Support Center (DSCVSC) has been undoubtedly an innovative model, but it presents drawbacks. For instance, there is a huge coverage gap due to its single office in the capital, and its temporary workforce causes both a staffing shortage and a loss of expertise. With regard to this, experts highlighted the need for adequate financing, ongoing expertise and awareness-raising measures. Barr.

continuing to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes despite later adjustments.<sup>344</sup> In the same vein, the Yoon administration has proposed removing gender minorities from the national school curriculum, drawing criticism as an attempt to erase marginalised identities and create confusion among the youth by replacing ‘gender equality’ with ‘gender prejudice’. These revisions came amid pressure from religious and right-wing groups demanding the removal of books on sex education and gender equality.<sup>345</sup>

Female representation is critical in the definition of policies and means of interventions; nonetheless, according to available statistics, the glass ceiling is still intact. Due to barriers to advancement in the police force and frequent isolation, the proportion of women in the justice system remains low: while women made up 15% of officers in 2021, female judges accounted for 34 by 2022. As for the general election held in April 2024, just 98 (or 14%) of 696 candidates in 235 constituencies nationwide were women. Of these, only 60 made it to the National Assembly, which is less than the quota policy’s desired 30%. Notwithstanding the low percentages, the Reform New Party advocated for a “meritocratic” and fair competition and suggested abandoning the gender quota system, arguing that it is a form of gaslighting that undercuts women’s abilities and constitutes systemic gender discrimination.<sup>346</sup>

### 3.3.2 *The Public Responsibility in Gendered Violence Against Women*

"The law was too cold toward our child, the victim,  
and too warm toward the perpetrator."  
—Lee Ye Ram’s mother<sup>347</sup>

The KWHL has been conducting research for the past 15 years due to the authorities’ refusal to provide a detailed account of gender statistics on incidents occurring: at least 1,379 women have been murdered by male partners in intimate relationships, in addition to 3,058 attempted murders and 3,773 witness victims.<sup>348</sup> In terms of dating violence (*kyoje-p’ongnyök*),<sup>349</sup> the number of cases reported has risen to 77,150 in 2023.<sup>350</sup> KWHL also reported that 138 cases of known femicides and 311 attempted murders in 2023

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Mendoza, ‘South Korea Revises School Curriculum’; Cho, ‘Removal of Gender Diversity’; Kim, ‘Because There Is No Social Consensus’.

<sup>346</sup> Yoon, ‘South Korea: Gender Distribution’; Lee, ‘Women’s Rights Take Back Seat’; Barr; Park, ‘For the First Time’; Park, ‘Over 20,000 Female Police Officers’; Lee and Shin, ‘Brother National Assembly’; Choi, ‘Opposing Female Quota System’.

<sup>347</sup> Kim, ‘The Sergeant Who Was in Charge of Her Abusers’s Work’.

<sup>348</sup> KWHL, ‘Statistics on Murders within Gender-Free “Intimate Relationships”?’

<sup>349</sup> There is currently no legal definition of “intimate partner violence (IPV)” in South Korea. Initially, the term “date-*p’ongnyök*” was introduced but, as gender sensibility grew, it was replaced with the Korean word for relationship, i.e. “*kyoje*”. Na, ‘Murders Every 2.6 Days’.

<sup>350</sup> Out of 13,939 arrestees, only 310 have been placed in detention. Lee, ‘Korea Facing Worrying Uptick’.

occurred in intimate relationships, that is a woman killed or almost killed every 19 hours.<sup>351</sup> In the first half of 2024, an upsurge in dating murders (*kyoje-sarin*) sparked public indignation and concerns: in March, a 26-year-old man stabbed to death his ex-girlfriend and attacked her mother in Gyonggi province. A similar case occurred in April in South Gyeongsan Province where a man broke in and assaulted to death the ex-girlfriend. In May, a man murdered a woman in her 20s on a rooftop near Gangnam Station in Seoul by the ex-partner.<sup>352</sup>

In spite of the urgency to intervene, legislators have found it difficult to define ‘dating relationship’ and hence there is currently no specific law against dating violence. Consequently, victims abused by intimate partners remain in the legal grey area because cases of violence among unmarried couples are not eligible for the immediate legal protections—separation or restraining orders—that are prescribed for stalking or domestic violence (*kajöng-p'ongnyöck*).<sup>353</sup> Secondly, victims are often persuaded to withdraw their accusations, which results in no measures being taken. Furthermore, although there have been attempted proposals to extend the Act on the Prevention of Domestic Violence to unmarried couples and enhance punishment and protection mechanisms, the entire legislation itself is outdated and requires improvement. In fact, the deficiency of an integrated system allows abusers to avoid having criminal records and have their charges dropped in exchange for participating in treatment programs.<sup>354</sup>

According to Heo Min Sook, a researcher at the National Assembly Research Service, Korean society has failed to show that is “unforgivable to assault and kill women”, arguing that the legal vacuum, lack of comprehensive statistics and definitions simply reflect the attitude and perception of the state towards violence against women.<sup>355</sup> For instance, in May 2021, the death of Lee Ye Ram, a female Air Force officer, created a national uproar. Following her sexual assault by a male superior officer, Lee suffered secondary victimisation that provoked psychological damage and isolation, accompanied by the military’s mishandling of her complaints and intimidatory acts from the perpetrator she was forced to continue to work with. Not only does the superior threaten her to remain silent, but he additionally belittles the abuse defining it as “something you can experience once in

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<sup>351</sup> Lee, ‘Why Femicide and Dating Violence’; Lee, ‘Korea Facing Worrying Uptick’. For a detailed account, see KWHL, ‘Analysis of 2023 Korean Women’s Hotline Counseling Statistics’; KWHL, ‘2023 Rage Gauge’.

<sup>352</sup> Considering several similar gruesome incidents, the notion of a “safe breakup” (*anjöghan ibyöl*) has become common among women. Lee, ‘Why Femicide and Dating Violence’.

<sup>353</sup> It is reported that 81% of domestic violence crimes victims are women, with 52% victims in their 40-50s and 29% victims in their 20-30s. As for the number of arrests for domestic violence, they accounted for 52,431 in 2023. KWDI, ‘Victims of Domestic Violence Crimes’; Jung-Youn, ‘6 out of 10 Digital Sex Crimes’.

<sup>354</sup> Kim, ‘Korean Women Scramble for “Safe Breakup”’; The Korea Times, ‘Get Serious on Dating Violence’.

<sup>355</sup> Lee, ‘Dating Violence Is the Result’.

your life”. However, the Supreme Court dismissed the claims of retaliation and intimidation and sentenced him to seven years in prison.<sup>356</sup> This incident opened new discussions surrounding sexual crimes in the barracks particularly, which amounted to 4,233 from 2020 to June 2023.<sup>357</sup> Significantly, there has been a rise in sexual violence incidents, reaching 45,115 in 2022. Of these, rape and attempted rape victims accounted for 6,414, all women.<sup>358</sup>

In an effort to eradicate gendered violence against women and transform the public perception of dating violence as a general violent crime given that it perpetuates victim-blaming, KSVRC and KWHL have demanded accountability from the government for their lack of initiative. Women’s rights advocates contend that the MoGEF needs to develop comprehensive measures to respond proactively and cooperatively with other ministries, in additionally to the enactment of anti-discrimination and gender-sensitive regulations to respond to the widespread discrimination against social minorities, such as the disabled and racial minorities, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community.<sup>359</sup>

In contrast, Ahn Chang Ho, the nominee to lead the National Human Rights Commission (NHRCK) has reiterated that the increase in sexual offences is a “result of showing skin and sexual urges”. He also opposed the formulation of anti-discrimination legislation (*Ch'abyŏlgŭmjibŏp*), arguing that homosexuality would trigger a “communist revolution” and emphasising the importance of defending the majority’s right to free speech. Finally, Ahn warned that such laws will contribute to the spread of diseases including cancer, hepatitis and AIDS.<sup>360</sup> Second, the MoGEF has faced criticism for withdrawing plans to include the crime of “non-consensual sex” in the legal definition of rape. The revision has been in fact discussed and advocated since 2015 in reaction to courts’ predisposition to narrowly regard rape based on the legal definition. In fact, rape is defined as intercourse accompanied by overwhelming physical violence or intimidation and the victim’s incapacity to resist, rather than their lack of consent. Despite women’s associations claiming that the current legislative framework is outdated and insufficient to protect

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<sup>356</sup> Lee, ‘More Indictments in Officer’s Sexual Harassment Suicide’; Lee, ‘Supreme Court Confirms 7 Year Sentence’; Gil, ‘How sexually harassed Air Force master sergeant’.

<sup>357</sup> Son, ‘Military Sexual Crimes Increase’.

<sup>358</sup> Kim, ‘Sexual Violence Increased by 33% in 7 Years’. For instance, in May 2022, a woman was knocked out and repeatedly assaulted by a stranger who followed her to the elevator with the purpose of rape. In 2023, similar other copycat incidents have been occurring in apartment elevators where two men indiscriminately assaulted and raped different female victims. And again, in 2024 a man attacked a woman on a hiking trail in Seoul with the purpose of rape. She died two days later. Yoo, ‘Supreme Court Confirms 20-Yr Sentence’; Han, ‘“Busan Kick” Victims Files Lawsuit’. Jo, ‘“I’m Too Scared to Ride”’; Lee, ‘Sillim-Dong Hiking Trail Killer Gets Life in Prison’.

<sup>359</sup> Han, ‘A Series of Dating Murders’; Jang, ‘Should I Move Secretly?’

<sup>360</sup> Koh, ‘Nominee to lead Korean human rights watchdog’; Park, ‘South Korea’s Nominated Human Rights Chief’; Lee, ‘New Human Rights Watchdog Chief Nominee’.

victims, numerous lawmakers have fostered ridicule against these intentions, and some men argued that it will exacerbate gender conflicts or increase false rape allegations. At last, Rep. Kweon of the People Power Party confined the matter of gendered sexual violence within the personal sphere, asserting that the state should restrain its meddling in people's *private* lives, such as sexual activities. As Heo contends, "the state is still hesitant to criminalise violence against women" neglecting to relate the gendered violence in intimate relationships to the structural gender inequality, but rather addressing it as an "unfortunate individual problem", resulting in a persistent legislative vacuum.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Choi, 'Opposing Female Quota System'; Kim, 'Ministry Blasted over Rape Law U-Turn'; Bergsten, 'South Korea Cancels Plans to Update'; Lee, 'Is Non-Consensual Sex Not Rape?'; Lee, 'Dating Violence Is the Result'.



## Conclusion

This dissertation has analysed the complex and profoundly entrenched history of gender inequality and violence in South Korea, including the advancement of women's status and their efforts for liberation and human rights. By tracing the historical chronology of Korean women's rights movements, this research has discovered the intersectionality of social, political, and cultural factors that have contributed to the construction of a misogynist culture, which include Confucian values, colonial and patriarchal frameworks, militarised masculinity, institutionalised gendered discrimination and naturalisation of hate-speech.

The media and political establishments have progressively framed and disguised gender violence as "gender politics". Public institutions have exploited this narrative to divert the attention from the intricate and underlying intersectionality between class struggle and gender discrimination that exacerbate and contribute to marginalisation and isolation of various vulnerable groups. This has shifted the responsibility to the "two factions" involved (that is women and anti-feminists), escaping any form of liability and accountability, eradicating any referral to systemic causes to avoid addressing the structural components. This misleading depiction would suggest that both sides detain an equal power position, which would reinforce the idea of mutual hostility and competition between them. Conversely, this narrative oversimplifies and maintain the structural problem that disproportionately impacts marginalised people. In other words, the portrayal of gender discrimination as a "war" between the sexes fails to acknowledge the substantial power disparities that exist in society. As a matter of fact, the sensationalised emphasis of "gender tensions" foster a culture of resentment and counterattacks by placing the attention on the individual than on the collective responsibility to end gendered discrimination. By reducing a complex injustice to a gender-based conflict, authorities hindered the emergence of a cross-class and gender solidarity, effectively maintaining the status quo, and eliminated any change for social change and justice.<sup>362</sup> Kim argues,

Education is also necessary, but it should start with politicians properly addressing the structural inequality that is very real and tangible in Korea. Yes, men can feel like their power is being taken away, but that's only because they're refusing to see what women have been denied all this time. Politicians have the power to divide people into groups, which should not be used to separate but to consolidate them.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Yang, 'A Society That Disguises Class Issues and Gender Discrimination as "Gender Conflict"'; Kim, 'Article on Cyberbullying Titled "Gender Conflict and Controversy"'; 'Is It Ok to Report on Gender Issues Disguised as "Gender Conflict"?'

<sup>363</sup> Kim Kwon, 2024, as cited in Yoon, 'Korea's Two-Finger Salute'.



The popular 4B Movement became the pinnacle of Korean women's efforts to resist against traditional roles and expectations, reflecting the growing discontent of young women with the patriarchal system that has enabled misogynist hate-speech, which has perpetuated their oppression. Although the movement has received a great amount of praise and attention for its contentious resistance, we cannot disregard the alarming transphobia and exclusivity within the digital movement. By reducing gender identity to simplistic biological notions, Korean radical feminists overlook and disregard the crucial concept of intersectionality for an all-inclusive society, refusing to acknowledge the heterogenous nature of unfair structures. As they prioritise their struggles over all forms of discrimination and inequality, they fail to acknowledge the various components of the patriarchal system. As a result, they maintain the system by resorting to solitude and exclusivity over collective solidarity. Rather of advancing all gendered-based discriminations together and simultaneously to deconstruct the conventional structures, their approach undermines the feminist movement's capacity to confront the broad spectrum of injustice affecting all socially marginalised groups. Therefore, they inadvertently strengthen the very oppressive and dominant institution that they seek to overthrow. Their insistence on biological essentialism undermines the principles that reside at the fundamental core of a transformational social movement. Resonating Harmer's words, "Nobody's free until everybody's free".<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Brooks and Houck, "Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free,".

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