UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Numerous faces of feminism and their meaning in contemporary South Korea through the lens of the country's young adults

Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science

Master's Thesis

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September 2023

Turku

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Subject: Social Sciences
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Title: Numerous faces of feminism and their meaning in contemporary South Korea through the lens of the country's young adults
Supervisor: PhD Sabine Burghart
Number of pages: 139 pages
Date: September 2023

Abstract

Beginning with contextualizing and historicizing South Korean feminism, this work aims to provide an inclusive perspective that recognizes numerous social, political, as well as economic conditions that have influenced the feminist resurgence in contemporary South Korea, but also the increasing backlash it has been recently receiving there. Further, the research continues by introducing the diverse forms of contemporary feminist activism in the country, focusing the examination on several of the most influential and publicized ones. In addition to the wide range of previously conducted studies on the subject, several secondary quantitative data sources, such as surveys, are used to thoroughly demonstrate the currently prevailing trends and phenomena. Finally, relying primarily on qualitative data in the form of seven semi-structured interviews with young South Koreans, the research explores the meanings, personal experiences, and attitudinal orientations, as well as ultimately, the feminist identity or lack thereof, as expressed by this group of interviewees. The study concludes that the major impediment to the endorsement of the feminist identity of its participants seems to be the negative cultural stereotypes attributed to the country's feminism that either make individuals reluctant to manifest such a label or influence their complete rejection of this ideology as harmful and deviant. The difference between the two orientations can be potentially associated with the experiences of gender discrimination of both the participants themselves and of people in their social environment, as well as their perception of the nature of the existing inequalities as an either structural, systemic, and collective social problem or as a highly individual, unshared incidents.

Key words: feminism, South Korea, attitudes towards feminism, feminist identity, feminist resurgence

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1 Introduction

(South) Korean feminism has come a long way, from its beginning that is dating back to the period of Japanese occupation when it was a part of the national liberation movement, through the partition of the Korean Peninsula, followed by rapid modernization of the country under the autocratic regime, the withdrawal of the military rule and the democratization period that activated civil society movements, and finally, to the 21st century that brought new forms of interaction popularized by the spread of the Internet, particularly various social media.

Nonetheless, though feminist discourse has marked its presence in vibrant online debates, poured out into the streets in the forms of various demonstrations and initiatives, culminating with the 2018 #MeToo movement, as well as has gradually become more prominent in popular media, the controversies that the term "feminism" entails, impose a stigma on anyone that would express support for or agreement with its claims. As noticed by Tan R. (2019), women's cautious disclaimer "I'm not a feminist, but…." that became an extremely frequent discursive practice used to open conversations on various, more or less contentious topics, can serve as a notable example of this alarming trend (2019, 32).

Simultaneously, with gradual attempts to shift the traditional gender dynamics towards more egalitarian relations, South Korean society has been slowly dismantling the patriarchal socio-cultural schemes, marked, for instance by the "gendered privileges" that belonged to older Korean males and that have currently started to be denied to the younger generation (Tan R. 2019, 33). Growing dissatisfaction with life, particularly frustration with current economic woes as well as bitterness over the country's discriminatory military conscription law, has made some younger Korean males feel disadvantaged, leading to their strong resentment towards feminism, which is believed to promote reverse discrimination and even hatred for men. The growth of feminist groups who, in order to draw attention to the persisting problems of sexism and misogyny, turned to dubious practices dubbed "mirroring," has only exacerbated the already severe animosities. At the center of this polarized conflict, there are two controversial groups with completely divergent views, representing the extreme ends of left- and right-wing ideologies. As tensions rise, the emergence of what has been labeled a "gender war" may suggest a key moment for South Korean society (Kim J. 2023, 183). Moreover, after the March 2022 presidential election and the victory of a conservative People's Power Party candidate, who has skillfully taken advantage of the country's anti-feminist climate in his campaign, the future of the gender equality question has stirred even

more controversies, occupying headlines of many domestic and international news stories (Tan R. 2019).

As the previously-mentioned issues have been gaining more and more importance, a vast number of reports and surveys, mostly based on quantitative data, tried to examine what are the current attitudes towards feminism (Korean Women's Development Institute 2018; Realmeter 2018; Park, Hankook Ilbo 2021). Yet arguably, there is still a lack of qualitative studies providing a deeper analysis of individuals' opinions and the reasons behind them that would allow us to look at the current situation in a slightly new light.

Therefore, in my research, I intend to focus on the attitudes of the young generation of Korean men and women (aged 18 to 30) towards various aspects of feminism, with an emphasis on the most recent events and developments but also examine in-depth their perspectives on the current status of gender equality in their country as well as the reasons behind them. Given the polarized nature of the discourses on feminism/gender equality in South Korea as well as the recent re-emergence of the conservatives as the ruling party and the relative importance of anti-feminist backlash during the presidential campaign, I would like to concentrate on people's perception of the policies and major events related to gender equality and feminism during the Moon Jae-in's administration and the period of power transition to the newly elected president Yoon Suk-yeol. The thesis' timeframe will cover the period from 2015 till 2023, since the rise of feminist movements and the creation of new developments such as online activism have emerged as well as the media discourse and public awareness of the problem have significantly increased during that time. Still, in this work, I find it relevant to also contextualize and historicize South Korean feminism with an aim to provide a more inclusive perspective in terms of social, political, as well as economic conditions that have influenced the feminist resurgence in its current form but also the increasing backlash it has been receiving. Therefore, the research will be built on a vast amount of existing literature concerning discourses on feminism in universal and regional perspectives as well as other relevant concepts, among others gender equality, misogyny, and backlash while also giving consideration to contextual variables, such as the history of feminism in the country, current socio-economic situation, changing political forces being in power, and the internet expansion.[1]

[1] The excerpt was submitted by the author to Research Seminar EAST0102 as a part of the Research Plan in the 2021/2022 academic year.

2 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I begin my research by looking into the divergent and multi-faced definitions of feminism, both from the Western and Asian perspectives, as well as examining one of the most fundamental questions in feminist studies, namely how gender equality can be understood and pursued. Following that, I look into literature focused specifically on South Korean feminism in the 21st century, its characteristics and changes that it has undergone, as well as the reactions of the Korean society that emerged as a reaction to it. Together, all the selected sources can serve as a solid background for researching the area of my interest.

2.1 Central concepts

2.1.1 Gender equality

In the simplest terms, gender equality (also gender egalitarianism or gender parity) can be defined as a condition or state of being treated the same, especially when it comes to legal rights and social standing, but as it turns out, such a definition, although at first glance sufficient, has become the subject of a long-lasting debate in research on gender and feminism. It has also remained a moot point among women themselves, who have struggled for equality both in the past and today. Does achieving equality require equality of chances or does it mean equality of results? Does it mean that women should conform to men's lifestyles and adopt men's norms and values? By what standard should the attainment of gender equality be evaluated? These are just some of the questions that emerge in the discourse on gender equality that researchers struggle to answer unambiguously (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 37-8).

However, the central question of both gender and feminist studies is whether the pursuit of equality entails treating women the same as men, regardless of their differences, or maybe should it take into account and even emphasize the differences between genders. As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan illustrate in their book *Fifty key concepts in gender studies*, this question gave rise to a so-called “equality vs. difference” debate, in which three different perspectives on how gender equality should be understood and striven for, can be distinguished (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004).

The first of them, the perspective of “strict” equality, argues that it is necessary to grant women the same rights and privileges as men, by identifying areas of discrimination and

elevating them through i.e., legal reforms (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 38). Such an approach can be found, for instance, in the works by Wendy W. Williams, an American scholar of gender and law. In the article *The Equality Crisis: Some Reflections on Culture*, *Courts and Feminism* focusing on the gender-based classification practices by the American Court, Williams brings up a couple of general reflections on the most challenging issues in the gender equality debate, which include, among others, females in military combat roles (1992). As she claims, exempting females from military roles and conscription, as implying special treatment for women that consequently may serve as a justification for the state to recognize and discriminate women as different from men in other ways, works for their disadvantage and therefore should be abandoned (Williams 1992, 152). Moreover, also in regard to the so-called double burden of balancing paid work with household and child-care responsibilities that women often experience, Anne Phillips, a professor of political and gender theory, argues for "strict equality" between genders. She emphasizes that as long as an unequal allocation of domestic and caring work between men and women dominates the reality of females around the world, also gender parity in the labor market cannot be attained (Phillips 1997, 32). Therefore, in the view of the strict equality approach advocates', gender constitutes an attribute that should be considered irrelevant in the distribution of social rights, responsibilities, or values. Nevertheless, its emphasis on complete neutrality in terms of gender, even androgyny, may result in unhealthy assimilatory practices, imposing the dominant male norms, lifestyles, and patterns of behavior on women whose norms, lifestyles, and patterns of behavior are in turn admitted to being inferior to those of men.

Contrary to gender neutrality suggested by the first approach, the "difference perspective" puts an emphasis on the necessity to acknowledge and appreciate how men and women differ from each other. Its supporters, such as Maria Recalde, Linda Babcock, and Lise Vesterlund (2017) criticize "rigid" equality, which assumes masculinity is the base value that women must strive for and against which they are judged, and in which femininity is seen as an impediment to equality. An example of such a gender-differentiated perception of equality, arguing for the societal valorization of what is considered to be feminine qualities and values, is found in the concept of "maternal thinking" coined by Sara Ruddick (1995, *xi*). Ruddick argues that by reinforcing the political role of women as mothers, as well as by enhancing and projecting mothering practices[2] of care and nurturance and values connected with them into

[2] It is important to note that in Ruddick's conception, mothering should not be understood in its biological terms but rather as a practice ingrained in the social context.

the political world, an effective framework that supports more peaceful relations at both personal, as well as international level, can be established (Ruddick 1995, xi). However, it should be also acknowledged that overemphasizing socio-cultural, bodily, or behavioral gender differences in some cases can turn out to be precarious, serving as a rationalization for the preservation of discriminatory practices, certain harmful stereotypes, and persistent social inequalities.

The third perspective, being an attempt at a syncretic approach to the concept of equality, critically refers to the dichotomous logic represented in the aforementioned perspectives as distorting and limiting. “Diversity perspective” questions the assumption that equality and difference are mutually exclusive, provided that equality is not understood as sameness. The theorists of this approach propose to deconstruct and go beyond this dichotomy, arguing that the very concept of equality and its strength is based on the assumption of diversity, which should be equally valued and respected. The relationship between equality and difference, based on respect and mutual affirmation can be seen, for instance, between some ethnically and culturally different collectives, as explored by Iris Marion Young. For Young, the pursuit of equality by eliminating all differences between those socio-culturally divergent groups is not only undesirable but also unrealistic (Young 1990). Both Young's work and the approach to equality that emphasizes diversity are often criticized, however, it seems like particularly these attempts to go beyond the simple dichotomy of “equality vs. difference” and to reconceptualize the notion of equality itself, have been the most noticeable in feminist studies in the 21st century.

Thus, the concept of “difference” in reference to the discrimination of women as compared to men has been challenged and recently reconstructed, given a distinctive meaning – the “differences” between females themselves. Denouncing the pretense of homogeneity of women’s experiences of inequality has gradually changed the feminist perceptions on the existence of “sisterhood” – an idea that gender can unite females above all other “differences” – and increasingly gave significance to identity politics that acknowledges one’s class, ethnicity, age, sexual identity, etc. as major determinants of women’s lives experiences (Letherby 2003, 50).

2.1.2 Feminism

All concepts and ideas as well as particular meanings and significance we attach to them naturally evolve over time, along with the continuous process of societal development,

determined by i.e., historical, cultural, and political circumstances. Therefore, as emphasized in the article *Forging Feminist Identity in an International Movement: A Collective Identity Approach to Twentieth-Century Feminism* by Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, also feminism, remaining a contested term both historically and geographically, as well as comprising its theoretical as well as normative variation, seemingly has not developed one simple definition (Rupp and Taylor 1999, 363). Nevertheless, despite the evident discrepancies and its multi-faceted nature, the common ground for all feminist ideologies is the recognition of women being disadvantaged and discriminated group. As Patricia Yancey Martin states in *Rethinking Feminist Organizations* (1990), since the oppression of women is entrenched in social arrangements, its elevation requires an alternation of the social, economic, and political systems. She also stresses the importance of the commitment of feminism to common values such as "[…] interpersonal relationships; empowerment and personal development; building of self-esteem; promotion of enhanced knowledge, skills, and political awareness; personal autonomy" (Martin 1990, 192-3).

A similar approach can be found in the works by June Hannam, for instance in her monograph *Feminism*, where she highlights that when looking at feminism in its broader spectrum, an elusive character of a uniform definition becomes indisputable. However, similarly to Martin, Hannam indicates three common features that characterize this ideology, namely: "a recognition of power imbalances between genders, with women in subordinate roles to men; a belief that the women's condition is socially constructed and therefore can be changed" as well as "an emphasis on female autonomy" (Hannam 2007, 4).

Therefore, although it can be claimed that feminism has been generally concerned with the recognition of the existence of inequalities between genders and the understanding of reasons behind them, there is no compliance on the causes nor remedies for this subordinate position of females and thus no unified, monolithic feminist agenda. Further, as emphasized by Abbott and Wallace (1997) there is even no agreement on how to define what a female is in the first place (in Letherby 2003, 4) as the notion of a woman has been long acknowledged to be considerably diverse and differentiated. Thus, when taking into account the diversity of how women have been positioned in regard to culture, history, as well as class, and having in mind that the concept of gender itself, being a discursive product of a kind, is also not simply binary, it is quite problematic to unreflectively rely on this basic categorization. In other words, feminism, as a diversified theoretical field and social movement, is grounded in various perspectives and practices that advocate the interests of women, while recognizing the

multitude of differences among them (DeVault and Gross 2012). While the essential objective of feminism has been claimed to be persistent over time, still, the values that we claim to comprise one's feminist consciousness or identification diverge substantially depending on historical, political, and cultural contexts (hooks 1984[3]; Sigel and Calogero 2021, 248). Therefore, following the multiracial feminist theory, as the experiences and lives of individuals are inevitably influenced by the numerous social statuses they uphold, it may in turn suggest that the understanding of feminism considerably diverges across cultures and societies as well as that also the feminist identity can be manifested quite differently in various contexts (Liu and Zheng 2019, 3).

2.1.3 Intersectionality in feminism

Here, it is also crucial to bring forward the concept of intersectionality that has become an essential part of feminism, both in its theory and research, providing an indispensable conceptual approach challenging homogeneity and embracing difference. The term, first introduced to express the "layered prejudices" (Crenshaw 2005), that the Afro-American female community experiences in relation to both their gender and race, was then extended to include a variety of minorities' experiences, recognizing that the relation between oppression and privilege is qualitatively diverse and should be regarded as different when compared to each other (Sigel and Calogero 2021, 248).

By pointing out the existing relations between different categories of identity such as nationality, culture, class, age, sexuality, religion, disability, in addition to gender, which intertwine with structures of inequality, intersectionality provides a comprehensive and inclusive lens for every feminist research (Thornton Dill and Kohlman 2012; Letherby 2003, 50). It also disproves the common assumption that claims a uniformity of women's experiences of gender discrimination and oppression, centering its analysis on the differences of experiences that are shaped as well as reinforced by a multitude of factors and thus the need for their thorough examination (Thornton Dill and Kohlman 2012). Furthermore, by examining multiple different dimensions of identity in relation to divergent systems of power, the intersectional approach enables to largely avoid the essentialization of individual's

[3] bell hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins, deliberately chose her pen name to be spelled in lowercase with an intention to prevent it from overshadowing the ideas and message of her writing. With respect to this decision, I followed this spelling in my work. For more see for instance: McGrady C. (2021). Why bell hooks didn't capitalize her name. *The Washington Post*. December 15. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/12/15/bell-hooks-real-name. Accessed September 18, 2023.

experiences (Bhavnani and Talcott 2012). In feminist studies, the intersectional mindset has enabled to acknowledge and embrace the uniqueness of every woman's or nonheteronormative people's relationship and attitudes towards feminism, which remains largely influenced by their personal experiences related to transphobia, homophobia, racism, ableism, and other social prejudice including, for instance, the bias towards females engaged in sex-work (Sigel and Calogero 2021, 248). Thus, as emphasized by Kim J.-S. (2021), it can be argued that an intersectional lens is useful if not necessary to thoroughly understand the role of gender and feminism in Korean society in terms of their cultural, social, political, and economic reverberations (2021, 93).

2.1.4 Feminist epistemology

Although there are different approaches to feminist epistemology, the one most commonly emphasized by contemporary feminist academia has been largely focused around the notion of essentialism and the necessity of its avoidance (McHugh 2020, 208; DeVault and Gross 2012). The perception of gender as biological, and gendered behaviors as universally prescribed and residing within women as inherent characteristics has been deemed inherently problematic as resulting in the perception of women apart from the cultural and socio-political contexts they are embedded in. Yet, by pointing out that gender and gender-based oppression are influenced by different processes and factors, including socialization, culture, social roles, policies, etc., as well as highlighting the consequent complexity and wide range of women's experiences has enabled to reduce or even eradicate the problems of essentialization. Therefore, as emphasized by Gergen (1988) and repeated by McHugh (2020), it is crucial to acknowledge and respect the "social embeddedness" of every research participant's lives, experiences, and opinions (cited in McHugh 2020, 208). Moreover, as claimed by Koertge (2012) and DeVault and Gross (2012), the notion of a situated knowledge – understanding the construction of knowledge as a product that is both a reflection of the vision of a particular subject as well as integral part of a specific research – constitutes another essential feature of feminist epistemology.

2.1.5 Western vs. Asian feminism

There is no doubt that feminist ideas do not emerge and operate in a vacuum, but rather they exist and engage in the socio-political framework of the contemporaneous world that, as a result, influences the creation of its nature which is relatively diversified in time and place.

However, in today's globalized world, the worldwide scope and implications of feminism also cannot be ignored. Therefore, the question of how feminism and the women's movements around the globe should be perceived, theorized, as well as examined constantly remains a contentious issue among feminist scholars both within Asian and Western academia (Sigel and Calogero 2021, 249).

In *The Challenge of Local Feminisms* (1995) Amrita Basu points out three perspectives, or "tendencies" as she calls them, that can be identified in the feminist literature since the 1980s. Chilia Bulbeck uses them as a basis for her reflection on the trends in the Western vs. Asian feminism debate, which can help to look at the problem from different viewpoints (Bullbeck 2008).

The first one, with an underlying assumption of a "commonality in the forms of [women's] oppression and activism worldwide," based on a belief that in the globalized world common experiences produce common worldviews, is referred to as a universalist approach (Bulbeck 2009, 11). Such a perspective can be found, among others, in the anthology *Sisterhood is Global* (1984) edited by Robin Morgan which, since its publishing, became considered a classic of feminist literature. Nevertheless, as Bulbeck notices, it has been also heavily criticized as problematically essentialist and, since frequently proposed by Western scholars, also as assuming a superiority of Western experiences and assumptions by deeming them the universal ones.

A second tendency, based on a dichotomous and hermetic separation between "the West" and "the East," is referred to as a dualist approach. Although it admits the existence of different contexts and thus divergent experiences of feminism, its critics argue that by denoting the world's dichotomy that is intrinsically characterized by a hierarchy of power, it positions the "civilized West" above the "Orientals" or "barbaric East" (Bulbeck 2009, 7). Conceptualizing feminism and women's movements (but also gender equality) as an exclusive product of Western-style modernization and industrialization implies the necessity of adopting Western ideas and norms so that a similar level of gender egalitarianism could be achieved also in the Asian context. Moreover, it implicitly assumes the existence of Asia as some kind of a united concept, with Asian states comprising "one nation", often in relation to the ubiquitous but extremely ambiguous idea of common Asian values (Bulbeck 2009, 10). However, the diversity of this region, with a huge variety of religions, languages, political regimes, and

socio-economic contexts, essentially means that no such thing as a quintessential Asia or 'Asian woman' should or can be recognized.

The third approach postulates the acknowledgment of an utterly unique character of every feminist practice all around the world and thus argues for perceiving and examining women's movement in relative isolation (Bulbeck 2009, 11). Contrary to the universalist perspective that ignores some crucial differences in history and culture, the particularistic approach assumes that feminism and gender relations in the so-called Third World or anywhere in Asia should not be measured or judged upon by a western standard because all women's movements are a product of particular, local circumstances.

Adding to this debate, Chen Chao-ju[4] in her article *The Difference that Differences Make: Asian Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, points out the existence of another, arguably the most useful, approach, that can serve as a middle ground between the contested discussion on commonalities vs. particularities, namely the differentiated universalism, which "calls for inclusion of differences as well as universal moral commitment" (Chen 2007, 9). Therefore, the politics of difference but solidarity, that intertwines specific local ideas as well as historical context, together with the influence of international trends, should create a base for Asian feminism in the contemporary transnational world. Moreover, because Asian countries' feminist theories have been developed in a process of (at least partial) re-thinking and alternation of Western feminist thought, Ellen Carol DuBois argues that Asian feminisms' intellectual content can be to some extent deemed as transnationally created (cited in Chen 2007, 10).

2.1.6 Feminism and its meanings in South Korea

As highlighted by Kim Eun-shil (2010), the frame of feminist studies in South Korea has greatly evolved throughout the years, having its origins in the context of the country's modernization and industrialization under authoritarian rule, to contemporary highly globalized, modernized, and democratized environment in what has been called a glocal era.[5] First introduced through largely Western theoretical frameworks, mostly centered around the United Nations' agenda serving as a reference, Korean Women's and Feminist Studies

[4] All Korean as well as Chinese names that appear in this work has been written using these countries' naming arrangement conventions, that is family name followed by personal name.
[5] Glocal refers to an interconnection and integration of both global and local considerations. Oxford References (2023). Glocal. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810105005976. Accessed May 29, 2023.

managed to emerge as a critical discourse that aimed to challenge and deconstruct the patriarchal cultural traits rooted in the country's society.

Yet, following that, the debate on tradition versus modernity as well as particularity versus universality of feminist studies and its agenda in Korea has emerged, prompting questions about the implications of each in the globalized, transnational world. With the increasing critique focused particularly around the accusations concerning the country's feminism reproducing and inflicting Western value systems, Korean feminist scholars were forced to call into question what should be perceived as truly "Korean" and what as "Western," as well as what is still "traditional" and what is already "modern." Although the problematization of feminist knowledge along the axis of Western/universal and Korean/particular specifically characterized Korean Women's Studies until the 1990s, its influence can be witnessed also today (Kim E.S. 2010, 9-10). Thus, despite having a long history of advocating for women's rights as well as successfully managing to develop a distinctive feminist practice, adapting to its own cultural and socio-political circumstances, Korean feminism has remained pejoratively regarded as connected to Western culture, as well as representing anti-family or even anti-men attitudes (Seo and Choi 2020, 371, 391).

Under these circumstances and with the rapidly developing local economies of East and South-East Asia, the multicultural, Asian feminist solidarity has emerged, reaching beyond the context of the particularity of a nation-state, yet alternative and challenging towards the Western, allegedly universal, feminist frame. The introduction of "Asia" in Korean feminist scholarly discourse came to be interpreted as a new context in which Korean women's experiences can be discussed and examined. Notably, this change of perspective brought about the emergence of new, alternative ways of perceiving Asian females as victims of conservative social conventions and markers of tradition in those countries' societies, endorsed by some Western feminist academia. Nevertheless, the debate on what kinds of spatial as well as temporal considerations are the most relevant in regard to the epistemic framework in the Korean Women's and Feminist studies prevails to this day (Kim E.S. 2010, 24-25).

2.1.7 Studying Korean Feminism in the 21st century

The second decade of the 21st century has been marked with an astonishing amount of feminist narratives challenging patriarchal hegemony becoming the center of the public

debate, owing to feminist rallies, media coverage, online campaigns, and, primarily, the usage of social media platforms. Still, the rise of feminist movements has met with an extreme backlash, particularly from young Korean men, resulting in the emergence of a divided and polarized society (Seo and Choi 2020, 371, 391). Thus, divergent perspectives on feminism, women's activism, and feminist counter-movements in the South Korean context have naturally become the subject of an extended number or studies, many of which were written in the English language, constituting a valuable source for researchers around the world.

A solid starting point for the examination of South Korean feminism can be found in the special issue of the Journal of Asian Sociology edited by Seo Jung-min and Choi Seo-young titled *Why Korean Feminism?* The issue traces back the origins of what the authors call a "feminism reboot" in 2015, identifies the existing narratives and trajectories, as well as summarizes the most significant events, including the rise of the #MeToo movement, "spycam" incidents and the protest that followed it, as well as the emergence of "escape the corset" movement. Moreover, as feminist discourses are certainly not free from their flaws, apart from the new possibilities, the authors determine the problems and struggles that feminism and feminists in Korea have been encountering (Seo and Choi 2020, 371, 390).

Taking a historical approach, Jung Kyung-ja in her book *Practicing Feminism in South Korea*: *The women's movement against sexual violence* points out a significant shift in the strategy and direction of the South Korean women's movement that was connected to the increasing awareness of sexual violence on women between the late 1980s and early 1990s. Jung explores how and why anti-sexual violence activism emerged as a part of feminist practice and explores how it has changed together with the altering socio-political context (Jung 2014, 1,8).

The discussion on the compatibility or lack thereof of feminism, with its strive for gender egalitarianism, and traditional Korean Confucianism advocating patriarchy has been considered one of the most crucial ones in Korean feminism. Koh Eun-kang in *Gender issues and Confucian scriptures: Is Confucianism incompatible with gender equality in South Korea?* presents an in-depth analysis centered on this debate, yet interesting focusing her examination on the Confucian scriptures as well as the Neo-Confucian text for women's education of the Joseon dynasty, which, in her view, constitute an ultimate source of Confucian philosophical approach in Korea. Attributing the prevailing subordination of women and male dominance in contemporary Korean society to the Confucian influences was

a common conviction shared by many Korean feminists of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. Yet, this popular belief was, at least partly, proven wrong by Koh, as her analysis of Confucian scriptures revealed the source of gender inequalities to largely be the manipulated interpretation of this ideology inflicted by the supporters of patriarchal social order, rather than the ideas included in the scriptures themselves (Koh 2008, 345-6, 361).

A different focus can be found in the article *Online Misogyny: A Challenge for Digital Feminism?* by Kim Barker and Olga Jurasz. The researchers analyze the Internet as a space of online violence, verbal abuse, and extreme misogyny in South Korea that serves as an impediment to female equal and free participation in the public, socio-political life as well as examine what implications these phenomena have on the digital feminism and the Korean women themselves (Barker and Jurasz 2019, 1-2).

In *Troll Feminism: The Rise of Popular Feminism in South Korea* Jeong Eui-sol also highlights the new form of popular feminist practice in South Korea that emerged in cyberspace but focuses her work on the particular phenomena of "troll feminism" as she terms it, that manifests itself in the form of "man-hating" comments posted online practiced by certain activist groups, such as Megalia and Womad. (Jeong 2020) In her paper, Jeong provides an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, including a contextual background of the current "gender war" as she calls it, and introduces a vast amount of useful neologisms such as *mirroring* that is used to express a strategy of imitating the hostile and aggressive acts of trolling and women-hating insults online in order to confront the pervasive misogyny in the cyberspace (Jeong 2020, 8); or *feminist in hell Chosŏn* that refers to the social reality marked with contradictions and self-abnegation experienced by young Korean women (Jeong 2020, 29).

The key importance of the aforementioned mirroring strategy for the young feminist groups as well as the evaluation of its effects, which are considered to be rather ambiguous, are the focus of the article by Kim Young-mi titled *Mirroring misogyny in Hell Chosŏn. Megalia, Womad, and Korea's feminism in the age of digital populism* (Kim Y-M. 2021). As Kim devotes a part of her work to an examination of the "dialectical relationship" (2021, 103) between the two most radical populist feminist groups and a far-right, anti-feminist online community called Ilbe, the article constitutes an interesting insight into the dynamics between the pervasive misogyny and a new aggressive digital feminism in contemporary Korean society (Kim Y-M. 2021, 101-104).

Another interesting aspect that has recently received increased attention is related to the beauty ideals and practices that started to be perceived as markers of social oppression of women and their overall status in South Korean society, ultimately becoming a part of the feminist agenda in 2018 under the name of "the escape the corset" movement. In response to the extremely rigid beauty standards imposed on Korean women, their pervasive sexual objectification, as well as the immense amount of societal pressure associated with maintaining a feminine look, the resistance movement has taken a form of protests involving the acts of destroying make-up products or cutting of long hair, both perceived as the symbols of oppressive femininity. In the article *Throwing off the Corset: A Contemporary History of the Beauty Resistance Movement in South Korea,* Park Hye-jung explains the historical, social, and cultural context in which this resistance campaign emerged, how it has operated in the era of digital feminism as well as examines the online materials and interviews with Korean women that associate themselves with the movement (Park 2020, 1-5).

A completely different approach can be found in the work by Xiao Feng *Research on the Visual Expression of Feminism: An Approach of Gentle Expression of Feminism in South Korea,* in which the author, taking a comparative approach, examines the visual manifestations of feminism in South Korea and selected Western countries, focusing on the so-called branding practices and the reaction of the Korean society in regard to the misunderstandings surrounding feminism in this country as well as some possible remedies that could improve the way feminism is expressed which could be successfully borrowed from the West (Xiao 2019, *i*).

With the abundance of approaches that have been undertaken on the topic of broadly understood feminism in South Korea, the one that I decided to take under examination – namely the attitudes towards feminism as perceived by young Korean adults – seems to be quite timely and worthwhile with regard to the current socio-political circumstances in the country but also concerning more global phenomena such as the emergence of post-feminist beliefs claiming the redundancy of feminism. Nevertheless, the wide range of previous studies taking diverse approaches and raising a variety of questions on the subject undoubtedly served as a meaningful tool that guided my own research.

2.1.8 Studying people's attitudes on feminism

The issues surrounding differing interpretations of gender equality as well as divergent opinions on feminist ideology held by individuals became a topic of scholarly attention worldwide, but particularly in the United States, in the late 1970s. Though recently, voices claiming the emergence of the post-feminist era which supposedly entails the redundancy of feminism have raised concerns within the feminist academia, research focusing on those issues has been continuously conducted in an attempt to thoroughly understand their complexities (Anderson 2015). Importantly, many studies that address the topic of widely understood feminist identity among ordinary people, have been consistently making a distinction between those who identify as feminists and those who reject feminist ideology (McCabe 2005). Due to the nature of my study and the overall complexity and variety of approaches taken by other researchers, the theorization of this so-called labeling problem should be given careful consideration.

As emphasized by Duncan (2010), in the existing literature, feminist self-identification has been often theorized and operationalized as an "all-or-nothing" type of construct. This perspective, although undoubtedly offering an advantage of clearly defined groups, neglects opinions of those whose feminist consciousness may be more ambiguous as being, for instance, in the ongoing process of formation, which is frequently true in the case of the younger generations (Duncan 2010). Moreover, by examining a limited set of gender-related attitudes, previous, mostly quantitative research, had a tendency to either underestimate or overestimate the role of feminist self-identification in connection with gender-equality-related attitudes.

Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, as noticed by McCabe (2005), Duncan (2010), as well as Houvouras and Carter (2008), a notable disconnect between feminist self-identification and attitudes on gender-equality-related topics (also called a feminist identity gap) has been found, further giving attention to the problematic nature of clear-cut labels in quantitative studies as well as implying a need for further research. Unsurprisingly, not everyone understands feminism as a belief in equal opportunities for both genders to participate in the greater society and there are many popular misconceptions about the term. For instance, as the study of American college students' attitudes towards feminism conducted by Houvouras and Carter (2008) revealed, students identified as non-feminist "were more inclined to identify a feminist as one who favors female superiority, dislikes men,

discriminates based on gender, has unfavorable personal qualities, and is lesbian or butch" (2008, 234). Moreover, they were also more inclined to use this definition (indicating negative, highly radical, and extremely marginal forms of feminism) to justify their opposition to the ideology. Similarly, the results of a recent study by Carrino, E.A., Bryen, C.P., Maheux, A.J. *et al.* (2022), examining multiple aspects and ways in which American adolescents conceptualize feminism, brought about analogous conclusions.

As the explanations of the discrepancies between high and low levels of expressed support for feminism and their relation with gender-equality attitudes vary from study to study, in this sense, identifying thoroughly the reasons for such gaps in the context of South Korea, even on a very small scale, may turn out to be valuable, as no qualitative studies focusing on the country and written in English have been conducted in recent years.[6]

2.2 Methodology and research objectives

2.2.1 Methodology

Numerous previous studies on feminism tend to derive from an approach that in the field's literature has been often referred to as "feminist methodology" (Letherby 2003; Hesse-Biber 2012). Despite the lack of a coherent and comprehensive definition, the value of this approach lies in its emphasis on the context in which the research is produced, the fundamentality of openness and respect for its participants, as well as the recognition of a subjective yet inherent involvement of the social researcher in the study they conduct. Considering that no researcher is a fully autonomous being who is able to separate themselves from the social environment they are situated in, also their work should be considered as a product that to some extent reflects this relation (Letherby 2003, 6-8). Further, this research attempts to follow the so-called "feminist objectivity" as asserted by Haraway (1988), Bhavnani (1993), and repeated by Hesse-Biber (2012), which can be understood as the "situated knowledges," implying that everything we know and consider a truth should be perceived as "[...] subjective, partial, situated, power imbued, and relational" (Haraway 1988). Therefore, I consider the way in which individuals articulate their experiences as influenced and conditioned by particular circumstances, norms, values, and power relations, all constituting people's social realities.

[6] The excerpt was submitted by the author to Research Seminar EAST0102 as a part of the Research Plan in the academic year 2021/2022.

Having that in mind, utilizing constructionism as the underlying paradigm that would allow for the interpretation of qualitative data obtained during interviews, while bearing in mind the larger socio-cultural context, seems well-justified by the character of this research project. Particularly, similarly to Hook (2016) and Thomas (2002), my objective is to examine how feminist and non-feminist identities of young Korean adults are expressed in relation to different topics and circumstances: both when sharing their beliefs about gender equality and feminism directly, and when discussing more loosely related issues. However, as the study's participants were asked to talk about their experiences, opinions, judgments, as well as understandings of certain issues, following Hook (2016) and her study of American feminist and non-feminist K-drama fans, I acknowledge that what people express in words might not necessarily represent their completely fixed ideas about certain issues nor the total truths about their process of thinking and understanding, might be necessary. As Kitzinger, an advocate of constructionist analysis, highlights:

> Constructionism… disputes the possibility of uncovering 'facts', 'realities', or 'truths' behind the talk, and treats as inappropriate any attempt to vet what people say for its 'accuracy', 'reliability', or 'validity' – thereby sidestepping altogether the positivist problems raised… From this perspective, what [people] say should not be taken as evidence of their experience, but only as a form of talk – a 'discourse', 'account' or 'repertoire' – which represents a culturally available way of packaging experience (Kitzinger 2004 cited in Hook 2016, 39).

Whilst this approach might seem slightly too far-fetched in the case of my research, I argue that having it in mind may prove to be quite beneficial, contributing to the more holistic picture of the examination of qualitative differences in individuals' experiences, understandings, and judgments on feminism-related issues. Particularly, considering the sole context in which the data will be produced, for instance, the interviews' setting and atmosphere, as well as my own identity as a young, white woman conducting research on feminism and the impressions that these easily recognizable facts may evoke in the participants may be valuable, if only for the sake of recognition of the possible influence of these factors on the research results (Rapley 2004).[7] As emphasized by DeVault and Gross (2012), the context of a research interview should always be considered as embedded in certain circumstances influenced by constructed differences and similarities of identity, age, gender, ethnicity, and others, which may inevitably lead the interviewee to make assumptions about the interviewer or feel like they might be misunderstood or judged, thus making

[7] The excerpt was submitted by the author to Research Seminar EAST0102 as a part of the Research Plan in the academic year 2021/2022.

necessary to maintain awareness about these issues as well as to acknowledge their effects on the research itself.

Moreover, as my ambition is certainly not to assume an overly psychological approach, but rather to simply address the issues that are inevitably limited by what the participants decide to speak about, a perspective that is highly speech-centered, such as the one proposed by Scott (1999), Kitzinger (2004), and Hook (2016) may ultimately constitute the most rational choice.[8] Moreover, as argued by Scott (1999), an advocate of a so-called "linguistic turn" in feminist studies, every research that tries to understand social realities from people's experiences should acknowledge the nature of these experiences as "[...] discursively constructed by dominant ideological structures" (cited in Hesse-Biber 2012, 9). Hence, identifying the discourses surrounding my participants' experiences and attitudes may constitute a valuable method allowing me to uncover their identities as well as the underlying realities behind them.

Thus, following DeVault and Gross (2012), the adoption of what can be broadly called a postpositivist approach, namely emphasizing that the social circumstances of individuals' lives must be perceived as culturally and historically constructed, might be also noteworthy. Therefore, apart from examining the participants' visions, attitudes, and experiences as a "resource for critical reflection" (Stone-Mediatore 1998, 121, cited in DeVault and Gross 2012), I attempt to consider the discourses behind people's accounts with a critical approach, having in mind that these narratives may constitute a key to understanding their ideas about the world as well as their identities.

Still, as importantly emphasized by Letherby (2003), the limitation of every purely personal account is that it entails a meaning of a particular individual's narrative and their own exceptional experience. However, acknowledging the diversity of people's worlds does not have to necessarily make this kind of research insignificant, especially when considering that individuals tend to make sense of their lives as well as form their ideas about them in reference to certain social and political environments they are surrounded by, possibly revealing common problems and issues. Therefore, as she explains, "[...] it is possible to argue that research of this type may have value in explanatory terms, if not in terms of its typicality [...]" (Letherby 2003, 90).

[8] The excerpt was submitted by the author to Research Seminar EAST0102 as a part of the Research Plan in the academic year 2021/2022.

As I also intend to focus on getting a comprehensive understanding of the explanatory themes and dynamics behind people's attitudes, looking at the prior studies on opinion-formation processes in regard to declared support for gender equality and/or feminism may prove to be useful. Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) provide a valuable theoretical framework for that, proposing a distinction between exposure-based and interest-based explanations for examining determinants behind opinions held by individuals. Following Bolzendahl and Myers (2004), the interest-based approach, focusing on different interest structures defined as goals that individuals strive for, is most commonly used to explain the individuals' support (or lack thereof) for feminist agendas. Therefore, if the individuals' interests directly benefit from gender-egalitarian ideas, it is more likely that these individuals would have positive attitudes towards feminism or identify as feminists themselves. Unsurprisingly, these explain why statistically more women than men express support for gender equity and/or feminism. However, this perspective is arguably useful also while identifying reasons behind opinions held by men, since, as noticed by Bolzendahl and Myers on the example of workforce participation, the partner's employment, though indirectly, is usually highly relevant for males and thus can influence their approaches towards feminism (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004, 761). The exposure-based perspective, as explained by the two researchers, is centered around the conviction that people's opinions on gender equality and feminist issues are formed when they are exposed to ideas and situations that, to a certain degree, resonate with feminist ideals. In this approach, exposure to discriminatory situations in a workplace, school, or university environment, or within one's family, is claimed to lead to the realization of gender inequalities and may consequently generate support for the feminist agenda. Other variables of this argument include education – understood as contact with the ideas promoting gender equality, and political socialization – entailing that early exposure to feminist ideas influences the creation of political consciousness that embraces gender egalitarianism, with the last one believed to be particularly significant for men (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004, 762).

Moreover, given the rising importance of intersectionality as an analytical approach in social as well as feminist studies (Carastathis 2014), this research project constitutes an attempt to follow that trend, bringing more focus to what Cole describes as "different meanings and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage" (Cole 2009 cited in Duncan 2010, 499). Further following Cole, in order to accomplish this goal, three practices need to be considered: (1) *paying attention to who is included within a particular*

category of people, (2) *exploring the role of inequality,* and finally (3) *looking for similarities between groups* (Cole 2009 cited in Duncan 2010, 499).

Here, it is also noteworthy to address the adoption of the writing style using the first person throughout this work. Following Letherby (2003), I recognize that the usage of "I" can be of significant value in a sense that it emphasizes the researcher's role in the construction of knowledge, acknowledging that such knowledge is highly specific and contextual as inquired, filtered through, as well as understood by the author (2003, 141).

2.2.2 Research questions

Building on the existing theories and concepts as well as the previous scholarly discussions and studies conducted by other scholars, the research questions that emerged in the process are as follows:

Main research question:

1. What are the young South Koreans' attitudes towards feminism?

Other research questions:

1. What are the participants' understanding of feminism and gender equality?
2. What factors have influenced the participants' declared identity as feminists or their rejection of this label?
3. How is the participants' feminist self-identification (or lack thereof) linked to their attitudes regarding feminism?
4. How do participants' judgments about certain policies and organizations connected to feminism/gender equality differ in relation to their expressed identity and attitudes towards feminism?

3 The evolution and achievements of the feminist movement on their road to gender equality in South Korea

3.1 Before the 1960s

The social situation of women in contemporary South Korea as well as the current nature of feminism and feminist movements in the country should be primarily viewed through the prism of the historical events and developments within the broadly understood Korean women's movements. In this chapter I attempt to situate the contemporary South Korean feminism within the historical, social, economic as well as political contextual environment of the country's society.

While the 1920s and 1930s marked the beginning of feminist awareness and the emergence of the first wave of women's movement organizations, little autonomous organizing by women was seen in Korea until the 1970s. Still, the Japanese occupation of the peninsula from 1910 served as a catalyst for women who, becoming increasingly aware of their power and importance in society, began to organize civil resistance that was to lay the foundations for the future women's emancipation movement (Jones 2006, 46). Thus, in that time, the newly emerged New Women (*shin yeoseong*[9]) movement attempted to confront the patriarchal Confucian ideology and its rigid hierarchical gender roles, increasingly emphasizing females' subjectivity apart from the Confucian *wise mother, good wife*[10] ideal. Nevertheless, during this colonial period, with rising modern nationalism, the national liberation efforts as well as the country's modernization were viewed as issues of incomparably more significance, and the women's empowerment attempts were halted (Kumar 2022).

After the division of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the pro-American government introduced a new constitution that stipulated equal

[9] All romanizations were done according to the Revised Romanization of Korean (RR, proclaimed by Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2000). For more see: National Institute of Korean Language (2023). *Romanization of Korean.* https://www.korean.go.kr/front_eng/roman/roman_01.do. Accessed September 15, 2023.

[10] The concept of *wise mother, good wife* (*hyonmo yangcho*) is a traditional ideal prescribing women the roles of mothers and wives through which females were expected to serve others and contribute to the prosperity of their country. This ideal of womanhood, described arguably as the most influential gender ideology of the twentieth-century Korea, took a form of patriarchal arrangements intertwining the Confucian-prescribed gender norms and womanly virtues with outside influences of the Protestant notion of domesticity spread by missionaries and Japan's concept of *good wife, wise mother* (jap. *ryōsai kenbo*), produced in the face of new challenges of the modern world. For more see for instance: Choi, H. (2009). "'Wise Mother, Good Wife': A Transcultural Discursive Construct in Modern Korea." *Journal of Korean Studies,* 14 (1), 1–33; or: Choi, H. (2020). Ideology: "Wise Mother, Good Wife". In *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad: Protestant Modernity in Colonial-Era Korea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 36-72.

protection of people regardless of gender, thereby prohibiting discrimination against women in the areas of fundamental rights such as employment, suffrage, education, and marriage (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, July 12, 1948, latest amendment made on October 29, 1987). The Korean War (1950-1953) left the country completely devastated, hence the efforts to rebuild, modernize, and industrialize the extremely impoverished state became a priority over improving the situation and rights of women *per se* (Kim S-K. 2014, 21).

3.2 The authoritarian period

From the early 1960s and throughout the 1970s, South Korean society went through an unprecedented period of rapid socio-economic change under the authoritarian military regime, that, however, exacerbated women's systemic discrimination as it became central to the country's adopted model of economic development. Still, women's mobilization against the prevalent inequalities did not gain momentum as in the initial breakdown of authoritarianism feminist issues have been falling behind the struggle for democratization in significance (Lee and Chin 2007, 1208; Nelson and Cho 2016, 327).

In the 1960s and 1970s, under the repressive government led by General Park Chung-hee and its strict political control, conservative women's organizations, such as the Korean National Council of Women (KNCW, established in 1959), Korea Church Women United (KCWU, established in 1966), and the Korean Federation of Housewives' Clubs, were organized. Founded by the state, these organizations' activities were limited to building support for the regime and its development policies as well as providing anti-communist education, therefore strongly avoiding social activism. Out of all the pro-government women's groups operating under Park, the KNCW was considered to be the most important. Serving as an umbrella organization for both individual members and institutional bodies, KNCW's agenda of "improving women's status and service to the society and the country" was tolerated by the regime as it did not directly challenge its priorities (Kim S-K. 2014, 22). Nevertheless, despite the Park's regime's attempts to completely suppress independent social or political movements under the 1970s nationwide martial law, various organizations, and particularly labor unions, did slowly begin to emerge during this period (Jones 2006, 46).

Growing South Korean activism at that time has been generally associated with a larger social movement framework known as *minjungundong*[11] or *minjung* democracy (Jones 2006, 47). Fighting for the rights of the most oppressed, *minjung* activists quickly became concerned with the pervasive exploitation of mostly young female workers, who as the export-led industrialization policy took hold, joined the workforce in the light manufacturing sector (Kim S-K. 2014, 22-23). Contributing to the South Korean development and its economic miracle, yet heavily underpaid, working in extremely poor conditions, as well as frequently sexually harassed and abused, these women workers started to organize themselves to influence the improvement of the working conditions in their factories. Thus, under the umbrella and along with the broader *minjung* activism, the feminist labor movement began to gradually expand, operating mainly within the intersection of gender and class as strongly oriented towards women of the urban and rural poor, whom it perceived as "the oppressed of the oppressed" (Ching and Louie 1995, 417-418).

Nevertheless, even though women workers were playing a significant role in the *minjung* movement, for instance encouraging the development of working-class consciousness, their activism was not directed specifically toward organizing a gender-based movement. Thus, despite the added gender-related value of the hardships women experienced, such as notably lower salaries in comparison to men, gendered violence, or sexual harassment, the major focus remained requests for "economic justice" and "humanitarian treatment" (Jones 2006, 47). Yet, with females' increasing access to higher education that followed the country's economic development, their entry into the broader socio-political arena in the form of involvement in anti-authoritarian, usually mixed-sex, labor as well as student organizations, developed even further. Moreover, in 1977, the Korean Women's Institute (KWI) – the first research institute dealing with women's issues – was established within the jurisdiction of Ewha Womans University. It became instrumental in creating the first in South Korea as well as in whole Asia, undergraduate Women's Studies course as well as the first master's degree program in Women's Studies, that soon became the center for feminist thought and activism

[11] *Minjung undong* – mass people's social and democratic movement that in the period 1961-1992 was fighting the successive authoritarian regimes for the improvement of the rights of the oppressed. The name was reclaimed from the colonial anti-Japanese movement. *Minjung* ideological foundations argue that the oppression of the masses has been a recurring theme in Korean history and that the lives, cultures, and struggles of the minjung – the excluded, the exploited, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the have-nots – can reveal the true national identity of Korea. Populist in nature, the *minjung* movement included peasants, intellectuals, workers, students, church activists, writers, and other oppressed that were engaged in the South Korean struggle for democracy. For more see, for instance: Ching, M., and Louie, Y. (1995). Minjung feminism: Korean women's movement for gender and class liberation. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18(4), 417–430.

in the country (Jung 2003, 262; Korean Women's Institute). Entering the sphere of the country's academia, women's studies gradually were able to challenge, bargain, and intertwine with the ideas and knowledge of other disciplines and eventually became recognized as a new scholarly filed (Kim E-S. 2010, 11). Since that time, KWI has also taken the lead in academic collaborations between women's research centers in Korea, helping to found the first national academic society for Women's Studies, the Korean Association of Women's Studies, in 1986 (Korean Women's Institute 2006).

The early 1980s witnessed a gradual popularization of feminism as the democratization struggle against the authoritarian regime swept the country. However, although activists aimed for women's emancipation, they operated under the assumption that this could only be accomplished via a larger social change. Thus, women's activism was characterized primarily by its involvement with the progressive democratic movement and its agenda was not considered independent at that time (Kim S-K. 2014, 27-28). It was not until the late 1980s that the first autonomous gender-specific demands were made, as the women activists had been increasingly acknowledging that the *minjung* framework was insufficient in accounting for the gender inequalities faced by females. Also from an organizational point of view, the democratization process was claimed to greatly facilitate the creation of women's organizations during that period – one of the most important ones being the already-mentioned Korean Women's Association United, established as an umbrella group uniting progressive females' voices nationwide[12] (Jones 2006, 46, 51). In addition, democratization considerably improved the political environment for women's associations as the sought to influence and cooperate with the state, increasingly enabling female leaders to push gender-specific problems onto the public agenda and pass women's legislation, successfully transforming several of females' complaints into direct actions (Chin and Lee 2007, 1223).

3.3 Democratic transition and post-authoritarian period

While the first women's movements have been almost exclusively focusing on the discrimination of females deriving from the intersection of gender and class, within this new

[12] The KWAU has now grown to include 30 affiliated member organizations with divergent target groups, among others: housewives, white and blue-collar workers, or farmers, as well as with specific thematic focus, including: women's health, environmental protection, peace promotion, violence and abuse prevention, or Buddhist and Christian feminism. Being at the forefront of the majority of the gender-related reform initiatives, it is considered as one of the most proactive and respected political players advancing greater gender equality in Korea. For more see: Korean Women's Association United (2023). *About KWAU.* http://women21.or.kr/kwau/6858.

context of changing socio-political dynamics brought about by the democratic process, women's movements were gradually including a variety of other issues into their agenda. Taking advantage of the increasing political prospects deriving from new domestic and international circumstances, they gradually included a wider range of issues that included employment discrimination, the gender wage gap, the burden of the so-called double shift, sex-related crimes, as well as the discriminatory aspects of the patriarchal family law (Jones 2006, 46).

A crucial moment and a big step forward in the process of building the equality of South Korean women was 1987 – the year of the first presidential election after the democratization – when both the enactment of The Equal Employment Act and the revision of the constitution to include provisions on equality in employment, took place. Following the country's gradual democratization and an increasing number of working women significantly contributing to the rapid economic growth of the country, the government, introduced employment equality legislation to prevent further discriminatory practices against females in the labor market (Kim E. 2006, 58).

Although the female activists, similar to the progressive civil society movements, opposed the government of the newly elected president Roh Tae-woo, having in mind his links to the state's past authoritarian regime, further democratization as well as changes in the global environment brought by the early 1990s, pushed women's organizations to reconsider their stance towards the formal institutional politics. Therefore, in order to push their own agenda and influence the state's policy to bring about some necessary representational as well as socio-cultural changes, feminist groups increasingly began to engage with the state. For instance, the Korean Women Association United (KWAU) decided to register with the government in 1993, in order to obtain access to state funds and build their formal legitimacy and larger social publicity (Jones 2006, 48-49).

The mid to late 1990s were marked by a further departure away from the male-dominant progressive movement, advancing the self-respect and autonomy of women. At that time many universities started to hold lectures on feminism, bringing it to the popular discourse. A so-called "campus feminism" emerged and young feminists, confronting the everyday patriarchal culture, led their own independent socio-cultural movements, increasingly advocating the so-called "politicization of everyday life" through which the importance of problems such as commercialized sexuality, sexual harassment, sexual violence, as well as

rape, including date and marital rape, previously considered a domain of private, was emphasized (Jung 2014). Importantly, the intellectual space created at those universities enabled female students not only to challenge the prevalence of sexual violence in Korean society, but also to reveal the disturbing effects of the construction of sexual violence as an act that brings shame upon the victim, as yet in the 1980s, it was predominantly perceived as damage to female's chastity (Nelson and Cho 2016, 336). Moreover, as a way of resistance towards the rigid organizational hierarchy, the seniority-based power, and patriarchal practices prevailing in the country, casual tone of conversation as well as the usage of nicknames were commonly practiced, promoting egalitarian values among their members. (Kim S-K. 2014, 32; Kim J-S. 2021, 85; Jung 2014).

The international environment, particularly the demise and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s, influencing the political opportunity structures, forced women's activists to reconsider their previous socialist orientation that focused mainly on the intersection of gender and class. Consequently, feminist groups started to increasingly focus on pan-class, issue-specific gender reforms' demands that included, among others, employment and workplace discrimination, access to childcare, the Confucian son preference as well as protection from sexual violence and domestic abuse. Still, to avoid being dismissed as importers of Western feminism, activists tried to frame these demands differently. Therefore, problems related to the female body and sexuality (apart from sexual violence) were largely put aside at this time, given Korea's deeply ingrained Confucian cultural and moral underpinnings influencing the taboo status of those issues (Jones 2006, 48-49, 62). Furthermore, during this period, along with civilian rule, not only the feminist narratives and agendas but also the organizations themselves have become more fragmented (Kim S-K. 2014, 32).

The 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, attracting more than 600 NGO participants from South Korea, constituted a major turning point from the institutional viewpoint, being a visible manifestation of the willingness of Korean feminists to use an international forum framework to draw attention to the gender inequalities prevalent in their country and pressure the government to address those issues. Importantly, the officially endorsed by the Beijing Platform concept of "gender mainstreaming," has been ever since gradually used by South Korean feminists as a discursive tool when referring to the need for integrating gender-sensitive policies into all spheres of society – the state, civil society as well as public and private life. Under the umbrella provided by gender mainstreaming, specific yet extremely

useful methodological approaches, such as gender-disaggregated data collection, gender-sensitive budgeting, and gender-sensitivity analysis have been increasingly employed (Jones 2006, 49, 63).

Accordingly, the central government, local governments, as well as many related organizations began to recruit specialists in Women's Studies or women-related fields. At the same time, a series of government-commissioned research projects on women's policy started to appear. Such gender mainstreaming undertaken by the government led not only to an increase in Women's Studies programs, but also the adoption of Women's Policy as a subject in the curriculum (Kim E. 2008). In addition, the Kim Dae-jung government (1998-2003) undertook "gender mainstreaming" as an important item on the agenda of its regime and considered the development of women's status as an indicator of social development (Kim E-S. 2010, 16).

Under the so-called women-friendly administrations in power from 1998 to 2008, the feminist movement was able to establish even closer collaboration with the state, which led to further institutionalization of the movement, enabling it to promote the implementation of gender mainstreaming in national policies. The recruitment of feminist researchers and movement leaders into the administration as well as their increased participation in both the National Assembly and the government made the women's voices in policymaking considerably more visible. One of the outcomes of this cooperation was the creation of the Presidential Committee on Women's Affairs in 1998, a government body that was to handle issues specifically involving women's discrimination. In 2001, the Commission was expanded as well as given a greater rank and scope of responsibilities and ultimately transformed into the Ministry for Gender Equality – an independent government ministry that has been provided with an administrative authority to supervise and implement policies for enhancing women's rights and gender equality[13] (Kim S-K. 2014, 117).

Throughout this period, women's organizations, while working with the government, attempted to challenge the patriarchal social system as well as the structural inequalities prevalent in the country, increasingly emphasizing the necessity of legislative reform and institution building (Kim S-K. 2014, 32). Some meaningful projects of the women's

[13] Noteworthy, in 2010, the Ministry of Gender Equality has changed its name to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, in Korean *Yeoseong Kajokbu,* which literally translates to "the ministry of women and family."

organizations to influence legal and political change in the transition period include, among others, the Act on Equal Employment and Reconciliation of Work and Family of 1989, the Mother-Child Welfare Act of 1991, the 1993 Punishment of Sexual Violence and Protection of the Victim Act, the 1995 Women's Development Act, the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of the Victim Act of 1997, and the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act enacted in 1999, as well as the revision of the Gender Equality Employment Act in 1999. Moreover, in 2000, influenced by KWAU and other women's groups, the National Assembly revised the Political Party Law to include a quota system for women increasing the number of female political representation (Nelson and Cho 2016, 335).

Arguably, one of the most prominent achievements of the feminist movement at that time was the abolishment of the *hoju* system (which in Korean means head of the family) – arguably the most controversial law that remained in effect since the founding of South Korean state despite being recognized by many as a source of gender inequality in the sphere of family and marriage. This innately patriarchal system established the family in terms of distinct gender roles, assigning the position of the family head almost exclusively to males who were given the authority over other family members (Kim S-K. 2014, 67). The status was transmitted on the basis of primogeniture, subordinating women's position within the family in the eyes of the law and making them continuously dependent on some male member of the family, being it father, husband, or son (even an infant) (The Korea Women's Development Institute 2015, 27). Although this symbolic subservience was considered to play a crucial role in why the female activist groups and civil society so fiercely opposed this system, it also had many harmful implications for the women's property ownership and inheritance as well as resulted in a vast amount of absurd cases involving, among others, the inability of mothers receiving custody of children after a divorce to transfer them from the father's family register to her own (Kim S-K. 2014, 78). While women's movements claimed the subordinate status of women embedded in the family-head system to be deeply damaging and offensive, some conservatives and Confucians defended it as being a "beautiful Korean custom" and perceived a possible revision of it as an attack on the integrity of traditional Confucian family values that had been cultivated for centuries (Kim S-K. 2014, 67).

Therefore, although different components of the family law were revised due to continuous efforts of women's movements to lessen its negative impact on gender parity, the *hoju* system remained the longest-surviving element of the Korean family law, constituting an emblematic cornerstone of a deeply patriarchal Confucian social order, even though the majority of public

opinion believed that traditional values such as devotion to the family and filial piety could be cultivated without the existence of this institutionalized system (Kim S-K. 2014, 68).

However, following the recommendation of a judicial review by the Society of Family Law, women's organizations, and NGOs, on February 3, 2005, the ruling of the Constitutional Court declaring that this traditional system was contrary to the national constitution as not guaranteeing equal rights for women, paved the way for an ultimate abolishment of the law that was later claimed an "epochal legal development" (Cho 2010). Thus, the National Assembly, under pressure from a powerful lobby of NGOs advocating gender equality on the one hand and strong conservative opposition counter-groups on the other, passed a statute abolishing this male-centered family system from January 1, 2008 onwards, proving the supremacy of constitutional law and a victory of the progressive attitudes advancing a more equal society (Kim S. K. 2014, 67). To move away from the previous male-centered family organization system, the government prepared a new method based on identity registration that allows individuals, regardless of gender, to manage their own family relations and register separately from other members of the family unit (The Korea Women's Development Institute 2015, 11-12).[14] This groundbreaking legislative change has been regarded as an example of successful co-operation between the state, particularly the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, and feminist NGOs, including the most prominent – the Korea Women's Associations United (Koh 2008, 346).

Campaigning of the anti-Miss Korea movement that involved a critique of the Korean national beauty pageant, postulating its harmful objectification as well as categorization of the contestants and their bodies is another example of the changing focus of feminist activism in the country. Even though the pageant is still being organized to this day, women's activism has successfully helped to bring the issue of female objectification into the larger public discourse (Kim J. 2022).

Another example of successful collective efforts of the women's organizations in changing the discriminatory legal landscape of the country with support from the state was the litigation of the so-called extra point system giving military service advantage. The system granted men who completed military service an additional 5% of points in the government service

[14] The whole fragment about the *hoju* system was taken from the author's essay submitted to South Korean Politics and Society course conducted by Sabine Burghart at the University of Turku in the 2021/22 academic year.

employment process that applied to low- to mid-level positions. As all South Korean men are obliged to perform military service lasting around 2 years, depending on the military branch, the extra point system was regarded by them as a very justifiable reward for their sacrifice and hard work serving in the army. On the other hand, women's movements have been strongly arguing against the system, advocating its highly discriminatory nature as well as general ineffectiveness as an employment practice that is supposed to fairly evaluate job candidates in terms of their merits and skills (Jung and Sohn 2011, 475).

Following the decision of the Constitutional Court of Korea which found providing military service advantage points unconstitutional, the system was successfully abolished in 1999. Nevertheless, the court's ruling has been claimed to lead to a united outrage of Korean men who, feeling jeopardized by the loss of the advantages they regarded as rightfully owned, started to share their resentment, for instance in early internet communities of the turn of the 21st century, some even resorting to various forms of cyber-terrorism against women. The spill of hatred was then aimed particularly towards feminists as the originators and main "perpetrators" of the whole situation, however, as the misogyny intensified, it soon spread its target to include all South Korean women (Kim J. 2022).

As men's once strongly established position in the Korean social order has been put in danger and their vested interests – taken away by the growing number of empowered women, who increasingly demanded equal treatment in the competitive, neo-liberal socio-economical order – many started to feel threatened and insecure. Moreover, with the growing economic and social prominence of women as well as their quite newly gained consumption power, males became a subject of commercialization and often objectification in the image market, which *de facto* meant a reversal of the conventional market trends as well as the male-female social position as known by then (Tan R. 2019, 36).

3.4 Feminist movement at the turn of the 21st century

With the groundbreaking legislative and institutional accomplishments of the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, however, came the debate among the Korean academia about the institutionalization of women's groups and its effects on the country's feminism and its priorities. Voices criticizing the mainstream feminist movements, arguing its detrimental practices, among others, excessively prioritizing organization, yet undermining grassroots movements, as well as focusing almost exclusively on socioeconomically advantaged

females, gradually emerged (Kim J-S. 2021, 79). As the critics claimed, "despite the success of state feminism – that is, the promotion of gender equality in law, policymaking, and governance at multiple levels – there have been limited gains for women when it comes to the socioeconomic sphere" (Han and Chun 2014, 246 cited in Kim J-S. 2021, 79). Therefore, although these feminist circles have undoubtedly succeeded in achieving legal and institutional changes that were to eradicate the discrimination of women, their close engagement with the regime has, at some point, reduced their role to mere passive agents of the official policies. Furthermore, as claimed by some feminist scholars and women's NGOs, this loss of agency and direction of the larger feminist movement as well as its inability to elevate the influence of feminism on society was partly blamed for the increasingly present anti-feminist sentiments as well as misogyny or even hatred for women among the demographic of young Korean men in the 2000s and 2010s (Jeong 2020, 31).

South Korea in its post-modernization period has been facing a gradual emergence of a multitude of problems including, among others, an aging population, a very low fertility rate, a high rate of young adult unemployment, as well as an increase of inequalities and growing polarization of the society. The competitiveness, that once contributed to the enormous economic success, known as the Miracle on the Han River, has now become a source of growing frustration and a decreasing sense of freedom, particularly among the young generations. The high costs of living, especially the real estate prices, and scarce job opportunities have often been cited as major factors driving the younger generation's rejection of the conventional lifepaths, pushing them to dub the current socio-economic situation of the country as the "Hell Joseon."[15] Alongside, concepts such as "Sampo Generation" meant to express the three things they have to give up, including dating, marriage, and childrearing, to navigate the country's extremely competitive job market and rising wealth inequities that have become symptomatic of the modernized Korea, have also gained publicity as the young became frustrated with their lives. Nevertheless, this so-called generational discourse, although undoubtedly constituting a meaningful research framework, fails to acknowledge different, gendered experiences within this young generation of Koreans (Kim J-S. 2021, 79-80). As noted by Kim J-S. (2021) "the post-feminist myth regarding women's power and agency and the neoliberal discourse about individual success and happiness have left unaddressed the structural issues of gendered precariousness […]" (2021, 80).

[15] The fragment was taken from the author's learning diary submitted to South Korean Politics and Society course taught by Sabine Burghart at the University of Turku in the 2021/22 academic year.

4 Numerous faces of the contemporary feminist resurgence

Drawing on previous studies on the subject, in this chapter, I attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the various developments in South Korean feminist activism since 2015, including its extensive range of agenda, the tools and methods it appropriates as well as the public reception it has been receiving including some controversies it has stirred. My objective is to situate the current feminist resurgence within both the global context of feminist struggle as well as the domestic contextual environment, looking into gender issues and feminism from the perspective of the newly emerged digital environments; the socio-economic problems of the young Korean adults; the political institutions, populism, and political forces in power; as well as the proliferation of the anti-feminist sentiments, all in an effort to thoroughly understand the current nature of feminism in the country as well as, most importantly, how it is perceived by the larger Korean public.

Feminism cannot be considered monolithic, rather, there have always been several different yet coexisting "feminisms" that correlate to divergent socio-political ideologies and goals (Kim J-S. 2021, 85). Although it is impossible to cover all those approaches in a single study, it is essential to acknowledge that feminist activists in Korea, with a multitude of aims, have engaged in practices varying from influencing legal reforms to criticizing cultural and structural arrangements, sometimes taking more radical actions including disruptive agitation (Nelson and Cho 2016, 337). Thus, the popularization of feminism usually entails only a particular form of it, raising rightful concerns about the inclusivity and intersectionality of the dominant feminist politics and its objectives. In South Korean contexts, those have been called into question as popular feminism declares its strong attachment to female identity grounded in notions of pure biological sex and does not hide its reluctance to sympathize with other social minority groups, often pursuing a women-first and -only politics (Kim J-S. 2021, 87).

Moreover, referring to the practices of the prevalent exclusion of non-heteronormative and transgender groups from the mainstream, popular feminist activism, feminist academia has also problematized the movement's construction of female identity around the idea of victimhood, that largely fails to recognize the fact that females can, and often are, embedded in numerous intersectional power relations, including heteronormativity and cis-gender privilege (Kim J-S. 2021, 90). Further, by providing affiliation and strong group identity as well as a platform for empowering women that enables them to respond to prevalent

discrimination on multiple levels, feminism in Korea has been often claimed to evolve into a kind of tool for surviving and coping with the current precarious, neoliberal socio-political circumstances. Yet, this very identification has made the popular feminists largely ignorant about the complexities of the social context as well as the processes through which the category of women is produced, unabling them to create solidarity with those falling outside of their essentialized identity politics. Still, it is crucial to recognize that not all newly emerged feminist movements in the country are characterized by this sort of exclusivity as evidenced by the numerous feminist scholars and activists who have expressed solidarity with the transgender feminist movement and strongly support their rights (Kim J-S. 2021, 90).

4.1 Generational change in feminist activism

While historically feminist movements in Korea have fought against the prevalent male-dominated patriarchal social order towards more equal participation in society, today's Korean feminists are claimed to also confront the erupting misogyny that supposedly marked the 2010s and has continued to spread till this day (Kim J-S. 2021). Since 2015, the reemergence of feminism as a popularized movement, particularly among young Korean females, has signified a major generational change that is said to alter the face of the women's movements in the country. Consequently, the term "young young feminist" began to appear in public discourse, in reference to the current wave of feminism, popularized after 2015, as contrasted with "older" feminists of the 1980s and "young" ones from the 1990s and the 2000s (Kim J-S. 2021, 86). Putting those generational labels, although not without limitations, certainly enables one to situate the feminist movements that have emerged in Korea since 2015 in a broader context of the history of Korean feminism. Many scholars highlight that generation is one of the most essential characteristics of the recent Korean feminist activism, however, they also warn against an excessive prioritization of generational difference at the expense of other differences, as both the historical diversity as well as the continuities of feminist politics are equally important. Therefore, the fact that the "young young feminists" are not homogenous in terms of their socio-political approach nor present a common perspective on the most crucial issues and the way to tackle them, needs to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the problems they are challenging including, among others, patriarchal social order, discrimination in employment, sexual abuse, as well as oppressive ideals of female beauty, have been also confronted by previous generations of feminists, in one way or the other (Kim J-S. 2021, 86-87).

Nevertheless, although feminists have long been challenging the patriarchal and sexist cultural practices rooted in Korean society, in the 21st century, many of them argued a failure of the previous gender politics and recognized a crisis of Korean feminism in general. This has been often cited to constitute one of the reasons behind the rise and popularization of new forms of feminism, focusing predominantly on the problem of misogyny and utilizing new opportunities that digital media platforms have delivered in the post-industrialized world (Jeong 2020, 31).

Thus, in a broader context, the recent resurgence of feminist activism in the country can also be viewed through the prism of the rising global trend of opposition to misogyny by feminists worldwide. As widely discussed by feminist scholars, recently, the influence of misogynistic narratives has become increasingly visible in political discourses all over the world, particularly in the sphere of digital media (Drüeke and Zobl 2016; Mendes et al. 2018). It seems like in this global environment, "misogyny," expressing the everyday experiences of many women transnationally, came to constitute a powerful term for females to articulate their woes publicly and might have triggered and fueled anti-misogynistic movements also in South Korea (Kim J-S. 2021, 80).

4.2 Digital space as a new platform of mobilization and debate

Since the 21st century and the massive popularization of digital media, the Internet has become widely recognized as a "vibrant space for grassroots discourse" (Kang 2016, 46 cited in Kim J-S. 2021, 78), greatly facilitating the emergence of social movements as constituting a tool of mobilization and organization as well as providing an alternative that allowed to largely bypass traditional media gatekeepers. Therefore, as digital populism characterized by using cyberspace as a tool for political mobilization and the manifestation of one's political beliefs, has gained importance as a new type of political behavior in South Korea, feminists have begun to appropriate the internet for their political ends. However, South Korean virtual space, especially in the early 2000s, was characterized by greater participation of men than women, resulting in the development of a strongly masculine internet culture, that was often based on violent comments or even online sexual harassment aimed at female participants of cyberspace. Many women who left the mainstream digital space established or joined the growing number of female-dominated communities, including the "young young" feminists, who aimed at creating new spaces for networking and organizing collective action (Jeong 2020, 10).

Thus, compared to the feminist movements organized by activists and students in the 1980s and 1990s, these new forms of activism allow for little or even no formal organization, institutionalization, or official membership, enabling ordinary citizens to take an initiative and mobilize as members of online communities and social networking sites (Kim J-S. 2021, 78, 81). Owing to the rising popularity of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as other online communities and networking sites, numerous contemporary women's challenges has begun to be widely discussed and strategies to address them have been developed and implemented. Moreover, the rise of digital media has greatly extended the range of methods and agendas that the Korean feminist activist have been undertaking, influencing the increasing diversity of the groups mobilized to highlight and challenge their specific issues. Consequently, cyberspace has often come to be compared to a real battleground for young feminists in their efforts to mobilize diverse subjects and extend the reach of feminism (Kim J-S. 2021, 81; Jeong and Lee 2018, 705).

4.2.1 Online misogyny and Ilbe

Yet, it is crucial to consider the recent Korean feminist reboot in the context of the contemporary culture of sexism, misogyny, and growing anti-feminism, in what has been dubbed a post-feminist era that claims a redundancy of feminism in the face of the achieved equality between genders. Further, as the argument goes, females have become so successful in their strive for equality, that allegedly it is now men who constitute the primary victims of gender discrimination. Those sentiments are claimed to constitute a modern face of misogyny, that has intensified both in terms of its reach and nature, thanks to its facilitation by digital media. Women's harassment has become increasingly prevalent in the media, popular culture, as well as on popular Internet platforms (Anderson 2015, 8-9; Vickery 2018, 31). In Korea, the increasing online misogyny and hate speech against females has primarily been driven by young, educated, and tech-savvy men who largely attribute their current socio-economic woes and growing dissatisfaction with life in a society that is troubled with increasing rates of young people's unemployment and widening economic inequalities, to feminists and women in general (Kim J-S. 2021, 80).

Historically, the public space has been established and functioned as a patriarchal, male-dominated sphere, yet nowadays the contestation of space has become greatly extended to include the online publics, allowing everybody to participate in the process while also retaining anonymity. Thus, online misogyny, by limiting women's visibility and marginalizing

their voices in an effort to safeguard this men-dominated environment, fosters a social discourse that supports hate and discrimination based on gender (Kim J. 2018, 153).

In this context, the emergence of the conservative, populist, far-right online community Ilbe (www.ilbe.com) in 2010 can be viewed as indicative of this raising trend of hateful, misogynistic discourse gaining quite considerable support among male-dominated Internet platforms' users. This community site, as its name suggests (Ilbe in Korean is an abbreviation for *Ilganbeseuteu Jeojangso* which translates to Daily Best Storage) was designed to collect and display the best daily posts from the bulletin board from another popular online forum DC Inside (Kim J. 2018, 151). Throughout the years, it has developed and expanded its trolling culture directed against females as well as various minority groups, promoting numerous forms of hate discourses including misogyny, xenophobia, racism, and regionalism. As a part of its practice to deliberately stoke controversy in an attempt to stigmatize and disparage Korean women as irresponsible, materialistic, and selfish, the community coined a new term *kimchi-nyeo/n* (meaning *kimchi* woman, bitch)[16] and turn it into an online buzzword, spreading the coinage itself but also the narrative behind it into the larger Korean society.[17] Among other, most concerning and offensive terms used by the members of this community, that managed to garner the attention of the mass media, are also neologisms such as *samilhan*, a Korean acronym for "women must be beaten every three days" that has been derived from an old saying that "women and dried fish should be beaten once every three days (as to make them amenable) (Kim J. 2018, 162). Therefore, since its creation, Ilbe has been largely regarded as a home for extremism and often called a "base camp" for conservative and far-right-wing Korean males, raising controversy about online misogyny in Korea as a serious social issue. However, the popularity of the website is yet undeniable as revealed, for instance, by the web-rating site Rankey, which, in 2016, ranked the website first among humor sites and third largest online community in the country (Kim J. 2018, 151-2).

However, misogynistic and hateful discourse is not only confined to this one extremist website, but rather has come to be perceived as a larger social phenomenon, as rampant comments and posts on various Korea's news portal sites, content-sharing websites, and SNSs

[16] As *kimchi* constitute a traditional Korean food staple, often associated with the country also worldwide, *kimchi-nyeo/n* signifies all Korean women as a whole.
[17] In a 2015 survey by the Korean Women's Development Institute, around 94% of respondents admitted that they were familiar with this term.

(social network sites) including the popular video-sharing platform YouTube[18] as well as on liberal male-dominated communities' sites, demonstrate strong prejudice towards females. As revealed by the 2015 survey conducted by the Korean Women's Development Institute, approximately 84% of respondents disclosed they were exposed to some kind of misogynistic language and content in cyberspace (Ahn et al. 2015). A 2018 study by the Korean Institute for Gender Equality Promotion and Education, which monitored eight popular content-sharing sites and online forums and examined 16,000 comments and 1,600 posts shared in a period of one week, exposed 90 cases of misogyny or sexism, and 71 comments expressing hatred or discrimination against women (Lee C. 2018b). Therefore, this proliferation of online misogyny should not be perceived in terms of the exceptional cases of extremist narrative, but as a collective discourse that is constructed in and relevant to wider contexts of South Korean society (Kim J. 2018, 152). Further, some researchers have argued that the rise of online misogyny in the country should be viewed as a manifestation of a growing anxiety over continuously changing gender relations that started to pose a threat to the hegemonic masculinity, and thus the hate discourse directed towards women "for just being women" serves as a mean that is to reinforce solidarity among males (Kim J. 2018; Lee C. 2018b; Kim and Choi 2007). Yet, particularly, the hateful discourse about women's organizations, feminism, but also the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, who are ultimately perceived as the initiators of the changes in patriarchal order, is believed to be constructed and distributed in an effort to argue for what is conventionally supposed to constitute generally shared notions of masculinity (Kim and Choi 2007, 5; Kim J. 2018, 154).

Research conducted by the Korean Women's Development Institute in 2017 seems to reaffirm this statement. Surveying 1,500 Koreans aged from 15 to 34, it revealed that the majority of male respondents, about 37%, hold a belief that Korean women in their 20s and 30s, among all groups in the nation, are the ones who benefit from current socio-economic structures the most. The male participants claimed that the privileges young women enjoy are, among others, not being required to give up their 20s to serve in the military, which gives them more time to prepare and seek for jobs, and not feeling under pressure to support their family

[18] Moonshot Solutions, a London-based social enterprise with an aim to raise awareness about the proliferation of hateful and harmful content spread on the Internet, examined a set of YouTube channels that have published misogynistic contents in South Korea. In their study, conducted from 2016 till 2019, they identified over 111 million views and almost 3 million engagements (user-initiated actions such as likes, shares, or comments) on these channels, which clearly signifies an active participation of Koreans with this type of content. Moonshot. (2019). *Misogyny, molka, and victims of domestic violence.* https://moonshotteam.com/resource/online-misogyny-in-south-korea/.

members financially. Moreover, the men who hold such attitudes were more likely to have made misogynistic online comments, the research demonstrated (Lee C. 2018b).

4.2.2 Cyberfeminism, Megalia, and Womad as forms of feminine counterpublic

As defined by Koo (2020), digital feminism, also known as cyberfeminism, denotes a body of theories and practices situated at the intersection of gender issues as well as feminist struggle with digital culture. Many scholars have emphasized the propose and role of cyberspace as a place that provides almost unrestricted access to women, where they can challenge the prevalent patriarchal system by creating a new culture online (Bavoleo and Chaure 2020; Kim J. 2018). Digital feminism is also claimed to enable females to appropriate the widespread use of technology as a tool of empowerment, increasing awareness about certain problems and mobilizing activism to tackle them. The popularity of such platforms as Facebook, Twitter (from July 2023 renamed X), and Instagram has greatly facilitated the visualization of diverse social demands of feminist activists as well as notably extended its reach, allowing for the interconnection between different feminist groups, also outside South Korea. Furthermore, the abundance of websites and forums with feminist content allowing the share of thoughts and experiences has strengthened the connection between members of the movement, creating a sense of collectivity and comradeship with an eye for a common goal (Bavoleo and Chaure 2020, 8). Yet, focusing only on the positive, liberatory aspect of Korean digital feminism does not give a full picture of the ongoing phenomenon, being largely inconsiderate about the numerous diverse facets that characterize the emergence of cyberfeminism in the country, of which many have contributed to the inflammatory rhetoric embraced by such radical groups as Megalia and Womad (Koo 2020, 832).

As has been already mentioned, not only structural, but also cultural factors have influenced women's engagement in cyberspace, thus creating what is known as a "cultural domination of masculinity in online spaces" (Spender 1995 cited in Kim J. 2018, 153), particularly in terms of customary and linguistic practices. As new media scholars point out, digital media has only reinforced and reproduced inequalities and gendered power relations as our identities online remain largely inseparable from the offline realities. It has been true also in the Korean context, where this men-dominated culture has pushed female Internet users to the margins of cyberspace, resulting in online communities becoming highly gendered as either male- or female-dominated (Kim and Kim 2008; Kim J. 2018, 153).

In this context, the appearance of an online group of young feminists called Megalia in June 2015 can be considered a response to the rising misogyny in the male-dominated online sphere and constitutes a significant moment in the history of both Korean feminism and digital activism (Koo 2020, 837; Barr 2021). The movement, named after the Norwegian feminist novel, titled "Egalia's Daughters," has proclaimed to win over misogyny in the current "gender war" using the strategy called *mirroring* that involves imitating the hostile acts of trolling and women-hating comments commonly found in male-dominant Internet communities. This direct action of reversing the conventionally known target of objectification and using sexist language based on hatred, threats, and belittlement, previously monopolized by men, has been deployed strategically by the members of the movement to expose misogyny and backwardness of the Korean patriarchal social order (Jeong 2020, 8). While considering trolling to be a sort of communal rhetoric allowing for the dissemination of shared ideas and values, Megalia and its members can be seen as having appropriated Ilbe's trolling strategies in order to circulate their communal agendas and build their own counterpublic (Koo 2020, 837). Further, following Yun (2022), the rise of cyberfeminism as practiced by the group may also be viewed from the perspective of the politics of rage, which instead of language of persuasion, utilizes the "strategy combining indignation with satirical humor and rage with cathartic joy" (2022, 259) in order to manifest the distress at the prevalent social prejudice against women at a collective level. In her point of view, this demonstration of gendered rage has constituted a crucial point in the formation of solidarity among the young generation of feminists who incorporated their feminist identity as a form of resistance and a way of survival. Their practices, however, stand in stark opposition to the previous feminist generations who understood feminism as an ethical discourse that should be grounded in, among others, political correctness and consideration for other social minorities (Yun 2022, 259-60).

The mirroring tactic, serving as an instrument that allows to express critic and garner attention to the prevalent gender inequity and misogyny in the country, has also influenced and advanced other new possibilities for gender politics in Korea (Young and Lee 2022, 671). From 2015, numerous political activities and social campaigns were undertaken, including the project to eliminate spy-cam crimes, in Korean the so-called *molka*, which included recording women in public restrooms, changing rooms, and hotels, and later uploading these videos to websites, where men could pay to access them. Another campaign founded the same year aimed to close down the pornography website 'Soranet,' infamous for sharing such content as

revenge porn and records from the above-mentioned spy-cams as well as notorious for arranging, recording, and sharing videos of gang rapes. Both of them, although cooperated by other organizations, have received huge attention from the Megalia users, who raised and further publicized the issue on the forum website DCinside (Jeong 2020, 99).

However, the embracement of the hostile language fueled by the cis-gender-based exclusionary identity politics, which, in fact, also characterize the rhetoric promoted by Ilbe, have eventually impacted Megalia as well, resulting in disputes and the consequent split of the community[19] (Koo 2020, 838; Jeong 2020, 99). The emergence of Womad in 2016 and the subsequent decline and ultimately disappearance of Megalia's website in 2017 have been viewed as a turning point that signifies a change in the stance and methods appropriated by women associated with radical cyberfeminism in the country (Koo 2020, 838).

In fact, in its strive for attention, Womad has largely replaced what has been considered a more critical form of "mirroring" which relied on satirizing an already-existing sexist content with more radical substance that requires the audience's acceptance of its essentialist reasoning assuming the Korean males to be inherently inferior to Korean females (Koo 2020, 838; Jeong 2020, 99). Similar to the Reddit and Ilbe platforms, Womad website is comprised of posts by individual users that can be downvoted or upvoted, influencing the exposure a certain post receives. As pointed out by Koo (2020), who studied the limitations of online feminist communities in the context of larger trolling internet culture in Korea, the upvote button, which is in the shape of a Swastika,[20] reflects "the inflammatory exclusionary identity politics (read: pro-woman, anti-men) [...] based on an us-versus-them rhetoric that touts quasi-biological claims regarding the racial and sexual inferiority of Korean men" the site embraces and promotes (2020, 840-1). Womad's excessive forms of mirroring that catch the attention of media include, among others, the 2017 case of the user known as *Hayoungg-jeyshin byongga 59* (HB59), who, on the forum, claimed that she had drugged and raped a boy she was babysitting when working in Australia, backing up her claim with images supposedly capturing that incident. The information had quickly leaked to other websites ultimately

[19] The main subject of the dispute considered the stance Megalia should adopt towards the LGBTQ+ movement, and ultimately resulted in the website's moderators banning the use of the term "asshole vermin" in reference to gays to stop it from getting out of control. This led to the creation of Womad, spearheaded by Megalia's anti-gay male users who sympathized with the essentialist notion that any biological Korean male should be considered an enemy. This controversy has revealed that Megalian activism was understood differently by different members. For more see: Koo, J. (2020). South Korean cyberfeminism and trolling: The limitation of online feminist community Womad as counterpublic. Feminist Media Studies, 20(6), 831–846.

[20] Swastika is believed to reflect Womad's embracement of the term "Feminazi," that was first coined in 1992 by Rush Limbaugh – a conservative radio show host – in reference to radical feminists.

reaching Interpol and the Australian authorities. Not much later, the Internet users revealed HB59 to be Hozu Gukza, a YouTuber who had posted videos endorsing Womad and its agenda, later also discovering her Twitter (X) account, where she had uploaded images of young boys along with the statement "They must want to be raped, lying on benches like that" (cited in Koo 2020, 835). In a live broadcast on her channel, Hozu Gukza admitted she indeed was HB59 yet she tried to defend her actions by insisting that, as a feminist, she was just trying to "mirror" what men, often with impunity, do towards women.

As concluded by Jeong (2020), through uploads and upvotes of inflammatory and harmful content on Womad website, the trolling, the mirroring practice seems to produce hatred that fuels on hatred (2020, 99). Yet, despite being criticized for its rather ambiguous mimicking method that can be seen as just perpetuating verbal abuse and reproducing cyberspace as a place of violence and sexism, the movement is believed to pave the way to the popularization of a new type of grass-roots feminism grounded in direct actions undertaken against gender discrimination as well as sexual violence and abuse (Kim Y. 2021, 101). Nevertheless, quite contrary to their efforts to improve the social situation of women in Korea, the Megalians' actions considered "man-hating" have ended up triggering an even more vicious "gender war," instilling deep hatred toward feminism in general among many young Korean men (Barraclough 2021). Moreover, by exposing and publicizing the radical and frequently aggressive statements of feminists affiliated with Megalia and Womad, which, however, remain the niche within the Korean feminist movements and are in no way a representative stance of the country's feminists, the anti-feminist groups, have managed to impose its narration of the imminent equation of feminism with misandry on the larger Korean society. As pointed out by Koo, the mirroring method has not only failed to bring its desired effect, but also inadvertently reinforced the prevailing "us versus them" rhetoric based on gendered categories (Koo 2020, 832).

4.3 The rebirth of female solidarity in the digital era

As discussed in-depth by Lee Y-J. (2002) and Kim J-S. (2021), throughout the 1990s Korean women's movements were largely characterized by their ongoing efforts to extend direct participation to go beyond the close circles of feminist academia and organized activists as well as to attract publicity through popular media outlets, both in order to broaden the reach of the movement (Lee 2002 in Kim J-S. 2021, 82). The examples of these efforts included, among others, mobilizing groups of marginalized females as well as organizing campaigns

concentrated on certain issues that were to present them from the perspective of a collective problem. Yet, the current feminist resurgence, often called a "feminist reboot," [21] a name that is suggestive of both the divergence and continuity of it with previous feminist activities, has become known for its participation by young ordinary females, who mobilize themselves through grassroots processes, usually appropriating various digital media platforms without the organizational guidance by an existing movement. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to perceive the present feminist activism in the country as limited only to the digital context as many young newly identified activists have their beginnings in offline activism. Moreover, particularly in terms of organization, the current phase of Korean feminist activism is rather best described by its convergence of engagement in both online and offline spheres (Kim J-S. 2021, 82-83).

The most well-publicized example of such collective action includes the public outrage of thousands of ordinary citizens which followed the Gangnam Station femicide in 2016. The horror of a 23-year-old woman murdered in a public toilet in a completely random attack by a man who later justified his unexplainably brutal act with his hatred for women for ignoring him, sparked an outpouring of rage, with thousands occupying and leaving sticky notes near the place of the murder, Seoul's Gangnam subway station, to protest against this misogynistic act. Additionally, social media were widely used to express fear and frustration as well as share personal experiences of sexual violence in order to criticize the persistence of gender-based violence in the country[22] (Kim J-S. 2021, 76-7, 83; Lee C. 2018b). This raise of awareness about gender inequalities encountered by Korean females has largely set the ground for the country's own #MeToo movement that sparked in 2018 and resulted in a mass of females testifying about their experiences of sexual harassment by high-profile men (Kim J-S. 2021, 83; Yamakana 2022).

The same year, in a series of rallies, a record 300,000 women (presumably organized through an online café) gathered to protest against the spycam pornography. With banners claiming that "My Life is Not Your Porn," women tried to force the Korean government to come up with measures and enforce changes that would tackle the prevailing problem of non-consensual filming in public spaces and sharing of those images on illegal platforms (Lee H.

[21] The term "reboot" originates from the film theory and denotes a new start or new perspective to an already-established work.
[22] According to the 2019 report by Human Rights Watch, almost 90 % of all victims of violent crimes in Korea are reported to be female.

K. 2018). Along with the online communities and networking sites, some non-governmental organizations including, among others, the Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center, as well as various other offline groups, hotlines, and seminars were organized, all of which have consequently influenced the government to place this prevalent problem on the national agenda (Kim J-S. 2021, 84).

As a more prosaic way of protesting against the entrenched gender inequalities, the so-called "escape-the-corset" movement has been launched by those rejecting the rigid standardized ideals of feminine beauty. Those women, in a collective act of rejection of the so-called "K-beauty" standards imposing a very specific idea of femininity, have protested by appropriating some symbolic practices, including destroying cosmetics or cutting their hair very short, and sharing their transformation on such popular platforms as Instagram, Twitter (now X), and YouTube (Kim J-S. 2021, 84).

Therefore, it seems like the usage of social media as an instrument that helps to both organize and communicate as well as raise awareness about feminist issues, combined with the public display of women's grievances in the form of campaigns and rallies, came to constitute the current so-called feminist reboot. The prevalence of cyber sexual violations, the rigid beauty standards, and traditional gender role expectations, alongside some catalyzing incidents such as the Gangnam femicide or the suicide of a female K-pop star bullied after being suspected of supporting feminism, all have forced Korean women to mobilize and take action in an effort to challenge the current unequal *status quo*. Consequently, over the past few years, South Korea has witnessed feminist activism gradually reshaping its society, making gender issues one of the top national agendas (Kim J-S. 2021, 77).

4.3.1 Fighting sexual crimes against women – the unprecedented success of the Korean #MeToo and #WithYou movements

It is nearly impossible to talk about the recent feminist resurgence without mentioning the emergence and repercussions of the Korean #MeToo campaign. Inspired by the American #MeToo movement as well as fueled by the surge of feminism in their own country, South Korean #MeToo came to be considered one of the most successful cases of this campaign in the world and probably the most successful one in the Asian continent (Jung 2023, 5). As the #MeToo activism, as well as other so-called hashtag feminist campaigns, have shown, the proliferation of digital media can serve as an effective instrument for current feminist

activists, also greatly facilitating the circulation of transnational feminist ideas (Kim J-S. 2021, 81). As demonstrated for instance by Kim J-S. (2017) in her study of Korean #iamafeminist and #MeToo activism on Twitter (X), hashtag feminism is the embodiment of what feminists used to call "the personal is also political" in that it brings together personal stories and concerns of individuals and links them to the broader social and structural issues concerning the persisting misogyny and gender inequality. In a sense, it has also helped to significantly lower the barriers for women to identify as feminists, allowing the creation of a collective aim that mobilizes them to take action (Kim J-S. 2017; Kim J.S. 2021, 81).

The catalyst of #MeToo in Korea was the January 2018 public testimony of a female prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun, in which she accused a former official of the Ministry of Justice and her senior of sexually abusing her. Hundreds of other allegations against powerful, high-profile men from the worlds of politics, academia, entertainment, sports, culture, and other sectors typically characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of males, have followed as Korean females, empowered by Seo's testimony, themselves decided to break the silence and spoke publicly about their personal stories of sexual harassment. Inspired by the ongoing global #MeToo campaign, Seo decided to come forward with her experience to help other women being victims of various forms of sexual violence understand that they actually are the victims, not the ones to be blamed, and thus the perpetrators, not them, should be the ones to feel ashamed. (Kim J-S. 2021, 91-2)

In the following months, words of solidarity with the victims of sexual abuse in the form of such hashtags as #WithYou flooded Korean SNSs. Women have also mobilized to take their grievances to the streets in months-lasting protests and rallies demanding the authorities to take some action to prevent and more severely punish the acts of sexual violence that have been easily going with impunity. Examples of the allegations included such prominent individuals as Ahn Hee-jung – a governor of South Chungcheong Province and a rising star in the liberal political circles – as well as Park Won-soon and Oh Keo-don – the mayors of South Korea's two largest cities, Seoul and Busan (Kim J-S. 2021, 93; Shin 2021, 508-9).[23] The successive cases of sexual violations backed by the victims' testimonies' reported by the media and numerous prominent officials and politicians being accused and forced to step

[23] Both governor Ahn and Mayor Park, who for years had sexually assaulted their female assistants, were widely known for their pro-women image. While Ahn and Oh were sentenced to three-year imprisonment for their sexual misconduct, Park, following sexual harassment allegations, was found dead reportedly committing suicide (Kim J.S. 2021; Shin 2021).

down have exposed the prevalence and magnitude of this problem, bringing light to what Shin called " the gendered power structure in which any man could become a predatory harasser if he occupied a powerful position in a hierarchical organization without external monitoring and regulation" (Shin 2021, 509).

Large public opinion's support for the #MeToo movement and its victims in Korea is perceived as a key factor that contributed to its strength and influence. As the study by the Korea Research Institute demonstrated, the majority of the Korean public approved of the movement and its aim, holding a believe that its actions to raise awareness on the issue as well as encourage an institutional and legal change to combat it have significantly benefited the whole society, though considerably more females than males shared this kind of opinion (Korea Research Institute 2019; Shin 2021, 509-10).

Yet, the overall success of the #MeToo movement in Korea is perceived as unprecedented. The demands of the young generation of Korean women, for whom feminism became a tool of empowerment in their fight against sexual violations, allowed the movement to bring about a real change, extending beyond the mere denunciation of prominent officials and politicians, the included fostering reforms of the structural gender inequality and culture condoning sexism characteristic for Korean society (Shin 2021, 507-8). Furthermore, to some extent, it has also influenced the popularization of feminism in general, extending the visibility of its demands as well as its capabilities to impact the public discourse on gender issues (Kim J-S. 2021, 92). Among the most meaningful repercussions that followed the #MeToo movement were several government-commissioned organizational reforms establishing new guidelines that are to manage and, most importantly, prevent cases of sexual abuse. Moreover, with the purpose of developing and enforcing sexual harassment prevention policies, the government installed a gender equality policy officer in eight ministries and agencies. Every ministry was also obliged to establish a public Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Reporting Center[24] (Shin 2021, 512).

[24] The decisions followed the number of official investigations and surveys. One of them revealed that around 85% of female employees in the judiciary and prosecutors' offices experienced disadvantages in work evaluation, distribution of tasks, and promotion in relation to their gender, with over 60% of them admitting to suffering sexual harassment within the organization. Still, most of them decided to endure it, believing that the organizations would not tackle the problem properly. (Lee 2018)

4.3.2 Fighting the patriarchal social conventions – the 4B and "escape the corset" movements

Throughout the 2010s, concerns about the so-called "youth" (c*heongnyeon*) issue have risen and soon came to be one of the most widely discussed topics, both in Korean media and among the academia (Yu and Park, 2011; Lee and Jeong 2021). The neologism *3-po sede*, coined by journalists in 2011 in reference to the generation of Korean young adults that "has given up three things in life" namely dating, marriage, and childbirth, became particularly influential when associating this "youth problem" to the rapid decline in fertility and changing family relations caused largely by the late marriage decisions of the Korean adults, often referred to as a crisis of social reproduction that the country and its government has been trying to address in its pro-natalist attempts to eradicate the problem of rapidly aging society (Lee and Jeong 2021, 636). This withdrawal from normative life paths was consequently recognized as not only a social, but also an economic and political matter in a society considered a victim of neoliberal reforms, burdened with extensive competition on the labor market and a rather weak social welfare system (Yu and Park, 2011; Lee and Jeong 2021, 636). Moreover, both scholars as well as the Korean government went even further and diagnosed a crisis of what has been called an "institutionalized familism"[25] that served as a dominant social paradigm and an engine accompanying the country's successful transition to modernity (Chang 2010; Chang and Song 2010, 539; Lee and Jeong 2021, 636). As emphasized by Lee and Jeong (2021), it is not yet certain whether the reasons behind this deferring or rejection of conventional life paths characterized by creating a martial family upon entering into adulthood, remain similar or are divergent between genders. However, the current feminist resurgence and especially the 4B movement that is elaborated on below, can presumably serve as an indicator that the lives and experiences of the Korean 3-po generation can be considered gendered in one way or another (Lee and Jeong 2021, 636).

Therefore, it has been widely claimed that the intervention of the government, in the form of its pro-natalist campaigns, has largely incited young females to protest against the state's

[25] It is claimed that familism in Korea has been largely protecting the members of one's family in face of the relatively weak welfare policies of the Korean state. However, the influence of it on gender relations has been really profound. The gender-based structure of family relations that has been a byproduct of the Confucian influences and the industrial capitalism of the authoritarian period have been long considered as particularly detrimental to Korean women. For more see: Chang, K.-S. (2010). South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition (1st ed.). Routledge; or Chang, K-S. & Song, M-Y. (2010). The stranded individualizer under compressed modernity: South Korean women in individualization without individualism. *The British Journal of Sociology, 61*, 539-564.

excessive, in their view, interest in their reproductive capacities and the socially prescribed, normative idea about what their lives should look like. Moreover, even though the issues regarding women's reproductive bodies have been, to some extent, politicized in Korea since the 1970s, now, with several government-commissioned measures designed to specifically target this problem, it has come to be perceived as exceptionally concerning (Lee and Jeong 2021, 637).

Among those catalyzing events, Lee and Jeong (2021) point out the 2016 'National Birth-Maps' launched online, where, among others, using the pink dots the distribution of women in reproductive age was visualized in each municipality. As the scholars argue, this incident has "brought to the fore how women's youthful, reproductive bodies are perceived as objects to be managed" (2021, 637) and triggered a wave of criticism. Consequently, a heated debate among the country's digital feminist circles was sparked with a protest advocating a "refusal to be fertile, refusing to be a livestock" (Bwave 2017 cited in Lee and Jeong 2021, 637), by one of the Korean online feminist groups Bwave, organized to confront the exploitation of women's bodies for the aim of the state's reproductive policies. For these women, the refusal of marriage and childbirth has served as a sort of political strategy to fight against the traditional gendered social structures and the patriarchal state.

It was through this online discourse that the 4B, also known as a 4-No's movement emerged to directly oppose and challenge the conventional, government-prescribed societal norms and expectations. The name 4B refers to the Korean homophone *bi* meaning "not" and includes: *bihon* – no marriage, *bichulsan* – no childbirth*, biyeonae* – no heterosexual dating, and *bisekseu* – no sexual relations, the last two included in the refusal list as they were also perceived as connecting women's lives to those of men and further, also to the patriarchal institutions they were challenging (Sussman 2023). Yet, as claimed by Lee and Jeong, what differentiates this movement form the 3-po generation, is that 4B feminist did not involuntary give up their future, for instance, marriage, as a matter of lifestyle choice, but rather decided to actively refuse to be a part of the future as expected and dictated by patriarchal institutions (Lee and Jeong 2021, 637). This critical response to gender inequality and patriarchal social norms constitutes a core of the 4B movement and its views became the most widely shared among young, active, digital feminists who, alongside some discursive practices and political actions, undertook an individualized tactic of self-help as a practical way to deal with the problem. Although 4B's activists may want to change the larger society through online activism and rallies, their influence on individual women's lives through various forms of

self-help practices and particularly modeling an alternative lifestyle to other young females who feel trapped in nowadays Korea, has been certainly quite profound (Lee and Jeong 2021, 633-4).

At the confluence of the fight with patriarchal social conventions of today's Korea, there is also a different, yet quite closely related, feminist online movement namely the escape-the-corset or tal-co (from Korean *talju coreuset*) movement that aims to challenge the conventional ideals of femininity in the country, criticizing gendered norms in beauty and dressing. In a society that considers beauty as an absolute value that is attributed to and imposed upon females, beauty norms in Korea constitute an inherently gendered value as the axis of femininity. Moreover, beauty conventions came to involve not only multiple norms and rules for an individual's appearance but also numerous codes of personal values and attitudes. Beauty norms have remained under the influence of and ultimately became intrinsically associated with the Korean popular culture including idol entertainment, as well as cosmetic and plastic surgery, all constituting the so-called K-beauty industry, that gives women mutually reinforcing messages. Many female K-pop idols are considered an embodiment of the Korean ideal beauty standards and serve as identification models who young women and girls have been looking up to and trying to imitate. Further, the rigid female beauty standards that involve, among others, long hair, pale skin, small face, facial makeup, and a slim S-shaped figure, especially a thin waist, have come to be perceived as matters of social etiquette and thus a very basic duty of every woman[26] (Jo 2018; Yun 2022, 260-1).

In these circumstances, the "escape the corset" emerged in 2016, growing in scope to become a popular feminist discourse throughout social media in 2018, as an attempt by Korean women to free themselves from social repressions in the form of conventionally imposed notions of feminine beauty. These repressions create the metaphorical "corset"[27] which is to explicitly emphasize the degree of the oppression of beauty norms and patriarchal structures on females as perceived by the movement's adherences (Haas 2018; Yun 2022, 260). The movement aims to expose the numerous gendered dimensions of the conventional value of

[26] An example of that is a case from 2016, when CJ CGV – the largest Korean cinema chain – obliged all part-time female workers to wear makeup at work. For more see: (in Korean) Hwang. J.-H. (2016). 빨간 립스틱 필수?…CGV 아르바이트 외모 규정 논. [Red lipstick required? CGV part-time job appearance regulations]. *Donga Ilbo*. April 1. https://www.donga.com/news/article/all/20160401/77340032/1. Accessed May 4, 2023.

[27] For Korean feminists, the corset is not a Western and obsolete device but a universal symbol of the cruelty of the male-centered economy of desire in the sense that the corset restricts breathing, breaks women's ribs, and deforms and damages their intestines. From this perspective, corset is an appropriate word to depict the gendered dimension of beauty and the correlation between beauty norms and gender normativity (Yun 2022, 260).

beauty that are particular to females. Instead of adhering to rigid standards by pursuing beauty, this new generation of feminists is trying to break the prevailing norms of femininity (Yun 2022, 267).

Through the past couple of years, Korea has witnessed increasing numbers of women posting on social media such as Twitter (X) or Instagram photos and videos of them destroying makeup products and other tools that enhance physical beauty, cutting their hair short or even completely shaving their heads, with the hashtag #escapethecorset. This demonstration of rage and an act of sabotage against the dictates of beauty that reinforce female subordination allowed them to gain visibility in which their rebelling body is to reveal the absurdity of the internalized ideal of beauty (Yun 2022, 265-6). Not until they did that, did many of them realize that society teaches women to blame themselves for not being pretty, young, sleek, or skinny enough. Yet, some women associated with the movement or even suspected to be a part of it have suffered discrimination including being fired from their jobs, or reportedly even assaulted, as in the case of the "Isu Station incident" when two women not wearing makeup and having shorter hair[28] were physically attacked by three men in a bar near one of the Seoul's subway stations. Stories of women being questioned and harassed by their friends, family, or even strangers for cutting their hair short, suspected of being "those feminists" or lesbians (Kuhn 2019), clearly reveal the normativity of rigid Korean beauty ideology as well as the dangers that its challenging can bring.

Still, through this rejection of the socially established ideals of what is feminine and beautiful, "escape the corset" has become a collective declaration of women's emancipation, that reflects the voices of Korean women spread through social media (Shin and Lee 2022, 1). Moreover, even today women in Korea remain under the influence of the traditional belief that considers beauty their greatest asset, that they can ultimately exchange for better socio-economic status by getting married (Kuhn 2019). Therefore, rebelling against beauty standards has led some young women to also defy the entire social structure they consider oppressive, and that includes rejecting dating, marriage, childbirth, and sexual relationships, which are the postulates of the 4B movement.

[28] Later, one of the two women admitted on the social media that she deliberately chose to look like that as a sign of her support for the "Escape the Corset" movement. (Lee 2018)

4.4 A Gender War?

Undoubtedly, the current resurgence of feminist activism in Korea has greatly extended the reach of the feminist agenda, as exemplified, among others, by the large numbers of participants in feminist protests in recent years, which certainly constitutes a significant point in the history of women's movements in the country. Importantly, this popularization has been also reflected in the growing number of self-identified feminists – as the 2019 study by the Korean Women's Development Institute showed, almost 49% of Korean women who are in their 20s revealed to identify as feminists. Yet, even though the previous achievements of the feminist movement have been quite profound, widespread misogyny and strong pejorative perceptions of feminism and feminists continuously persist or have even intensified, as some research demonstrated (Kim J-S. 2021, 77; Park, Hankook Ilbo 2021). The neoliberal economy with its aftermath unstable labor market has been largely claimed to diminish the traditional social role of males as sole or major breadwinners of the family that has quite significantly threatened the normative, hegemonic masculinity and male superiority, as experienced by the contemporary generation of young Korean men (Koo 2020). Korean society has been witnessing a process of gradual transition – from a deeply patriarchal towards an increasingly gender equal one. All these, as claimed by Kwak (2020), have made a conflict between men and women in Korea inevitable (in Bavoleo and Chaure 2020, 16). Thus, it seems like Korean young men, instead of blaming the subsequent governments, big corporations, or the system they have established, decided to displace their frustration and direct it towards women whom they consider as allegedly more privileged. Hence, unsurprisingly, the recent popularization and growing visibility of feminism with its strive for a gender-equal Korean society, have met with a significant backlash from these young males for whom they themselves should be considered the victims of gender discrimination (Koo 2020). In their view, there is no need for continued feminist activism as the discrimination against females has been completely eradicated, reaching a state that some scholars have referred to as "post-feminism" (Anderson 2015, 9). Consequently, the feminist ideology, the history of the movement in the country, as well as its current goals have been widely misunderstood and misinterpreted, making feminism the "F-word" and a sort of taboo (Anderson 2015, 8).

The 2021 survey conducted by Hankook Ilbo and Hankook Research shed more light on the country's current state of gender equality, feminism, and the ongoing "gender war" as perceived by Korean men and women in different age groups. The study revealed that

approximately 84% of women in their 20s and 83% in their 30s admitted to agreeing with the statement “The discrimination against women in Korean society is serious,” whereas only 38% and 49% of male respondents from the respective age groups expressed agreement with the same claim (Park, Hankook Ilbo 2021). The survey found a relatively minor difference in the perceptions of discrimination against women with regard to age, with the percentage of respondents from the older generation agreeing with the statement being rather similar to those in their 20s and 30s, standing at nearly 52% for men in their 50s and 51% for men over 60, as well as around 72% for women in their 50s and 64% for females over 60. Yet, a visible increase in the expressed agreement for men in older age groups and a decrease in it for women could be observed.

Moreover, when inquired about the perceived severity of discrimination against men in Korean society, younger male respondents recognized themselves as victims of sexism significantly more often, with around 79% of males in their 20s and 70% in their 30s agreeing, while between 30% and 50% of male respondents in their 40s, 50s, and 60s expressed a similar opinion. Among female respondents, the rate of agreement with this claim remained relatively similar across the age groups, with 33% of women in their 20s, 54% in their 30s, 48% in their 40s, and around 30% for both women in their 50s as well as 60s and over.

These findings to some extent indicate that Korean women and men in their 20s and 30s regard gender discrimination quite differently, with both groups claiming to be victims of gender discrimination and sexism. Moreover, the different perceptions of the problem can be also found across generations, as exemplified by 50- and 60-year-old males who recognized the discrimination against females as more serious and prevalent than the one against males.

This quite significant divergence in views of the young generation of men and women was also found in other areas, as revealed by the survey. Only 27% of men in their 20s and around 38% of men in their 30s agreed with a statement that “Women have a lower social and economic status than men because of patriarchy and sexism,” while more than 50% of the oldest age groups (50- and 60-years olds) expressed compliance with this view. For women in their 20s and 30s, the compliance rate amounted to around 81% and 67% respectively. Moreover, the same pattern could be found when asked about compliance with the statement “Women are not rewarded for their efforts,” with

approximately 18% and 30% of men in their 20s and 30s respectively expressing agreement, while about 74% and 69% of females in the same respective age groups recognizing it as true. All these signify that generally, men of the young generation seem to not acknowledge the degree to which structural gender discrimination against females still prevails within the patriarchal and androcentric Korean society. As claimed by Jeong, one of the researchers at Hankook Research, the competitive market that largely determines an individual's success and social status, including such milestones as passing the university entrance exam or acquiring an office job, has largely contributed to the current 20- and 30-years-old men's feeling threatened, as they were lagging behind women. These so-called indicators of success in Korean society, including for instance higher education attainment which in 2013 revealed for the first time that slightly more females than males had received a university degree, have given those men sort of an illusion of women striving in today's society while them themselves being discriminated against (Park, Hankook Ilbo 2021). This seems to be reflected in the disproportionately large number of 20-year-old men who believed that the university admissions and generally – the country's education system – have been favoring females over males. Furthermore, approximately 75% of the male respondents in the same age group disapproved of government gender-sensitive policies including programs supporting females whose careers were interrupted by childbirth as well as the quota system in elections. (Park, Hankook Ilbo 2021).

Nevertheless, a conclusion that the differences in perception of those issues between men and women in their 20s and 30s is a sign of the full-fletched "gender war" seems to be a bit of an overstatement. As the same survey demonstrated, the 20- and 30-year-olds were found to be generally more unbiased when it comes to gender role stereotypes in comparison to older generations. Both younger men and women in this age group rejected the traditional gender roles that prescribed "Men should earn money, women should take care of the family," and there was little difference between genders in recognizing the need for compensation for the burden of childbirth, childrearing, as well as the military service (Park, Hankook Ilbo 2021). Still, as emphasized by Hankook Research, the significantly distorted perceptions of males and females within this age group are expanded by both the male-centered online communities as well as some radical feminist camps, that mutually demonize each other, while also serving some politicians the logic of hatred that they can easily reproduce to get approval and votes

(Park, Hankook Ilbo 2021). All these may indicate that this gender conflict of the young generation of men and women in their 20s and 30s that assumes they fight with each other and consider the other groups as enemies seems to have been expediently inflated (Song 2021).

Yet, it is worthwhile to point out that a survey conducted by Realmeter in 2018 showed that nearly 60% of both male and female respondents in their 20s admitted that they perceive gender issues as the most profound source of conflict in today's Korea. Moreover, in the same poll, around 76% of men in their 20s and 66% in their 30s admitted to opposing feminism (whereas more than 60% of women in the same cohorts expressed their support for it). The anti-feminist inclination of young Korean males has been also revealed in the 2018 research by the Korean Women's Development Institute, in which more than half of the respondents in their 20s described themselves as anti-feminist and nearly 24% admitted being patriarchal (see Graph 1 below). Interestingly, the highest number of self-identified feminist males was found to be in their 40s and 50s. The results of these surveys are indicative of an alarmingly increasing polarization of the young Koreans' views and attitudes concerning the issues of feminism and gender and may suggest a possibility of future escalation of the problem and a further intensified gender conflict.

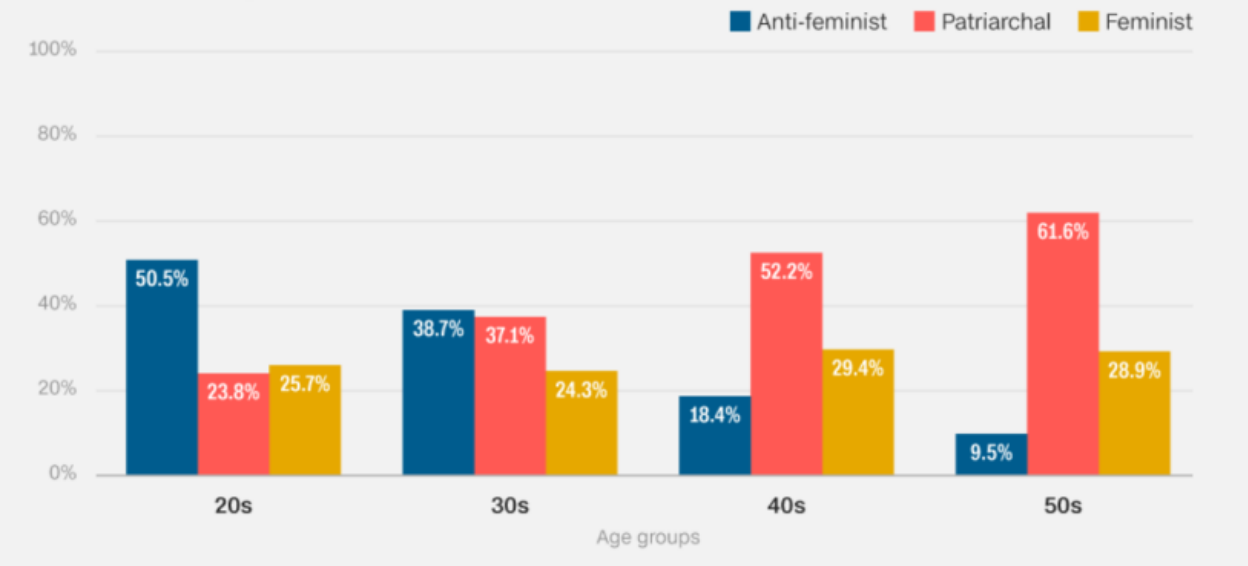

Figure 1: Self-identification of South Korean adult males as anti-feminist, patriarchal, or feminist by age.

Source: Research by the Korean Women's Development Institute (2018) Graphic by Leung N. Retrieved from: https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/21/asia/korea-angry-young-men-intl-hnk.

Thus, it seems like the nature of the current "gender conflict" in Korea, predominantly manifested in aversion, blame, and even sexual insult towards the opposite-sex, has been triggered by the younger generation of men and women, as well as taking place in the online sphere particularly in the way of sharing on social media as well as commenting on online news, where individuals feel free to express their even most radical opinions somewhat with impunity. Moreover, similarly to other online conflicts, it is by nature bilateral, meaning it usually involves two individuals or groups that exchange offense and defense against each other (Lee and Park 2018, 119). In this context, the narratives of online communities such as Ilbae or New Men's Solidarity as well as Megalia and Womad with their mirroring strategy, although certainly not constituting the mainstream, seem to emerge as the center of what has come to be known as a "gender war" in today's Korea. Moreover, many of those online incubated communities have been occasionally taking their frustration to the streets, organizing rallies, and manifesting their vows on banners as well as through controversy-stoking actions. Still, unsurprisingly, this conflict based on politics of hatred and discursive violence utilized as tools for disrupting the current *status quo* has been only reinforcing the narrative of "us versus them" between Korean women and men (Koo 2020, 832-835).

Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile to acknowledge to what extent the recent debate over feminism and issues concerning gender equality have become triggered and polarized in Korea. One commonly raised example of that is the controversy over the 2016 novel by author Cho Nam-joo titled "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982" and the 2019 movie adaption of it. This bestselling book tells the story of an ordinary Korean woman in her 30s who struggles to balance family and work while facing gender discrimination at each and every phase of her life. Although sold in more than a million of copies and claimed by some critics to be one of the most meaningful feminist novels in the country, the book has also met with quite extreme backlash from the anti-feminist circles that heavily critiqued its distorted, in their view, portrayal of men as either passively or actively endorsing the culture of gender discrimination. Therefore, those anti-feminists decided to actively argue against this pejorative, sexist generalization of Korean men that, according to them, has only exacerbated the current gender conflict in Korea (Kim H-E. 2019). Further, with the recent movie adaptation of the novel, those arguments have resurfaced even more viciously, particularly across social media, while also reportedly constituting a reason for many young couples to argue and even break-up (Tan C. 2019). The notoriety of the controversy it triggered has been reflected in many instances including Jung Yu-mi – the actress portraying the character of Kim Ji-young – receiving thousands of hate comments on her social

media account in the span of one day. (Kim H-E. 2019). Additionally, some female idols and actresses who mentioned reading the book, watching the movie or reacted to it somewhat, received serious backlash and were criticized and bullied online.[29] Interestingly, male actors and idols who have also mentioned the book or the movie, for instance, RM of the male group BTS, do not seem to meet with the same scrutiny and critique as their female counterparts. As the Korean movie critic Hwang Jin-mi noticed in an interview for the newspaper Hankook Ilbo, it seems like, to some part of the public, "female celebrities reading the book means it is their way of testifying that they are the victims of gender inequality" (Kim H-E. 2019). Moreover, the book's as well as its movie adaptation's significant success has incited a sense of fear over the rise and popularization of feminism in some Korean males who consequently want to some extent suppress female voices to conserve the *status quo* (Yun 2022, 265).

The anti-feminists have targeted several female public figures, from idols and actresses to politicians and sportswomen. For instance, An San – Olympic archer and a triple medalist at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics – in the aftermath of her success has come under scrutiny and became a victim of a virulent online attack by social media users and was even abused at her home solely due to her preference to have a short haircut[30] (New York Times 2021; JoongAng Daily 2021).

Borrowing the term form Yun Ji-yeong (2022), who examined the current Korean gender war through the lens of the politics of gendered rage, the notoriety of those "feminist witch hunts" has been particularly visible in the domain conventionally perceived as reserved for men namely the videogame industry (2022, 265). When in 2016 Kim Ja-yeon, a female working as

[29] The most publicized cases included the singer and actress Suzy who "liked" a photo of an event organized to promote the movie on Instagram and consequently met with an extended critique, with the screenshot of her reaction spreading through various online communities stirring a hateful debate about her. Another one involved Irene – a member of a female group Red Velvet – who admitted to reading the book during one of her fan meeting events which led to thousands of insults and hateful comments on her social media, criticizing her seemingly feminist reading preferences and her alleged support for the feminist movement. Further, male fans reportedly got rid of the merchandise with her image as well as cut and even burned photos of her while posting photos proving those acts on social media and other online community forums (Koreaboo 2020).

[30] When in 2020 under one of An's Instagram video posts of her practicing one user asked for the reason behind her short hairstyle, she politely replied that it was "because it is more comfortable" (Instagram, retrieved from JoongAng Daily 2021). Still, it did not prevent male online users from speculating on her feminist identity, adding her enrollment at the all-female Gwangju Women's University to allegedly be additional proof of that. A post on a predominantly male online forum claiming "Women who attend women's universities and have a short cut are 90% likely to be feminist" argued that the archer is compelled to be one. The responses that followed were largely insulting and critical. In response to the hostility An has been a victim of, a number of her supporters demanded the Korea Archery Association to protect the athlete, sending hundreds of complaints on the Association's message board. Moreover, in support of all Korean women who decide to wear their hair short as well as An San herself, female Twitter (X) users began to post photos depicting their own short hairstyles under the hashtag #women_shortcut_campaign, which soon became trending. For more see: JoongAng Daily (2021). Despite two Olympic golds, anti-feminists focus on An San's hair. July 29. https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/07/29/national/socialAffairs/an-san-archer-an-san-koreaarchery/20210729182200479.html.

a voice actress for the video game company Nexon, posted a photo of herself wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "Girls Do Not Need a Prince" on her private Twitter (X) account, she immediately faced backlash and was consequently fired from her job. The t-shirt has been manufactured and sold by Megalia, whose members claimed that the message was meant to challenge and denounce the conventional idea that women need male figures in order to be supported and protected by them (BBC News 2016). Soon Kim faced accusations by male fans of games who suspected her of being a Megalia member and promoting misandry. Despite her denial of that yet willingness to take responsibility for her action, fans of the company's games flooded it with complaints that demanded the actress to be fired and her voice to be replaced in the upcoming yet unreleased game, to which Nexon complied with and other companies followed (The Korea Bizwire 2016). Although several members of game communities expressed a critical stance towards the companies' behavior, describing it as unnecessarily exaggerated (BBC News 2016), the voices of players who continuously attack any female whose actions are even remotely related to women's rights issues on the premise of being a misandrist Megalia supporter have been much more prevalent (Yun 2022, 265). In a protest against the actress' dismissal, Megalia's activists organized a demonstration gathering around 300 women, yet a male counterdemonstration, during which some of its participants used name-calling and taking pictures of the female protesters as means to intimidate them, was held (BBC News 2016).

In addition to the anti-feminist public outcry triggered by particular events or certain public figures, the Korean anti-feminist groups have been organized and incubated in various online forums, such as the newly established New Men's Solidarity (in Korean *shin namseongyeondae*) movement where radicalized men actively engage in the fight against feminism. As one of the organization's founders and its central figure Bae In-gyu, recently revealed in an interview for Asian Boss, a popular YouTube channel that undertakes various social issues related to East Asian countries, the belief that almost all feminists in South Korea are radical, extreme misandrists has served as one of the primary objective or even a core of the movement's identity. The group claims that radical feminists have not only been taking over the streets but have also managed to manipulate the Korean media as well as take root in the country's politics as "a minority that has taken over the establishment" (Asian Boss 2022). In the interview, Bae insists that today's South Korean feminists are not advocating gender equality but female chauvinism. On the other hand, the New Men's Solidarity has been promoting a rather ambiguous "gender harmony" that, in Bae's view, would be based on

gender differences and "covering for each other weaknesses." As he claims, this concept should become the primary feminist premise instead of the "blinded gender equality" that, in his view, has been preached by them (Asian Boss 2022). As for today, New Men's Solidarity remains one of Korea's most active anti-feminist groups, frequently organizing its members through counter-feminist rallies hailing the feminists to be "a social evil" (Gunia 2022). One recent incident stoking much controversy and public concern occurred in August 2021 during a rally by women's rights activist group Haeil where Bae In-gyu dressed as the Joker reportedly harassed women who took part in it, screaming "I heard that there were f—king feminists here. I'm going to murder them all" while streaming his actions live on social media (Gunia 2022). The movement's central figure is also known for his controversial social media posts in which he has been frequently blaming Korean women for leading "easier lives" in comparison to men (Bae In-gyu's Facebook). On his public Facebook profile, where he has almost 15,000 followers, he also criticized the government's efforts to tackle the illegal spy camera problem and its alleged reliance on the "feminist establishment:" "Spy cam? It has to be punished sternly by law. But the Republic of Korea is now going crazy, scrapping the principle of the benefit of a doubt by letting men be branded as sex criminals without any evidence just because women say so, due to the feminist establishment" (Bae In-gyu's Facebook post, February 17, 2021, translated and retrieved from Gunia 2022).

4.4.1 Anti-feminism as a new political force

The anti-feminist sentiments have become explicitly heard not only among young Korean males but also increasingly in the sphere of politics, with some conservative politicians manipulating this rhetoric for their political gains in an effort to win the group's support (Moon 2022). After the liberal Democratic Party's Moon Jae-in's presidency, marked with a relative consideration towards largely understood women's issues, as exemplified by, for instance, the ratification of the act on gender equality, legislation on violence against women, as well as an enlarged budget for the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family,[31] the 2022 Presidential elections were characterized by what may be called a "weaponization" of the anti-feminist discourse (Kang, The Washington Post 2022) that is speculated to have

[31] Moreover, before the 2017 elections, Moon has largely campaigned on the premise of becoming "a feminist president" (Seo Y.J. and Hollingsworth J. 2020).

benefited the People Power Party's (PPP) candidate in his victory (Yamakana 2022; Stallard 2022; Rich et al. 2020).

Leading up to the March 2022 presidential election, polarization between the conservatives and the progressives was particularly sharp, with the two leading candidates – the ruling Democratic Party's Lee Jae-myung and the opposition People Power Party's Yoon Suk-yeol contesting numerous, multifaceted ongoing conflicts and divisions: between the young and the old, the poor and the rich, the liberal and the conservative as well as between genders (Al-Fadhad and Choi 2023, 6). The campaign, particularly of the People Power Party's candidate – a former Prosecutor General and a political novice – was indicative of populism and that was also apparent in Yoon's take on the ongoing gender equality issues in the country. In the forerun of the elections, Yoon accused the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of its tendency to promote reverse gender discrimination and regard men as potential sexual offenders and criminals, campaigning on a promise to enforce more severe penalties for false accusations of sexual violence as well as a dissolution of the Ministry, when coming to power (Rashid 2021; Stallard 2020). By that, the PPP's candidate has pledged to realize "true gender equality" – a stance that strongly resonates with the one held by members of numerous male-dominated online communities, including the already-mentioned New Men's Solidarity and Ilbe, who consider the country's gender equality policies essentially detrimental to them as providing preferential treatment in favor of females. Yoon also implied that he considers feminism to be politically exploited and abused as well as a factor contributing to the country's extremely low birthrates, as, in his view, constituting "an emotional barrier to healthy relationships" (Rashid 2021).

To a certain extent, Yoon's convictions in this regard seem to be in line with the opinions of the then PPP's leader Lee Jun-seok, whose controversial statements, including the comparison of radical feminists to terrorists as well as criticism of feminist politics under the Democratic Party as having a totalitarian inclination, attracted a lot of attention and gained him the support of *idaenam* – young men with anti-feminist tendencies. The 38 years-old Lee, considered a men's rights advocate and a new generation's voice, became known for his harsh critique of the country's women-friendly policies and his plea for the abolishment of the

Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, on the premise of its promotion of bias and discrimination against men[32] (Song 2021).

Moreover, the progressive Democratic Party's candidate and the potential successor to the former self-proclaimed feminist president claimed to oppose the current discrimination against Korean men and pledged reform of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF), including its official Korean name that would abandon the word "women" (*yeoseong*) in order to widen its inclusivity, in an attempt to entice young male voters with anti-feminist inclinations (Rashid 2021; Jo 2022).

In this political environment marked by growing divisions and partisanship, the PPP's Yoon Suk-yeol won the election at a very thin margin of less than 1%, gaining 48.6% of support while his main opponent Lee claimed 47.8% of the votes. Nevertheless, following some political commentators and experts, it is crucial to refrain from tracing Yoon's victory solely to the anti-feminist rhetoric and gender-specific men's rights electoral promises characteristic of his campaign, particularly considering the extremely slim margin of the votes (Al-Fadhad and Choi 2023; Kim J. 2022; Gunia 2022). Although the exit polls demonstrated a sharp divide in support among young males and females in their 20s, with around 59% of men in this cohort voting for Yoon and a comparable rate of women backing Lee[33] (Kim Y-E. Yonhap News 2022), it remains unclear whether the PPP's candidate's popularity among *idaenam* was due to his stance on gender issues and his anti-feminist narrative or their frustration over the former president's administration that witnessed increasing economic inequalities, surging housing prices, and decreasing job opportunities, particularly influencing the country's young population (Al-Fadhad and Choi 2023, 8; Gunia 2022; Rich et al. 2022). Moreover, growing public resentment against Moon's administration's legacy and the ruling Democratic Party itself was elevated by its involvement in corruption and real estate scandals, enabling the conservatives to capitalize on those sentiments to win electoral support (Al-Fadhad and Choi 2023, 3-4). Still, it appears that the

[32] In August 2022 Lee Jun-seok was removed from the position of the PPP's leader following the review of the Party's ethics committee for an allegation of sexual favors and bribery. He will remain suspended from party activities until January 2024. Park J.-Y. (2022). 이준석 "가처분 신청 접수했다"... 비대위 전환에 반발. *Hankook Ilbo*. August 10. https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2022081011350000431.

[33] Out of all age cohorts, between men and women in their 20s there was the biggest difference in terms of the chosen candidate. In other age groups, voters were much more likely to choose the same candidate regardless of their own gender. For more information see the graph in: Kim, Y.-E. (2022). 2022 대선 성별•연령별 출구조사 결과 [Exit Poll Results for the 2022 Presidential Election by Gender and Age]. 연합뉴스 [Yonhap News]. https://www.yna.co.kr/view/GYH20220 309000900044.

recent presidential elections' result has become indicative of the increasing multifaceted fractures and divisions within Korean society, with the gender aspect constituting one of them.

4.4.2 The debate over MOGEF and the state of gender equality

Despite the increased backlash against feminism and gender equality efforts, however, President Yoon's electoral vows to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family which was seemingly a quite beneficial political move that helped him to raise to power, has not materialized yet and for now, the Ministry remains in tacked (MOGEF May 25, 2023). Still, President Yoon has reaffirmed that, in his view, the abolishment of the Ministry would intend to better support and protect socially vulnerable groups such as children and women but also Korean families. Further, its newly-nominated Minister – Kim Hyun-sook, one of three females appointed to form Yoon's nineteen-member Cabinet – has publicly supported the President's plans to dissolve the ministry under her jurisdiction, claiming the necessity of its transformation in the face of the changing environment (Korea Herald 2022). In this context, it seems that the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family is to undergo its first major reorganization, yet it still remains unclear what shape it will take.[34]

As data demonstrates, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family remains the least financed ministry of the country – in previous years its annual budget accounted for 0.2% of the total government budget (in 2022 it received around 1.4 trillion won which accounted for 0.23% of the executive branch's budget) from which approximately 3% has been usually allocated to support women and issues concerning gender equality, whereas the majority of funds have been distributed to assist children and families (Jo 2022). Nevertheless, the possibility of the Ministry's abolishment has raised major concerns, particularly among the feminist circles, regarding the future environment for women in the country, as, in their view, its absence may eventually shift the attention away from the issues concerning female discrimination and lead to insufficiency of gender-sensitivity in policymaking. Furthermore, it also constitutes a manifestation of President Yoon Suk-yeol's socio-political priorities – the new President has been arguing that gender discrimination in Korea is not a structural but highly individual

[34] In July 2022, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family published its recent report on policy recommendations to tackle the problems related to gender as well as the population crisis. For more see: Un Y.-J. (2022). A warm society where no one feels alienated. The new government's MOGEF reports on its business to the President. *The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family*. July 29. http://www.mogef.go.kr/eng/pr/eng_pr_ s101d.do?mid=eng001&bbtSn =708687.

problem (Ji 2022). Yet, as demonstrated by various gender equality indicators, for instance, the gender wage gap that shows around 31% disproportion between what men and women earn for the same job – the worst out of all OECD countries (see Graph 2 below) (OECD 2022) – as well as the Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum that in 2022 ranked South Korea on 99th place out of 146 countries with some major problems in the spheres of Political Empowerment and Economic Participation and Opportunity, the reality seems to prove otherwise (see Graph 3 below) (Global Gender Gap Report 2022).

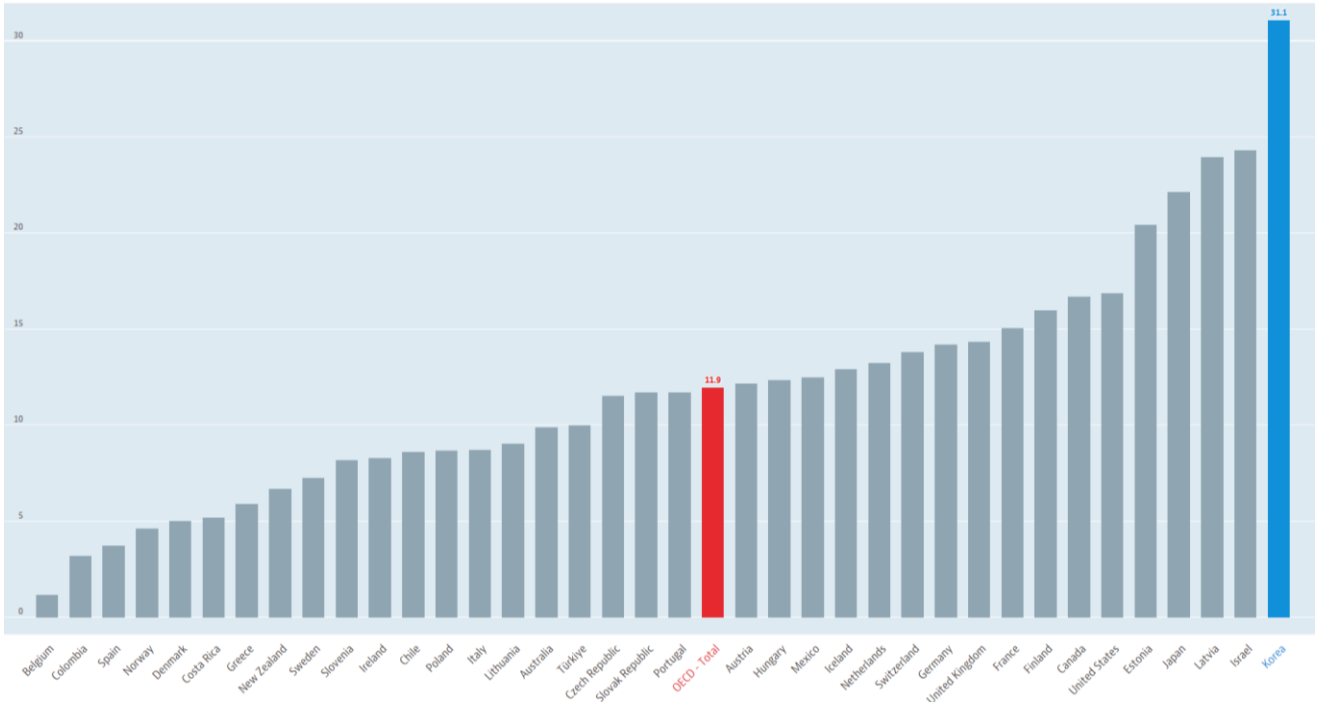

Figure 2: The gender wage gap 2022 – comparison of OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2022). Gender wage gap indicator. Retrieved from: https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/gender-wage-gap.htm.

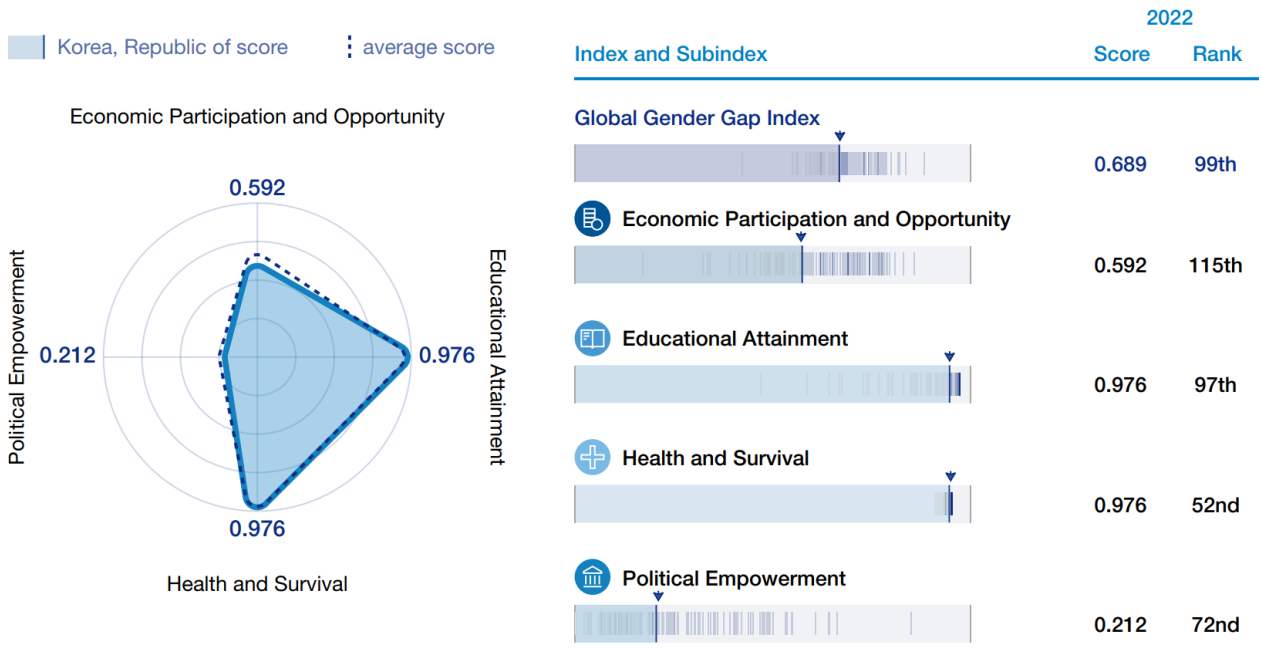

Figure 3: Global Gender Gap Index 2022. Country-specific indicators – Republic of Korea.

Source: World Economic Forum (2022). Global Gender Gap Index Report. July 13, 216. Retrieved from: https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022.

Under these circumstances, the feminist protests against the Ministry's abolition seem to constitute a reaction triggered by anxiety and concern over the future of South Korean politics, which, in their view, increasingly accept and reproduce the anti-feminist narrative (Gunia 2022). However, as the 2022 survey conducted by a local pollster showed, public opinion regarding this issue remains rather divided: almost 52% of over 1000 adult respondents agreed on the dissolution of the Ministry, while approximately 39% opposed it, and around 9% did not express a clear opinion. Unsurprisingly, male respondents were significantly more likely to support the abolishment, with 64% agreeing and around 30% opposing it, whereas, among female respondents, the agreement rate accounted for around 40% while slightly above 47% expressed a disagreement with this idea (Realmeter 2022, retrieved from Jo 2022).

5 Feminism in the lens of the young South Korean adults

5.1 Experiences, attitudes, and identities

Studying feminism, as it is perceived and experienced in modern societies, has been marked with numerous challenges that significantly influence how we examine issues related to individuals' feminist identity, feminist beliefs, as well as attitudinal orientations towards it (Sigel and Calogero 2021, 266). As emphasized within certain critical feminist circles (Sigel and Calogero 2021; Gill 2016), with the emergence and popularization of post-feminist views and the seemingly weakened purpose of feminism in the contemporary world, but also with the diversification of the feminist thought itself, distinguishing and interpreting people's complex and often even paradoxical attitudes and identities in regard to feminism has become essential (Sigel and Calogero 2021, 250). In this context, although the support for feminist principles and goals has increased substantially in the previous couple of decades, the embracement of feminist identification by individuals has not followed. The disavowal of this label, similarly as in the case of every other marginalized social identity, is usually a result of the prevalence of pejorative cultural stereotypes about feminists that view them as radical, men-hating extremists who pursue women's superiority and thus constitute a threat to the whole societal order. On the other hand, in the literature on the subject, certain conditions are repeatedly cited as favorably influencing individuals' support for the feminist cause and their decision to embrace such identity and include, among others, personal experiences of gender discrimination as well as exposure to feminist-related content, for instance, through education.

Moreover, despite some studies suggesting the existence of the so-called "feminist allyship" across the gender spectrum (hooks 2000; Sigel and Calogero 2021), simultaneously, the conception claiming that the privileged position of cis-gender males is serving as a major structural impediment to their engagement in the feminist cause has been also widely recognized in other scholarly circles (Conlin and Heesacker 2018; Burrell and Flood 2019). Further, the recognition that some individuals decide to reject the binary identification assuming either female or male gender is of crucial importance, as such individuals also can and often do embrace feminist values as well as such an identity (Sigel and Calogero 2021, 249).

Therefore, exploring the aspects of feminist attitudinal orientation and identification should be considerate of the diverse experiences and nuanced forms of identity of individuals, regardless

of their gender, recognizing both the potential barriers as well as favorable conditions that might have influenced their decisions in this regard.

5.1.1 Research methods

Although qualitative data serves as the basis of the research, as it focuses on certain attitudes, visions, as well as identities, incorporation of quantitative data can also prove to be useful to provide a more comprehensive overview of the phenomena, therefore the mixed method is utilized.

Practicing research interviewing has been long considered to be associated with and important for feminist projects that aim to bring forward and make sense of individuals' voices, particularly on socially sensitive topics (DeVault and Gross 2012; McHugh 2020, 204). Thus, interviews and specifically semi-structured interviews – commonly favored in feminist studies (Letherby 2003, 85) – constitute my primary data sources, as arguably the most appropriate for uncovering people's real experiences and thoughts thus enabling the throughout examination of this research subject. As emphasized by Maynard (1994), the qualitative in-depth interviewing method with a more unstructured arrangement can be essential in feminist research, allowing one to uncover issues concerning feminism grounded in individuals' experiences and viewpoints that may be considered highly subjective, emotional, or too private to share in other circumstances (in Letherby 2003, 85-86). Therefore, although, interviews are arguably one of the best tools that can be used to explore what people think about a given topic (Rapley 2004), they will have to be carefully prepared and analyzed with utmost objectivity, while, again, also acknowledging that the research participants do not necessarily disclose everything about themselves thus, the results cannot be expected to represent the whole picture nor the truth, especially considering the very small scale of this study.

Following Letherby (2003), the additional use of the quantitative method in the form of secondary statistical data is used to identify and analyze certain social phenomena, trends, and attitudes as well as their distribution within the population that, to some extent, allows for their generalization to a larger group of people. The incorporation of secondary data primarily coming from a number of surveys on public attitudes in Korea allows identifying and comparing similarities as well as differences among certain groups, particularly in terms of

gender and age, while also helping to better understand the reasons and the ways in which they are distributed.

Therefore, as noted by Reinharz (1992), this appropriation of mixed method allows the research to identify and analyze more layers of information, leading to an enhanced and extended understanding of the subject under examination (in Letherby 2003, 86).

Additionally, I acknowledge that full objectivity in the analysis of the gathered data is impossible to obtain. Nevertheless, to avoid the potential pitfalls, particularly the ones that might arise from my own beliefs and prejudices, the attempt for utmost neutrality is acknowledged as necessary in all stages of the research project: in my focus on feminism, my methodological approach, as well as finally, in the data analysis. Following Hook (2016) and many other contemporary feminist researchers, even inadvertently assuming a superiority of certain ideals over others, in this case, feminist over non-feminist, should be criticized and avoided at all costs. Instead, adopting a premise that individuals' decisions to reject or embrace a feminist identity as well as their attitudes and visions about feminism are utterly rational, while still trying to examine the reasons behind those choices, is recommended.

The data is examined through the lens of qualitative content analysis approach by using multiple thematic categories which reflect both my own preconceptions about the subject as well as the ones that emerged during the interviewing process, raised by the participants themselves.

5.1.2 Research participants' profile

The target population of my study is the young generation of South Korean women and men. Having this in mind. the participants were recruited through the purposive and snowball sampling method, in consideration of the following criteria: (1) ethnicity and upbringing – respondents had to be Korean nationals, living in South Korea most of their lives, although not necessarily residing there at the time of the research; (2) age – eligible participants had to be between 18 and 30 years old. Although the attitudes of older generations of adults may be the most significant to understanding the socio-cultural landscape as it is today, yet, following Pepin and Cotter (2018), I argue that the unquestionable advantage of studying the attitudes of young adults is that "their ideals provide an indicator of aspirations [...]" which can serve as the "[..] potential harbingers of future social change" (2018, 8).

Ultimately, seven participants were recruited of which five identified as women and two as men. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 30. At the time of the interview, four of them resided in South Korea, two in Finland, and one in Norway.

Table 1: Participants' gender-identification, age, occupation, and place of residence at the time of the interviews (names are pseudonyms)

Ni-na	Female, 23 years-old, freelancer Seoul, South Korea
Soo-bin	Male, 26 years-old, office worker Oslo, Norway
Tae-min	Male, 25 years old, university student Gyeonggi-do, South Korea
Min-young	Female, 30 years-old, Korean language teacher Espoo, Finland
Da-eun	Female, 18 years-old, high-school student Gyeonggi-do, South Korea
Ha-na	Female, 30 years-old, software developer Espoo, Finland
Ji-won	Female, 30 years-old, programmer Seoul, South Korea

5.1.3 Research limitations

Importantly, I recognize the constraints of this research's findings resulting from the scope of the project that was considerably restricted by a small group of participants as well as from the undertaken qualitative approach. Therefore, the findings do not represent a comprehensive view of the social attitudes whatsoever and my intention is certainly not to generalize the participants' opinions. However, the relatively in-depth data obtained through the interviewing process comprise an expression of the participants' experiences and attitudes, that to some extent, constitute a valuable and insightful look into their lives, when viewed in consideration with all the research's limitations.

Additionally, this study does not account for the possible differences in opinions and experiences that may result from intersectional identities related to divergent ethnicity, class, non-heteronormativity, disability, or religion.

Finally, I bear in mind that my research is to a certain extent based on an assumption that the participants have a general knowledge of the social and political situation in their country, as well as the ability to critically analyze this situation, in other words, that they possess a certain level of socio-political consciousness.

5.1.4. Ethical considerations

All information gathered in the interviews is confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. The identity of the participants is protected and anonymity is provided through the usage of pseudonyms in consideration for their safety and comfort of expression. As the interviews revolved around a socially delicate topic that some individuals may consider uncomfortable and even taboo, particular attention was put into explaining the research's nature and objective as well as all the measures undertaken to provide protection of the interviewees. Therefore, before each interview, participants were informed about the ethical concerns including the data confidentiality, the purpose of its usage, as well as the voluntarism of their participation and the possibility of withdrawing their consent at any moment of the interview. Moreover, as each interview was being recorded, consent was obtained from each participant upon every interview.

5.1.4 The interviewing process

The interviews were conducted from June to July 2023. Both the questions as well as the participants' answers were given in English. Five of the seven interviews were conducted online, using the collaboration and meeting platform Zoom, whereas two of them were submitted in a written form due to the participants' perceived low level of fluency in English.

Each interview began with short questions about eligibility and demographic information, including the participants' age, gender identity, as well as how much time of their lives they spent in South Korea, followed by the open-ended questions categorized into four sections – understanding, experiences, attitudes, and identity – that allowed the interviewees to discuss their thoughts and experiences in an in-depth manner.

The interview sessions ranged from 40 minutes to one hour and a half. All of the interviews conducted online were recorded upon agreement with every participant, using the Zoom recording setting. Right after each interview, notes concerning my impressions, the interviewing process itself, as well as the key ideas, were prepared. Following that, the transcripts of every meeting were made using the transcription software that ensures safety of encryption and data-handling processes in compliance with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation.

5.2 Data analysis and findings

The content analysis was conducted manually – the interviews' transcripts and above-mentioned notes were reviewed several times with the purpose of identifying and documenting all relevant ideas and patterns, with similar themes grouped into categories. The conceptual categories and subcategories were labeled in consideration with the previously defined research objectives as well as the reoccurring themes. Following that, the sorted data was reviewed once again in a search for some more commonalities and differences as well as relevant relationships and connections. The subjectivity of every personal account was fully acknowledged throughout the whole analysis process. The objective was to get the possibly deepest understanding of the participants' personal opinions and experiences in order to discover the meaning behind them.

5.2.1 Content-coding process

With the qualitative data analysis approach undertaken, I began the examining process with an individual case analysis which assumed highlighting the information that seemed the most relevant to this research's objectives in each respective interview, creating condensed and distinctive data. In the next step, the general analysis was undertaken in an attempt to identify and thoroughly examine the differences as well as similarities between the individual's responses and to determine the existing general patterns and tendencies. The main categories of the content analysis were introduced deductively (in a concept-driven manner) in coherence with the research questions, whereas the detailed subcategories were specified following what is called a mixed strategy, that is partly deductively and partly inductively (in a data-driven manner) by segmenting the material.

Understanding and meaning: attempts to determine how the participants understand the concept of gender equality as well as feminism as an ideology, movement, mindset, etc.

- Understanding of gender equality (assess how the concept of gender quality is understood by the participant)
- Understanding of feminism (assess how the notion of feminism is understood by the participant)
- Understanding of who feminism is for (assess the participant's views about what groups of people feminism is for)

Feminist consciousness: examines to what extent the participant shares the beliefs and values conventionally associated with feminism as well as what experiences they had regarding gender equality and feminist-related content.

- Holding feminist beliefs and embracing feminist values such as: striving for the equality of rights, opportunities, respect, and value regardless of gender, eradicating violence against women, etc.
    - Present
    - Not present
    - Ambiguous
- Perceptions related to gendered-power relations and gender inequality problems in the society (assess opinions of the participant on the gender-related disadvantages and discrimination in contemporary South Korean society)
    - Mostly related to women
    - Related to both genders
    - Mostly related to men
    - Non
- Experiences of sexism and discrimination (assess whether the participant has experienced gender discrimination or sexism and if so, what were those experiences; assess whether the participant is aware of some cases of gender discrimination and sexism among their friends or relatives)
- Education and development of the socio-political consciousness (assess whether the participant has searched for and consumed feminist-related content or sought feminist education)

Evaluative stance towards feminism: tries to determine how individuals feel about feminism, particularly as a social group in today's South Korea as well as to identify what reasons might have influenced the participants' attitudes towards feminism

- General attitudes towards feminism and women's movements (assess opinions of the participant about certain feminist movements and feminism more generally in contemporary South Korea)
    - Mostly positive
    - Mostly negative
    - Ambiguous
  - Perception of feminists as radical extremists (assess whether the participant perceives feminism as a generally radical and extreme movement in South Korea)
    - Present
    - Not present
    - Ambiguous
  - Social stigma and negative public perception of feminism in media, among peers, etc. (assess whether the participant has been in some way influenced by the negative public views on feminism in South Korea)
    - Present
    - Not present
    - Ambiguous
- Judgments on feminist-related policies (assess opinions of the participant about certain feminist-related policies in contemporary South Korea)
  - Opinions on the quota system
    - Positive
    - Negative
    - Ambiguous
    - Non
  - Opinions on the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family
    - Positive
    - Negative
    - Ambiguous
    - Non

- Attitudes towards anti-feminist movements (assess opinions of the participant about certain anti-feminist movements and anti-feminist sentiments more generally in contemporary South Korea)
    - Mostly positive
    - Mostly negative
    - Ambiguous
- Expressing the need for feminism (assess whether the participant views feminism as necessary or redundant in contemporary South Korea)
    - Present
    - Not present
    - Ambiguous

Identity status: explores the aspects of the adoption or rejection of the feminist label

- Feminist self-labeling (assigned when participant themselves admits to embracing a feminist identity, finds feminist principles important, and has a rather positive perception of feminism)
    - Private identification (assigned when participant does not share or admit their feminist label to others)
    - Public identification (assigned when participant openly shares their feminist label with others)
        - Active (assigned when participant actively engages in some feminist cause)
        - Passive (assigned when participant passively engages in some feminist cause)
- Egalitarian (assigned when participant rejects any labels yet finds some of feminist principles important, and has a rather positive or neutral perception of feminism)
- Ambiguous (assigned when participant rejects any labels and expresses unclear opinions about feminist principles and feminism itself)
- Non-feminist (assigned when participant rejects any labels, doesn't find feminist principles important, and has a rather negative perception of feminism)

All of the above-mentioned main conceptual categories were identified and coded in each interview, marking the passages that referred to the respective categories. Following that, the subcategories, namely more detailed components of each main category, were decided on and

examined using the thematic criterion that enabled to divide all the relevant data into units of coding. The segmented and coded material was then further sorted out with text and data matrices in the form of tables, giving it a more clear and coherent form that also significantly benefited the analysis.

5.2.2 The analysis

5.2.2.1 Understanding and meaning.

Gender equality

The term gender equality has long become part of our mainstream language, widely used especially by politicians and media, yet, although social awareness about it has been ever-increasing, not many people have considered its deeper and more elaborate meaning. Therefore, I was particularly interested in exploring what understandings of the concept my participants have, aside from the dictionary definitions easily found online. Even though the interpretations shared by the participants did not vary considerably from each other, they all did put an emphasis on slightly different aspects of its meaning.

The most emphasized prerequisites of gender equality were the equality of rights of men and women as well as the lack of largely understood discrimination based on gender:

> SOO-BIN: This topic, it's like very deep and I don't think I have enough knowledge on it but … I guess it just means women and men having equal rights, law has to guarantee equal rights so no gender experiences discrimination, for instance giving equal wages and so on.

> MIN-YOUNG: For me, the most important thing would be not being discriminated against by gender.

Tae-min drew attention not only to discrimination, but also to what lies on the opposite side of it, that is, the privilege:

> TAE-MIN: I understand it like … that there shouldn't be discrimination but also there shouldn't be any privilege.

Ni-na, apart from the equality of rights, also encompassed the aspect of limitations that should not be appropriated to any gender:

> NI-NA: I never actually looked up, researched, or heard about definition of equality or feminism. But I think that gender equality […] has to guarantee both genders' rights […] So, that means

> women can do…. There shouldn't be any limits by gender. That's my definition of gender equality.

Another participant, Ha-na, gave a more elaborate description, besides rights, emphasizing also the aspects such as rules, roles, accessibility, as well as opportunities in different life situations that should be the same regardless of gender:

> HA-NA: In my perspective, gender equality means having same accessibility to whenever you're in a social environment or work environment or, you know, in the family situation. […] it's about having same rules or roles within these different situations […] and also the same rights and opportunities.

On the other hand, both Da-eun and Ji-won, despite their rather brief definitions, managed to bring focus to slightly different aspects, mentioning respectively the equality of respect and judgment:

> DA-EUN: For me, a gender-equal society can be defined as a society where everyone has respect for each other, regardless of gender.

> JI-WON: Well … people are not judged by their gender. It's the essential gender equality.

Interestingly, there were also two participants who in their interpretations of gender equality decided to encompass issues of difference as well as mutual consideration and understanding between genders, with Min-young referring specifically to the "biological differences" of men and women, while Tae-min addressing them as "weaknesses."

> MIN-YOUNG: I think gender equality [...] is basically understanding the biological differences of each other and kind of to consider the other side based on that as well. […]

> TAE-MIN: For me, personally, it means covering for each other's weaknesses […] like both genders have to consider them and help each other out. […]

Table 2: Summary of text matrix for subcategory *Understanding of gender equality*

Interviewee	Description summary
Ni-na	Guaranteeing both genders' rights; no limits based on gender.
Soo-bin	Women and men having same rights guaranteed by the law.
Tae-min	Covering for each other's weaknesses; no discrimination but also no privilege based on gender.

Interviewee	Description summary
Min-young	Understanding and consideration for biological differences; no discrimination based on gender as the most important aspect.
Da-eun	Respecting each other, regardless of gender.
Ha-na	Having same accessibility, same rules, roles, and same opportunities in every circumstance (social environment, work environment, family situation).
Ji-won	Not judging people by their gender as an essential aspect.

The image of gender equality that emerged from the participants' accounts is one of a fundamental human right, followed by the emphasis on premises of respect, understanding, and lack of judgment which ultimately constitute a non-discriminatory environment.

Feminism

In an attempt to discover the contested and nuanced meanings young Koreans make of feminism today, I decided to not impose a conventional, dictionary definition of it, let alone my own one, but rather allow my participants to themselves speak about what it means to them personally. Although many of them were quite reserved and uncertain in their answers, somewhat indicating that they lacked the knowledge to speak about it at more length, still, their definitions comprise a meaningful input into my work as well as an important element of its analysis.

When it comes to the participants' understandings of what feminism is, several in some way equalized it with their definition of the notion of gender equality or somehow emphasized this concept as its central and essential objective. For instance, in her description, Ni-na specifically focused on the aspect of inclusivity of feminism, which, for her, denotes that all people, regardless of their identity, should be guaranteed the equality of rights:

> NI-NA: For me, […] it is kind of similar to gender equality […] everyone should have their own rights. No matter how they identify themselves […] the point is every gender has the same rights.
>
> DA-EUN: It basically means to give equal value to both genders.
>
> TAE-MIN: Feminism should be about not to discriminate people based on their gender.

Yet, the majority of my respondents referred specifically to one group of people that, in their view, feminism is concerned with, that is women. Soo-bin, Ha-na, Ji-won, and Min-young

gave very straightforward definitions, focused around the idea of promoting women's rights in society:

> HA-NA: I don't know much about feminism but, from my perspective, feminism is about raising voices about women's rights in society.
>
> JI-WON: It is about advocating women's rights in society.
>
> MIN-YOUNG: I think just like a basic definition of feminism […] so it would be the movement to promote female rights.
>
> SOO-BIN: I think it is just women fighting for their equal rights. […]

Interestingly, both male participants when inquired about their understanding of feminism, elaborated their basic definitions with a bit more personal impressions, which in both cases had a rather pejorative nature. Tae-min referred to the state of modern feminism in the context of what, for him, is a deviation of feminism, that now rather than gender equality, strives for supremacy of the female:

> TAE-MIN: […] But I guess right now it's changed into … now it is more about women's supremacy and domination. Just more privileges for women basically.

Soo-bin, on the other hand, with a bit of embarrassment admitted to his first impression of the word "feminist" being a stereotypical yet mainstream, as he himself emphasized, perception depicting a rather unattractive, loud woman who hates all males.

> SOO-BIN: […] But the first thing … when I hear a feminist, I see like this ugly … I don't want to sound stereotypical […] Just the typical view of a feminist is a screaming, men-hating woman.

He follows, however, by stating that he finds the impression detrimental to feminism, emphasizing that he does not equate this image with feminism as a whole.

> SOO-BIN: […] There is a small percentage of women like this, they're trying to get more attention […] but I think they're destroying the view of feminism. I think they [feminists] have some positive stances but in the mainstream, it's shown in this bad light.

Table 3: Summary of text matrix for subcategory *Understanding of feminism*

Interviewee	Description summary
Ni-na	Similar to gender equality – every person having the same rights, no matter how they identify themselves.
Soo-bin	Women fighting for their equal rights, especially in the past century.
Tae-min	Not discriminating against people based on gender; now more about women's supremacy.
Min-young	The movement to promote female rights.
Da-eun	Giving equal value to both genders.
Ha-na	Raising voices about women's rights in society.
Ji-won	Advocating women's rights in society.

Thus, feminism, as understood by the study's participants, seemed to be closely linked or even equivalent to the notion of gender equality, with several giving the focus to the advocacy of women's equal rights in particular.

Who is feminism for

The issues related to the extent of inclusivity of feminist causes are undoubtedly incredibly significant in the contemporary world, particularly in South Korea, where feminist movements tend to be rather closed to identities other than cis-gender women. Although I certainly acknowledge the importance of this problem, it does not remain central to this work, thus, I touched upon it very briefly leaving a more proper analysis for further research.

Ha-na was one of two participants who argued for feminism that would embrace the problems of non-cis-gender people as well as sexual minorities, also expressing regret that their issues now remain largely ignored:

> HA-NA: Of course, yes, it should be. Their issues are also ...like ... kind of connected with feminists' [...] but now […] it's somehow not [like that], people don't pay attention to these issues. Of course, it's an issue and it's not a bigger issue than this feminist at the moment. It'll be nice if we also […] take care of these minority's issues at the same time.

Two other interviewees perceived feminism as a platform for all individuals who identify as female, one of whom justified this view by pointing to the diversity of groups such as sexual minorities, while also expressing hope for a new, all-encompassing idea and platform:

> MIN-YOUNG: I think it's a good question. I just personally think that maybe non-cis-gender women's issues could be included in feminism […] but sexual minorities .... there could be many different groups, right, so I think it's a more broad concept than feminism so I just personally hope that there would be some new term or new idea about the whole equality issue so it includes everything.

On the other hand, two other respondents, although mentioning quite different reasons, argued for a separation of the groups under consideration, with Ni-na suggesting the fundamental differences between the issues and problems they face, while Tae-min – focusing on a detrimental effect that the association with feminists might have, claiming:

> TAE-MIN: In a form feminism in Korea is right now, I don't really think it would benefit those groups, so I guess, they should find another platform.

Table 4: Summary of text matrix for subcategory *Understanding of who feminism is for*

Interviewee	Description summary
Ni-na	Those groups' issues [transgender, sexual minorities, etc.] seen as different, thus necessary to remain separate from each other.
Soo-bin	A need for inclusivity for every person that identifies as a female.
Tae-min	A need for other kind of platform for all those groups justified by the lack of benefit the association with the current form of feminism in Korea brings.
Min-young	A possibility of including the non-cis-gender women's issues, but separation in the case of sexual minorities – a broader concept than feminism.
Da-eun	No stance, never thought more deeply about it.
Ha-na	Those groups issues [transgender, sexual minorities, etc.] seen as connected with feminists' ones, thus the need for more inclusivity.
Ji-won	A need for inclusivity for everyone.

Therefore, the participants' views on this issue remained rather divided, with several arguing for an all-inclusive feminist agenda, some claiming a female identity to be a border line of inclusivity, while some drew a line between these issues altogether.

5.2.2.2 Feminist consciousness

In the contemporary developed world where gender quality has, to a certain extent, started to be taken for granted, individuals' worldviews have come to include increasingly more feminism-derived principles and values, which, however, simultaneously become less

explicitly associated with feminism (Aronson 2003, 906; Green 1979, 359). Therefore, all of this may suggest that examining whether individuals endorse or reject feminist principles can be equally, if not more, important than studying the feminist identity itself. Consequently, discovering whether, or to what degree, the study's participants held feminist beliefs and interjected them into their perceptions of everyday life – with a particular emphasis on striving for the equality of rights, opportunities, respect, and value regardless of gender and perception of the lack of it as a major problem – was a natural subject of my examination.

A vast majority of the respondents (six out of seven) possessed a substantially high level of gender or feminist consciousness, recognizing the existence of inequalities as well as a need for further social change in certain areas, with one participant remaining ambivalent about it. Moreover, many expressed the need for an increased gender-sensibility of Koreans, bringing attention to the importance of social awareness of the issues of discrimination against both women and men, while simultaneously emphasizing the negligence or lack of interest of the larger society on the related problems. One of four participants who mentioned the societal carelessness about gender inequalities, perceiving it as an attitude that needs to be confronted and ultimately changed, was Ni-na who directly claimed that in her view, people just "don't care:"

> NI-NA: I feel like most people in here are not that interested or they don't really care about these issues. [...] I think they [women] should recognize and confront their rights and discrimination. I guess.... also men often seem to be put in situations where they don't know if they are facing reverse discrimination.

Also Ji-won expressed a similar stance, emphasizing that for her, especially men tend to remain oblivious to the inequality problems faced by females:

> JI-WON: [...] some people, they don't really care about it, and they don't know if that's even a problem. And also, many guys, I'm not sure, but I think that many guys are not really aware of this kind of discrimination against girls.

Further, referring to the case of uncommonness of paternity leave among Korean male employees, she pointed out how an extensive societal change is necessary for both men and women to realize their rights and opportunities in the sphere of employment as well as family life:

> JI-WON: I heard actually [that] the paternity leave in Korea gets a little bit better, but then still people feel like they shouldn't use it. Still, the society isn't really comfortable with the stay-at-home father, so I guess people hesitate to use it, even though they can have the same length of paternity leave as the moms. And still, many of my friends and many of my colleagues, they prefer to stay at home than letting their husband or boyfriend stay at home. I think society isn't ready for that yet.

Speaking from her perspective of a woman considering having a first child in the employment system she views as unfriendly towards mothers, she referred to Korea's demographic problems as a consequence of Korean females' increased awareness of the disadvantages which largely understood motherhood has on their career prospects:

> JI-WON: […] it's a lot on a woman's shoulders, I guess… But still... I think people are more aware of it because of online or maybe it's getting more international, so many people have been abroad, so they know about it a little bit better. The reason why I think the marriage rate is going down or the birth rate is going down is because people are aware of it a little bit more, since they know they can change the society, they just choose not to be a part of it.

Another participant, Soo-bin, brought attention to the issue of "mutual understanding" between genders, emphasizing the significance of acknowledging and understanding that both women and men can and do experience discrimination in certain spheres or moments of their lives:

> SOO-BIN: I think that... there're problems on both sides, I mean both genders have their issues with discrimination, and... though everybody is rather focused on themselves, I guess that we need more...you know...a mutual understanding. It's just that one gender's discrimination in one sphere doesn't mean that the other gender's discrimination is not possible or I don't know...important in some other sphere.

Table 5: Data matrix for subcategory *Holding feminist beliefs and embracing feminist values*

Interviewee	Present	Ambiguous	Not present
Ni-na	Yes		
Soo-bin	Yes		
Tae-min		Yes	
Min-young	Yes		
Da-eun	Yes		

Interviewee	Present	Ambiguous	Not present
Ha-na	Yes		
Ji-won	Yes		

To sum up, a vast majority of the participants' accounts reflected what can be interpreted as a considerably high degree of feminist consciousness – understood as an increased awareness about gender inequalities – with only one out of seven expressing a rather inconclusive and somewhat skeptical stance.

Perceptions related to gendered-power relations and gender inequality problems in society

Based on the social and cultural ideas about gender roles as well as gendered power relations of inequality and privilege, gender dynamics in a society dictates the relationships between its members. In this way, within both private and public spheres, the normative behaviors and roles are appropriated, consequently shaping the prevalent patterns of power relations between men and women (Han and Chun 2014, 248). Despite far-reaching changes in the traditionally defined gender dynamics in Korean society, certain problems that it entails have still been resonating, causing discrimination and disadvantages that prevail from the household realm to the labor market and policymaking. Thus, understanding how all these issues are perceived by the young participants of this study has naturally become one of the most crucial objectives I devoted myself to. Inquiring it, I was able to identify several different points of view stemming not only from the female or male perspective, but also from a highly individual one.

In order to assess the opinions of the participants on gender-related disadvantages and discrimination in contemporary South Korean society, I coded their accounts based on the most frequently reoccurring gender inequality issues they mentioned, assigning them to the following categories: as *mostly related to women; related to both genders; mostly related to men;* or *non*. Nevertheless, since their accounts tended to be very descriptive and rich in nuances, I explored certain issues and patterns in more depth to better grasp the visions they have of the overall state of gender equality in Korea – the visions that might have also influenced their attitudes towards feminism in their country.

The majority of my interviewees discussed gender equality-related issues in Korea in terms of their changed or continuing to change nature, although some still viewed it as a significant

social problem. Nevertheless, areas that they cited as the most problematic and requiring further improvement varied quite significantly, yet with a few reoccurring patterns.

Four of the participants declared women to remain a more disadvantaged group, often referring the spheres such as employment, promotion in work, particularly in relation to maternity leave, sexual harassment, sexism, as well as domestic work, especially during traditional Korean holidays. Notably, however, it does not mean that they refused to recognize the existence of male discrimination – quite the contrary as the majority pointed out that both genders have to face problems in their own way. Moreover, some of them also emphasized the links between female discrimination with that of men, perceiving inequality as a sort of double-edged sword that by disadvantaging one gender simultaneously works to the detriment of the other. For instance, when asked what group they consider to be more disadvantaged, both Ji-won and Min-young claimed:

> JI-WON: Women for sure. I think in that sense, since women are discriminated, it's also the same for guys. I'm not sure which speech it was, but a long time ago I watched a speech that Emma Watson made. As much as girls get discriminated, that's also discrimination for boys too.
>
> MIN-YOUNG: The situation is getting better but still, I think both groups like a man and woman are disadvantages in their own way. It's quite tricky to say but still, as a woman, I say that woman group is more disadvantaged especially when we get a job or want to get promoted within the company.

Also Ha-na, inquired about whether she considers Korean society as gender equal, replied:

> HA-NA: I would say ....um still no because like the stories that I heard from friends and family um there is so much like … not understandable situations. […] And then the politics, the current government, and those kind of things. I think it's definitely not [equal] yet.
>
> […] When it comes to responsibility for household and family caregiving, it's been changed a lot, so I think there is like less problem than before about the responsibilities for raising a child and so on. But as I said before, women's harassment and the employment discrimination are still there... I heard many, maybe you know, like there are some situations where harassment occurred in a company or in military and they try to hide the story instead of you know punish or do something about it. Koreans should be more sensitive and then hear the women's voices more.

On the other hand, Min-young emphasized the family sphere as the one requiring change, referring specifically to the traditional Korean holidays that, in her view, have been perpetuating inequalities in its established traditions and customs. She also noticed that

nowadays, inequality problems can and should be discussed more, since, as compared to the past, there is finally time and space to properly tackle them:

> MIN-YOUNG: Traditionally definitely yes, and again it's getting better but still... I think like there are a lot of inequalities regarding the household or family caregiving especially the traditional holiday. [...] I think there should be more chances like... that people more openly talk about it, so I think maybe at least in my parents' generation because the economy growth was such an important goal, so I think people actually didn't have even time to talk about it.
>
> A: It was not a priority, yeah?
>
> MIN-YOUNG: Yes, so like now we have more time and chance to talk about it more openly so I think when people really talk a lot about this issue then maybe we can find a solution.

Further, two other respondents believed that currently, the inequality issues somehow affect both genders more or less equally, yet the nature of them naturally differs from each other. Moreover, in Tae-min's case, this kind of problems seemed to be perceived in highly individualistic terms, with personal experiences of young individuals in the sphere of employment being an example of that:

> TAE-MIN: Within my generation of like people in their 20s and 30s, [it] depends on their personal experiences. Because if I want to get a job in manufacturing, men can be more advantageous, but if I want to be in teaching, women can be more advantageous. […] So, I think that it's not like one gender is unilaterally discriminated against.

Then, asked about certain systemic problems related to gender, he said:

> TAE-MIN: It seems there is a bit of sexual harassment still exists... but the rest of the things... I don't think they exist anymore. I think that there still may be some individual cases, but generally it does not happen.

On the other hand, similarly to Min-young, Da-eun pointed out the influence of tradition, particularly in the household realm, which perpetuates the conventions people have been accustomed to and which remain outside of the sphere of state interference:

> DA-EUN: It doesn't seem to be equal. Culture itself seems to have been greatly influenced by the distinct differences in the gender roles of Confucian culture. So, every gender has its advantages and disadvantages, I guess. And then, a lot of improvement has been made in the surface area, but I think that not so much in the household, because you cannot interfere so much in people's personal lives. So, I think many just take and repeat what they've learned in their own families.

Only one participant expressed the opinion that nowadays, after all the improvements in this sphere as well as with an increased awareness of the problem, Korea can be considered a gender-equal society:

> NI-NA: If I have to say that between yes or no, I would say it's a gender-equal society. Things have changed rapidly past decades. So back 15-20 years ago, I don't consider it as a gender equal society. But now, things have changed a lot. You know, Korean thing, everything changed so fast. And if something happens on the news, like whole entire Koreans are obsessed about it. And they're trying to do something with it. These days, I can consider Korea as a gender-equal society. Compared to the past, I think the awareness about those issues is very high.

Yet, she also indicated that, based on her experiences and observations made while traveling abroad, she views Korea as ranking in the middle, between Europe and Southeast Asia, in terms of how gender-equal the society is:

> NI-NA: Korea is like a middle between Europe and Southeast Asia [in terms of gender equality]. So somewhere like that.

Since the military service – compulsory only for the male part of the Korean population – has in recent years become a subject of contention, frequently cited as an exemplary case of reverse discrimination, I was dedicated to learning how my interviewees perceive this issue.

Unsurprisingly, the two male respondents were the most critical about the mandatory military conscription forced onto men, but not women, however, to a greater or lesser extent, opinions of all participants revealed to be negative about it yet suggesting quite diverse solutions to this compounded problem.

One of the male participants, Tae-min, very clearly indicated that both men and women should be obliged to enlist in the military, to which he directly referred as an experience of suffering:

> TAE-MIN: I think that, ideally, there should be an option for both of genders, if it’s obligatory then why just one gender needs to suffer.

Another male respondent, Soo-bin, made a similar stance in regard to the unfairness of the conscription that enlists only men, yet he also pointed out that, although he considered it reasonable to maintain this kind of compulsory military service in Korea, that remains in the

state of war, for him, the time that it covers forces people to lose a huge part of their lives, which is then difficult to be put back together:

> SOO-BIN: Well, I think that maybe in a state of war it's ok to do military service, but it should definitely be shorter, for 2 months max. Because if it's longer than that, it is really hard to put your life back together… You feel like you have to lose and just … let go of so much of your life. And as it is, it should be for both women and men, everyone. And then, whoever likes it joins the professional army.

Moreover, Tae-min mentioned also the so-called extra point system giving military service advantage in employment – briefly introduced in Chapter 2 – which abolishment he perceives as unjustifiable, leaving men without any sort of compensation for their disadvantaged position in the labor market:

> TAE-MIN: And due to the Korean Gender Equality Act, the military's additional points system was abolished, making it impossible to compensate for employment disadvantages caused by the mandatory service period. I think it actually made things more unfair.

Further, one of the female participants also referred to the additional points system, admitting that she does not consider it unreasonable in the current circumstances, and was surprised that this system has actually been abolished:

> JI-WON: I'm not against the fact that they're actually getting some kind of benefits when they apply for a job. I heard the guys who finish the military service, they get some kind of points.
>
> A: Yeah, but I think it was actually abolished, this system of additional points.
>
> JI-WON: Ah, really? […] I think that they still consider these two years as the kind of experience when they get the job candidates. I'm not against that, because they spend their two years at least in some kind of system, so they learn something.

Additionally, after some consideration, she admitted that from a rational point of view, no gender should be exempt from enlisting and at least some less physical training should be given also to females, posing, however, an important question:

> But do women want to go? […] But if I think rationally, to be more equal women also should go. Maybe not the same service, but still. Maybe less physical, but still, something relevant.

Ni-na was another interviewee who emphasized the need for some basic military training for women, pointing out how important, in her opinion, it might turn out in a critical situation forcing a direct threat from the North Korean side:

> NI-NA: I think that women should get a basic training for military skills, because of the fact that South Korea is in a state of war with North Korea. If something bad happens, every citizen should know how to react and be able to use their skills in this situation.

Min-young, on the other hand, expressed quite the opposite stance, viewing the conscription of ordinary citizens as pointless when compared to the professional army. With regret, she also mentioned the prevalence of a culture of harassment in the ranks of the army, which young men often become a victim of:

> MIN-YOUNG: .... I don't know .... like back then the war and the political situation was really bad. But nowadays ... like Korean people keep talking about this North Korean dictator or the war, but in the end, nowadays... they should want nuclear power then. Anyway, the war could not be ended so ... I don't know what's the point of still having the military if it's not... very professional army. At this point, when I see the 20-something guys ... they need to go to do the military service and spend their time [there] for one and a half years, it's kind of shame. There are a lot of bad stories about military service ... that the young men go through the harassment or violence.

Inquired about whether some kind of other military training should be provided also to women if men are obliged to do it, she replied:

> MIN-YOUNG: If it's necessary, why not. But like I told you before, I basically don't understand why in the 21st century we need this kind of militaries.

Table 6: Data matrix for subcategory *Perceptions related to gendered-power relations and gender inequality problems in society*

Interviewee	Mostly related to women	Mostly related to men	Related to both genders	Not present
Ni-na				Yes
Soo-bin	Yes			
Tae-min			Yes	
Min-young	Yes			
Da-eun			Yes	
Ha-na	Yes			

Interviewee	Mostly related to women	Mostly related to men	Related to both genders	Not present
Ji-won	Yes			

Although both the perceptions of the discriminated groups as well as the areas and nature of this discrimination being referred to varied substantially among the interviewees, in simplified terms a slight majority pointed at women as more frequent victims of gender inequality in Korea. The second most repeated opinion viewed gender inequality-related problems as concerning both genders somewhat evenly. Only one participant claimed gender inequality to be a rather uncommon and highly individual problem, implying a perceived gender parity of Korean society, whereas no one seemed to attribute gender discrimination exclusively to males. However, all participants, to a greater or lesser extent, found the compulsory military service for men unequal.

Experiences of sexism and discrimination

Experiences individuals as well as people from their close environment might have had with gender discrimination can undoubtedly influence one's attitudes towards feminism, increasing the awareness of gender inequality issues as well as impacting the perception of them as a legitimate social problem. Thus, by letting my participants speak about their own, but also their relatives or peers, encounters with gender inequality, I attempted not only to discover their stories, but also identify the possible influences these experiences had on their perceptions of feminism.

Their accounts revealed that nearly all have had some kind of experience or minor instances of discrimination related to their gender, with some worrying about the possibility of its occurrence in the future. More specifically, within the group of five female respondents, there were two mentions referring to workplace discrimination and harassment, two about the inequalities rooted in the traditional Korean holidays such as Jesa and Chuseok, one mention of the conventional femininity ideals being a source of restriction of women's freedom of self-expression, as well as one reference of the domestic works' division in marriage and one of the sexual harassment in public transportation.

Ha-na was one of the participants who described her experience with workplace discrimination that involved some minor, as she called it, instances of sexism or harassment she went through every time she started to work in a new company as an intern:

> HA-NA: when I was in South Korea...When I had an internship in big company. In there, men colleagues call me a ‘beauty’ or something like that. Yeah, I think that's sort of like sexism or something like this. Harassment somehow, something like that. And making coffees [for them] those kind of things. It was like few years ago back then. Many things changed but at the time … whenever I moved into new company, I felt this kind of minor sexism or harassment in those companies.

Another participant, Ji-won – speaking from the perspective of a married woman at an age perceived as one when females often decide to have a first child – expressed her concern or even fear of sharing her intention of getting pregnant in the near future with her work colleagues:

> JI-WON: As I told you, I'm married and I'm considering to have kids now... Actually, I'm not talking about this plan to my colleagues because I'm afraid that I will get disadvantaged from any kind of promotions. I don't want to give the impression that I will be away for a while if I have a kid. So, I'm trying to hide, and I'm afraid this could be a reason for many girls why they don't want to get married early, because it will affect their getting jobs and everything related to work.

Her worries were exacerbated by the stories she has been hearing from her friends in similar life circumstances, one of which she shared with me:

> JI-WON: My friend recently got a second child. It's after she took a maternity leave for her first child. It's been only like six months since she went back to her workplace, but she applied for the second one [maternity leave]. Her company wasn't really happy about it and tried to give her a shorter time compared to her first maternity leave. She needed to fight for it. That's the sexism that my close friend experienced.

Min-young, on the other hand, working in a quite feminized field, as she admitted herself, mentioned having no experiences with workplace discrimination. However, what she did mention were the restrictions of women’s and girls’ behavior and appearance that, from her experience, remain bound by the conventional social ideas about what femininity should be like:

> MIN-YOUNG: I really don't remember any like a very severe experience .... Or maybe I'm just like so used to hearing about some things so I maybe didn't think about it that seriously. But, while growing up in Korea, I think like all the female friends were talking ... I think it was kind of common ... like ‘oh you're a girl so you shouldn't be dressed up like that or behave like that’ something like this. So that's why ... they're kind of common... like a conventional idea about what female should be.

Ji-won was the only participant who highlighted a case of sexual harassment which, as she claimed, makes women feel vulnerable yet helpless when confronted with it, describing a story that very recently happened to one of her female friends:

> JI-WON: Actually, my close friend told be yesterday that she was harassed by a random guy because it's really packed during the rush hour, and someone was robbing himself against her. I was really shocked to find out that's actually happening. Of course, I heard it happens a lot, but the place where I usually go to, it's hard to avoid the situation, because anyway you need to go to work. Even if it happens, you can't really do anything, you can't really avoid the place. And if it's very packed, you cannot even prove the guy was doing it on purpose. Also, you can't really run away from the situation, you can't really do anything. Maybe you can shout, but then I guess you will get puzzled. That's what my colleague said. She said she didn't know what to do at the moment, and she just came back home and just cried by herself.

In the case of one participant – Ni-na – her very precise and narrow understanding of the word "discrimination" itself, that, as she explained, needs to encompass an ill-intentioned behavior and mistreatment, as well as having experienced no instances of discrimination herself, might have influenced her perception of the uncommonness of such occurrences and, more generally, lack of gender inequalities in Korea altogether:

> NI-NA: My definition of discrimination has to be intention ...it has to be bad. I think [all I experienced in Korea] it's age discrimination. And apart from that, I never felt any kind of discrimination in Korea. […] From my experience, I actually worked as a designer in one of the companies last month. So, I kind of know what it's like when a woman works in a company. And then actually I felt that it's a lot more comfortable than guys working in a company. I don't know why I felt like this, but there's definitely no harassment. As far as I can tell, I never heard or seen anyone who got harassed by someone in the company, apart from the news, so I don't think it's a common thing.

Later, however, she, herself, admitted to one situation in which she felt unjustifiably excluded from participation in a family tradition due to being a female:

> NI-NA: [During] Korean Thanksgiving [*Chuseok*], not everybody does it, but my family do [a thing] called *Beolcho*. [...] Fathers and sons in every families go to the graveyard to cut the grass. It's considered as a man's job. So, my father goes *Beolcho* every single year and then he asked my younger brother to come, starting this year. And he never asked me about it, 'you want to go to *Beolcho*' or something like that.

Then, she also continues with the stories of her female friends:

> NI-NA: And then from my friends, there are a lot of cases like 82-year-old Kim Ji-young [original English title Kim Ji-young, Born 1982] the movie. Because I heard that still a lot of grandmothers think that boys shouldn't be allowed in the kitchen. They should not touch things in kitchen or cooking and preparing stuffs has to be done by girls. So, whenever my friends go to their grandparent's house on Thanksgiving [*Chuseok*], New Year's Day [*Seollal*], they always complain about 'my brothers are not helping at all'. And no one really talks about it.

Paradoxically, although claiming the prevalence of gender equality in Korea, Ni-na describes several instances of gender discrimination happening to her or her friends. Yet, perhaps because she perceives these occurrences in highly individual terms rather than as a systemic problem, they seem not to influence her perspective in this regard. Moreover, she seems to associate these instances with culturally appropriated traditions perpetuated mostly by older generations, which she, herself, stated:

> NI-NA: So, I don't think that older generations are aware of what feminism is. They're just doing what they saw, what they've been experiencing.

This perspective emphasizing tradition as a source of inequalities was a reoccurring theme repeated by several other participants, particularly female ones.

On the other hand, male interviewees naturally focused exclusively on instances of discrimination targeting men, however, the areas of its occurrence did not vary substantially from the ones highlighted by females. For instance, Tae-min mentioned the inequality of responsibilities incorporated in the traditional ancestral commemorative rites called Jesa, claiming:

> TAE-MIN: During Jesa, when family gather all together and [perform] commemorative rites for ancestors, all the male member has to attend no matter what while my sister doesn't come just because she has other things to do.

Then, he also pointed out the abundance of policies and programs that aim to support young female engineers and entrepreneurs in establishing their own businesses, feeling wronged by the fact that no such initiatives are lunched to benefit men:

> TAE-MIN: In college – Natural Sciences – there's a scholarship only for girls engineers and while I prepare my start-up, I realized that there are so many policies and benefits for a girl who wants to start their own business and no such things for guys. I felt really bad about it.

In this case, although I certainly do not intend to discredit his valid point, it did seem like he did not recognize the reason why this kind of programs have been created in the first place, namely the strongly disadvantaged position of women in this field.

Table 7: Summary of text matrices for *Experiences of sexism and discrimination*

Interviewee	Description summary
Ni-na	Gender roles inherited in traditional Korean holidays; division of domestic works during the traditional Korean holidays; impairment of career prospects after having a child.
Soo-bin	Apartment-sharing advertised to women only.
Tae-min	Programs and scholarships dedicated to supporting female entrepreneurs only; more responsibilities of male employees; gender roles inherited in traditional Korean holidays.
Min-young	Restraints of the conventional ideals of femininity; division of caregiving and domestic work, especially during traditional Korean holidays; more importance given to financial support for the sons.
Da-eun	Never thought about it or realized it happened.
Ha-na	Workplace sexism; impairment of career prospects after having a child.
Ji-won	Gender roles in marriage as perceived by family members; impairment of career prospects after having a child; sexual harassment in public transportation.

The participants' accounts cumulated and intersecting mostly in areas such as family, work, and cultural traditions, may help to better understand the qualitative nature of the experiences with gender discrimination of young Korean adults on the individual level, while also shedding more light on their position towards feminism.

Education and development of the socio-political consciousness

Previous studies on feminist attitudes of young adults, for instance, one conducted by Aronson (2003) on American women, revealed the development of feminist consciousness and identity to be closely related to the institutional legitimization of feminism that is said to expose individuals to feminist ideas, influencing their perceptions of this ideology. In the above-mentioned research, Anderson particularly emphasizes the impact of women's or gender studies courses taken at the university as one of the most powerful tools for nurturing such feminist perspectives. Thus, inquiring my interviewees about their experiences with such courses as well as other feminist-related content such as books or movies, has naturally

become one of my objectives that in turn could possibly allow me to examine what has influenced their conceptions of feminism the most.

As I expected, most of my interviewees – four out of seven – reported having read the book "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982" or watched the movie based on it at the time it became a popular and contentious debate topic in the country. At the same time, for all these participants, it did not seem like the story it portrays has had a significant impact on their views on feminism nor their perceptions of gender equality issues it raises, perhaps due to a generational difference between themselves and its characters as well as a sense of detachment and disengagement with the plot they have felt. For instance, to both Da-eun and Ni-na, the problems depicted in this story felt very unfamiliar, unrelatable, or even odd, as they, themselves, have never had contact with such instances of discrimination and found them distant from their own life circumstances. Additionally, Ni-na pointed out that she perceives the struggles of the main female character as representing the most severe cases of gender discrimination in the country, that are faced by only a minority of Korean women. However, she also admitted that some of her friends she talked with found it quite relatable, connecting it to their own realities. Similarly to Ni-na, Tae-min described his encounter with this movie as quite unappealing, feeling that it showed strongly overblown as well as uncommonly occurring problems.

Interestingly, Tae-min was also the only respondent to ever participate in a gender equality-related course, which, as he admitted, has been established obligatory for university students in Korea in order for them to graduate. Nevertheless, his attitude towards it was noticeably critical:

> TAE-MIN: Actually, in order to graduate [from the University], we have to take a course for example on gender equality or sexual discrimination. It's a mandatory course. But I wouldn't choose it myself if it was not like that.

It may suggest that the mandatory nature of such courses fails to bring the desired effect as a tool potentially nurturing gender-sensitivity and feminist consciousness.

Further, three female participants reported consuming other feminist-related content such as books by foreign authors, domestic and foreign movies, as well as podcasts, however, all referred to these encounters as unintentional or unconscious of their feminist character. Still,

their choices in this regard seemed to be most likely caused by curiosity and desire to learn new opinions and a better understanding about certain issues. As Min-young admitted:

> MIN-YOUNG: I don't know whether you already heard about this book [...] Kim Ji-young, born 1982. [...] I also read a lot of like comics were about feminism ... And then, I don't know what is the title of the book in English exactly, ... like a war didn't have the face of female or woman .... [English title: *The Unwomenly Face of War*] it's by a Russian writer [referring to Svetlana Alexievich] and it was nominated to the Nobel Prize. So […] there was a lot of it, books, dramas or movies related to feminism... But, just personally, I wasn't like super into it [in a sense like] 'okay I gotta study feminism.' […] But if I remember correctly, when I studied in Korea in 2017 or 18, feminism become a very hot topic.

She also adds:

> I thought it would be interesting to at least like have some basic understanding or how other people think about it so that's why I have read the books or I've watched some of the movies.

Additionally, others, like Ha-na, wanted to learn more about women's perspectives in regard to something that was close to her own life circumstances, as a female in a male-dominated tech industry:

> HA-NA: I often like to watch YouTube videos regarding Michelle Obama, because she's not literally feminist but she raises voices for women. And because I'm in tech [industry] where a lot of men are in, so I like to watch videos that talk about women in the tech field.

Table 8: Summary of the text matrix for *Education and development of the socio-political consciousness*

Interviewee	Consumed content
Ni-na	Kim Ji-young, Born 1982.
Soo-bin	No recall of such content consumed deliberately.
Tae-min	Kim Ji-young, Born 1982; gender equality-related course at the University.
Min-young	Kim Ji-young, Born 1982; several books, such as The Unwomenly Face of War, dramas and movies related to feminism.
Da-eun	Kim Ji-young, Born 1982.
Ha-na	Videos and podcasts about women in the tech field.

Interviewee	Consumed content
Ji-won	Several books, such as Lessons in Chemistry; movies that touch upon feminist topics.

All these possibly suggest that the preconditions and motivations behind the participants' decisions to reach for feminist-related content of any form might have impacted their either positive or more negative reception of it. Furthermore, in the case of the group of interviewees under examination, the aspect of relatability to this kind of content was revealed to be of crucial importance to a more meaningful and mindful reception of it, resulting in stronger recognition of the existence of certain gender equality problems as well as greater feminist consciousness.

5.2.2.3 Evaluative stance towards feminism

Discovering the opinions of the participants about certain feminist movements and feminism more generally in contemporary South Korea was one of the most essential parts of this research. Based on the common themes that emerged from the interviewees' accounts, I was able to explore multiple aspects related to their opinions and what they stem from, while also keeping in mind that all of them are fully rational decisions reflective of these individuals' own social realities.

General attitudes towards feminism and women's movements

The most commonly reoccurring theme in the visions of the participants was the differentiation they made between the "good" or "right" feminism and the "wrong" or "biased" one. This stark division characterized a vast majority of opinions regarding both certain feminist movements – that in recent years became quite well-recognized by the larger Korean public, including primarily the #MeToo and #WithYou initiatives but also others such as the infamous Megalia and less popular 4D or escape the corset movements – as well as their overall evaluation of feminism in the country. Nevertheless, this consistency in perceiving feminism as a morally diversified ideology that consists of both "right" and "wrong" feminist activists, did not mean that their attitudes towards feminism were equally consistent.

Two of the interviewees remained mostly critical about both the above-mentioned movements and feminism more generally, emphasizing that it is not "common" among South Koreans and

its objectives are in no way representative of the common stance shared by ordinary members of Korean society. The exception was the #MeToo movement, which all the participants were rather positive about. Still, one participant hinted that to him, also in this case, it can become "abused" and manipulated by underlying harmful intentions of the ones involved in it, by saying:

> TAE-MIN: It is necessary for a movement like #Metoo to be used to catch crime, but it is not desirable for it to be abused for the benefit of certain groups. 4B and tal-co [escape the corset] are up to their mind, I don't think they are common values for common Korean women. And I think people who support these [groups] are generally unhappy people in their real life. I think they support the movement to cover their weaknesses and dissatisfaction with themselves.

Two other interviewees were very ambivalent and unable to express a more elaborate opinion on this topic, which, however, also constitutes a piece of significant information on its own.

As for the three remaining participants, the positive stances about certain movements on the one hand were combined with more unfavorable opinions about others, including primarily Megalia and Womad communities. As Ji-won put it:

> JI-WON: I think they're doing some good, like #MeToo and the Escaping the Corset movement, that kind of thing. They're just trying to stand up for themselves. Unless… I think there're all kinds of movements, and if it's not going too extreme, because I think some are going to the wrong direction, everything other [than that] is okay. […] I know that Megalia and Womad are very criticized, and I understand why, totally.

Another participant who viewed Korean feminist movements in a quite positive light mentioned how a certain initiative has influenced her perception of wearing make-up and helped her realize that it became a sort of normative attribute of femininity in Korea. As she admitted, it even made her question her own motivations as to why she is so used to wearing it:

> MIN-YOUNG: About the escape the corset movement, I think it was also [similarly to #MeToo] like a hot topic for a while and whenever some female celebrity cut her hair or do less makeup they would talk about. It it's a lot but I think in the end ... the original idea was nice that, in the end, putting makeup on or do whatever hairstyle or whatever clothing it's your own decision. But before this actually, I think, I haven't thought about why I need to do makeup or why makeup is kind of necessary within a society for women. I think it was good opportunity at least to think about what I am doing and why I'm doing it.

Ha-na, although unfamiliar with some other movements I asked her about, when inquired about her thoughts on #MeToo, admitted:

> HA-NA: I think very positively on this movement because, you know, it shows how women try to change society, their opportunities, and their rights in society. So, I think instead of staying calm and saying nothing, it's a very good movement to show ... to change the society in a positive way.

Despite revealing mostly positive perceptions in regard to feminism in Korea, also this group of participants recognized the existence of some controversial movements, which, however, did not substantially influence their overall view of feminism. This stance was particularly well-articulated by Min-young:

> MIN-YOUNG: […] And then, also the Megalia... I think I might have read some comments or something that those people wrote about the Korean men, and I don't think they are real feminists if they are like that. If they really want to make both men and women rights equal, then they shouldn't make any kind of discrimination in that malicious way. So, it's just a shame that feminism's got this bad image because of those groups.

Social stigma and negative public perception of feminism in media, among peers, *etc.,* and *Perception of feminists as radical extremists*

As already mentioned in the previous parts of this work, the controversies that the term "feminism" entails as well as the kind of stigma it imposes on women who directly express support for it has become a restraint for females wanting to engage in feminism in any way, including simple discussions about it that often have to be opened with a cautious disclaimer stating: "I'm not a feminist, but…." (Tan 2019, 32)

All these made me eager to learn in a more comprehensive and extensive manner, how this study's participants perceive this issue as well as what experiences they had with it. As I had partly assumed, three of the respondents seemed to share this view that associate or even equalize all feminist movements in Korea with extreme, radical feminist behavior. This claim was demonstrated, for instance, in Ni-na's statement:

> NI-NA: Most feminists, if they identify or call themselves feminists in Korea, are probably from those radical communities, like Womad. And this is my opinion ...I just think they are doing this stuff without knowing what they really want. They just want to fight; they just want to express their anger. They just don't feel happy about their own life, and they want to express with something else. They want to attack people. Yes, and then they just want to make a confusion, so

> that people can fight each other. Yeah, this is just my own opinion, they do [use] feminist movement just to make people more confused, I guess. Yeah, I don't really see any point of doing that.

Yet, three other participants who held a more favorable position towards feminism and feminist movements in the country, shared with me their experiences with using the term in conversations, emphasizing the uncommonness of the idea of its direct articulation, even among friends. As Ji-won pointed out:

> JI-WON: It [feminism] kind of became a negative word for some reason.

Later she also mentioned what she thinks is a possible cause of that:

> JI-WON: […] [some feminist groups] still have a very negative mood, so many of my friends avoid talking about the word feminism … avoid it at all. We are talking about women's rights a lot, but that word is kind of what everyone is avoiding, I think.

Further, also Min-young noticed the unfamiliarity and bizarreness of this term, indicating that it somehow never directly appears in conversations:

> MIN-YOUNG: [...] I don't know how about in Poland or in Finland ... but in Korea ... I have never basically heard that 'I'm a feminist,' it's like that even among female friends. It's kind of weird to say like 'oh yeah I'm a feminist.' […]

She continued with a claim that not only the word's avoidance, but even denial of any association with the movement, is a quite common practice:

> MIN-YOUNG: I think Korean people usually never say this. [It's more like] 'obviously that I'm not any feminist.'

For these three female participants, the term "feminism" seemed to become a subject of some sort of self-censorship which they subconsciously practice in their social environment, even when talking about issues that directly relate to feminist concerns.

Table 9: Summary of the data matrix for *Social stigma and negative public perception of feminism (in media, among peers)*

Interviewee	Present	Not present	Ambiguous
Ni-na	Yes		
Soo-bin			Yes

Interviewee	Present	Not present	Ambiguous
Tae-min	Yes		
Min-young			Yes
Da-eun	Yes		
Ha-na		Yes	
Ji-won			Yes

It seemed like almost all participants remained somehow influenced by the controversy and stigma the term "feminism" entails, with only one out of seven reporting to be unaffected by the pejorative image that this ideology and movement as well as the people who associate themselves with it, have. Still, a more ambiguous position of the three respondents towards this negative image was accompanied by skepticism as well as hope for the rehabilitation and improvement of this pejorative public perception of feminism in the country. Whereas in the case of the three other interviewees, they themselves seemed to consolidate and perpetuate this image.

Table 10: Summary of data matrix for *Perception of feminists as radical extremists*

Interviewee	Present	Not present	Ambiguous
Ni-na	Yes		
Soo-bin			Yes
Tae-min	Yes		
Min-young			Yes
Da-eun	Yes		
Ha-na		Yes	
Ji-won		Yes	

The incorporation of the image of feminists as radical extremists was identified among three respondents, with the rest of the participants divided equally between the ones expressing an ambiguous position in this regard and the ones who did not seem to incorporate this image.

Table 11: Summary of the data matrix for subcategory *General attitudes towards feminism and women's movements*

Interviewee	Mostly positive	Mostly negative	Ambiguous
Ni-na		Yes	
Soo-bin			Yes
Tae-min		Yes	
Min-young	Yes		
Da-eun			Yes
Ha-na	Yes		
Ji-won	Yes		

In sum, the participants' overall attitudinal orientation towards feminism and feminist movements turned out to be diverse and quite equally divided between the analytical subcategories: with three identified as holding mostly positive attitudes, two as having an ambiguous position, and two as possessing a mostly negative stance.

Judgments on feminist-related policies

Opinions on the quota system

The quality of democracy is determined not only by the institutions existing in the state, but also by the extent to which various social groups participate in them. In this context, the so-called gender of democracy is increasingly gaining importance in public debates. It has been noticed that the lack of women in political or, more broadly, public life, ignoring their voices in decision-making processes and debates on political priorities, leads to incomplete democratization – the so-called "male" or "masculine democracy," which turns out to be partisan, and the decisions taken in it – not optimal from the point of view of the society as a whole (Moghadam 2008; Heinen 1992). Therefore, although democratic institutions existed long before the idea of gender egalitarianism appeared, nowadays more and more emphasis is placed on equality between citizens as a significant factor in the democratization process, and even as one of the key indicators of the quality of the state's political culture. Nevertheless, in numerous countries, including South Korea, the barriers to females being elected, such as their perception as incompetent leaders as well as their systemic discrimination, are still negatively influencing their chances to participate in decision-making (Freedom House 2023;

Liu S-J.S 2018) Thus, gender quota systems in politics, entailing a minimum percentage for the representation of female politicians, are established as an effective measure to compensate women for these barriers, allowing for a more fair and equal participation. However, both the role that quota systems play in raising female political representation as well as their perception as a legitimate and democratic tool, are rather complex and diverse, as various studies demonstrate (Zehnter and Kirchler 2020; Nayar 2019; Franceschet, et al. 2012). Even in some feminist circles, it is argued that quotas are, in fact, anti-democratic and harmful to female politicians, as rather than equality and merit, they support bias based purely on demographics, which in turn delegitimizes women elected both with and without quota (Nayar 2019). Despite its drawbacks, as shown in a study by Shin Ki-young (2014), the enforcement of gender quotas has quite successfully contributed to more sustainable female representation in the South Korean National Assembly. Moreover, although the effective quota system was enforced only on the proportional representation part of the parliament in South Korea's mixed electoral system,[35] due to the "spillover effect" in the long run quotas seem to benefit the female candidate selection in both proportional representation and single-member district realms[36] (Shin 2014). Still, the public reception of the quota system in the country has been ambiguous and attitudes towards it remain rather mixed, thus making it an interesting topic for examination.

Diverse the issues of quota implementation are, also the opinions of this study's participants turned out to significantly differ from one another. Three of the respondents shared a view that may be considered a positive one, describing gender quota as needed and beneficial in the current Korean system that still does not seem to give equal representation to female politicians. Furthermore, those three respondents referred to the nature of the Korean political sphere as the main argument in favor of the existence of gender quotas in the country. However, all of them emphasized the temporality of its usage as an effective measure which is to eliminate the underrepresentation problem, stating that eventually this kind of system will need to be abolished.

> HA-NA: I heard that the women ratio in the congress [in Korea] is really low compared to all the OECD countries. It's really poor, so I think it's just this kind of ... how do I say ... it's a like this

[35] Though quota system was also applied to the single-member district portion, its stipulation and enforcement were weak in comparison to proportional representation realm.
[36] The excerpt was based on the author's Learning Diary written for the course South Korean Politics and Society taught by Sabine Burghart during the academic year 2021/22 in the University of Turku.

> kind of basic rule that can promote women to be in politics and to be politicians. I think it's a good approach in the beginning.
>
> JI-WON: Well, for now, since it's really male-heavy, I think having some quota would be a great start to make it a little bit more equal. But I think later it should be gone because it can be a reverse discrimination. For now, getting into it [politics] is way too difficult, and having some women in the system would be more helpful to have more gender-considered laws and stuff.
>
> MIN-YOUNG: I think maybe when they just started this system, it kind of shows how much gender inequality is severe in Korea, like back then. And even though situation is getting better but it's going on because still there is some necessity to kind of support females more. […] I see that there are more female candidates whenever there are election so I think it's going into a better direction. But I think maybe at some point they should abolish this kind of system.

One participant emphasized the duality of the gender quota system, which on the one hand brings more women to take part in decision-making, yet on the other, results in the delegitimization of them as competent and effective politicians:

> SOO-BIN: I guess it is a good decision, if there's very few women in the political sphere like in Korea right now. It gives them a chance to take part in decision making. But I guess that it also makes men doubt their, you know…. competences. So, it is a like good in a way, but also bad in a way.

Two of the interviewees, however, held beliefs unfavorable towards gender quotas, with one evoking its negative impact as creating a detrimental image of women in politics:

> NI-NA: It's actually not good for women in politics because the girls in politics might have a stereotype that she came in just because they took an advantage from this. So, I don't think that it's a right or a good way to promote women in politics,

while the other referring to it as a "twisted" form of gender equality policy that unfairly elects politicians based on their gender instead of their skills and merit:

> TAE-MIN: I think it is not the right way of gender equality policy […] like this twisted form of feminism that demands privileges. Politicians should be chosen based on their skills and so on … and not because of gender.

Table 12: Summary of the data matrix for subcategory *Judgments on feminist-related policies – Quota system*

Interviewee	Mostly positive	Mostly negative	Ambiguous	Non
Ni-na		Yes		
Soo-bin			Yes	
Tae-min		Yes		
Min-young	Yes (at the beginning)			
Da-eun				Yes
Ha-na	Yes (at the beginning)			
Ji-won	Yes (at the beginning)			

The participants' accounts divided and often ambiguous, to a certain extent – largely limited by the small number of the sample under examination – reflect the compound nature of the gender quota system as understood by the larger public opinion. However, it cannot go unnoticed that the respondents who claimed more favorable views on the quotas were also inclined to hold more positive beliefs about feminism and feminist movements, whereas the participants more critical about it tended to perceive feminism in a more negative light.

Ministry of Gender Equality and Family

As revealed by the 2022 survey included in Chapter 3, the social debate over the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family as well as its future abolition or reorganization remains significantly divided – with approximately half of the respondents of this poll being in favor and half against of it remaining intact. Therefore, examining this issue in a more qualitative manner seems quite valuable, as it may, in turn, shed new light on the individuals' opinions and attitudes towards the Ministry itself, as well as its previous achievements and possible future operation. Although the scope of this study does not allow for much proper analysis and leaves the issue for further research, I was still interested to learn what perceptions of this topic my participants have. Unsurprisingly, the opinions about the Ministry as well as the plans to dissolve it were very diverse, which, indeed, to a certain extent aligns with the survey findings cited above. Nevertheless, as many as three of the participants expressed strongly

negative opinions about the Ministry and its work, with two taking a rather ambiguous stance, one having no position, and only one declaring a positive attitude towards it.

Inquired about her thoughts about the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and the plans to abolish it, Ha-na highlighted the possible detrimental effect of this move as well as emphasized that the work it oversaw has not yet been completed:

> HA-NA: It's not a right way to demolish this ministry because still, there are a lot of things to do in Korean society to diminish this discrimination toward women. So, I think this is just ... how to say ... this just promotes [wrong things]. I mean, there are a lot of things going on ... like political game and so on. I know there are a lot of stories going on about this premise ... […] I don't think it's a good way to promote women's rights and so.

Soo-bin and Ji-won, although not completely against the Ministry's existence, expressed more critical claims on its past accomplishments, yet also stating a need for some political body or simply more policies that would deal with gender equality-related problems. In her reply, Ji-won also touched upon the problematic issue of the Ministry's very name (which in Korean, as was previously mentioned, is translated to Ministry of Women and Family), as one of the things that should be changed for this governmental body to appeal more to her:

> JI-WON: Well, I don't really care if they abolish it, but they should change it to something else. Because I kind of agree that they didn't really do much. Maybe if they change the name and exist in another kind of form, it could work. […] I think, as long as it has *yeoseong* [female] in the name, it'll not do any good. If there is some kind of ministry or other body taking care of family issues or gender issues, that's more important than just the Ministry itself. They just need to have more policies and more practical things that they actually take care of instead of just some kind of department dealing with that, only in theory, on paper.

Another interviewee who mentioned the harmful repercussions the Ministry's official Korean name has on its public image was Min-young. In her answer, she was rather critical in her evaluation of this governmental body, giving particular attention to the word "female" that in her view, prevents Korean males from giving the Ministry any support as it, even name-wise, does not consider them:

> MIN-YOUNG: I myself also didn't have such a nice image about this Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and then I don't know... I think it's kind of easy for men to give hostility because the [word] 'female' is written in their name, so [men think that] this is not the government organization for us, so why would I need to support that. […] It should be like both genders are

> included ...yeah for me it's also kind of like ... why only for a woman, in the end … if they support *kajok* [family] anyway.

On the other hand, two other participants – Ni-na and Tae-min, who held a generally negative view of the Ministry, pointed out the negligible effect any of its policies has had and thus deemed its existence unproductive and pointless:

> NI-NA: To be honest, I have never heard of the policies or programs they have created that have actually had a good effect on society or helped in any way... For me, this Ministry is completely useless, at least in its current form, so I guess, for me it may be abolished.

> TAE-MIN: It would be nice if some more policies that are good and beneficial for the whole society were formed, but if it's the way it is now, it doesn't need to exist […] I don't see any good or beneficial things that this Ministry has done.

Table 13: Summary of the data matrix for subcategory *Judgments on feminist-related policies – Ministry of Gender Equality and Family*

Interviewee	Mostly positive	Mostly negative	Ambiguous	Non
Ni-na		Yes		
Soo-bin			Yes	
Tae-min		Yes		
Min-young		Yes		
Da-eun				Yes
Ha-na	Yes			
Ji-won			Yes	

To conclude, the opinions of the participants – in majority negative or at least ambiguous – depicted the Ministry of Gender Equality as a rather incompetent governmental body that, if not abolishment, requires a thorough reorganization on such fundamental levels as its basic agenda, the effectiveness of policy implementation, as well as its official name.

Attitudes towards anti-feminist movements

With the publicity of male movements promoting anti-feminist rhetoric in the country in the previous couple of years, I was eager to inquire what my interviewees think about this trend and how they evaluate these groups as well as their agenda. Still, even considering the sole subject of my study, but also the overall sensitivity of this issue, I did not expect the answers

to be in any way supportive of the movements. Nevertheless, although all critical, the replies of the participants allowed be to get a more comprehensive understanding of what they think these movements and the people supporting them are like. Many described it as similar to radical feminist groups, including the most well-known Megalia, emphasizing that the movements, though remaining on completely opposite ends, are both enforcing a radicalized, toxic, malicious mindsets and distorted view of feminism and women, which has been widely criticized by the larger Korean society.

> MIN-YOUNG I think Ilbe is kind of same as the Megalia so they kind of maliciously distort feminism. […] I feel like in society, the perception about the Ilbe is pretty bad. I don't know how it looks like within a male group, but at least when there're both male and female together then [it's] like 'ah have you heard about that guy or that guy, like oh how can he do that' that kind of image.

> JI-WON: So, not only Ilbe, but also Megalia, they have a really distorted view of women and men. I hope they're both getting smaller because I tend to hear less about them nowadays.

> NI-NA: I do not support any of their actions and voice because I personally think that they have a very toxic mindsets, Ilbe is very criticized in Korea, but still, not many people are supporting them, and it's never like you just admit in public that you like them or support them. But I don't think that generally these groups are representative of men's rights, at least not in a good way, that it supposed to be.

> TAE-MIN: I do not think that the above organizations and women's organizations represent the average of men and women in Korea because I think they represent the interests of themselves rather than the average position.

One participant also shared an interesting story about her female friends' worries when going on blind dates:

> JI-WON: I'm not sure if it's still big, but it used to be a really big problem in a society. I remember when my friends were going on a blind dates, they were checking if the other person is a member of Ilbe or not. You wouldn't be able to tell apart, but still, while you are talking, those specific words that they are using, you can notice if they are actually a member or not. Even if you are not an active member, still you can see if they use the community or not. So, one of my friends actually broke up with her boyfriend because he kept using those specific words that Ilbae members use. […] she was not really comfortable with the fact that he might be a member because they are known to be sexist, I guess. Yeah, it was a red flag.

Table 14: Data matrix for subcategory *Attitudes towards anti-feminist movements*

Interviewee	Mostly positive	Mostly negative	Ambiguous
Ni-na		Yes	
Soo-bin		Yes	
Tae-min		Yes	
Min-young		Yes	
Da-eun		Yes	
Ha-na		Yes	
Ji-won		Yes	

The participants' critical views on anti-feminist movements in Korea, although unsurprising, revealed an image of those groups as toxic, non-representative, and, perhaps most importantly, similar in nature to the radical feminist communities such as Megalia and Womad.

Expressing the need for feminism

In times when women, in countries conventionally deemed as developed, have seemingly guaranteed themselves a complete equality of rights and fair treatment in all life realms, the argument claiming feminism's meaninglessness has increasingly gained attention, becoming a subject of contention between feminist and post-feminist supporting circles. The understanding of what feminism has become in today's world as well as what its current agenda is, together with its perception as right or wrong, may certainly influence the individuals' beliefs about it as necessary or redundant. Thus, examining the study's participants' views on whether feminism is indeed needed in contemporary South Korean society was naturally a meaningful objective.

Interestingly, none of my interviewees expressed claims that were to stand totally against the need for feminism's existence in Korea, many, however, articulated the necessity of some kind of alteration, either in social perception of women's movements in the country, or feminism's overall objectives.

For instance, Ji-won pointed out how discussing feminism as well as using the word itself should not be a taboo that makes people uncomfortable or scared of negative judgments that it somehow entails:

> JI-WON: Yeah, I think there should be [feminism] but also the word "feminism" should have a better reputation. People shouldn't feel uncomfortable using the word. You can't really talk about the word itself, so how can you talk about feminism?

Min-young was another participant who, despite strongly believing in the necessity of feminism, expressed regret with its current common association with the most radical groups which distorts the understanding people have of feminism as a whole:

> MIN-YOUNG: There is definitely a need. But I think why .... before, my friend in the Turku University also wrote about the propaganda in Korea as his master thesis, so back then I also talked to him that it's kind of shame that the term feminism itself is kind of like distorted very badly in Korea […]

On the other hand, Ha-na, referring specifically to the understanding people have of feminism, believed that for the Korean context, the word "feminism" itself should be replaced with some other term that would help people consider it in a more "integrated" manner – without separating the roles of men and women:

> HA-NA: I think yes, there's a need for feminism. But instead of using the word feminism in South Korea I think it'd be better to just ... change the term because this term somehow […]

Soo-bin, while emphasizing the need for "healthy" feminism that, in his view, should serve as a guarantee of equality for both women and men, mentioned his concern with the present attitudes towards it as well as hope that its image could be somehow improved:

> SOO-BIN: I guess it should exist, if only for it to like … guarantee equal treatment of both genders and also give attention to some problems with it. But it's somehow like … now people see it in quite negative light so I think it should be changed for the better for it to actually work and stuff.

On the other hand, three participants, namely Da-eun, Ni-na, and Tae-min, due to their quite strongly pejorative perceptions of the current feminist movements in Korea, shared a more ambiguous opinion on feminism's necessity, claiming, among others, that nowadays, it creates more problems than benefits for the whole Korean society. Ni-na, for instance, stated that although feminism based on the premise of ensuring equal rights for both genders would be valuable, still, in its present form she saw it as unnecessary and even harmful:

> NI-NA: Yes, but not in its current form. I think that feminism under the meaning of a guarantee of equal rights on both sides would be really helpful, but still... like it should be a premise that they

> are beneficial to society, like the whole society, without just arguing or emotionally appealing to each other, like it is right now. So, I guess, we don't need feminism that is what it is right now ... it's now doing more harm than good.

Additionally, Tae-min pointed out the problems posed by contemporary feminism due to its exclusivity as well as striving for privileges for only women:

> TAE-MIN: I don't think there is a need for feminism that only considers women's human rights and more privileges for women, like now. It just creates more problems in society.

Table 15: Summary of the data matrix for subcategory *Expressing the need for feminism*

Interviewee	Present	Not present	Ambiguous
Ni-na			Yes
Soo-bin	Yes		
Tae-min			Yes
Min-young	Yes		
Da-eun			Yes
Ha-na	Yes		
Ji-won	Yes		

Although no participant blatantly stated the redundancy of every form of feminism in contemporary Korean society, almost half (three out of seven) somewhat questioned the necessity of its existence, referring particularly to what they viewed as "the wrong feminism" which was said to be emotional, unbeneficial, and excessively focused on gains for women exclusively. Moreover, among the slight majority of the respondents who did perceive feminism as needed, expressions of concern over its pejorative public image as well as the necessity of some change prevailed.

5.2.2.4 Identity status

Following Huddy (2001), Quinn and Radtke (2006), as well as Duncan (2010) who warned against an overly simplistic and reductivist treatment of social identities such as the examined feminist one, I tried to avoid categorization that would lack complexity – dichotomously assuming the existence of a strict boundary in feminist identity status, such as between feminist and non-feminist, either yes or no. However, examining the individuals'

understanding and attitudes on feminism as well as their motivations to reject or embrace a feminist identity in a qualitative manner can arguably "lead to meaningful insights into the complex intersection of political identities and personal ideologies" (Zucker and Bay-Cheng 2010, 1903). Therefore, keeping all of these in mind, I attempted to analyze the responses of the study's participants in a way that would account for all the complexities as well as qualitatively different understandings and experiences of feminism, while taking into consideration a so-called "feminist paradox" (Zucker and Bay-Cheng 2010, 1895) or "feminist gap" (McCabe 2005; Duncan 2010; Houvouras and Carter 2008), entailing an embracement of feminist values while simultaneously a rejection of the feminist label itself, which turned out to be a commonly identified pattern. The assessment of the gradation of feminist identity was attempted through the introduction of several analytical categories, namely: *feminist private, feminist public (active or passive), egalitarian, ambiguous,* and *non-feminist* with the criteria of each based on the responses for questions regarding beliefs on gender equality, feminist consciousness, and self-labeling. Moreover, in my analysis, I tried to get a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the respondents' decisions to reject feminist self-identification while holding beliefs that to a large extent align with the feminist ones, considering factors such as a fear of stigma associated with the word "feminist" in today's Korea, perceptions of contemporary feminist movements and initiatives in the country as well as an overall understanding of what feminism is. Although Zucker and Bay-Cheng (2010) in their study on the gap between feminist attitudes and feminist identity of American students suggested the existence of a major ideological gap between the self-identified feminists and individuals they named non-labelers, that is the ones that reject the identity but embrace the feminist values, I did not make a similar observation among my interviewees, perhaps because of the small number of participants of the study or due to the nature of contemporary feminist movements in Korea itself, and this matter should be a subject of further research.

The most commonly identified buffer against the embracement of feminist label among the respondents was the conviction that contemporary feminism in South Korea is the "wrong" form of feminism, that is not beneficial from the point of view of the society as a whole.

> TAE-MIN: Being a feminist is fine if it means equalizing each other's rights. But if you only think about the gains of one side like now, that's not the case. I wouldn't call myself a feminist. I think their behavior and what they represent is just incorrect.

Inquired about whether he finds some feminist values important, Tae-min replied:

> What are the values? Is it female supremacy? Is it equality? Because it seems like it's about more benefits for women only, and I don't support that.

Another participant who shared a similar belief was Ni-na. When asked about whether she would call herself a feminist, she said with puzzlement:

> NI-NA: I don't know .... I don't feel the need to define myself as such.

Then, in reply to the questions about her support of the goals or actions of the feminist movements in Korea, she added:

> NI-NA: Nope, not really... Korean feminism is not common, I think their behavior and way of doing things is bringing more confusion and issues and accelerating them to the bad side.

Similarly, Da-eun, although unable to clearly express whether she would define herself as a feminist when inquired about her support for any of the feminist initiatives, replied:

> DA-EUN: No … I think they are unusual extremists. They don't do anything that I would support.

Tae-min was the only participant to also share a common post-feminist belief that claims a redundancy of feminist efforts in the face of the state of gender equality in today's South Korean society, stating:

> TAE-MIN: I just don't think that there is much to do […],

while also claiming feminism to now attempt to gain more power and privileges for women:

> TAE-MIN: […] I don't agree with more privileges to only one gender.

Another male participant, Soo-bin, although overall having a relatively neutral stance towards feminism and expressing the need for some feminist-driven changes in Korean society, claimed:

> SOO-BIN: I think… I know there are some good feminists doing good things but, in the mainstream, … women screaming and you know… all those extremists are shown acting like this, so they can get more attention […] I think they're destroying the view of feminism as we just started to associate feminism with this kind of behavior.

However, in reply to the question about his feminist identity or lack thereof, he states a different reasoning:

> SOO-BIN: I don't feel a feminist myself… as a man I feel like it's a bit awkward to say so [that I'm a feminist], I mean just being a male, I don't feel a need to be a feminist, I guess.

This belief that feminism is inherently reserved only for women, as displayed even by its very name, is a well-documented (mis)conception that prevents men from engaging with feminism as well as identifying as such (Jensen 1995, 111-13). Additionally, the preferential treatment and even superiority of the feminine that is often perceived as the main feminist goal, rather than striving for fairness and equality regardless of gender, seem to be another commonly held view, that deters males from feminism as previously mentioned, was demonstrated in Tae-min's reply.

Further, as for the participants who claimed a feminist identity but reserved it only to their private sphere, their reasoning seemed to be mostly centered around the stigma as well as the uncommonness of the idea of being a feminist and openly stating that in their social environment. As Min-young states:

> MIN-YOUNG: I call myself a feminist.

Yet she quickly followed with reassurance that although she thinks about herself as such, she does so exclusively on a personal level, not sharing the label with others. When inquired about whether she feels like the gender of the people around her matters in this regard, she said:

> MIN-YOUNG: […] Well of course ... maybe if I need to say about this somewhere, then it would be kind of easier psychologically [in a group of females]. But generally, the word is not spoken out loud that much.

Ji-won, on the other hand, specifically emphasized that although she thinks about herself as a feminist in the international understanding of the term, neither her friends nor her ever articulate the word, even while discussing the issues concerning women's rights, due to its socially pejorative connotations.

> JI-WON: […] In an international way, I think I would call myself a feminist. Even though I'm not actively fighting for gender equality, but still, I think I'm a feminist.

She adds:

> […] but if you say the word feminism, even if people think of you as not that extreme, but still one of those Megalia or Womad people… and they still have a very negative mood, so many of my

> friends avoid talking about the word feminism … avoid it at all. We are talking about women's rights a lot, but that word is kind of what everyone is avoiding, I think.
>
> A: Even among just women?
>
> JI-WON: Yeah, even the women. It kind of became a negative word for some reason.

Yet, both of them expressed a strong belief that feminist effort is required from the societal point of view as some improvement in women's equal rights still needs to be done in their country. Moreover, they both possessed a quite high degree of feminist consciousness – holding views that significantly align with this ideology – at least on the general level and without active engagement in the feminist cause.

> MIN-YOUNG: At least just the basic idea that both genders' rights should be equal and then there shouldn't be any discrimination. And there are quite a few issues that still need to be … you know… taken care of for it to be like that.
>
> […] No, I just personally haven't joined any movement or site. I think ... the only thing I usually could do was just leave some comment to the news article regarding a crime, I think it matters to say like .... those motives are bad.
>
> JI-WON: Like generally, very generally. Because I know many people do not know what the values are, like feminist values. I guess I wouldn't, I don't even know about what their values are, but if I just think simple, then you should be able to do what you are feeling. No matter what gender you have, I guess. Then yeah, I think it's really valuable, it's really important to think about. You should be just yourself, like you shouldn't really limit yourself because of gender.
>
> […] Yeah, I am working for it. And it's more passive like I'm not actively supporting them or joining officially, just rooting for them. I'm just doing it on my personal level.

Ha-na displayed the strongest degree of support for feminism yet she also acknowledged the negative public perception of feminism, which she attributed particularly to the older generation of South Koreans:

> HA-NA: Personally, I support feminism and I see myself as a feminist but ... in general like especially the older generation, when they hear about feminism, I think they think of it not in a good way.

Also, Ni-na makes a similar claim, stating that older generations are not concerned with feminism as well as not even aware of what feminism is. Interestingly, however, the statistical

data on support for feminism across different ages, mentioned in Chapter 3 of this work, seemed to demonstrate quite an opposite pattern.

Ha-na was also the only participant who, when inquired about her support for the goals or actions of the feminist movement in Korea. admitted to making an active effort to speak up for the feminist cause in real-life situations that she perceives as harmful:

> HA-NA: I tried to raise my voice [in those issues]. Just in the workplace when I saw something wrong. It's not like joining the movement or protest but, you know, in a life situation.

However, even she claimed to implicitly avoid the usage of the word "feminism," yet motivating her behavior with the lack of necessity of its direct articulation:

> HA-NA: We [me and my friends] have a lot of conversations about feminist-related issues but .... we didn't like to put the word "feminist" in the conversation. But we talk a lot about our situations, rights in workplaces, and so on but without using the word because.... like that's not needed.
>
> A: And do you think that the gender of the people that you talked about those issues with matters in this case?
>
> HA-NA: No, I don't think so. I generally share my or other's stories with anyone, [both] guy friends and female friends.

Noticeably, although all the interviewees, to a greater or lesser extent, shared a conviction that South Korean feminism is perceived rather negatively by the general public, what seemed to be different was the perception of this so-called "wrong feminism" as either an exceptional behavior and distortion from the whole, or its association with the entirety of what feminism is in Korea, with the former identified within the feminist as well as egalitarian group categories, and the latter in non-feminist, with the ambiguous remaining too unclear to assess.

As Min-young states:

> MIN-YOUNG: […] it's kind of shame that the term feminism itself is kind of like distorted very badly in Korea. I think that the radical groups are mostly associated with feminism and not they're very healthy and like good feminisms.

Additionally, Ha-na and Ji-won also expressed the necessity of some kind of change in the general conception of what feminism is in Korea and how society understands it:

> JI-WON: The word feminism in Korea should have a better reputation, I think. People shouldn't feel uncomfortable using the word and just … don't connect feminism with just its extreme and kind of wrong form,

with Ha-na specifically believing that the term "feminism" in the country should be replaced with a more neutral and integrated one, due to the far-fetched social misunderstanding of it.

> HA-NA: […] instead of using the word feminism in South Korea I think it'd be better to just ... change the term because this term somehow .... I don't know [about this situation] in western countries but in South Korea it makes people think about women's role separately from men's role. I think instead of separating these two genders, it'd be better to think in an integrated way...

Whereas Ni-na and Tae-min, although they both claimed that feminism which exists to guarantee equal rights to both genders, would be desired due to its premise of being beneficial to larger society, rejected the current feminism in the country and feminist label altogether, believing it is entirely detrimental and simply bad:

> NI-NA: Feminism should be beneficial to society, like the whole society, without just arguing or emotionally appealing to each other, like it is right now. So, I guess, we don't need feminism that is what it is right now ... it's now doing more harm than good.

> TAE-MIN: I think their [Korean feminists] behavior and what they represent is just incorrect and it also deviates from the basic concept [of feminism]. Just as I said earlier, it is not wrong to be a feminist if you want to equalize rights of both genders, but it is not a case now. It's more about gains for just women.

Table 16: Summary of the data matrix for dimension *Identity Status*

Interviewee	Feminist private	Feminist public (active and passive)	Egalitarian	Ambiguous	Non-feminist
Ni-na					Yes
Soo-bin			Yes		
Tae-min					Yes
Min-young	Yes				
Da-eun				Yes	
Ha-na		Yes			
Ji-won	Yes				

In conclusion, using the analytical categories that attempted to create a possibly most comprehensive gradation of the participants' identity in relation to feminism based on their accounts, one participant was identified as feminist public, two as feminist private, one as egalitarian, one as ambiguous, and finally two participants as non-feminist.

5.2.3 Discussion of the research findings

The image of the attitudes towards feminism in contemporary South Korea emerging from the accounts of the young adult participants of this study was compound, ambiguous, often contradictory, and certainly not homogenous. The results of this study may suggest that among its participants, the relation between stating a more explicit feminist identification and the expressed attitudes towards feminism as well as feminist movements in today's Korea, seemed to be quite pronounced and the participants' feminist self-identification came simultaneously with a positive attitudinal orientation towards feminism in general. It is, however, much less evident in the case of the possible connections between declaring a feminist identity and the expressed support for basic principles conventionally regarded as feminist, suggesting the existence of the already-mentioned "feminist gap." Furthermore, as the basic definitions of feminism expressed by the respondents of this study did not differ significantly, focused mostly on its understanding as a strive for the equality of rights, opportunities, etc. regardless of gender, it may suggest that it did not significantly influence their feminist self-identification nor the attitudes they have towards feminism.

Although some participants remained ambivalent and uncertain in their position towards feminism, all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, endorsed the idea of gender equality. However, those who perceived feminism as an ideology which primary objective is striving for gender parity were almost in all cases (three out of four) inclined to claim a feminist identity and in all cases (four out of four) possessed a more favorable view on feminist movements and initiatives as well as gender-sensitive policies such as quotas. Whereas the interviewees who viewed feminism as an ideology that should seek egalitarianism but is currently not doing so were significantly more critical in their attitudes towards feminism and feminist-driven initiatives – incorporating negative stereotypes about it – as well as refused to identify as such, which was true in all three cases involved.

Moreover, despite the conviction about the rather negative public perception of South Korean feminism expressed by all participants, the differentiation between "good" and "bad"

feminisms – together with the perception of the latter as either an exceptional, distorted behavior or rather as associated with the entirety of what feminism is in the country – seemed to be of particular importance – with the former identified within the feminist as well as egalitarian categories, while the latter in the non-feminist group.

Additionally, the respondents who perceived the nature of gender inequalities experienced by women as a systemic, notorious problem, were also the ones to adopt the feminist label and to hold more positive attitudes towards feminist movements in Korea when compared to the ones who viewed the problem in terms of individual cases.

Further, more life experiences, which in the case of this group of participants were most likely associated with a relatively older age, seemed to increase the awareness of certain gender issues and in turn might have influenced the adoption of feminist identity. This was particularly noticeable in regard to the older female participants' accounts about the work sphere, which all of them described as unfriendly, if not hostile, towards mothers.

Diversity of opinions was also found in the participants' orientations towards the gender-sensitive policies namely the quota system which was perceived both beneficial as a short-term tool that is to eradicate the underrepresentation of women in politics on the one hand, and harmful and useless as a "twisted" form of feminism which undermines competences of female politicians on the other. However, in the case of a governmental body that, at least in theory, was bound to uphold gender parity in Korean society – that is the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family – a great sense of reluctance and aversion towards it – as incompetent and in need of reorganization if not abolition – was observed among almost all participants, even the ones expressing the most favorable views on feminism and other feminist-driven initiatives as well as those who indicated to embrace some form of feminist label.

Unsurprisingly, when considering the participants' gender, female respondents were much more likely to endorse some form of feminist identification (three out of five cases), while all two male interviewees rejected this label. Importantly, however, all the above-mentioned relations and lack thereof may have a purely circumstantial character, as the scope of this study did not allow for more coherent results.

Moreover, although a vast majority of the respondents possessed a substantially high level of gender or feminist consciousness, recognizing the existence of inequalities as well as a need for further social change in certain areas, none of them found the collective and more active

feminist orientation appealing. This may suggest a possible influence and prevalence of the so-called post-feminist attitudes, that entail a highly individualistic perception of gender disparities rather than viewing them in more collective as well as politicized terms – as a shared and common interest. Notably, some sort of disconnection or a political apathy of the interviewees' worldviews mainly, as it seems, caused by their distrust in politicians and political institutions, was also noticeable in certain descriptions, including their political views as well as other politically-related issues which I wanted to hear their opinions on.

In sum, it seems like the positive embracement of the feminist values and goals by the majority of this study's participants came hand in hand with the ambivalence and complexity of their orientations towards the word "feminism" itself. This finding also seems coherent with the previous studies on attitudes towards feminism conducted by researchers in other countries on much more diverse and numerous cohorts, suggesting the possibility of it being a widely occurring phenomenon (Sigel 1996; Aronson 2003). Still, even though my work did not allow for exploring and identifying a more generalized and comprehensive picture of the subject, it leaves the question of whether this phenomenon can be considered more pronounced in South Korea than elsewhere in the world for further research.

Importantly, this work may also conclude that – borrowing a term from one of the participants – the "uncommonness" of feminism in contemporary South Korea does not necessarily entail a rejection of all feminist ideals, which remained true even for the respondents with the most unfavorable views of feminism. Therefore, although certainly not without challenges, it leaves room for a positive change which Korean feminism needs to work on in the future in order to improve both the state of gender equality in the country, as well as its own public image.

6 Conclusions

By introducing the contextual variables, such as the history of feminism, the current socio-economic situation, changing political forces being in power, as well as the emergence of the digital era, followed by qualitative research in the form of interviews, this study attempted to examine the meaning of feminism in contemporary South Korea as perceived by its generation of young adults.

Tracing back the social position of women as well as the evolution of feminism in the country through the prism of the historical events and developments within the broadly understood Korean women's movements throughout the authoritarian regime, the democratic transition and the post-authoritarian period, and finally the turn of the 21st century with the 2000s and early 2010s, provided a comprehensive contextual background which allowed to better understand the contemporary resurgence of Korean feminism. Since 2015, the reemergence of feminism as a popularized movement, particularly among young Korean females, has signified a major generational change that is said to alter the face of the women's movements in the country. The problems they are now challenging including, among others, patriarchal social order, discrimination in employment, sexual abuse, as well as oppressive ideals of female beauty, have been also known and confronted by previous generations of feminists. Notably, however, this new face of feminism in the country does not seem to be homogenous in terms of its socio-political approach nor presents a common perspective on the most crucial issues. With the popularization of the digital space as a new platform of social mobilization and debate, contemporary feminists have begun to appropriate the internet and the new opportunities that digital media platforms brought for their political ends, which came to include such collective actions as hashtag feminism, with its most well-known example #MeToo movement. Moreover, with the proliferation of online misogyny and the raise of anti-feminist sentiments, South Korea witnessed the emergence of radicalized online-based feminist communities such as Megalia and Womad. Yet, quite contrary to their efforts to improve the social situation of women in Korea, these groups' actions deemed "man-hating" have ended up triggering a so-called "gender war," damaging the image of feminism in the country and instilling animosity towards it, particularly among young Korean men.

Therefore, relying primarily on qualitative data obtained during seven semi-structured interviews with young South Koreans, the research explored the meanings, personal experiences, and attitudinal orientations, as well as ultimately, the feminist identity or lack

thereof, as expressed by this group of interviewees. With the feminist ideology in the country considered to be commonly misunderstood and misinterpreted as well as the term “feminism” being largely avoided as a sort of taboo, this study found a great sense of ambivalence in its participants' orientations towards this social movement and ideology in today’s Korea. Thus, the participants’ attitudes, although certainly not homogenous, revealed a shared sense of uncommonness, distance, and reserve towards feminism – manifested particularly, as it seemed, in the specific context of the Korean feminism and its feminist movements – and expressed in several instances that served to depict the domestic form of feminism as bizarre and the word “feminism” itself – a subject of circumlocution or avoidance. Nevertheless, the differences in the perception of feminism as either an ideology that strives for gender parity or as one that should seek egalitarianism but is currently not doing so – preoccupied with arguments and demanding more gains for women – seemed to predominantly shape the participants' position towards feminist initiatives and gender-sensitive policies such as quotas as well as ultimately influenced their decisions on embracement or rejection of the feminist identity. Further, the difference between the two orientations could be potentially associated also with the diverse experiences with gender discrimination of both the participants themselves and of people in their social environment, as well as their perception of the nature of the existing inequalities as either structural, systemic, and collective social problem or as highly individual, unshared, and uncommon incidents.

Thus, the study concludes that the major factor affecting the participants’ feminist self-identification or lack thereof seemed to be the negative cultural stereotypes associating or even equalizing all feminist movements in Korea with extreme, radical feminist behavior, which ultimately either made individuals reluctant to manifest such a label or influenced their complete rejection of this ideology as harmful and deviant.

Furthermore, although some participants remained ambivalent, uncertain, or even hostile in their position towards feminism, all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, endorsed the idea of gender equality and expressed support for basic principles conventionally regarded as feminist which may suggest the existence of the so-called feminist gap. Thus, this work also concludes that the ambiguous or even pejorative perceptions of feminism in modern South Korea do not necessarily entail a rejection of all feminist conceptions and ideals, which endorsement seemed to be commonly shared by all of the participants.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Interview questionnaire

Title of the research: Numerous faces of feminism and their meaning in contemporary South Korea through the lens of the country's young adults.

The research objective: The purpose of this research is to examine the attitudes on feminism and feminist self-identity in relation to experiences and understandings in regard to gender equality and other feminist-related issues.

Personal data protection: All information gathered in the interviews is confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. The identity of the participants is protected and anonymity is provided through the usage of pseudonyms.

Eligibility and demographic information:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. How much of your life have you spent in South Korea?
4. What is your current occupation?
5. Where do you currently reside?
6. What gender are you identifying with?

Questions about understanding:

7. What in your understanding is gender equality? What is a gender-equal society?
8. What is feminism in your opinion? How do you understand it?

Questions about experiences:

9. Have you ever read a book or watched a movie that can be labeled as feminist? *If yes*, did you choose it deliberately? Why?
10. Have you ever taken a women's studies course at the University? *If yes,* why did you choose it?
11. Have you ever experienced sexism or any kind of discrimination that you felt was based on your gender in a private or public setting?

12. Have any of your friends or family members had those kinds of experiences that you know of? Or maybe you have heard about those situations in the news or on social media?

If yes for any of the above:

13. Have any of those experiences influenced your attitudes on feminism?

Questions about attitudes:

14. Would you describe Korean society as gender equal? *If no*, what group do you find more disadvantaged: men or women?

Q. RELATED TO WOMEN:

15. Do you think that Korea has a problem with women's harassment, employment discrimination, and women having more responsibility for household and familial caregiving?
16. Do you feel that Koreans should be sensitive to women's issues and their discrimination?
17. Have you heard about some feminist movements or initiatives in Korea? The examples are #Metoo and #Withyou movements, the 4B movement (비섹스; 비출산; 비연애; 비혼) escape the corset movement (탈코 short for 탈주 코르셋), Megalia (메갈리아) and Womad (워마드) communities. What do you think about their values and actions?

Q. RELATED TO MEN

18. Do you think that the Korean quota system for women in politics is discriminating against men?
19. How do you feel about only men having to serve in the military?
20. Do you feel that Koreans should be sensitive to men's issues and their discrimination?
21. Have you heard about some anti-feminist, men's rights groups or initiatives in Korea? The examples may be Ilbae (일베저장소) shin namseongyeondae (신 남성연), and *idaenam* (이대남)? What are your thoughts about their values and actions?

Q. RELATED TO POLITICS

22. Have you heard about the current president's Yoon Suk-yeol anti-feminist inclinations, particularly in his presidential campaign in 2022? What are your opinions about that and the President himself?
23. Have you heard about the current debate on the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (여성가족부)? *If yes,* What are your thoughts about the abolition of this Ministry?
24. Would you describe yourself as conservative or liberal, in terms of your political views?

25. Do you think that there is a so-called "gender war" between women and men in Korea? *If yes,* what are your thoughts about it? What has influenced it?

Questions about feminist identity:

26. Do you think that there is a need for feminism in South Korea today?
27. Would you call yourself a feminist?

If yes: WHY do you find it appealing?

28. Do you identify yourself as a feminist to other people: your friends, partners, relatives? Do you admit that you are a feminist? Do you think that the gender of those people matters in this regard?
29. Do you find feminist principles and values important?
30. Do you support the goals and actions of the feminist movements in Korea?
31. Have you ever participated in any feminist action or event (e.g., on women's rights, nonheteronormative people's rights, pro-choice) online or offline, or supported such actions in any other way?
32. Do you think that non-cis-gender women (e.g., transgender people) and sexual minorities' issues should be included in feminist agendas in Korea?

If no: WHY do you find it unappealing?

33. Do you find some feminist principles and values important?
34. Do you have friends or relatives that identify as feminists? Or have feminist beliefs?
35. Did you have conversations with them about feminist-related issues? Do you agree with them in some respects?