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Introduction

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Why Korean Feminism?

In 2015, South Korea society saw a "feminism reboot"[1] (Sohn 2015) and the popularization of feminism to a remarkable degree. Since then, amid the expansion of feminist movements worldwide, Korean feminist movements have on their side been constructing with astonishing velocity a narrative that challenges patriarchal hegemony in every aspect. This special issue is an invitation to feminist scholarship around the world to engage in a conversation on Korean feminism from a transnational perspective by locating the current feminist movements of South Korea within the local context and exploring the possibilities of comparative analysis of worldwide feminist movements. The global wave of neoliberalism, the emergence of digital technology that connects the world with remarkable speed and scope, the greater globalized awareness of its users, and the changes they are making in the political landscape of different societies intersect with the similarities and differences of feminist movements around the world, introducing multiple possibilities for comparative analyses. Neither *woman* nor *patriarchy* can be homogeneous categories and concepts, and in order to understand feminist movements it is necessary to acknowledge the difference and diversity between women and to situate the experiences of women within their specific context and politics (Mani 1990; Mohanty 1991, 2003). The

[1] Sohn (2015) takes the Hollywood term "reboot" that refers to when a film "resets the continuity of an established film series" while it "throws out in favor of a new status" (*Vox* September 16, 2015) and coins the expression "feminism reboot" to explicate the new phase of Korean feminism that began in 2015. According to Sohn (2015, p. 15), this expression alludes to the continuities and ruptures between existing and current Korean feminist movements, and that the capitalist rhetoric embedded in the term "reboot" reveals the post-feminist conditions from which a "feminism reboot" that also involves the features of a cultural movement, emerged.

differences and commonalities, as well as the connections and interactions between nationhood, race, sexuality, and gender under global capitalism can provide a comparative perspective that does not "just subside into multiple differences" (Reed 2015, p. 146) or fall into cultural relativism (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Yuval-Davis 1997; Mohanty 2003). While it would be crucial to locate the current feminist movement in Korea within the complex layers of Korean society and to recognize its particularity, a drawback of exploring the possibilities of a Korean feminist discourse and practice would be to take "the Korean" for granted and fall into cultural essentialism, which itself requires further deconstruction.

This special issue presents an analysis of recent Korean feminist movements since 2015. The authors of this special issue show why and how recent Korean feminist movements are making cracks in patriarchal hegemony and forming a narrative far removed from the mainstream political and social narratives and timeline that are constructed upon the national missions of democratization and economic development. In this temporal progress, "important political events" in the conventional sense are insignificant and irrelevant. It is within this narrative, based on the timeline of Korean women, that we locate each article. The primary purpose of this special issue is to offer critical insights into the recent politicization process of online and offline feminist movements, including the LGBTQ movement, and subsequent reactions from various spectrums of Korean society. Contributed articles analyze how the newly emerging feminist movements are responding to androcentric and heteronormative social inertia and, at the same time, addressing the dilemma of divergent voices within the movements themselves in Korea.

Korea's Feminist Movements

The meta-narratives of nationalism and democratization arose from the colonial experiences under the Empire of Japan and the military dictatorships that followed liberation in 1945. Korea is often located within the Confucian sphere, but its Confucian patriarchy was further reinforced by the state-led modernization project under postcolonial conditions. A "reactionary response to the masculine process of colonialism" (Kim 2005, p. 183), the capitalist developmental state of Park Chung-hee's regime was, according to Han and Ling (1998, p. 54) a "hybrid hypermasculinized state" that "exaggerated its mantle of local patriarchal values by evoking an unquestioned

hegemony of classical Confucian paternalism and manhood while locking society into a hyperfeminized identity" (Kim 2005, p. 183). The gendered image of the state and society "based on familism has been widespread up to the present time" (Kim 2005, p. 184), enforcing gendered power relations and the concept of the normal family. The military conscription system, the resident registration law, the family planning project, and the deployment of female labor and sex for rapid industrialization institutionalized patriarchy, androcentrism, and heteronormativity in every corner of society.[2]

The influence of this order made no exception for the pro-democracy movements. The student movement that was the core of the pro-democracy movement was itself "saturated in militarism" and operated by privileging masculinity and trivializing femininity (Kwon 2005, p. 30). As Hur (2011, p. 182) states, the women's movement that started as a segment of the national liberation movement in the 1940s continued to be considered as a part of the democratic movement under military dictatorship. Under the greater causes of national liberation and democratization, women in the movement were regarded as a homogeneous category and identity, as members of "the nation, the state, and/or of the working class" (Hur 2011, p. 182). For instance, sexual violence was yet to be recognized as a gender issue since sexual violence committed by the police was a matter of state corruption and oppression, while sexual violence within movement was silenced (Shin 2004, p. 280).

Since Korea's democratization in 1987, women's movements have developed their own path, publicizing issues of violence against women (Shin 2004, p. 274). However, the major narratives continued to be nationalism and pro-democracy. As Chizuko (2004) criticized, the "comfort women" issue that became a major agenda of the women's movement in Korea since the late 1980s, was treated with patriarchic and nationalist grammar, not as sexual violence but as national violence against Korea by its colonial master, Japan. Meanwhile, the neoliberalization that intensified following the 1997 Asian financial crisis reinforced the gendered social order. Discriminatory layoffs of women based on sex upon restructuring, the irregularization of female labor, and the political discourse that regarded the crisis of economy as a crisis of masculinity while burdening women with the double duty of "boosting the morale" of their husbands and working to contribute to their family economy marginalized women in the labor market and imposed on them a fixed gender role (Bae 2009, pp. 40-41). Despite women's high levels of educational attainment, female labor remains vulnerable in Korea as it is concentrated in

[2] Also see Moon 1997; Moon 2005; Cho 2016.

low-paid jobs, as well as suffering due to sexual discrimination upon employment and re-entry to labor market, and wage discrimination (Bae 2009, pp. 53-55; Kim 2018, p. 123). In 2019, South Korea had the highest gender wage gap in the OECD and ranked lowest in *The Economist's* annual Glass Ceiling Index (*The Diplomat* June 14, 2019). According to a 2019 report by the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, the gender wage gap has been widening.

Nonetheless, since democratization in 1987, Korean society has witnessed remarkable progress in gender equality. Women's movements started to focus on gender issues, actively publicizing issues like sexual violence, domestic violence, and issues encompassing Japanese "comfort women" (Shin 2004, p. 271). Women's studies flourished on campuses and in bookstores in the 1980s and the 1990s. The public was quite united in improving the legal, institutional, and social status of women vis-à-vis men. In 1987, the Act on Equal Employment was enacted. In 1994, the National Assembly promulgated the Act on the Punishment of Sexual Violence and Protection of Victims that strengthened punishment for perpetrators of sexual violence and outlined special procedures and regulations for investigation and prosecution to protect victims who are disproportionately women. Between 1997 and 1998, the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of the Victim Act was enacted. In 1999, the Act on the Prohibition and Remedy for Sexual Discrimination was enacted, though it was later abolished in 2005. In 2001, the Ministry of Gender Equality was established to lead comprehensive policies for women. In 2005, the Constitutional Court found the *hoju* system, a family register system that had buttressed the patriarchic social order, unconstitutional. Institutionally and legally, the social status of Korean women seemed to have drastically improved in less than two decades after democratization. Meanwhile, women's movements of the time are criticized by lesbian activists such as Park-Kim et al. (2007) for their heteronormative orientation that excluded queer issues from their agendas and that viewed lesbianism as a foreign import rather than an issue relevant to the movement.

While the women's movement institutionalized quickly and gained socio-political power since the mid 1990s, "new feminists" or the so-called Young Feminists, became prominent in the 2000s. Young Feminists rose to prominence by criticizing the assumption of the single category of "woman" presupposed by conventional women's movements and attempted to (re)construct women as fluid and fragmented subjects of resistance (Jeong 2015). This was a new phase of the women's movements in that they began to

recognize the multiple identities of women including "marginalized women such as irregular workers, migrant workers, sexual minorities, and disabled women" (Hur 2011, pp. 182-183) and to contemplate intersectionality and essentialism based on feminine identity politics (Jeong 2015, p. 42). Though the Young Feminists' movement has been largely (dis)regarded as a cultural movement, that is, a sub-category of larger women's movements, by feminists belonging to previous generations (see Chung 2020), it is more and more becoming recognized as a movement in itself. Jeong (2015, p. 39) argues that it was a movement that criticized women's movements for viewing women's or gender issues as subordinate to class and nation, and that attempted to resist the meta-structure outside institutions and in everyday politics through sexual politics that reexamined the category of woman.

In the 1990s, the student movements that had formerly focused on democratization, started to diversify—the Young Feminists being one result of such diversification. Dissenting from student unions that maintained the student movement over the women's movement, Young Feminists identified themselves as feminists and sought solidarity beyond campuses, not as students but as women (KwonKim 2017, p. 22). According to Shin (2004, pp. 292-293), by denouncing sexual violence on campuses and the way that student unions historicized sexual violence by police as oppression of students rather than as a gender issue, and by demanding a new conceptualization of sexual violence, these women who sought sexual politics led the enactment of university statutes for the eradication of sexual violence on campus. However, as Mihyun Kim will discuss in this issue, the campuses where feminist politics sprouted were to be replaced by the depoliticized campuses of the neoliberal era.

For Young Feminists, PC Communication, and later the internet, was a space of challenge (KwonKim 2017, p. 18). Young Feminists carried out progressive and experimental activism on the net and on campus by advancing feminist issues and confronting misogyny within digital communities (Shin 2004, p. 294; Jeong 2015; KwonKim 2017). In 2000, an anonymous group of Young Feminists launched the Hundred Persons Committee for the Eradication of Sexual Violence in Social Movements to investigate sexual violence cases in student unions, labor unions, and other progressive organizations and released the list of 16 perpetrators on the online board of the progressive network *ChamSesang* (True World) Community. This incident opened the floor for active discussions on the concept of sexual violence. It highlighted the different perceptions among women and men and introduced debates on the need for victim-centered

approaches and the expansion of the concept of sexual violence. Most important of all, these Young Feminists politicized sexual violence (Shin 2004, p. 295).

In the 2000s, however, feminist movements became less and less visible. With the acceleration of neoliberalization that the state had led following the 1997 Asian financial crisis and that had intensified with the 2008 financial crisis, Korean feminism seemed to have entered a phase of "post-feminism" (McRobbie 2004) and/or anti-feminism. Despite the fragile economic realities of women shaped by the two financial crises and the consequent anxiety of young women (Bae 2009), neoliberalization accentuated the socio-cultural representations of young women as "alpha girls"—winners in competition with men, and consumers with purchasing power (Lee 2016, p. 85). On the other hand, neoliberalism prompted men's fear of weakened masculinity (Sohn 2015, p. 22). As will be discussed further in Jihyun Choo and Mihyun Kim's articles, such fear created an anti-feminist discourse among young men that advocates "equality over equity."[3] In the following section, we provide the context on the digital environment of Korea, which became one of the major battlegrounds for, and site of, the "feminism reboot" in 2015 and the evolvement of feminist movements from then on.

Accumulation: The Path toward Gangnam Station and the Rise of 'Megal Feminists'

Cyberspace Misogyny

Defying Haraway's (1991, pp. 149-182) expectations that cyberspace would become a space of liberation where gendered power relations and patriarchal oppression will be abolished, online space has proven to be a space where gender differences are highlighted and misogynic violence prevails. According to Cortese (2005, p. 90), who analyzes hate speech in the American context, women are silenced and objectified in the hostile male-dominated online space where men make the rules and grammar, and where sexual assaults that reflect gender power relations are amplified through digital technology. Korea's cyber space is no exception to such analysis. In

[3] Social economist Naila Kabeer (Kabeer 1994, p. 86) distinguishes gender equity "based on recognition of difference than similarity" from equality of opportunity i.e., "formal equality" and emphasizes the need for equity over equality.

fact, as one of the most wired societies,[4] Korea could serve as a precedent that shows the correlation between the development of the digital environment and that of feminist movements.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, according to KwonKim (2020, pp. 57-58), Korean male internet users and Korea's male-centered society experienced how women could be rendered into consumable content and not be equal users of online space. In a society where rape culture was already widespread, connection through cyberspace facilitated the circulation of illegal nude photography, rape videos, and non-consensual illegal video recordings such as revenge porn, hidden camera recordings of a sexual nature (the so-called *molka* or spy cams), and deepfake videos among male users. Distribution of such contents that sexually exploited and objectified women "flourished" as IT companies that had witnessed the failure of American and Chinese dot-com companies in 2000 realized that these contents targeting male users guaranteed profits (KwonKim 2020, p. 65). Soranet, Korea's largest illegal pornography website that was shut down in 2016, where male users conspired to commit gang rape and shared non-consensual illegal video recordings, started operating in this context in 1999.

It is true that the Young Feminists who envisaged an alternative space where sexual, class, racial, and national differences would diminish also occupied cyberspace and led active discussions on feminist agendas by creating feminist and queer online platforms (Yoon 2014; Kim 2018). Nevertheless, online sexual harassment that extended offline and other online abuse targeting women were common. Indeed, the gendered and misogynic discourses of Korean society were amplified online. For instance, when the Constitutional Court ruled the military service reward system to be unconstitutional,[5] male online users launched massive attacks on female users and the websites of women's organizations. As Bae (2000, p. 93) points out, the online attacks were an intensified reproduction of discourses commonly

[4] According to government statistics, more than 90% of the population is connected to the internet as of 2019. From 1997 to 2000, following the world-wide dot-com bubble, the IT industry boomed in Korea introducing networks known as PC Communication to the wide public (*Korea Times* January 30, 2011; *Korea Herald* August 14, 2013).

[5] The military service reward system that provided extra points to men who completed military service upon application to office was ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 1999 on grounds of discrimination against women and the disabled. The ruling offended the vulnerability of Korean men to most of whom the military conscription is a self-defining narrative, especially in the age of neoliberalism where women and men engage in harsh competitions, and in an era when young men started to perceive the burden of mandatory military conscription as limited to those who did not have the means to avoid it (Bae 2000).

circulated in Korea's online space: witch hunts against women's organizations and feminists, and accusing competent and affluent women of stealing the bread from poor men who had to complete their military service. These discourses are still common among young Korean men, as will be shown further in the articles of Jihyun Choo and Mihyun Kim.

In the early 2000s, the internet seemed to have become a male-dominated space. Female-dominated platforms were oftentimes "trolled" and "flamed" by male users, while female users were increasingly considered as either content in themselves or consumers of commercial websites (KwonKim 2020, pp. 55-63) rather than active creators of online culture. If they chose not to stay in the female-dominated platforms, female users would oftentimes choose to hide themselves behind a male identity. DCInside.com, a male-dominated platform representative of Korea's online subculture, has constructed a misogynic grammar that infiltrated into popular culture. Korean portal services, where the majority of Koreans access the news, are one such platform where this misogynic grammar is circulated through news comments, as will be explored by Sooah Kim in this special issue. On DC Inside, women are objectified as sexual objects and stigmatized with modern sexual stereotypes as they are interpellated with vocabularies such as *kimchi-nyeo*, which refers to "a Korean woman who is sexually promiscuous, extravagant, and tends to live off men's financial means" (Um 2016, pp. 207-208) or *doenjang-nyeo*.[6] Platform users disseminate misogynic stereotypes by referring to women as *-nyeo* (girl). Women who the male users think are subservient to patriarchy and perform the modern gender stereotype are referred to as *tal-kimchi-nyeo* or *gaenyeom-nyeo*[7] (Um 2016, p. 212). On the other hand, feminists are generalized as abnormal and lacking common sense in the inimical discourses about feminists, women's student councils and organizations, and the Ministry of Gender Equality produced by users of male-dominated communities (Kim and Choi 2007, pp. 27-28).

Ilbe, a former sub-board on DC Inside started in 2010 and an independent website since 2011 that gained notoriety for its far right-wing

[6] *Doenjang-nyeo,* or soybean paste girl, refers to women "who live frugally (on [soy]bean paste stew) so they can save up for designer handbags and shoes" (*The Korea Times* May 29, 2012), that is, selfish and vain.

[7] *Tal-kimchi-nyeo* means women who are not *kimchi-nyeo* anymore, as *tal-* means "to exit." *Gaenyeom-nyeo* means a woman who does not lack common sense. Both words refer to women who split the check without making men pay everything, who are frugal and diligent, and who "prepare a warm meal" once married (Um 2016, p. 213).

orientation during the period leading up to the presidential election in 2012,[8] has been the exemplary online space for hate speech, including misogyny and homophobia. The website can be regarded as one of the most important phenomena of anti-feminism (or backlash) in Korea as it provided a platform to formulate coherent narratives against Korean women by assembling scattered discourses and images of misogyny in Korean society. Of course, Ilbe was not the cause of misogyny but rather a consequence of it. Nevertheless, the narratives assembled on and by Ilbe provide us with the current map of misogyny. Firstly, Ilbe discourses clearly express Korean (young) men's fears of weakened masculinity and failure to maintain their superior status (Yoon 2013) by being the sole breadwinner of a normal family.[9] The two financial crises of 1997 and 2008 that accelerated economic re-arrangements that favor labor flexibility and other neoliberal social and economic policies are partial causes of the rise of such discourse. Second, unlike traditional misogynic perspectives, Ilbe discourses perceive young Korean women as selfish predators who steal men's property (which had been regarded as family property) by utilizing the progressive government's pro-women policies or by forcing men to spend more money than they can afford (Yoon 2013; Kim 2015).

Ilbe discourses were initially regarded as typical losers' discourses amid intensifying competition in the labor market. Yet, numerous surveys indicated that Ilbe discourses were broadly shared among young men and drew attention from the media and academia. Both the media and academia noticed that the widespread misogynic discourses found on Ilbe were fundamentally different from traditional misogyny. During the period of industrialization and modernization,[10] women were often disciplined for inappropriate behaviors, that is, participation in politics, pursuit of her own career, or refusal to reproduce for the maintenance of the patriarchic family order. Nevertheless, the misogyny of Ilbe presumes the victimhood of average young Korean men[11] who are alienated from Korean women (because they believe that young Korean women prefer rich men or white men over the average Korean man) and have to endure disadvantages in the job market due

[8] Ilbe, the abbreviation of *ilgan best jeojangso* (daily best storage) is particularly notorious for its disparagement of the 1980 May 18 Gwangju Democratic Movement and the late president Roh Moo-hyun.

[9] Though it has never been the case according to various statistics. For instance, see Bae 2009; Hwang 2018.

[10] For this theme, see Moon 2005.

[11] See Kim and Lee 2017.

to their compulsory military service. At the same time, it should be noted that Ilbe, which is the acronym for *ilgan best* (daily best) started as a board to round up the best daily posts on DC Inside. Rather than through serious debates, Ilbe discourses are accumulated through the playful competition for more attention from other Ilbe users, making misogyny a game and spreading "misogyny like air" as Korean women call it.

Korean intellectuals were alarmed by the sudden proliferation of Ilbe's misogynic discourses to online spaces and dismayed by the fact that they could not find appropriate analytical tools with which to address them.[12] Academic communities were helpless in the face of the new online syndrome, being unable to figure out the realities let alone provide interpretation and analysis. Young Korean women, surrounded by omnipresent misogyny spreading from online to offline and from subculture to popular culture, were silenced by incessant hate speech. Some reproduced the misogyny within themselves to silence other women and self-censored in order to not become a *kimchi-nyeo* but a *gaenyum-nyeo* (Yoo 2016, p. 34). To survive in such a popular culture, many women could not help but start their sentences with "I am not a feminist, but—," until 2015.

2015, Feminism Reboot

In February 2015, the hashtag "*#na-neun_pe-mi-ni-seu-teu-ib-ni-da* (#I_am_a_feminist)"[13] began to trend on Twitter. This was after a male columnist wrote that "brainless feminism is more dangerous than ISIS" (*Grazia* Issue No. 48 February 2, 2015) following the disappearance of an 18-year-old Korean boy who was suspected to have joined ISIS after tweeting "i hate feminists. So I like the isis [sic]" (*The Kyunghyang Shinmun* February 16, 2015). After the incident, the word *feminist* became a trending keyword. In response to the columnist,[14] numerous Twitter users started to declare themselves feminists and to share their past experiences of and reflections on sexual discrimination in Korean society. The hashtag movement lasted for a

[12] In 2013, the Korean Association of Women's Studies tried to organize an academic conference to discuss the Ilbe phenomenon but failed due to the lack of applicants (Kim 2016).

[13] On this issue, see Kim 2017.

[14] The columnist Kim Tae Hoon argued that contemporary Korean feminists who were asking for more even after achieving enough gender equality were brainless. One example was the extra point system for military service. Kim's analysis was that unlike the feminism of the past that was part of the social movements of the 1960s, contemporary feminism was the cause of the rise of men's rights movements and misogynic online spaces (*Ohmynews* February 13, 2015).

few months, and those who had made their feminist declaration online started to meet up on the streets. This was the beginning of a "feminism reboot" as online resistance to misogyny but also the advent of a feminist politics for survival by women mobilized online, that raised questions about misogyny, women's safety, women's reproductive and health rights, and women's citizenship in democracy online, in popular culture, and on the streets (Kim 2018, pp. 100-101). Feminist scholars including Sohn (2015, p. 45) also diagnosed the phenomenon as "the collapse of the post-feminist myth" in Korean society.

In August of the same year, a counteroffensive against the rampant misogynic internet sub-culture in Korea came in a very unexpected way but on a grand scale. Women who "refused to be silenced or instigated by misogyny appeared" (Yoo 2016, p. 53) on the online scene with Megalian.com (or Megalia). Earlier in spring, upon the outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, false rumors spread that two young Korean women infected with the disease had refused to quarantine and instead continued shopping in Hong Kong, triggering harsh misogynic reactions in male-dominated online communities such as Ilbe and DC Inside. As female users of DC Inside started to articulate the disproportionate level of criticism against the actual first patient of the disease, who was a man, the MERS Gallery—a board formed on DC Inside to share information about the epidemic—grew into the battleground for an unprecedented counterattack against male internet users.

Using this so-called mirroring tactic,[15] female users switched the subject of existing misogynic phrases from male to female and devised new words that twisted and countered the misogynic vocabulary used on male-dominant websites to create a new context (Yoo 2016, p. 64). For instance, "Women should stay home and be docile" was mirrored as "Men should stay home and be docile," "Women should be beaten up every three days" as "Men should be beaten up every three days," and "Women should be ditched once screwed" as "Men should be ditched once screwed." *Kimchi-nyeo* was mirrored as *kimchi-nam* (kimchi man), and *mam-chung*[16] (mother worm) as *hannam-chung* (Korean male worm). Hearing the news that women were

[15] Megalians (Megalia users) called their strategic appropriation of Ilbe's misogynic grammar that parodied and revealed the absurdly pervasive degree of misogyny "mirroring (tactic)". In using the mirroring tactic, Megalians deliberately and actively deployed extremely vulgar and nasty language, including swear words and slang (Jeong and Lee 2018, p. 711).

[16] Also translated as mom-roach, *mam-chung* is a misogynic term that refers to young mothers that "cause a nuisance" with their children.

"joyfully beating up" males, combative female internet users from other female-dominated platforms swiftly gathered in the gallery and continued to appropriate the "masculine" language of profanity, sexual organs, and assessments of external appearance formerly prohibited to women who were supposed to be obedient and well-behaved (Yun 2015; Yoo 2016, pp. 106-107).

Female MERS Gallery users exited DC Inside in August 2015 and regrouped to create their own website, Megalia, a term coined by combining MERS Gallery and *Egalia's Daughters*, the title of a feminist novel. Since then, the new website became the center of extremely radical feminist expressions that were unimaginable for established feminist scholarship or NGOs for women's rights. The vocabulary used on the website became sensational in mass media, and subsequently, gave an excuse for mainstream media and scholarship to criticize the vulgarity of this new phenomenon. Nevertheless, what really mattered for concerned feminist scholars was not the vulgar content of the website but the newly constructed grammar through which women became the subject of misandry instead of being the object of misogyny. The new language of misandry, ironically, explicated the width and depth of misogyny in Korean society because it intentionally and directly adopted the grammatic structure of misogyny.

Megalia quickly became the symbol of young feminists who have less been contaminated and restrained by traditional Korean patriarchy. It was the first organized resistance against the problematic Ilbe phenomenon and led a number of successful campaigns for feminist agendas.[17] Feminism, which had seemed to be remote from the popular imagination of Korean women during the 2000s, was "rebooted" amid the incidents that ensued online in 2015. The events that followed prompted an even larger number of young Korean women to identify as feminists, referring to themselves as "Megal(ian) Feminists," and being referred to as "Young Young Feminists," "Net Feminists," and "Twitter Feminists."

[17] Megalia's activities include denunciation of misogynist popular culture, demands for the eradication of *molka*, the closure of Soranet, and donations to women's organizations.

Explosion and Evolution

Gangnam Station Murder

In May 2016, a man with schizophrenia murdered a woman in a public bathroom near the Gangnam subway station, one of the busiest districts in Seoul. Though the criminal confessed that he had committed the murder "because women looked down on him," the police concluded the investigation by deeming it wanton murder. On May 19, two days after the murder, hundreds of mourners gathered in front of the exit 10 of the subway station, protesting against the misogynic nature of Korean society. The protest grew both offline and online, and Park Wonsun, the mayor of Seoul, visited the memorial site and promised that the city would pursue assertive policies on crimes against women and preserve the mourning sites.

The murder at Gangnam Station on May 17, 2016 decisively altered the path of Korean feminism. Firstly, whereas Megalia and other insurgencies against the patriarchic social order in Korea largely remained online or in academia, mourning for the victim of the murder at Gangnam Station occurred in real world, at exit 10 of Gangnam Station. Thousands physically participated in the commemoration by leaving post-it notes or participating in marches. Feminists mobilized to define the crime as a misogynic crime or a femicide (Kim 2018, p. 116). Further, feminist mourners and anti-feminist Ilbe users made their very first face-to-face confrontation as Ilbe users also protested on site against feminists' claim that the murder was caused by misogyny. Second, the murder symbolized the vulnerability of Korean women against misogynic crimes, even at a place where the majority of population had felt safe, a restroom near the busiest subway station in Korea. Ever since the tragedy of the Sewol Ferry in 2014, Korean society had begun to perceive security not as a personal matter but a political affair. The murder at Gangnam Station politicized young Korean women as they started to see themselves as a collectivity that shares a sense of insecurity in everyday life. Furthermore, the shared cumulative experiences of being neglected by the police upon reporting stalking, spy cameras, and sexual violence politicized these women under the "realization" that state power was not there to protect its female citizens.

Since the murder, taking direct action has become the principle for young Korean feminists. Numerous feminist groups that were organized following the murder and that led the mourning have been mobilizing

women as a political force (Kim 2018, pp. 6-7). For example, they led protests against the abortion ban that was ruled to be "not consistent with the Constitution" in 2019 and denounced the misogynic language and conduct of the progressive movement against the Park Geun-hye government in November 2016, by creating "femi-zones" in the demonstration area. On social media, the *tal-koreuset* movement (Remove the Corset movement) that refuses to conform to the beauty standards imposed on women in Korean society spread among young feminists.[18] As more and more women decide to resist patriarchy, the Four Nos movement that refuses heterosexual dating, sex, marriage, and child-rearing is gaining popularity.[19] Along with the popularity of biological essentialism among young feminists that will be further discussed by Hyun-Jae Lee, both the Four Nos movement and political lesbianism have been gaining more interest in recent years. As male internet users appropriated feminist knowledge through information shared on Namuwiki, a Korean wiki that is widely used but also produces misogynic information, women launched Femiwiki to correct such information and spread feminist knowledge. Young women mobilized to confront digital sexual crimes themselves by successfully investigating, reporting, and publicizing the hideous crimes conspired and committed in online spaces.[20]

Furthermore, young Korean women's rebellion against the patriarchal social order evolved around the issue of political subjectivity or women as a political category. A little before the murder at Gangnam Station, an intensive debate had started on Megalia over whether sexual minorities, especially gay

[18] On this issue also see Lee 2016.

[19] According to Femiwiki, at the foundation of the Four Nos Movement is the rejection of patriarchy, male-centered sex, and the economic structure in which men gain money through the circulation and sale of non-consensual illegal videos (https://femiwiki.com/w/4B).

[20] For instance, DSO (Digital Sexual Crime Out) that was established by a dozen of women publicized and reported the website Soranet where thousands of non-consensual illegal video recordings of sexual nature were shared among millions of viewers, by urging the press, the police, and the legislature to act. The organization continues to monitor and report platforms similar to Soranet to eradicate digital sexual crimes (*Women News* March 7, 2017). Another prominent example is the activism against the Telegram Nth Room Case, a criminal case that involved sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and blackmailing of women and young girls, and circulation of sexually exploitative contents on the messenger app Telegram, among 15,000 members as confirmed by the police. Two female university students first investigated the case under the team name Team Flame in July 2019 (*Korea JoongAng Daily* March 31, 2020). In December 2019, anonymous women mobilized on Twitter to investigate, report, and publicize the crime (*Kookminilbo* April 1, 2020). As the case gained public attention, more than five million people signed National Petitions that directly address the presidential office calling for the punishment and disclosure of perpetrators' identities (*Korea JoongAng Daily* March 29, 2020).

men and transgender women (MTF), should be the targets of mirroring or misandry. The polemic was sparked amidst discussions on cases of fake marriages by gay men with heterosexual women, the misogynic culture and discrimination against lesbians in gay communities, and as Megalians mirrored the misogynic expressions used in a gay community (Kim 2017, p. 112). One group emphasized a united front for women, sexual minorities, and all minorities in general against the hegemonic hetero-patriarchic social order while another argued for an exclusive coalition among biological women including heterosexual women and lesbians. In favor of the former, the Megalia operators filtered demeaning terms used to disparage gay men. Hundreds of Megalia users left the website and founded a new internet community, WOMAD (woman + nomad) in early 2016. WOMAD quickly became notorious for its extreme and explicit content that assaults any type of male objects, including children, animals, independent movement heroes, and deceased progressive political figures such as Roh Moo-hyun and Roh Hoe-chan. The website was also filled with claims of murders targeting men, descriptions of abuse of male pets, and criminal hidden camera videos, all of which supposedly mirrored content from male-dominated websites.

The content and strategies of WOMAD were not well received, even among progressives and mainstream feminists. Nevertheless, WOMAD's essentialist definition of "woman" has shown the possibility or the existence of entirely subverted gender relations. Unlike mainstream feminism or feminism found on Megalia that aims at the dismantlement of the hetero-patriarchic social order, WOMAD depicted a world where women replaced men's position in the gender hierarchy.[21] It is not certain whether WOMAD is deploying "strategic essentialism" (Spivak [1985] 1996) to reveal unendurable social realities for "liberated" women or becoming "another Ilbe" by immersing itself in a grotesque world for social losers. At very least, it has shown the degree of discomfort that arises when women's gazes are disconnected from the state, nation, and society.

In spite of the instability of woman as a category, it is evident that Korean women have shown the possibility of being a collective subject of social movements. A series of protests against *molka* and gender-biased investigations ensued (*ABC News* August 5, 2018). One of the largest female-only protests and post-impeachment protests that drew roughly 300,000

[21] However, the essentialist strategy of WOMAD to produce a counter-society may create a simulacrum of the existing power structure, then reinforce the existing categories. This would be a tragic result because hegemonic order is sustained not necessarily by changed hierarchy but by the unchanging categories themselves (Kristeva 1981 referred to by Kim 2018, p. 21).

participants started with a WOMAD user posting a nude photo of a male model taken with an illegal hidden camera on May 1, 2018. The police began their investigation on May 3 and made an arrest on May 10. The female suspect was prosecuted on May 24 and found guilty with the sentence of 10 months in prison on August 13. All the processes were extremely speedy, and the sentence was perceived as unjust by women because similar criminal cases with male perpetrators usually end up with no prison time but with a suspended sentence or a fine. Female-dominated online communities, Twitter, and Facebook immediately filled up with posts arguing that the case was treated unfairly with a speedy investigation/arrest and a heavy sentence because the culprit was a female. With this incident, the perception that state power does not stand by women but is eager to punish them while turning a blind eye to sexual crimes committed by men spread among Korean women. In addition, with the surge of the Me Too movement that started in the beginning of the same year, women were well aware of the prevalence of sexual violence against women and the rigid gendered social structure that allows for the pervasiveness of sexual crimes.

Women who had endured *molka* (criminal spy cameras) as an everyday threat and were angered by the disproportionate reaction of the police, who had shown lukewarm responses to women's reports of the same crime, quickly mobilized (Park and Lee 2019). The very first protest was held on May 19 and, subsequently, five more protests were organized until the end of 2018 under the name Uncomfortable Courage. The size of protests grew rapidly. According to the organizers, the first protest mobilized around 12,000 participants, the second (June 9) 45,000, the third (July 7) 60,000 and the fourth (August 4) 70,000 participants. Though it started with the demand for legal impartiality, the protest evolved into the demand to eliminate the everyday threats of spy cams[22] and, further, sexual and gender discrimination by the state in general.

The #MeToo Movement

Amid increasing awareness of the sustaining patriarchal social structure, Korean society witnessed another wave of the feminist movement, the Me Too movement. On January 29, 2018, only three months after the Me Too movement first started in the United States, public prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun

[22] The most conspicuous slogan during the fourth and fifth protests was "My Life is Not Your Porn."

revealed her experience of being sexually assaulted by a high-level prosecutor in 2010. This incident triggered hundreds of subsequent revelations and accusations of sexual harassment, rape, and assault of female subordinates by their powerful male superiors. Prominent figures in Korean society including film/stage directors, actors, singers, politicians, and professors were indicted or, at least, disgraced by this movement. Two accusations of sexual misconduct were particularly revealing for Korean society, one against Ko Un, a poet who had long been regarded as a potential winner of the Nobel Prize for literature[23] and the indictment on criminal charges against Ahn Hee-jung,[24] the governor of South Chungcheong Province, who had long been regarded as the strongest contender for presidential in the next election. The court sentenced Ahn Hee-jung to three years in prison. As will be discussed by Sooah Kim, however, news reports and news comments on portal websites caused and aggravated secondary victimization, and such a phenomenon was not limited to the case of Ahn.

Prior to the Me Too movement, Megalia and Twitter had already become spaces where women could safely and without shame share their experiences of sexual violence and come together in solidarity. As the hashtag "#sexualviolence_in_xx" spread, Korean women started to publicly report, discuss, and archive sexual violence and misogyny in different industries, such as the photography, film, and theatre industries and the literary scene. What followed public prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun's accusation were reports from the theatre and cinema industries. The experience of individuals through the online hashtag movement made it easier for people to feel connected, and to publicly disclose their experiences of sexual assault (KwonKim 2020, pp. 131-132). As KwonKim (2000, p. 188) points out, considering how the patriarchic culture of Korea had silenced victims of sexual violence, making the offense harder to prosecute, the outpouring of testimonies by women that claimed a collective victim identity was a revolutionary change that shook the androcentric structure that had been maintained by their silence.

[23] Ko filed a charge against the accuser for defamation. The court of first instance found the accuser not guilty in February 2019. Ko appealed but the appellate court upheld the judgment in November 2019 (*JoongAng Daily* November 8, 2019).

[24] Ahn was found not guilty in the first court trial in August 2018 but found guilty in the appeal court in February 2019 with three-and-a-half-year prison term. In September 2019, the Supreme Court confirmed the sentence (*The Kyunghyang Shinmun* September 10, 2019).

Backlash: "Reactionary Korean Progressives and Young Men"

If recent developments of combative discourses of feminism were the result of a countermovement against the increasing tendency towards misogyny on the internet, the strongest backlash against Megalia and WOMAD came from left-wing and progressive political communities as shown in the so-called "Megalia - Justice Party Incident of 2016" (*BBC News* August 14, 2016). A voice actress who worked for a large Korean game company posted a selfie on Twitter, wearing a t-shirt with the slogan "Girls Do Not Need a Prince" printed on it. The t-shirt was made by Megalia for fundraising purposes. Thousands of game users complained to the company for hiring a "radical feminist." Surprisingly by global standards, but not so surprisingly by Korean standards, the company fired her. The controversial gender issue then became a labor issue. A progressive and labor-friendly party, the Justice Party, made an official comment that protested the company's rushed decision to fire the voice actress claiming that "it is unfair to be excluded from work due to her/his political opinion." Thousands of Justice Party members, however, objected to the comment and threatened to defect from the party, and indeed a few hundred did just that.[25] The Justice Party then officially withdrew its comment and fell into chaos as both female and male members of the party protested against the party leadership for being pro-Megalia or anti-feminist (*JoongAng Daily* August 3, 2016). In the meantime, a progressive/left-wing magazine, *SisaIn*, published an article in support of the voice actress that criticized the culture of misogyny (*SisaIn Issue* No. 467, August 2016). The article resulted in a loss of thousands of subscribers.

Both of the incidents mentioned above explicate the uncomfortable relationship between feminism and left-wing or progressive politics in Korea. During the Justice Party crisis in 2016, party members searched for and hunted down Megalia-sympathizers within the party and demanded that a few party leaders declare their position on Megalia. *SisaIn* subscribers conducted a manhunt for the reporters who wrote the provocative article. Unlike far right-wing Ilbe users who ridiculed feminists for sport, progressives in Korea harshly reacted to the advent of unruly feminists. Protesters in the Justice Party and disgruntled *SisaIn* subscribers commented,

[25] 580 defected according to an unofficial report by the party. One year later, a Justice Party lawmaker mentioned that the controversy cost 3,000 in party membership, around 10% percent of total party membership (*NoCut News* April 20, 2017).

almost without exception, that they support feminism and feminists but reject Megalian feminism because it is filled with hatred directed against men. This sentiment is broadly shared among progressive voters and intellectuals, whereas feminists, both moderate and radical, were left to wonder why men should determine which forms of feminism are acceptable and which are not.

Another conspicuous backlash against the advent of unruly feminism is the withdrawal of young male voters' support for the progressive government, which resulted in an unprecedented ideological division along gender lines among Korean youths. Korean voters in their twenties and thirties were an important power base of progressive politics in Korea. In particular, Korean male voters in their twenties and thirties, along with female voters in their twenties, were staunch opponents of the conservative president, Park Geun-hye even before her political scandal came out in October 2016. Nevertheless, a more recent survey from February 2019 shows an interesting change. Whereas 60% of Korean females in their twenties support the current progressive president, Moon Jae-in, only 35% of Korean males in their twenties approve of the president's performance. Defying the generational factor, their approval rate is even lower than it is among Korean men in their 60s.[26]

These unusual findings drew broad media attention and both academics and journalists have been busy interpreting them, especially the defection of the males in their twenties from progressive political camps. Numerous media reports pointed at the tougher job market conditions in recent years, but this does not explain why Korean females in their twenties had been enthusiastically supporting the current government until recently. Scholars in gender studies, however, explain that the very conditions that produced Ilbe are influencing Korean male youths as a whole (Kim and Choi 2007; Kim and Lee 2017; Kim 2018)—the perception that they are the victims of feminist policies, the fear that they are losing the competition in the job market because of obligatory military service, and the discomfort caused by the elitism of the progressive media and intellectuals.

[26] According to another recent survey of Korean young people (in their twenties) done in December 2018, 57% answered that gender struggle is the most serious social problem whereas seventy six percent of males stated that they "oppose" feminist movements. (*Realmeter* December 17, 2018)

Conclusion

Young Korean women seem to be less interested in why men in their twenties withdrew support for the progressive government. The androcentric political culture—regardless of left or right—the series of decisions made by the police and the judiciary on sex crimes, and the misogynic atmosphere of Korean society made women grow more conscious of the necessity of feminist politics and solidarity. The launching of the Women's Party is one swift materialization of such feminist politics. On March 8, 2020—International Women's Day and only slightly more than a month before the 21st General Elections of Korea—the Women's Party was launched with more than 6,000 members that had gathered within a week. As the first women's agenda-only party that advocates feminist politics since Korea's democratization, it won 0.74% of general election turnout. The Women's Party and its supporters are waiting for the next general election, that is, for when the ballots of the 10.7% of teenage supporters from the straw poll will actually count. Feminist movements are influencing the daily lives of Korean women through feminist lectures, books, films, and other cultural contents that spread feminist concepts such as misogyny and sexual objectification. As women look for a distinct feminist genealogy and language,[27] they are creating an independent narrative that refuses to embrace and to be embraced by the meta-narratives of Korean society.

However, feminist politics are not without their own drawbacks and polemics. As we see a visible rise in feminisms, there are active struggles among women on the definition of woman as a category, as will be explored by Hyun-Jae Lee. In February 2020, the renouncement of enrollment by a transgender woman who had been admitted to Sookmyung Women's University due to strong oppositions from trans-exclusionary radical feminists and the debates that followed clearly illustrated the diverging paths of feminisms. Alongside this, discussions on queer life and rights are burgeoning. Queer resistance has been growing as an intelligible force in Korea and the expansion of Korean Pride parade(s) is one indicator as will be discussed by Seoyoung Choi and Jungmin Seo. Meanwhile, the recent gay bashing that ensued following media reports that unnecessarily linked a

[27] Among the most popular feminist books published in Korea in 2019 and 2020 were Lee Min Kyung's *Uriegen eoneoga piryohada: ibi teuineun peminijeum* [*We Need a Language: Feminism that Makes You Speak*] and *Uriegedo gyeboga itda* [*We Also Have a Genealogy: Feminism That Isn't Lonely*].

COVID-19 outbreak in a clubbing district to gay clubs confirmed the widespread homophobia in Korean society (*CNN* May 13, 2020). The proposed "comprehensive anti-discrimination act" that includes protections from discrimination based on sexual orientation, awaits to be enacted as it continues to face harsh opposition from conservative Christians as it has since 2007.

Yet at the same time, anti-feminism is growing in proportion with feminism. As thought to prove such tendency, in 2018, women's student councils were abolished through student referendums at three major universities, leaving no women's student councils remaining on any of the campuses in Seoul, as will be further explored by Mihyun Kim. While more women are facing the misogynic grammar that proliferates online and offline with an increased feminist awareness, they are also increasingly realizing the extensiveness of the battle that they fight. President Moon Jae-in sending a wreath to Ahn Hee-jung's mother's funeral and major politicians visiting the funeral to salute Ahn seemed to send a message to Korean women that solid political connections could outweigh track records of sexual crimes. The decision of the judiciary to not extradite Son Jeong-woo, owner of the child sexual exploitation dark web site Welcome to Video, to the United States seemed also to tell Korean women that the state will continue to take lukewarm measures when it comes to sexual crimes. With government's plan to revise the abortion ban that was ruled to be "not consistent with the Constitution" by the Constitutional Court in 2019 to permit termination pregnancy before the 14th week, women are again out on the streets, fighting for their right to autonomy over their bodies.

The five articles that make up this special issue provide analyses of aspects of Korean society that make these subjects resist as well as how their resistance unfolds with success and limits. These feminist subjects cannot be understood in discontinuity with feminist movements from before 2015, but also need to be analyzed in their specificities and within the global context.

In the first article, Sooah Kim analyzes news reports and portal news comments on the case of sexual abuse by former governor Ahn Hee-jung. According to Kim, secondary victimization of sexual violence victims caused by the media and news comment sections is a phenomenon unique to Korea's digital environment. As she examines how Korean media and news comment section users aggravated secondary victimization during Ahn's trial, Kim underscores the need for feminist intervention in what she calls "online comment culture" that produces and reproduces negative stereotypes of sexual violence victims and suspicions about the victim's testimonies into

public opinion.

In the second article, Hyun-Jae Lee offers a critical analysis of the identity politics based on the idea of "biological women" that has recently been advanced by Korean radical feminists. She argues that the competitive young Korean women resist misogyny in the urban imaginary, but not biological dichotomy itself. This is because for these women, a reversal of position—from object to subject—in the existing frame is more advantageous. As a result, women aim to become subjects by excluding not just men but also transgender women as objects. Lee concludes her article by suggesting a feminist politics based on the politics of recognition in accordance with the "status model" which can provide Korean women with the possibility of guaranteeing equal parity for women, without falling into the trap of exclusion.

The third article by Mihyun Kim discusses the abolition of women's student councils at three top-ranking universities in Seoul, a series of incidents that took place in 2018 and that was regarded as a "backlash" against the "reboot" of feminism in Korea. For Kim, the case is symbolic in two ways. First, it is symbolic in that it deteriorated the feminist movement in the midst of its popularization and second, in that it emerged on a depoliticized campus where political activism was rare. By analyzing the process of abolition, Kim reveals how the languages of feminism and democracy, and of digital activism (a major feature of recent feminist activism) were appropriated and divorced from their context to justify the abolition of women's student councils, and to finally eliminate feminist activism from the campus by way of university referendum, despite feminist opposition.

In the fourth article, Jihyun Choo considers the issue of mandatory military conscription for men that is at the center of feminist versus anti-feminist debates. Choo analyzes the reasons behind Korean society's failure to make expansive criticisms of its gendered military system and militarism, both of which construct gender. Choo argues that underlying this failure are the precarious life conditions of the young generation that are constituted by neoliberalism. Amid increased anxiety about the future caused by neoliberalism, the period of compulsory military service came to be perceived as a loss of opportunity for career management. As a result, the traditional gender norm that men should serve in the military has weakened over the generations. However, unlike the older generations that nevertheless comply with the traditional norm, the young generation—both women and men—refuses such a norm and understands gender not as a social structure

but as an individual identity. According to Choo, such a perception enhances the self-protection strategies of young people. Instead of criticizing militarism and the gendered social structure, a large number of young men call for women to endure the same amount of suffering caused by military service, and young women standing against anti-feminism resort to identity politics.

Finally, Seoyoung Choi and Jungmin Seo discuss the queer movement in Korea that has been progressing alongside, and separately from, Korea's feminist movements. Choi and Seo attempt to theorize the resistance of Korean sexual minorities at Pride parades by analyzing the three phases of Seoul Queer Parade in light of Judith Butler's concept of vulnerability as a condition of resistance. In doing so, they argue that the LGBTQ of Korea that were once an unintelligible force of resistance, entered hegemony and are challenging hegemony by deliberately exposing their bodily and normative vulnerability at Pride parades.

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