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Contemporary South Korean Society and Feminism

Súčasná juhokórejská spoločnosť a feminizmus

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Táto bakalárska práca sa zaoberá juhokórejským ženským hnutím a feministickým aktivizmom. Po poskytnutí potrebného historického kontextu sa práca zameriava na súčasnú juhokórejskú spoločnosť a stav feminizmu v nej. Hlavným cieľom tejto práce je preskúmať oživenie a popularizáciu feminizmu po roku 2015 a úlohu anti-feministických a feministických internetových komunit v tejto popularizácii. Ďalej práca opisuje feministické hnutia, ktoré sa odvtedy v Kórei objavili, a ich ciele. Práca sa zaoberá feministickým aktivizmom ako aj anti-feministickou reakciou, a stretom a konfliktom týchto dvoch hnutí v juhokórejskej spoločnosti. Nakoniec práca skúma aj postoje k feministickému hnutiu v súčasnej juhokórejskej spoločnosti.

ABSTRACT

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This bachelor's thesis examines the South Korean women's movement and feminist activism. After providing the necessary historical context this thesis focuses on contemporary South Korean society and the state of feminism within it. The main goal of this thesis is to explore the resurgence and popularisation of feminism in mid-2010s and the role of anti-feminist and feminist online communities in this popularisation. Furthermore, the thesis describes the feminist movements that have emerged since and their objectives. The thesis deals with both feminist activism and anti-feminist backlash as the two movements clash in Korean society. At last, the attitudes to the feminist movement in contemporary Korean society are also explored.

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Note on transcription

This thesis uses the McCune – Reischauer transcription with the exception of names of Korean presidents, which are written in the format commonly used in media.

Introduction

In the past century South Korean society has experienced a great deal of changes. From the neo-Confucian Chosŏn dynasty, through Japanese colonisation, Korean war, a period of a military dictatorship, and rapid industrialisation and modernisation, Korea has emerged as a first-world democratic country. The rapid economic progress did not necessarily come hand in hand with a significant improvement in the status of status within Korean society. Korean women's lives have long been defined by the patriarchal neo-Confucian ideology of the late Chosŏn dynasty, where women were considered second-class citizens. It was towards the end of the 19th century when women begun forming movements through which they participated in the larger social movements while also championing for their own rights, and towards the end of the 20th century, women's movements gleaned numerous successes. Arriving in the 21st century, although equal to men by law, Korean women continue to face gender-based discrimination, violence and double standards in their daily lives.

Much like Korean society, the women's movement has gone through significant change and development. After achieving a number of successes in the form of policies and legislation, the women's movement has come to be considered redundant by some, and a stark opposition in a form of anti-feminism has emerged. Now in the digital age, as a response to this online anti-feminist movement, a new digital feminist movement was born.

In this bachelor's thesis I examine the resurgence and popularisation of feminism in contemporary South Korea and the role of online communities in this so-called "reboot" of feminism. I then focus on the feminist movements that have emerged since then as well as attitudes to feminism, which has come to be viewed as controversial in contemporary Korean society where a conflict between genders has set in.

The first chapter explores the very beginnings of the women's movement in Korea and the significant change and development the movement has gone through. I illustrate the over 100 year-long presence of women's groups and activism and describe their efforts over that time.

Chapter two describes changes that took place in Korean society which significantly affected people's socio-economic status. These led to changing attitudes

towards the feminist movement and its previous achievements, and this period marks the beginning of the anti-feminist backlash.

Third chapter focuses on online communities that have played a significant role in the popularisation of feminism and also influenced the ways in which feminism is perceived in contemporary Korean society. I describe discourse found on these communities and how it attributed to the reboot of feminism, which is discussed in the fourth chapter.

Chapter five deals with the feminist movements that have emerged in contemporary Korea, focusing on those that have garnered the most attention from the public and media. Through the current feminist movements and their objectives, it possible to see what the reality of Korean women is nowadays as they continue to fight against sexual harassment, discrimination, as well as protest oppressive beauty standards and societal norms.

Last chapter describes the current status of feminism in Korea. By examining news articles and studies, I aim to illustrate the position feminism holds in Korean society and whether it is indeed controversial, also touching upon the anti-feminist backlash that prevails since its emergence at the beginning of the 2000s.

1. The History of the Women's Movement in Korea

1.1. Women in Korean Society

Confucianism was the state ideology in the Chosŏn Dynasty of the kingdom of Korea (1393–1910). As a social and ethical system of thought it shapes organisational and social behaviour. Social hierarchy, individual's status, social etiquette and personal loyalty, and social stratification based on gender, education and family status, are all shaped by Confucianism. As such, it has played an important role in moulding the Korean women's status.

Based on Confucianism, women's role in the society is as a daughter, wife, and a mother. Up until the end of the Chosŏn dynasty (and for decades after) Korean society was organised through a patriarchal family system with rigid class stratification and little social mobility. Women's lives were regulated based on strict gender roles. In particular, the women of the ruling class were confined to the inside of a house, and their role was to bare children, specifically sons; look after the children and take care of the husband (Jung 2014).

1.2. Beginnings of the Women's Movement in the late 19th Century

The history of the Korean women's movement¹ spans over 100 years, emerging at the end of the 19th century as resistance to the patriarchal Confucian culture and politics. Affected by the political context, the movement was shaped throughout history facing various challenges and going through significant changes and development (Hur 2011).

Many of the early women's organisations were influenced by Western Christian women missionaries in Korea. These movement's viewed women's education as essential for their participation in the national independence movement as Korea struggled against Japanese colonisation. They aimed to abolish the Confucian patriarchal system that reinforced traditional social and cultural norms based on which legal and political institutions discriminated against women. The first autonomous women's organisation, *Ch'an-yang-hoe* was formed in Seoul in 1898 by upper-class women to build schools and promote education for girls (Kim and Kim 2010).

¹ There are many definitions for women's or feminist movement. This thesis understands women's movement as a movement campaigning for women's rights and liberation. The individual feminist movements and their objectives will be discussed later.

Progressive male intellectuals of the time supported equality for women and reforms in society. *Tongnip Sinmun* (“The Independent Newspaper”) published editorials advocating for gender equality in 1896. September 9, 1896, *Ch’an-yang-hoe* published a manifesto in the same newspaper, a document considered to be “the first declaration of women’s rights” in Korea (Hur 2011).

1.3. First Half of the 20th Century (Colonial Period 1910–1945)

In 1905, Korea became a Japanese protectorate and in 1910 Japan annexed Korea and set up a colonial government. In the time after the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, a second wave of women’s activism emerged. Women’s groups continued their movement for enlightenment through education and also participated in the national independence movement. Women activists, notably students from Ewha University, joined their male counterparts in the movement against Japanese colonisation – the Independence Declaration Movement on March 1, 1919.

Women educated in Western-style schools opposed the traditional family system and advocated for women’s self-realisation and free choice in marriage. They sought to replace the Confucian ideal of a woman with an alternative “new woman” (*sinyŏsŏng*) ideal. However, by the end of the 1920s this movement faded out, and the term *sinyŏsŏng* was used derogatorily to indicate a woman with loose sexual morality.

In the 1920s, the evolution of Japanese industry had an impact on the Korean economy. It brought textile companies to Korea which utilised the cheaper labour of women. Women’s organisations and women’s trade unions advocated rights for women and organised frequent strikes against poor working conditions Korean women endured, as well as sexual harassment in the workplace (Hur 2011).

In 1927 missionary and socialist women formed the coalition *Kŭn-u-hoe* and advocated both rights for women workers and national independence from Japan. They declared that the oppression of Korean women is caused both by Confucian patriarchy and the contradictions of modern capitalism (Kim and Kim 2010).

1.4. The Period after the Liberation

The liberation from Japanese imperialist rule (1945) led to the division of the nation and the US military occupation of South Korea (Jones 2006). Socialist women’s activism was temporarily revived after independence, but the following years of the American military government (1946–1948) saw the eradication of the working class and

revolutionary left-wing movements (Hur 2011). The constitution of the newly established Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea or Korea) in 1948 guaranteed women and men equal rights, including the right to vote. Women were, however, excluded from political life, the National Assembly at the time included only one woman (Kim and Kim 2010).

During the leadership of Syngman Rhee (1948–1960), right-wing groups increased. The second half of the 1950s marked the establishment of professional women’s organisations that coordinated in 1959 under the Korean National Council of Women (KNCW) together with philanthropic and intellectual groups. In the following decades, the KNCW focused on “women-development”; women’s participation in the social and economic development of the state, an agenda that grew from the UN women’s conferences in the 1970s and 1980s (Kim and Kim, 2010).

1.5. Military Dictatorship (1962-1986)

The years of the Park Chung-hee’s military dictatorship (1962–1979) saw rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, anti-communist policies and disbandment of all political and social organisations, including women’s organisations. Later a small number of pro-government, conservative women’s groups were allowed to organise. Namely, the Korean National Council of Women (KNCW), Korean Church Women United and Christian Academy, which formed the mainstream of the women’s movement and collaborated with the government. This period also saw the rise of women’s worker unions (Kim and Kim, 2010).

The women’s movement of the time was meant to support the ruling regime/built support for the state development policies. The women’s groups were restricted to providing anti-communist education, mobilising women in the project of national modernisation and improving women’s status to serve society and the country. They helped a few well-known women advance into politics (Jones 2006). These organisations avoided any form of social activism. Their uncritical attitude towards the dictatorship was criticised by future women’s organisations and feminists and the movement was deemed conservative and pro-government (Hur 2011).

During this period in response to the rapid changes in Korean society and the repressive government women also formed non-government-sponsored organisations with various agendas like promoting the rights of workers. In the 1970s college students

also formed groups to oppose dictatorship and support democracy. The coalition of women's groups achieved a revision of the family law in 1977 (Kim and Kim 2010).

In 1979, military general Chun Doo-hwan rose to power through a military coup after Park Chung-hee's assassination. Chun Doo-hwan continued most of Park's policies however, pro-democratic activism grew, and women's movements differed from the previous ones by being clear social change movements that played a crucial role in moving Korean society towards democratisation (Kim and Kim 2010).

Women of various backgrounds (workers, professors, college students) formed many organisations with progressive agendas. Association for Women's Equality and Friendship (1983) described itself as the first organisation with a clear programme for women's liberation since the division of Korea (Kim and Kim 2010).

Women's groups also emerged in the *minjung* ("the people's") movement. *Minjung* women's focus was on the human and labour rights of women and women of all social groups joined in – farmers, workers, the urban poor, intellectuals, and students. The state-driven industrialisation and economic development plan counted on the cheap labour of girls and young women supporting their families. Their wages were half that of men, working conditions were poor and women were targets of workplace sexual harassment (Hur 2011).

In 1987, Korean Women's Association United (KWAU) was established as an umbrella organisation for progressive women's groups and it partook in the democratisation of Korea. The KWAU was at the forefront of advocating the Equal Employment Law which passed in 1988. This law made it illegal to discriminate against women in the job recruitment process and in the workplace (Kim and Kim 2010).

Intellectuals involved with the Christian Academy introduced Western Feminism to Korea. They read Western feminist theories and adapted them to the Korean context (Hur 2011).

1.6. Democratisation and the Feminist movement

The change from military dictatorship to democracy meant a growth in civil movements with a variety of objectives. The women's movement also experienced a change in its direction. Women that before focused on the fight to end dictatorship and establishing democracy, started forming organisations focused on the everyday reality of women in society (Chung 2020). Women's organisations responded to the state-led democratisation process by creating women's political spaces in democratic institutions and bringing

about gender equality by participating in policymaking. Their efforts were aimed at women's issues of employment, sexual and domestic violence, maternity leave, and affirmative action in educational and political institutions (science, farming, and fishing) (Hur 2011). Notably, the KWAU lobbied for legal reforms throughout the 1990s and its efforts led to the enactment of several laws. One of the biggest achievements of the women's movement was the abolition of the patriarchal Family Head System in 2005 (Hwang 2019)². A coalition of 27 women's movements created the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan in 1990. The combined efforts of KWAU and KNCW also led to an increased number of women represented in public office. The efforts toward legal and institutional reforms continued throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s (Kim and Kim 2010).

Before democratisation women's movements, although various, viewed women as a unitary collective member of the nation. In the first half of the 20th century, the three main trends in the women's movement and their objectives can be summarised as the movement for women's education, the reformist movement against Japanese colonisation and the national liberation movement. During the military dictatorship the agenda of KNCW counted on women's identity as a unitary member of the state to achieve social and economic development and build a strong nation (Hur 2011). In the late 1980s women's movement plays a role in the transition of Korea towards democracy and is characterised by being anti-government, pro-labour and pro-democracy (Kim and Kim, 2010). Following decades see a diversification in the women's movement.

² Legislative reforms KWAU lobbied for focused on women's issues of employment, sexual and domestic violence, maternity leave and protection, and affirmative action. Other successfully passed reforms include the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (1988), the Family Law (1989), Child Care Act (1991), the Punishment of the Crime of Sexual Violence Act (1993), the Prevention of Prostitution Act (1993), the Assistance of the Livelihood of Women Forced into Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military Act (1995), the Basic Act for Women's Development (1995), the Prevention of Family Violence Act (1997), the Punishment for Procuring Prostitution and Associated Act (2002), and the abolition of Family Registry System (2003) (Hur 2011).

1.7. The New Feminist Groups of the late 1990s and Early 2000s

The 2000s saw the emergence of new feminist groups and widening in scopes of women's issues. After the conservative groups of KNCW and progressive groups of KWAU, the younger feminists of since late 1990s and the 2000s are seen as a third wave of contemporary feminist movement. They are known as "Young Feminists" or the 2000s New Feminist Group (NFG). Although previous movements were influenced by feminist ideas, the NFGs are the first in the history of Korea's women's movement to define themselves as feminists. First appearing on university campuses, influenced by the women's studies programmes that were institutionalised by the earlier movements. These groups were critical of the earlier movements of KWAU for its categorisation of women as a uniform category, and their focus on economic and political issues while maintaining patriarchal culture. Lesbian activist criticised previous women's movement's heteronormativity and exclusion of queer issues. The NFGs were diverse, and they began contemplating intersectionality, recognised various identities of women including queer women and marginalised women such as migrant or irregular workers. The NFGs also adopted new technology, expanding into cyberspace, most NFGs groups had their own websites (Kim and Kim 2010).

2. Changes in Korean Society in the Late 1990s and Early 2000s

2.1. Economic Crisis and Neo-liberal Reforms

Towards the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, Korean society experienced several changes that had a significant impact on people's lives and their socio-economic status.

The Korean economy was previously state-led and allowed a small number of industrial conglomerates – *chaebŏl*, to concentrate wealth. Korea was affected by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and in the following years accepted neoliberal policies such as flexible labour market. The protected domestic market opened to foreign companies, and the globalisation of the Korean economy and accelerated polarisation of the society led to an increasingly larger gap in the distribution of wealth. Following the crisis, Korea took a loan package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which called for reconstructing policies in line with neo-liberal market policies (Kim and

Finch 2002). These led to major layoffs of employees, lower wages, job insecurity, an increase in the number of irregular workers and short-term contracts. This trend continued, even intensified, following another financial crisis in 2008 (Song 2020).

The economic disparity affected the entirety of Korean society, large numbers of people in their 40s and 50s lost their jobs, and it became harder for young people to find long-term employment. It is worth mentioning that women were in cases disproportionately affected by this crisis (Kim, Y. 2021). They were oftentimes first to be laid off and notably, the rise in the number of irregular workers was greater amongst women. Furthermore, married women were also expected to perform a double duty of being employed and bringing money to the household as well as taking care of children and doing unpaid domestic labour (Song 2020).

This situation gave rise to pessimism among the younger generation about their prospects. They have been nicknamed the *samp'o* (“three surrenders”) generation meaning that people of this age group are giving up three things: dating, marriage, and children due to their unstable socio-economic situation (Ashman 2020). And “hell-chosŏn” has been used to refer to the growing economic inequality and social polarisation, comparing it with the class-based society of Chosŏn (Kim, Y. 2021).

2.2. Women and Feminism in the Neo-liberal Age

Up until the 2010s, the Korean feminist movement was led by professional feminist activists and academics focusing on legislative changes (Moon 2022). During the period of economic crisis and neoliberal reforms, the feminist movement achieved several successes. The abolishment of the reward point system in civil service exams (in 1999)³ for men who completed military service, the Act Prohibiting Gender Discrimination (1999) or the abolishment of the Family Head (*hoju*) system (2005)⁴ the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (in 2001) (Hwang 2019).

³ The compulsory military service was established in 1949 and strictly applied during the Korean war (1950–53). In the patriarchal Korean society, it was the men’s duty to complete this service, while it did not apply to women. In 1961, Park Chung-hee enacted a law that awarded those who completed the service with extra points for positions of civil servants. This system has since been the subject of controversy due to corruption. In 1998 five female university students and one disabled male student questioned whether it was constitutional to provide extra points in the recruitment process for civil servants. The Constitutional Court later judged that the veteran’s extra point system violated the constitutional right to public service and the right to equality (Choo 2020).

⁴ Based on this system, all family members were registered under a *hoju* – the family head. The system was patriarchal/patrilinear, the family heads were generally the male members of the family. Women would be registered under their father’s name and after marriage, under their husband’s name (Koh 2008).

This happened under the governments of democratically elected presidents Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) whose policy of “gender mainstreaming” promoted gender equality, and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) during whose presidency prominent activists from women’s civil rights groups were employed by the government to help with the task of abolishing the Family Head System and preventing prostitution (Ashman 2020).

It is also worth mentioning that since the 1990s the number of women graduating college began increasing and so did the number of women seeking professional careers. Expressions like “Alpha Girl” (student achieving high grades in school) or “Gold Miss” (single woman with a professional career who earns high wages) were coined and became popular (Kim, Y. 2021).

2.3. Beginnings of the Anti-Feminist Backlash

As women joined the labour market in larger numbers, competition for jobs rose. The affirmative action and policies institutionalised by the women’s rights movements, and progressive governments’ pro-women policies that aimed at achieving gender equality started to be seen by some as unfair advantages for women (Song 2019).

This situation started putting cracks into the family model where the man/husband is the sole breadwinner as many younger men could not afford to do that. Among young Korean men, this prompted fears of weakening social status and weakening patriarchal social order. Many of them turned the frustration they felt towards who they considered their direct competitors in the job market – women. Some felt that men are being disadvantaged by the social welfare system, while women are being favoured and receiving preferential treatment, and are ‘stealing jobs’ from men. On top of that, the societal perception was that women could always get married and solve their economic situation while men could not. Number of young men began to see themselves as victims of the feminist movement.

Things like women-only subway carriages and rooms in public spaces or the gender-quota policies that helped increase women’s participation in the National Assembly and local councils⁵, also became a cause of controversy. The abolition of the reward point system for military service and the existence of The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family began to be seen by some as a sign of reverse discrimination (Choo 2020).

⁵ As of 2022, 18,6% of the National Assembly members are women (*Statista*, 3 May 2023).

Thus, against the achievements of feminist movements, the anti-feminist backlash started emerging. The younger generation looked for places to express their frustration and many took to online spaces to do so. In the wake of the online misogyny, established feminists' groups were somewhat helpless and unsuccessful in countering it. This reality gave rise to online feminist movements. Unlike earlier movements, these were led by the generation of digital natives who started to confront the misogyny they faced online (Moon 2020).

3. The Online Anti-Feminist Backlash and Digital Feminism in the 2000s

In the 21st century cyberspace has become the main ground for both feminist activism and anti-feminist backlash, as well as the new feminist movements. The generation of digital natives took to online spaces to talk about their frustrations, created places for discussions, and platforms that gathered like-minded people.

3.1. Digital Environment in Korea

In the 1990s as the internet was becoming mainstream, Korean women and Young Feminists (NFGs) participated in online spaces, setting up platforms and talking about feminist agendas. They envisioned an alternative space where gender-based differences would diminish (Hur 2011). By the end of the 1990s women made up a minority of all internet users. Although this difference in the number of users based on gender diminished in the 21st century, however, online communities remained largely gendered; either male-dominated or exclusive to women.

During this time female internet users were not considered creators of “online culture” but were either viewed as consumers of commercial goods, targeted with advertisements for beauty, fashion or household products. Or they were rendered into consumable content as cyberspace provided a place for content that objectified and sexually exploited women such as illegal nude photography, hidden-camera recordings (spy cams, or “*molka*” in Korean), revenge porn, rape videos, or deepfake videos, to circulate. For example, *SoraNet*, the largest illegal pornography website was functional since 1999 (Seo and Choi 2020).

If female users engaged in male-dominated platforms, they would often do so hidden behind a male identity. Male users often “trolled” female-dominated platforms.

For example, when the Constitutional Court ruled the military reward system unconstitutional, individual female users and websites of women's organisations were attacked by male users (Seo and Choi 2020).

3.2. Ilbe

Ilbe is a conservative humour site that started in 2010 as a sub-board on *DC Inside*. *DC Inside* is a popular Korean platform similar to Reddit. It constitutes of multiple sub-pages (“galleries”) that work as discussion boards for certain topics. In galleries with a majority presence of men, women often faced misogyny, their voices were excluded from discussion, and they were ostracised (Yeon and Lee 2022). Out of this website, the two antagonistic platforms *Ilbe* and *Megalia* originated.

The name *Ilbe* is an abbreviation of the “Daily Best Archive” (*ilgan pesūt’ū chōchangso*, in Korean), and originally this website gathered popular posts and comments that would end up censored or banned on *DC Inside* due to ‘inappropriate’ content (e.g., profanity, pornography). *Ilbe* split from *DC Inside* and became an independent website in 2011, during the presidential election in 2012 number of its users drastically increased and it became known for its far-right orientation (Shim 2015). The average number of daily visitors in 2013 was 300 000, and in 2016, 700 000 (Lee 2019).

Although an anonymous website, based on its contents it is presumed that the demography of *Ilbe* mostly consisted of men between their late teens to 40s, most popular among men in their 20s and 30s, while users that were revealed to be women were not welcome, even banned by the group's admins (Ashman 2020).

3.2.1. Discourse on Ilbe

Posts on *Ilbe* frequently contained offensive/extreme takes on topics of politics, society and popular culture and the users ranked them by “humour”. On this website, expressions of hatred towards marginalised groups such as women, and sexual or racial minorities were frequent, and *Ilbe* users singled out foreign migrant workers, people from the Jeolla province, and “lefties” as their “enemies” (Ashman 2020). The website became known for uploading cartoons and memes displaying misogyny and vulgar content and pictures of naked women (Kim, Y. 2021).

Of course, when it comes to misogyny in online spaces, it cannot be restricted to one website (nor is misogyny in Korea restricted to online spaces), however, it was *Ilbe*

where the most radical misogyny emerged and spread across cyberspace. The platform gathered misogynistic discourses across cyberspace and concentrated them in one place thus creating a coherent misogynistic narrative against Korean women (Seo and Choi 2020).

On *Ilbe*, derogatory expressions against women were often used (and sometimes newly coined), spread across online spaces and eventually infiltrated popular culture. The misogynistic hate speech found on *Ilbe* objectified women; belittled their abilities, and appearance, depicted them with misogynistic gendered stereotypes and in some cases threatened violence (Yeon, and Lee, 2021).

An array of expressions including words such as *kimch'inyŏ* (“kimchi girl”) or *toenchangnyŏ* (“bean paste girl”) to designate women as “material girls” who judge men by their economic status and expect men to financially support them; *sŏnggoe* (“plastic surgery monster”) or *nakt'aenyŏ* (“woman who had an abortion”), and more⁶, were used against women on platforms such as *Ilbe*.

3.3. Megalia

Much like *Ilbe*, *Megalia* is a platform that was created from a sub-board/gallery on *DC Inside*, specifically the sub-board for MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome). Here false information spread that it was two young Korean women who refused to quarantine that brought the virus to Korea. This led to strong misogynistic reactions amongst Korean men on websites like *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* (Kim 2017).

Women at first tried to counter the misogyny on the MERS gallery but in August 2015, many female users of the MERS gallery exited *DC Inside* and created the website

⁶ More specifically, a “kimchi girl”, as defined by online misogynists, is a cultivation of everything they hate, she is unattractive, promiscuous and tries to take advantage of men’s wealth. Meanwhile a “bean paste girl” spends money irresponsibly, eating cheap meals while buying expensive foreign goods. *Mamch'ung* (“mom-roach”), used against mothers who bring their child to public spaces and “cause nuisance”, condemns mothers as “roaches” that live off of their husbands money and neglect taking care of the house and instead spend time in cafes with their friends Others include *posŭl ach'i* (“taking advantage through sexuality”), *kolbaengi* (a drugged or drunk girl who is an easy target for rape) or *sangp'yenyŏ* (“delistedame”), which is term used deprecate women older than 30, referring to them as “delisted stock” on the dating market. The list of words is rather exhaustive, but for some other examples, it also included words that would make fun of men who are nice to women or terms that would sexually objectify foreign women such as “sushi girl” for Japanese women or “white horse” for white women (Kim Y. 2021, Lee 2019).

*Megalia.com*⁷. This website was created to confront the misogyny in online spaces (Oh 2021).

3.3.1. Mirroring

The users of *Megalia* employed a strategy called “mirroring”; taking the existing misogynistic phrases and the more newly coined derogatory terms towards women and turning them around and using them to refer to men. They started using this strategy already on *DCInside* but the platform would moderate the language they used (Kim, Y. 2021).

Megalians (*Megalia* users) found that rather than battling misogyny through discussion and citing feminist knowledge, what resulted in a greater response was “mirroring” derogatory remarks because it angered or humiliated the misogynists. The usage of such language was found shocking by many as it deviated from societal expectations for women’s behaviour. They fought misogyny through gamified activism; “playing games”, attacking misogynists by the very means they used against women to defeat them in the “war between genders” (Jeong 2020). Every slur that was thrown at them they mirrored and threw back, *Megalians* also trolled male-dominated websites and male users by using hostile language, and they uploaded satirical content making fun of men⁸.

Megalians’ strategy was polarising and sparked concerns about the man-hating language they were using and fear that even stronger misogyny would arise as a reaction to *Megalians’* behaviour. Some criticised that it opened up *Megalians* to accusations of misandry. However, the mirroring strategy served to bring attention to the pervasive misogynistic culture in digital (but also offline) spaces (Kim Y. 2021).

⁷ *Megalia* stands for MERS + “Egalia’s daughters: A Satire of the Sexes” a feminist novel by Gerd Brantenberg, where the stereotypical gender roles are switched.

⁸ The mirrored language includes words like *kimch’inam* (a Korean man who judges women by their appearance), a series of slangs that counter “mom-roach” expression by referring to man as “daddy insect”, “invisible or scarecrow-daddy” or “feed-me roach” (men who can’t take care of themselves and their of families and don’t do any housework), *ssach’wit’ung* (a man who left after a woman gave birth to their child), *sönggoe* (“sex buyer”), *chasül ach’i* (“sexually taking advantage”) or *ssipch’inam* (“man with 10cm genitalia). A frequently used term would be *hannamch’ung*, shortened to *hannam*, meaning “typical Korean man”, which in this case refers to a misogynistic Korean man. *Megalians* also took some of the misogynistic words and turned them around to have positive connotations. They redefined the *kimch’inyö* by combining it with the word God as *katch’inyö* to mean “a confident woman who knows what she wants” (Kim Y. 2021, Lee 2019).

3.4. Womad

Womad is a platform that splintered off *Megalia* in 2016 following an argument between the users over whether they should align themselves with gay men and the usage of homophobic slurs. After *Megalia* banned the usage of anti-LGBTQ+ language, the group of *Megalians* that was pro the usage of homophobic slurs created their own platform – *Womad* (women+nomad). Couple of months after this incident *Megalia* as a website was closed down. *Womad* continued *Megalia*'s mirroring strategy but has been a point of even larger criticism as some of its content was hateful, even violent, with some users expressing a desire to physically assault men.

3.5. Why Ilbe, Megalia and Womad?

The biggest conflict between the users *Ilbe*, *Megalia* and later *Womad* was ablaze mostly in around 2016. However, the creation of *Megalia* and *Womad* had influence on the state of Korean feminism in the upcoming years. The mirroring strategy employed by users of *Megalia* and *Womad* as well as some of the content was a point of controversy and criticism. But at the same time, it served to bring attention to the pervasive misogyny in society and battle it in an unprecedented way.

Everything that happened within and between these three platforms cannot be fully delved into here but for the purpose of this thesis it is necessary to illustrate their existence, and the discourse found within these platforms, as they played a significant role in the so-called reboot of Korean feminism I discuss in the next chapter.

4. The Reboot of Feminism

Sohn (2020) uses the term “reboot” to refer to the changes in the South Korean feminist movement. Borrowing the term reboot from the film industry to indicate both a continuity of the feminist movement in Korea and a change between the previous feminist movements and the movements emerging after the year 2015 (i.e., the Fourth Wave feminism characterised by the usage of digital media) in Korea.

Since 2015, feminism in Korea has been extending in its reach, scope and range of agendas, beyond academia and professional feminist activists. As such the reboot of feminism refers to the expansion of the feminist movement into the popular imagination of Koreans and the resurgence of feminist activism. This wave of feminism has been mostly initiated by young women through grassroots movements without the direction

of existing organisations (Kim J. 2021a). The feminists of this generation have been referred to as “Young-Young feminists” “Net-feminists”, “Cyborg-feminists” or “Hell-feminists” (Lee 2020).

4.1. Role of Megalia in the Reboot of Feminism

The creation of *Megalia* played an important in the expansion of feminism and has been considered as the origin of the feminist reboot (Kim J. 2021a, Jeong 2020, Jeong and Lee 2018). Digital feminism after 2015 was largely influenced by *Megalia*, which created momentum for the emergence of new feminist movements. Apart from the mirroring strategy, which countered misogyny in online spaces *Megalians* also engaged in offline feminist activism. They publicised issues of sexual violence, signed petitions and collected 10 million won to support a Member of Parliament in an effort to take down *SoraNet* in 2016, Korea’s largest pornographic website that contained nonconsensual videos, revenge and deepfake porn (Kim, Y. 2021). *Megalians* also raised issues surrounding abortion and advocated for their legalisation. Feminist movements such as “Escape the Corset Movement” or the “4B Movement”, which will be discussed later, originated from *Megalia*.

The *Megal* feminist deviate from the common imagery of political activists and their movement is different from previous feminist movements. The tactics they employed (mirroring, trolling) were meant to “stir things up” and provoke a reaction. Their movement attracted young women who didn’t have a prior interest in feminist ideas as feminism was not popular among the majority of women in Korea (Jeong 2020).

By the beginning of the 2010s, Korean feminist academics started to talk about the crisis of feminism in Korean studies and during this time online misogyny started growing. Digital feminism emerged within this context in 2015 as the feminist academia and established feminist groups failed to deal with the rising anti-feminism. Digital activism brought oppression to the light of many young people that spend time online and sparked heated debates (Jeong 2020).

4.2. Critique of the Rebooted Feminism

To end this chapter, I briefly want to touch upon some of the critique of the current feminist movement. It has been previously mentioned that the Young Feminists (or NFGs) began contemplating intersectionality, queer feminism and post-colonial feminism. Many of the Young-Young feminists of the digital age, growing up in the

competitive neoliberal system, have come to exclude certain minorities from the possible subjects of feminism. The platform *Womad*, largely rejected intersectional feminism of Young Feminists and *Womad* users took exclusionary stance against minorities such as LGBTQ+ people, specifically transgender women, who they considered not a minority but a part of the privileged class together with cisgender men. Although the *Womad* website was accessible to anyone, it claimed to ‘accept’ only cisgender women. The way it essentialised women based on biological sex and thus serves to maintain the gendered patriarchal system was also criticised by feminist scholars and different feminist groups (Yang and Lee 2021).

The *Womad* feminism protests how the social hierarchy has been set up but doesn’t try to completely dismantle it; by having freedom to develop and self-improve, through individual agency, its (*Womad* feminism’s) subjects mean to escape the patriarchy, while not aiming at complete structural change (Kim and Koo 2021). As Lee (2020) describes it, in the struggle to survive in the neoliberal age, women are trying to claim their piece of the pie, and since the pie is limited, they state cannot advocate for everyone. The radical feminism found on *Womad* was often heavily leaning towards TERF-ism (i.e., Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism).

5. Contemporary Feminist Activism in Korea

Since the expansion of feminist activism, women have been creating more feminist platforms and rallying to protest the discrimination and violence they face in Korean society. Numerous online and offline feminist movements have emerged in Korea since the 2015 reboot. Thousands of women participated in a series of protests named “Courage to be Uncomfortable” (or “Hyehwa Station protests”) against spy cameras in public bathrooms demanding better legislation to deal with perpetrators of illegal filming⁹ (Bunaeva, et.al. 2022). And started various movements to stand against societal norms, such as the aforementioned “Escape the Corset” or the “4B” movements. It is not possible to touch up on everything that happened within the realm of feminism in

⁹ Perhaps paradoxically, this series of protests started after a woman uploaded a picture of a nude model, secretly taken at a drawing class, to *Womad*. The police responded immediately, and she was promptly arrested, which many found quite different compared to the police’s response of illegal filming of women, and many felt the police had a sexist bias. This resulted in the largest women-only protests in Korea (Lee, 2020)

Korea, but I try to illustrate the continuity of feminist activism in Korea through movements which garnered the most attention from the public and media.

5.1. #Iamafeminist as a Way to Reclaim Feminist Identity

Although it was the *Megalia* phenomenon which created momentum for new feminist movements since 2015, the very beginning of the year saw a smaller online movement on Twitter that aimed at creating a space for feminist self-identification and resistance against misogyny.

The hashtag #iamafeminist appeared on February 10, 2015, and started gaining traction. This happened after a Korean teenage boy who tweeted about his desire to join ISIS because of his hatred towards feminism, has gone missing (*CNN*, 23 January 2015). After this incident became publicly known, the word “feminist” started trending on major Korean web portals.

The presence of this hashtag was most notable for three months after its emergence. During this time Korean women took to Twitter to reclaim a feminist identity, expressing resistance towards the skewed idea of feminism in society and speaking out against anti-feminism.

Under the hashtag #iamfeminist online users expressed difficulty with identifying as a feminist due to the stigma associated with the word. Many tweets also talked about the usage of the phrase “I am not a feminist but...”, even when discussing gender equality and women’s issues. Some users talked about using this phrase because of the perception that identifying as a feminist requires qualifications and was thus limited to scholars and activists and others because they wanted to avoid the stigma that came with being labelled as feminist. In this context, the hashtag served as a space for people to share similar concerns, discuss what it means to be a feminist and help get rid of the barriers to identifying as a feminist. Users would share personal stories about being discriminated against or talk about their motives for identifying as a feminist. This hashtag was not the only one of its kind, but it could be regarded one of the first and noteworthy examples of feminist “hashtag activism” at the time (Kim J. 2017).

5.2. The Gangnam Station Murder Case and “Sticky-Note Activism”

On May 17, 2016, a man murdered a woman in a public bathroom and after being arrested claimed he “hated women” for “belittling and ignoring him”. The murder has been reported by media as a “random killing”, the police stated that the man has

schizophrenia and concluded that the act was a wanton murder. This resulted in a public response on social media and offline and many took to Gangnam to leave messages on sticky notes in the place where the murder happened. Feminists sought to define this murder as a misogynistic hate crime and the case sparked a strong debate about gender-based violence and femicide in Korea (Kim J. 2021b).

This situation also led to the first public altercation between feminists and anti-feminist. *Ilbe* users who came to the station where mourners were gathering to protests the feminist's claim that the murder was motivated by misogyny.

The public attention that this case garnered served to raise consciousness about feminism and misogyny in Korean society. It prompted a larger conversation about women's experiences of being neglected by the police when reporting sexual violence, spy cams or stalking. It led to more young women identifying as feminists and the organisation of new feminist groups that would rally women to speak up and protest gender-based discrimination (*The Korea Herald*, 19 May 2016, Kim J. 2021b).

5.3. Escape the Corset Movement

“Escape” or “Free the Corset” movement (Korean *t'alchul k'orŭset*) is another among the fourth-wave feminist movements characterised by their usage of social media platforms. The movement is an opposition to oppressive beauty standards and normative femininity imposed on women, using the word ‘corset’ as a metaphor for them.

The beginnings of this movement can be traced back to 2015 when a series of illustrations that were a part of the “Out of the Corset” project was posted on a Facebook page for *Megalia*. The theme of these illustrations was that true beauty is defined by a person themselves, not by others. Out of this, a movement that ventured from the digital space into offline life, was born. To take part women would post pictures of themselves “with the corset took-off” under the hashtag #EscapeTheCorset. On *Megalia*'s social media platforms users posted images and texts with the intent to bring awareness to the gendered nature of certain beauty standards and practices such as waxing, wearing make-up or dieting. Many cut their hair short, changed their clothing style/exchanged clothes and shoes that they found uncomfortable and restrictive for more practical and comfortable garments, or stopped wearing make-up and destroyed their beauty products as an act of resistance against societal norms that expect women to dress, look or behave a certain way (Park 2020).

The movement was most significant between the years 2016 and 2019. During this period, several Korean YouTubers made videos about their ‘escape the corset’ journey and the movement led to some changes in shopping habits among women where the expenses on makeup, hair or plastic surgery lowered (Shin and Lee 2022).

5.4. The 4B Movement

The “4B” movement or the “4-No’s” movement refers to the refusal of four things: heterosexual marriage (*pihon*), dating (*piyõnae*) and sexual relationships (*piseksũ*), and child-rearing (*pich'ulsan*).

When the 3rd Plan for the Ageing Society and Population was released in 2016, it encouraged early marriage and it included maps visualising the number of women in “reproductive” age. It also contained a paper written by a researcher at the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, which attributed “women’s incline to hypergamy” to low birth rate. This resulted in much criticism from Korean women, who felt they were being only seen for their body and their reproductive capacity by the state. The movement emerged as an opposition to the patriarchal order and the heteronormative family model in Korea and it criticises the pro-natalist orientation of the state.

The movement prompted its participant to imagine a different future, or rather imagine their future beyond the familiar path they grew up imagining, one marked by marriage and child-rearing. Discussions about personal financing, self-help and emphasis on personal aspirations, have become an important part of this movement as dealing with money smartly and saving up is necessary if the participants want to stay unmarried long-term (Jeong and Lee 2021).

Those that partake in this movement view it as the only way to live autonomously. They are trying to eliminate discrimination and danger they face by not participating in heterosexual relations. They view Korean society as “patriarchal beyond redemption” and as such have, in a way, decided to leave it behind (*The Cut*, 8 March 2023).

5.5. The Me Too Movement

In late 2016, a series of hashtags trended on Korean Twitter. Under these hashtags, people shared their testimonies about the sexual violence they suffered. First appeared the hashtag #sexual_violence_in_otaku_culture and then others followed. The hashtag #yeonghwagye_nae_seongpongyeok (#sexual_violence_in_the_film_industry),

brought to attention the verbal and physical abuse of female staff and actors on the sets of films. It brought to light the misogynistic culture in the film industry where cases like a director forcing an actress into an unscripted sex scene happen (Kim 2018). Some actresses and celebrities joined this hashtag with their own stories, but unlike the #metoo movement in the US, many of the perpetrators were kept anonymous for fear that they would sue the victims for defamation.

The #metoo movement originated in the US in 2017 when actress name Alyssa Milano tweeted calling on people to share their stories of sexual abuse using the hashtag. The movement became viral after the hashtag was used in response to sexual abuse inflicted by producer Harvey Weinstein (*Britannica*, 23 June 2023).

In Korea, the #metoo movement started in January 2018 when public prosecutor Seo Ji-hyeon, revealed sexual harassment in the prosecution office. In the following months many people across industries spoke out about their experiences with sexual harassment. In their stories, many were shedding light on how within the hierarchical working environment, they were too afraid to come forward with allegations or when they did, they were dismissed, and their jobs were threatened. The #metoo movement in Korea included some high-profile cases involving politicians, movie directors and actors, or professors and literary figures (*BBC News*, 26 March 2018)

Koreans held demonstrations throughout 2018 in support of the #metoo movement, trying to bring attention to workplace sexual harassment. These led to some changes, as the authorities were pressured to take action and investigate the prosecutor's office. This later revealed that over 60% of women in prosecutor's office have been victims of sexual harassment (Hasunama and Shin 2019). The movement also faced some backlash mostly from Korean men. In male-dominated digital communities some users developed a perception that women's claims and accusations have been unconditionally accepted as truth (Kim S. 2020).

6. Attitudes to Feminism in Contemporary South Korean Society

The previous chapters touched on the presence of feminism in Korean society as well as the digital feminist activism that has emerged as an opposition to digital misogyny in around the year 2015. The following popularisation and emergence of new feminist movements has gained attention of the Korean public. While some support or directly

participate in them, others view them in a negative light. If we talk about the popularisation of feminism, we cannot omit that the topic of feminism has been also one of controversy and polarisation. Through English-written and studies articles about Korea I look at what status does feminism have in Korean society.

6.1. Perception of Feminism and Gender Related Issues in Korean Society

Korean Women's Development Institute conducted a survey on the perception of feminism amongst Korean people in their 20s. Survey was conducted in July 2018 and involved 1,004 people, 53% women 47% and men in the age range of 19 to 29.

According to the survey, almost half (48.9%) of the women identify as feminists while 1 in 10 men identify as feminists, and 77.7% state that they do not identify as feminists. When it comes to specific movements, women show significantly bigger support for them than men. Over half of the women (56.3%) support the "Escape the corset" movement, 60.6% support the "Heyhwa Station Demonstrations", and 88.8% of women support the #metoo movement. For men these numbers go 19.1% for "Escape the corset", 19.4% for "Hyehwa", and 56.5% for #metoo movement. The #metoo movement being the only one that garnered support from more than half of the men.

The survey further shows that both men (71,3%) and women (81,5%) are interested in issues of gender equality or rather, gender discrimination in Korean society. When asked about the seriousness of gender stereotypes and discrimination against women, 79.3% of women replied that they are serious, less than half (42.6%) of men replied that they are serious with 55.2% of men stating that they are "not serious". The former of these two questions did not exactly state what "interest in gender discrimination means" or more specifically, what "gender discrimination" means and the figures from the second question suggest that the respondents don't necessarily equate "gender discrimination" with the discrimination of women. Questioned about misogyny, 70.4% of women recognise the seriousness of misogyny in Korean society, while only 27.9% of men do.

On the topic of interest in gender related issues, Park and Lee (2019) analysed news articles and comments related to gender issues between the years 2012 and 2017. The number of comments under news articles related gender equality rose from around 7000 to 57 000 during this period. When it comes to feminism itself, the study found

that in online comments regarding gender issues, the word feminism was often being used in distorted terms as an insult. Frequently used words together with feminism included ‘women’, ‘men’, ‘daily best’, ‘megal’, ‘womad’, ‘policy’, ‘equality’, ‘discrimination’, ‘rights’, and ‘hated’.

6.2. Feminism – an unnecessary movement?

Despite movements like #iamafeminists, many people who support women’s rights and empowerment hesitate to call themselves feminists due to the stigma that has come to be attached to the word (*Vice*, 17 February 2020). For some feminism/feminist became dirty words. A number of anti-feminists have taken to referring to feminists as “mentally ill” or “man-haters” and referring to the feminist movement as a “female supremacy movement” (*The New York Times*, 1 January 2022).

A number of men in their 20s and 30s, some previously supportive of feminism, now hold a view that women of their generation do not experience discrimination. They acknowledge that women of older generations have made sacrifices and were oppressed, but they believe that patriarchy and gender discrimination is the stuff of the older generations. Many young men feel as they are being punished for the “crimes” of older generations while feeling a loss of privilege that older generation of men had in the male dominated patriarchal society (*CNN*, 24 September 2021).

Now many began to see themselves as victims of reverse gender discrimination and the mandatory military conscription that only applies to men, is for considered a sign of this discrimination. Among the continuing competitive job and housing market, young men feel disadvantaged as the military service delays their start at life¹⁰ (*The New York Times*, 1 January 2022). Some men have begun forming men’s rights groups, advocating “true gender equality”, since they see feminism as not about equality but as discrimination against men (*CNN*, 23 September 2019).

6.3. Feminism and the Latest Presidential Elections

During the latest presidential election, feminism became a frequently mentioned topic. The presidential candidate, and now elected Korean president, Yoon Suk-yeol, has stated during his presidential campaign that there is no structural gender discrimination

¹⁰ Korea highest gender wage gap among OECD countries (OECD, 29 June 2023) and the ranks last on the glass ceiling index (*The Economist*, 6 March 2023), so although young women enter workforce in larger numbers, they experience barriers in moving up the corporate ladder.

in Korea and blamed the low birth-rate in Korea on feminism. He has vowed to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and bring about harsher punishment for false accusations of sexual violence (*The Guardian*, 11 March 2022). Whether his anti-feminist statements attributed to his win or not cannot be directly said however it remains true that the heightened gender sensitivity and aversion to feminism has been used as a tool in the campaign (*Time*, 10 March 2022).

His opposing candidate initially tried to appeal to anti-feminists as well, and he has stated that reverse discrimination exists in Korea but changed his strategy last minute trying to sway women voters towards him (*The Washington Post*, 12 March 2022). The Ministry of Gender Equality continues to be a topic of controversy¹¹ and for some also a sign of reverse gender discrimination.

6.4. Feminism and Public Figures

In connection to feminism, there have been cases of public figures receiving negative attention, facing backlash or online harassment. Archer An San, for example, has been “accused” of being a feminist following her winning gold in the 2021 Olympic games due to her short hair. And she is not the first sportswomen to face backlash from anti-feminists. Following this incident, people took to Korea Archery Association’s message board asking to protect An San and they trended a #women_shortcut_campaign hashtag under which they posted pictures of themselves and their short hair with the hashtag Young, 30 July 2021 (*The New York Times*, 30 July 2021).

Irene of Red Velvet has come under fire from some of her fans for reading the feminist novel ‘Kim Jiyoung, born 1982’, which recounts ordinary life of its protagonist and the daily sexism she faces. Similar incidents happened with other celebrities too. Naeun from group APink faced backlash for “promoting feminism” due to a phone case that had a phrase “Girls can do anything” written on it (*Billboard*, 2 February 2023).

¹¹ The ministry, which has the smallest budget among all ministries, has diverse functions, it deals with prevention of sexual violence, policymaking on gender equality, women’s participation in political life as well as family-related policies (*Institut du Genre en Géopolitique*, 23 January 2023).

Conclusion

This bachelor's thesis examined the resurgence of feminist activism in Korea during the mid-2010s and the role of cyberspace in the popularisation of the feminist movement. The development of feminist movement is situated within the larger historical and socio-economic development of Korean society. After looking through the historical context, I described the economic crises and following neo-liberalisation that influenced people's lives and also shaped the feminist movement. During this period, the achievements of previous feminist movements became a subject of anti-feminist backlash.

The unfavourable economic situation led a number of men to look for scapegoats for their frustrations, which they found in women – their new competitors in the job market. Now in the digital age, past the year 2000, male-dominated online communities became the place to express frustrations from the socio-economic situation and therefore places where a strong misogynistic narrative emerged. Online community *Ilbe* has become the main place for this cyberspace misogyny in the mid-2000s and as response to it, radical feminist groups *Megalia* and *Womad* were created. And to counter the specific misogynistic language found on *Ilbe*, users of the radical feminist communities created their own grammar by mirroring that of *Ilbe* and together users of these three groups “waged gender wars” across cyberspace.

The emergence of *Megalia* and *Womad* played a major role in the reboot of Korean feminism, which we understand as the resurgence and popularisation of feminist activism. The users of these platforms, with their mirroring technique, brought attention to the misogyny within society, which proliferated in the cyberspace. They countered misogyny in an unprecedented, and a rather shocking way and gained attention from the public. Furthermore, the activities on their websites, social media and offline spaces attributed in the popularisation of feminism in Korea and as such, contributed to the emergence of new feminist movements in Korea in the past 8 years.

With feminism becoming more visible than ever, even stronger anti-feminist backlash appeared as a response, mainly from young men. Despite the fact that Korean women continue to face discrimination, some believe that the tables have turned, and now young men are being subjected to reverse-discrimination. In this context, feminism has become a controversial topic, as some believe it is a movement for women's supremacy. Thus, the anti-feminist and feminist groups clash within Korean society,

where sensitivity around gender-related issues seems to be at an all-time high. The fierce neoliberal competition, where the resources are insufficient and everyone competes for a seat at the table, is stoking the fires of this gender conflict. The clashes between anti-feminists and feminists, which are for the most part made up the young generations of Koreans, are currently still taking place and it remains to be seen how, or whether the conflict between these two groups will be resolved. And while it continues, feminism remains a controversial and divisive topic.

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