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Honors Thesis

THE WAR ON GENDER EQUALITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN FEMINISM
AND ANTI-FEMINISM WITHIN SOUTH KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for
University Honors

Korean Department
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

THE WAR ON GENDER EQUALITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN FEMINISM AND ANTI-FEMINISM WITHIN SOUTH KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES

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Bachelor of Liberal Arts

Since the time of Confucianism and the development of patriarchal systems in South Korea, there have been distinct differences between male and female experiences and roles in various aspects of Korean life. The gendered history of South Korea has led to a gap between the two genders that persists today in important areas of Korean society, such as education and social life. As both genders struggle for equality and representation, both sides argue that they are being discriminated against. This struggle has led to two major groups being formed in South Korea (hereafter Korea): feminists and anti-feminists. The following review and analysis of the literature examines how feminist and anti-feminist groups have formed in Korea. Through the analysis of past and current movements, I examine how the feminist and anti-feminist groups have come to be and how they have evolved to the present day. By analyzing and filtering trends and patterns within these two movements I examine possible forthcoming trends for those movements as well as whether or not Korea's gender movements will follow the same path to greater gender equality that has occurred in the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this thesis truly came smack dab in the middle of what probably was the busiest time I have ever had in my life. It was truly the busiest and most stressed I have ever been in my twenty-two years of life. I truly only got through this experience with the help of my friends, family, and advisors.

I want to acknowledge the strong presence of both my mother and Nana. Thank you to my mom for continuing to show me how to be strong and independent. Thank you to my nana; I hope she knew how much of an impact she had and continues to have on my life. They have both been such a positive influence in my life and have shown me what it is to be a strong woman in the world of academics. Without them I would not have been able to be who I am today and have gotten this far enough into my academic career as successfully as I have. I want to sincerely thank them.

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“The feminists had only one model, one image, one vision, of a full and free human being: man. For until very recently, only men (though not all men) had the freedom and the education necessary to realize their full abilities, to pioneer and create and discover, and map new trails for future generations. Only men had the vote: the freedom to love, and enjoy love, and decide for themselves in the eyes of their God the problems of right and wrong. Did women want these freedoms because they wanted to be men? Or did they want them because they also were human?”¹

Kim, JaeWon. *Confucian Legal Discourse and Women in Korea*. 2006. Cornell University, PhD dissertation.

Introduction

Standing out facing a crowd of hundreds upon hundreds of people, with shaking hands and trembling voices, women stood their ground to speak out on all of the mistreatment that they had faced in their lives for being a woman. Once the person at the microphone could not speak, the women around her cheered and applauded for her in the absence of the words she had trouble speaking. At a marathon protest for #MeToo, 193 women came forward to stand at the microphone to relay their personal stories and experiences of harassment for 2018 minutes non-stop.² Attendees in the audience held signs with the hashtags ‘#WithYou,’ #SpeakOut,’ and ‘#MeToo.’ They also tied a black string on themselves to represent standing in solidarity with victims of sexual violence and to symbolize the accusations of the perpetrators that will keep being told. One girl speaks out,

“I was molested by a man I didn’t know in front of my house at an age where I hadn’t even received sex education. I wrote one letter at the time in my diary. My mother looked at my diary and told me, ‘erase the text and don’t tell anyone.’ However, she erased the words with her hands, but she couldn’t erase it from my head”³

Hundreds of stories like these were told throughout the event. The talking did not stop the entire 2018 minutes. However, there was something surprising about this protest: it was performed in South Korea.

² Bicker, Laura. "#MeToo Movement Takes Hold in South Korea." *BBC News*, 26 Mar. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43534074. Accessed 26 Feb. 2023.

³ Choi, Kyujin. "Cheongyegwanggjang ssotajineun mitu...ilbakiil 'isipcheonsip-palbun' ieomalhagi" 천계광장에 쏟아지는 미투... 1 박 2 일 '2018 분' 이어말하기. *The JoongAng*, 22 Mar. 2018, www.joongang.co.kr/article/22465750#home. Accessed 26 Feb. 2023.

Reading the events of the protest a person might have thought that this event happened anywhere, particularly in more progressive or egalitarian places such as the United States. However, the #MeToo movement managed to grab a sturdy foothold in the Korean community that is known for being conservative in nature. The move for feminism in South Korea has always been a fight women have striven for but when the #MeToo movement started in America and eventually spread internationally, it was exactly the push Korean women needed to be seen and have their voices heard on a larger scale.

What is the ‘feminism’ that Koreans and women all over the world are fighting for? When the media covers feminism movements it often portrays feminists as wanting to have more rights than men and to put men beneath women. However, that is what radical feminism is which consists of a lot of small groups of females in the overarching feminism category. But justifying misandry is not the right approach according to OhSe Rabi, author of *That Feminism is Wrong*. OhSe said, “countering hatred with hatred is no different from responding to gender inequality with another gender inequality.”⁴ The goal of the feminist movement is not to put other genders down and make them suffer, it is to bring the female gender up to the equal status that the male gender has due to various historical and societal factors that have allowed for them to have more rights and opportunities than women on the average. Feminism is about, “all genders having equal rights and opportunities [and] respecting diverse women’s experiences, identities, knowledge, and strength, and striving to empower all women to realize their full rights.”⁵

⁴ Lee, Sunny. "Why Korean Women Are Hesitant to Label Themselves Feminists." *Vice*, 17 Feb. 2020, www.vice.com/en/article/v74zd3/korean-women-feminists. Accessed 24 Nov. 2022.

⁵ "What is Feminism?" *International Women's Development Agency*,

Although it should be recognized that because of radical feminists the feminist movement was able to gain attention and traction, the real meaning and message behind feminism got lost in translation.

Not only with the #MeToo movement but with the overall development of the feminist movement, Korean feminists have shown that they are following a similar path that feminism took in America to gain the level of gender equality seen today. Although the United States and Korea have varying backgrounds, a similar path to gender equality can be observed. There is a matter of how much change was able to happen legally and in society that occurred in different points of time in America vs Korea leading to Korea being behind in the feminist movement compared to America. Just a few years ago women would not want to call themselves a feminist for fear of being perceived as a radical feminist but now many women call themselves a feminist with pride. On the other hand, Korean women are still at the point in their path to gender equality where they are still very hesitant to label themselves as a feminist publicly. In Korea there is also a lot more turmoil surrounding gender equality because of the newness in which the feminist movement has gained traction so there is a huge opposing group that is against the feminists called anti-feminists. They believe that feminism in Korea opposes and attacks men and that in the past men were on top and women were on the bottom but now it feels like women are on top and men are being trampled.⁶ With the two very different mindsets on what should be done about gender inequality in Korea, the feminist and anti-feminist groups often bump heads in various settings; one more recent event being the 2022 presidential election. With this large opposing

iwda.org.au/learn/what-is-feminism/#:~:text=Quite%20simply%2C%20feminism%20is%20about,to%20realise%20their%20full%20rights. Accessed 27 Feb. 2023.

⁶ "From Military to Makeup: The Changing of Korean Male." *Youtube*, uploaded by Joi Lee, 10 Sept. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmYMGomeSic. Accessed 25 Feb. 2022.

group that the feminist groups in Korea have to face, will they be able to stay on the path to a more gender equal society that the United States took?

II. History of Gender Inequality in South Korea and the United States

The United States of America (hereafter, the America) has a long history of gender inequality. There are many factors that have contributed to gender inequality in America but one most notably is the role of women in traditional families. Gender roles in American society have long held a traditional view of men as the breadwinners of the family and women as the homemakers and main caretakers of children. This social phenomenon in American society has made it difficult for women to make their own money and contribute outside of the home. Although in the present-day women in America work in jobs and there are many women risings to higher positions, traditional views of gender roles still loom. As a result, women remain primary caretakers of children, earn less than men and have reduced work hours. These discrepancies are even greater among minority women in America.⁷ So, while there is much progress toward greater flexibility in these traditional family roles, there are still lingering effects of these traditional gender roles and gender inequality in American society.

But just how deep do these traditional gender roles reach in American society and how did they come to be? Since the American colonial era, women have experienced disadvantages, some of this stemming from the religions brought over from Europe. Many different religious groups came over to America when colonialism first began, such as the Puritans and Quakers. In the colonies that practiced Puritanism, men had a deep mistrust in women in general because they suspected them of being daughters of Eve that were greedy for power and sexual

⁷ Evason, Nina. "American Culture: Family." *Cultural Atlas*, 2021,

culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/american-culture/american-culture-family. Accessed 26 Feb.

gratification. These sorts of perceptive misogyny made many women susceptible to charges of witchcraft.⁸ Since that time, traditional family roles and gender roles have kept evolving even as the religious aspect of the roles faded. The long-standing history of traditional gender roles persist even when progress has been made towards more gender equality.

There have been multiple waves of feminism that have brought feminism to where it is today in the United States. To summarize briefly, feminism can be broken down into four waves. Each wave of feminism was closely tied with historical events occurring in America at the time. The first wave was closely tied to temperance and the women's suffrage movement. The second wave stemmed from anti-war and civil rights movements, and America's growing diversity and self-consciousness among minority groups that made this wave more radical than the first. The third feminist wave occurred in the mid-1990s and was largely influenced by post-colonial and post-modern thinking that celebrated ambiguity. This wave was considered ambiguous because most refused to even use the word "feminist" because the scope of their beliefs went beyond just that single word. Finally, the most current wave of feminism in America, the fourth wave, is characterized by the development of social media, and the problems fought for in the second wave (sexual abuse, unequal pay, rape, etc.) are being brought to attention once more.⁹ These historical events and society's reaction to those events play a huge role in the shape that feminist movements have taken during those time periods.

In South Korea, there are many different historical events and cultural phenomena that factor into gender inequality. One aspect in Korean culture that has played a role in gender

⁸ Heyrman, Christine Leigh. "Religion, Women, and the Family in Early America." *TeacherServe*, National Humanities Center, nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/erelwom.htm. Accessed 22 Feb. 2023.

⁹ Rampton, Martha. "Four Waves of Feminism." *Pacific University Oregon*, Feb. 2008, www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism.

inequality is Confucianism. This religious philosophy has played an integral role in Korean social culture. “Oryun-ga” (The Song of Five Relationships), explains the five traditional values that make up the groundwork for Confucian moral standards. Of these five values, one focuses particularly on the role of women in a Confucianist society. This standard is called *bubu yubyeol* (husband and wife are different). This standard, “refers to the complementary duties of a husband and a wife, but also implies a hierarchy in a married relationship, where a wife is expected to serve the husband.”¹⁰ A lot of Confucian moral standards are still seen in present-day Korean society, such as *jangyu yuseo* (old and young have order) in the different levels of respect given to older people via honorifics when speaking. As a result, the expectation of women staying at home and serving their husbands has been an important principle in Korean society for a very long time and is still a part of an unspoken standard.

How integrated Confucianism is in Korean society, along with why it is seen as a factor that has affected the progress of gender equality for so long, can be seen in the Confucian teaching of the *hojujae* (family headship system). In this system, which started in 1953 and was abolished in 2001, families were registered under the head of the family (men) and daughters were registered to their husband’s families. If their husband dies, women then become registered under their eldest son. If their son dies, the head becomes the next oldest son and so on and so forth. In this system women could not become heads of their families until there were no surviving males.¹¹ When this system was finally abolished in 2001 many feminists celebrated, and many other religions agreed with getting rid of this unequal system.

¹⁰ Chu, Sebung. *The Song of Five Relationships*. Compiled by Jieun Kiaer and Anna Yates-Lu, translated by Jieun Kiaer, Routledge, 2019.

¹¹ "Korea: The Family Registration System ('Hoju'); Who Has Access to the System and Whether or Not Individuals Can Access Information on Other Families." *Reworld*, Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 15 Feb. 2007, www.refworld.org/docid/47d6545fc.html. Accessed 23 Feb. 2023.

Some argue that Confucianism is not affecting gender equality in present-day Korea because of Confucianism's ability to adapt with the times and that this religious philosophy could not survive if it did not match the current wave of feminism in Korea. However, when the *hojujae* was abolished, there was a group called the Sungkyunkwan (the National Confucian Academy) opposed this abolition. This association argued that the system should be preserved since it was so ingrained in Korean culture. When statements such as this are made many feminists conclude that Confucianism has had an active role in creating gender inequality. However, some feminist scholars such as Eunkang Koh of Oxford University argues that, “we should not blame the Confucian scriptures for the reason for the current male-dominated society in Korea but rather the supporters of male-domination who manipulated the interpretation of the scriptures.”¹² This illustrates that the feminist community varies in their opinions on how much of an impact Confucianism has had in promoting gender inequality but it certainly at one point contributed to many unequal gender policies that have bled into modern Korean society.

While Confucianism undoubtedly has had a hand in the way gender inequality has evolved and progressed, there are other aspects of Korean culture and history that have also contributed. A significant period in the history of South Korea was the military rule from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. During this period, women faced substantial systemic discrimination. During this period of military dictatorship, women were finally given more rights, such as being able to work, but equal employment was not truly attainable until much later. Employment for females in this time period was difficult as women were disadvantaged through the hiring systems rewarding men for their compulsory military service and dismissing

¹² Koh, Eunkang. “Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2008, pp. 345–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40378774>. Accessed 6 Apr. 2022.

women when they became pregnant or got married.¹³ Females were often targeted when layoffs and dismissals were necessary. This sort of systemic discrimination towards females in the workforce was a huge barrier that early feminists fought to overcome.

Along the lines of historical events that have also shaped the way gender inequality is experienced in Korea, there is another event that has had negative economic repercussions for women. Korea's incredible economic growth in a very short period of time after the Korean War is well known. There have been positive and negative effects of rapid economic growth in Korea. On one hand, progress was made on remedying gender inequality in the workforce. The gender gap became smaller as women were able to enroll in secondary schools and the advancement rates to higher education was more accessible for females. There was also a more noticeable presence of women in elite professions such as medicine and law.¹⁴ So there were positive advances toward gender equality during this time in terms of women gaining education and employment opportunities.

Inversely, this time of economic growth and rebranding has also had negative consequences for women in Korea. When the Asian Financial Crisis occurred in 1997, Korea agreed to strict conditions on repayment through the IMF (International Monetary Fund). This bailout permanently altered the employment system in Korea and had many negative consequences for women in the workforce. One repercussion of this can be seen in the global

¹³ Barraclough, Ruth. "Most Read of 2021: The Feminist Renaissance in South Korea." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 3 Jan. 2022, www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-feminist-renaissance-in-south-korea/. Accessed 6 Apr. 2022

¹⁴ Kim, Jinyoung, et al. "Impact of Gender Inequality on the Republic of Korea's Long-Term Economic Growth: An Application of the Theoretical Model of Gender Inequality and Economic Growth." *ADB Economics Working Paper Series*, no. 472, Jan. 2016.

indicators on women's economic participation and opportunity where, compared to the rest of the world, Korea ranked 127th out of 153 countries.¹⁵ Another one of those effects is the gender pay gap that is very prevalent in Korea. According to the OECD (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), Korea has the biggest gender pay gaps among high-income countries. According to Figure 1 from the OECD wage gap data, Korea's gender wage gap is 31.1%. This means that women receive only 68.9% of the salary that men receive. Compared to the other countries on this graph, Korea is the only country that has recorded a gender wage gap higher than 30%. Although the rapid growth of the economy in Korea has allowed women more opportunities there are still many subsidiary effects experienced in the workforce today.

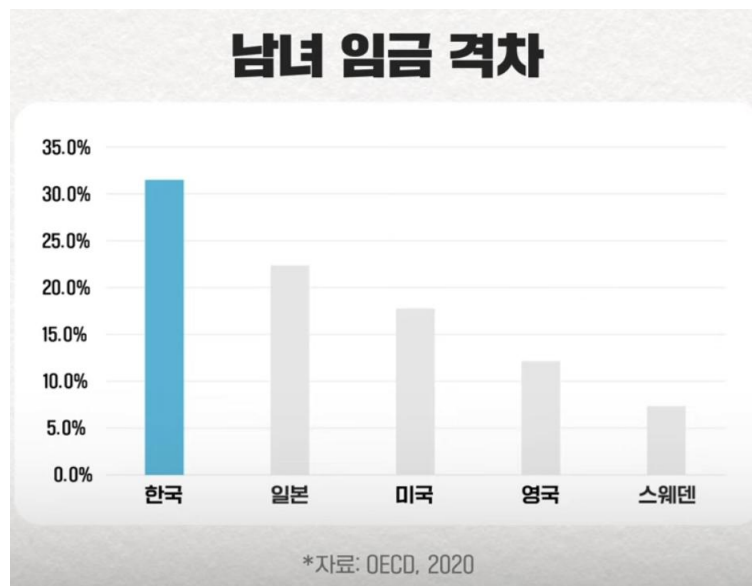


Figure 1: Gender Wage Gap Survey

¹⁵ Barraclough, Ruth. "Most Read of 2021: The Feminist Renaissance in South Korea." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 3 Jan. 2022, www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-feminist-renaissance-in-south-korea/. Accessed 6 Apr. 2022

III. Modern Feminism in South Korea

There are a multitude of instances where women have less equality and feel more unsafe than men in Korea, but currently they do not even feel safe enough to call themselves feminists and fight for their rights. The word “feminism” does not have a good connotation in Korea. Feminism is commonly confused with radical feminism. In a popular video online a man doing street interviews in Korea asked people their thoughts on feminism and anti-feminism. A majority of Koreans he spoke with (both male and female) responded by describing a picture of feminism that really was radical feminism. One man in particular said that feminists take equality and assert it on others, and they love to “unrighteously” take advantage of others in that way. One person used the word *maegal* to describe feminists which was an online platform in the early days of feminism in Korea that had a mostly radical view. Korean people today use that website as a negative way to refer to feminists.¹⁶ The website would use mirroring methods to show how women feel they are portrayed and treated, referring to men as *hannamchung* (male pests).¹⁷ Due to the stigma behind the word, most people– even if they are feminist – are too scared to call themselves a feminist.

There are many implications when someone calls themselves a feminist in Korea and the feminism seen in Korea is different from the Westernized versions of feminism because the origins of feminism were more radical feminists. This is still how feminism is seen to Koreans who do not know what basic feminism– wanting to have the same rights as men and be their

¹⁶“Pemi vs banpemi dangsineun eoneupyeon? [iuhi, omunyeong gijai gilbadak inteobyu]” 페미 vs 반페미 당신은 어느편? 이우희, 오문영 기자의 길바닥 인터뷰. *Youtube*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDU3WEw4xYQ. Accessed 28 Feb. 2023. Interview.

¹⁷ Lee, Sunny. "Why Korean Women Are Hesitant to Label Themselves Feminists." *Vice*, 17 Feb. 2020, www.vice.com/en/article/v74zd3/korean-women-feminists. Accessed 24 Nov. 2022.

equals in all things— is. In Korea, revealing to people that you are a feminist means people see you as an active participant in gender war, misogyny, and misandry.¹⁸ In order to avoid this social stigma people avoid openly labeling themselves as such. This sentiment is echoed by Korean feminist YunKim Jiyoung who said, “feminists are being presented as misandrists to be silenced and to have their efforts for gender equality stigmatized.”¹⁹ So the largest issue currently in Korea are feminists being able to change the public understanding of feminism back to more clearly the fundamentals of their movement and away from the image of radical feminism to be portrayed in the media.

While there are many gender inequalities that feminists in Korea hope to change, a few big issues have gained national attention and stand out among feminist movements. One of the biggest issues has been cameras in women’s public restrooms. These cameras have also been in places like hotels and changing rooms. These cameras have targeted women in particular, as one woman in a street interview about feminism and antifeminism pointed out that these cameras have not been in men’s restrooms.²⁰ The videos and images from these cameras were uploaded to websites where men paid to access and watch them. The phenomenon led to huge public protests, where women took to the streets of Seoul with signs labeled “My Life is Not Your Porn” in protest of all the illegal filming in 2018.²¹ The protests allowed for a turning point in

¹⁸ Lee, Sunny. "Why Korean Women Are Hesitant to Label Themselves Feminists." *Vice*, 17 Feb. 2020, www.vice.com/en/article/v74zd3/korean-women-feminists. Accessed 24 Nov. 2022.

¹⁹ Hines, Spencer, and Jay Song. "How Feminism Became a Dirty Word in South Korea." *The Diplomat*, 30 July 2021, thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-feminism-became-a-dirty-word-in-south-korea/. Accessed 22 Nov. 2022.

²⁰ "Pemi vs banpemi dangsineun eoneupyeon? [iuhui, omunyeong gijaui gilbadak inteobyu]" 페미 vs 반페미 당신은 어느편? 이우희, 오문영 기자의 길바닥 인터뷰. *Youtube*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDU3WEw4xYQ. Accessed 28 Feb. 2023. Interview.

²¹ Gunia, Amy. "Confronting the Traumatic Impact of South Korea's Spycam Problem on

terms of feminism in Korea. This was a protest that people and the government took more seriously compared to outcries before, such as the #MeToo movement. It ultimately changed the way that Korean society views illegal filming.

This is in stark contrast to previous public opinions on the illegal filming of women and people in general. It was a common occurrence that a man could take a picture of a woman on the subway and post the picture with a caption talking about the woman's legs, with very limited repercussions. But after the protest brought so much attention to the gravity of illegal filming, people would see similar posts and respond negatively. The media used to use the term *molka* (short for *mollae kamaera*— camera prank) but now the term the media uses for when this occurs is "illegal filming." The protest of this situation led to change not just legally, but also shed a light on the problems that women faced and made the general public more aware of the positive changes that feminism can bring to bettering the lives of not only females but males as well.

Another prominent issue for feminism in Korea is the topic of office culture. More specifically, the things that female workers experience in office culture because of their male coworkers. Especially in the larger cities, Korea has many office workers, and it is common for people to go out with their workers after work. This is known as *hoesik* (company dinner). This activity is often led by bosses, making it hard for employees to refuse out of respect for seniority which is a very important part of the social hierarchy in Korea. During the height of the #MeToo movement, many women spoke out about how their male coworkers would often get drunk and start trying to touch them inappropriately. The #MeToo movement sought to protect young women in the workplace and has allowed for an anti-harassment regulation to be put in place that makes it illegal for bosses to force an employee to have to go to a *hoesik*. This is another instance

Women." *Time*, 7 Mar. 2022, time.com/6154837/open-shutters-south-korea-spycam-molka/. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

of a big issue of gender inequality that was taken to the street and then to the government, resulting in a positive change. While feminism in general is still seen as a word with negative connotations, these small wins are helping to clear the prejudice of thinking all feminism is radical feminism.

There are some social stigmas ingrained in society that women in Korea continue to face. These sorts of gender inequality issues will likely take longer than a few protests to tackle and resolve like it happened with the bathroom camera and after work office dinner harassment. For example, there is a huge social stigma in Korea against single mothers. Being a single mom affects Korean women in a multitude of ways. “Single moms are still forced into the shadows of society – ostracized by family members, discriminated against at work and all the while, trying to raise children without a network of support.” Not only do the families of these single mothers often cut ties, but they are also looked down upon at work. While working mothers in general are looked down upon for working instead of putting all their efforts and attention on their children, single mothers have the added stigma of not having a husband or a father figure for their children. When Korean women have children, they have a difficult time reentering the job market, fill fewer management positions, and are passed over for promotions. Although Korea’s Ministry of Gender and Equality and Family is trying to fix this issue, the current president has said they may be getting rid of this organization. This leads to another gender inequality problem that gained notoriety during the most recent 2022 presidential election in Korea and became the fuel that has been added to the fire of the feminism vs anti-feminism debate. seriously compared to outcries before, such as the #MeToo movement. It ultimately changed the way that Korean society views illegal filming.

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²² Gunia, Amy. "Confronting the Traumatic Impact of South Korea's Spycam Problem on Women." *Time*, 7 Mar. 2022, time.com/6154837/open-shutters-south-korea-spycam-molka/. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

²³ Strother, Jason. "South Korea's #MeToo Movement Challenges Workplace Sexual Harassment." *Voanews*, 11 Nov. 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_south-koreas-metoo-movement-challenges-workplace-sexual-harassment/6179152.html Accessed 6 Mar. 2022.

another instance of a big issue of gender inequality that was taken to the street and then to the government, resulting in a positive change. While feminism in general is still seen as a word with negative connotations, these small wins are helping to clear the prejudice of thinking all feminism is radical feminism.

There are some social stigmas ingrained in society that women in Korea continue to face. These sorts of gender inequality issues will likely take longer than a few protests to tackle and resolve as it happened with the bathroom camera and after work office dinner harassment. For example, there is a huge social stigma in Korea against single mothers. Being a single mom affects Korean women in a multitude of ways. "Single moms are still forced into the shadows of society – ostracized by family members, discriminated against at work and all the while, trying to raise children without a network of support."²⁴ Not only do the families of these single mothers often cut ties, but they are also looked down upon at work. While working mothers in general are looked down upon for working instead of putting all their efforts and attention on their children, single mothers have the added stigma of not having a husband or a father figure for their children. When Korean women have children, they have a difficult time reentering the job market, fill fewer management positions, and are passed over for promotions.²⁵ Although Korea's Ministry of Gender and Equality and Family is trying to fix this issue, the current president has said they may be getting rid of this organization. This leads to another gender inequality problem that gained notoriety during the most recent 2022 presidential election in

²⁴ Hu, Elise. "South Korea's Single Moms Struggle to Remove a Social Stigma." *NPR*, 11 May 2015, www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/11/405622494/south-koreas-single-moms-struggle-to-remove-a-social-stigma. Accessed 6 Apr. 2022

²⁵ Draudt, Darcie. "The South Korean Election's Gender Conflict and the Future of Women Voters." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 Feb. 2022, www.cfr.org/blog/south-korean-elections-gender-conflict-and-future-women-voters. Accessed 12 Mar. 2022.

Korea and became the fuel that has been added to the fire of the feminism vs anti-feminism debate.

IV. Anti-Feminism in South Korea

During the most recent presidential election in Korea, current president Yoon Seokyeul said that he was going to “demolish” the MOGEF (Ministry of Gender Equality). While it can be argued that getting rid of this ministry might be justified because of the difficulty in making positive changes in society. However, Yoon specifically said that getting rid of this ministry was because it “treated men as potential criminals.” The mindset that Yoon has about regulations and ministries that help to bring more equality to women is shared by many men in Korea. What is unique to the Korean context is that this view is specifically shared by many younger men in their 20s. As observed from the graph below, the main population with anti-feminist views in Korea are men in their 20s.²⁶ The demographic of anti-feminists shows the newness of this movement and how it differs from other groups against feminism movements around the world.

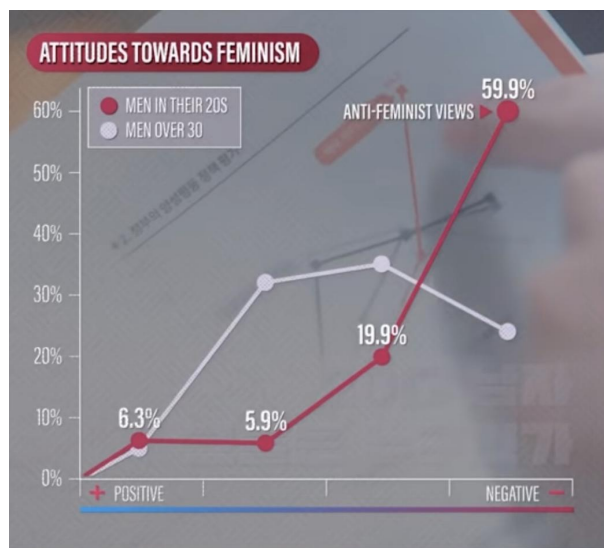


Figure 2: Attitudes Towards Feminism

²⁶ "From Military to Makeup: The Changing of Korean Male." *Youtube*, uploaded by Joi Lee, 10 Sept. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmYMGomeSic. Accessed 25 Feb. 2022.

There is a reason for this focus on gendered policies during this most recent election. Now elected President Yoon was tapping into the anti-feminist sentiment that many young men in their 20s have at the moment. One argument of anti-feminists is that they feel the government efforts of gender equality have been very disadvantageous to them and that there is a lot of preferential treatment towards women. After Yoon promised policies geared towards benefitting men and reducing the amount of government help that was given to women, he experienced a 6% boost in the polls after his pledge.²⁷ But politics and voting have not always been gender-skewed in Korea. Koreans have historically voted along the lines of ideology and region. But for the first time, younger voters have begun to split according to gender. Yoon continued to speak poorly about feminism and blamed it for the country's alarmingly low recent birth rates and even equated feminism with terrorism.²⁸ The graph below depicts the support for major political parties based on gender and age. On the top line are the votes for the People's Power party (Yoon's representative party) with overwhelming support from men between ages 18-29. The bottom charts show that very few women between ages 18-29 support Yoon and his policies.

The other ages all have varying results because they are still voting based on the old voting trends. The shift in the voting trends of younger people in Korea shows that the current war for gender equality is the biggest issue causing a lot of turmoil within the younger generation of Koreans.

²⁷ Draudt, Darcie. "The South Korean Election's Gender Conflict and the Future of Women Voters." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 Feb. 2022, www.cfr.org/blog/south-korean-elections-gender-conflict-and-future-women-voters. Accessed 12 Mar. 2022.

²⁸ Draudt, Darcie. "The South Korean Election's Gender Conflict and the Future of Women Voters." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 Feb. 2022, www.cfr.org/blog/south-korean-elections-gender-conflict-and-future-women-voters. Accessed 12 Mar. 2022.

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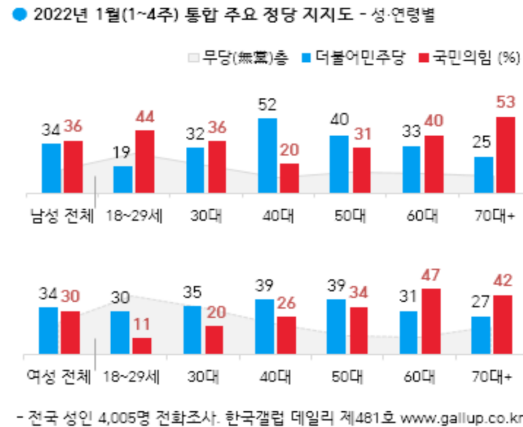


Figure 3: Voting poll based on gender and age

There are various reasons and arguments that anti-feminists in Korea have for their movement that distinguish them from other countries. One major reason is because of the compulsory military service that all men with Korean citizenship partake in. The main argument that men make is that it is unfair that only men are forced to do military service. Their reasoning for this is that while men serve in the military for a year and a half, women are able to keep moving on in their lives and get certifications and enter the workforce first. This freezes and limits the job opportunities for men when they return from the military and jump back into society and the workforce.²⁹ This leaves men at a disadvantage when it comes to jump starting their careers. Men can enlist from ages 18-30 so depending on when they decide to enlist, this mandatory service puts men behind a year and a half compared to their female counterparts. There are some anti-feminist men that also believe that women are seen as ungrateful and undeserving of the protection that men provide in the military.³⁰ So, rather than needing men's

²⁹“Idaenamui banpemi, hae-oesun eotteoke bona” 이대남의 반페미, 해외에선 어떻게 보나. Youtube, uploaded by TheJoongAng, 16 Feb. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWZEj3eGO0o. Accessed 1 Mar. 2023.

³⁰ "From Military to Makeup: The Changing of Korean Male." Youtube, uploaded by Joi Lee, 10 Sept. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmYMGomeSic. Accessed 25 Feb. 2022.

protection, women are seen as exploiting men for their service and taking advantage of being able to continue to get an education and work without having to serve in the military. This is an argument that anti-feminists have continued to use and have tried to take it to the government to make it so that women also have compulsory military service to make it fairer. So far there has been no plans or official rulings to changes such as that, but anti-feminists are still making sure that their voices are being heard and that women will not get preferential treatment in the Korean government.

Earlier I discussed how feminists can be scared of the stigma and backlash by labeling themselves as feminists. Many anti-feminists support the view that all feminists are radical feminists. A reason many anti-feminists think this way stems from 2016, with the launch of radical feminist websites. While these websites are considered some of the largest catalysts for jumpstarting the feminist movement in Korea, they were also very radical. Men would call women bad names online such as *kimchinyeo* (kimchi bitch). This insult is calling women selfish, vain, and sexually promiscuous. The radical feminist on these websites would retaliate using mirroring methods where they would also call men rude nicknames and slurs. Many men did not understand what crime they had done to deserve the treatment that they were getting online from these radical feminist websites. Because of this history, many anti-feminists perceive radical feminism as mainstream feminism.³¹ So, anti-feminists do not see feminist movements as moderate feminism that works towards gaining gender equality.

Kim Seungju, representative of an anti-feminist group, discussed the thoughts and feelings his group had towards feminism. He said that gender equality and feminism are

³¹ “Idaenamui banpemi, hae-oesun eotteoke bona” 이대남의 반페미, 해외에선 어떻게 보나. *Youtube*, uploaded by TheJoongAng, 16 Feb. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWZEj3eGO0o. Accessed 1 Mar. 2023.

completely different movements. He also explained that they feel very isolated in terms of feminism because feminism is akin to misandry.³² Because anti-feminists still associate feminism in general as being the same group and movement that was in the early days of radical feminist websites, they do not view the goal of the feminist movement as aligned with gender equality.

Many men in the anti-feminist group believe that gender equality has already been reached and are confused why feminists are still protesting and organizing events. There are many men's organizations that insist women are no longer a social minority and the government's support of them is reverse discrimination. There is this general sense of aggressive misogyny and distorted worship of supposed meritocracy about "fairness."³³ They feel that in the past it was men who had the higher ground and advantage over women. However, these days there is a level playing field between men and women.³⁴ The sudden shift in the social playing field was very jarring for men. To go from being on top to no longer having that advantage over women made a lot of men feel socially disadvantaged. Especially since feminism is understood by anti-feminists as the eradication of men's rights, there are a lot of anti-feminists who fear that even though both genders are on more of a level playing field now, what could happen when the feminists they know keep working and overtake men to the point where women will have the advantage. The fear and feeling of being threatened by feminists have led too many men—

³² "Idaenamui banpemi, hae-oesun eotteoke bona" 이대남의 반페미, 해외에선 어떻게 보나. *Youtube*, uploaded by TheJoongAng, 16 Feb. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWZEj3eGO0o. Accessed 1 Mar. 2023.

³³ "From Military to Makeup: The Changing of Korean Male." *Youtube*, uploaded by Joi Lee, 10 Sept. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmYMGomeSic. Accessed 25 Feb. 2022.

³⁴ "Idaenamui banpemi, hae-oesun eotteoke bona" 이대남의 반페미, 해외에선 어떻게 보나. *Youtube*, uploaded by TheJoongAng, 16 Feb. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWZEj3eGO0o. Accessed 1 Mar. 2023.

especially in their 20s— to look to anti-feminism to protect the rights of men and to preserve the sanctity of what they believe to be an already equally gendered society in Korea.

V. Conclusions

With a rich and deep history in Korea as well as very active anti-feminist groups, the future of Korea's feminist movement is looking a little unclear. When comparing the path to America's current state of gender equality to the gender inequality in Korea, there are similarities. However, Korea has various factors that differentiates them from America and thus could make them deviate from the path to the level of gender equality America has achieved.

The first factor that could shape the future of Korean feminism is the history of Korea. Unlike America, Korea has a much longer history that has a huge effect on the makeup of Korean society and culture. It is a lot harder to change something when it is so embedded into society. Whereas America is a much newer country and the culture that was first in America was brought over from various countries, so it was much easier to try and change those older values that brought about gender inequality. With religions such as Confucianism still being so integrated into Korean society it will be hard for women to rid themselves of the label and role that talks about women serving the husband and being primary caretakers of the children. Even though that is not a literal law in Korea the sentiment is still there because of the strong influence of Confucianism. There are also newer historical events such as the rapid growth of the Korean economy that will take a long time to recover from since the main focus at that time had been to boost the economy rather than focus on how social aspects could evolve alongside the economy. Due to these historical factors in Korea, it appears to have slowed down the path to gender equality. This gives an explanation as to how America is further along in this process, since

Korea's historical factors have withheld feminists from making a lot of progress in closing the gender inequality gap.

Another explanation is that, even though American and Korean feminism are following very similar paths to reach gender equality, Korean feminists are still behind because of the anti-feminist groups in Korea. American feminists have had their fair share of dealing with anti-feminist groups and dealing with the arguments that were made, but Korean anti-feminists are different compared to other anti-feminist groups. With the meaning of what a feminist is still being misconstrued, there will continue to be many debates between the feminist and anti-feminist groups because one group is saying they are working towards gender equality and the other does not. Also, the political field changing to reflect these gender wars shows that the debates between the two groups have attracted national interest. Gendered policies being promised and made by candidates and government officials continues a back-and-forth dialogue between Korean feminists and anti-feminists that is still so new that it will take a while to resolve.

Based on my observations and studies of these various factors, feminism in Korea will continue to be able to grow but not without some resistance. It is possible for Korean feminism to continue along the same path that American feminism has developed but due to the state of the historical, political, and social factors, it will take Korea a lot longer to catch up to where gender equality in America is.

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