

# The Spread of Feminism and the Silence of Gendered Militarism in the Neoliberal Era: Controversy Over Military Conscription Among Members of the Young Generation in South Korea

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*Male military conscription is situated at the center of the dispute between feminism and anti-feminism in South Korea, most notably among young people. This article aims to explain why concrete attempts to transform the conscription system have yet to appear in respect to neoliberalism, which constitutes the condition of life for the young generation. With the precarity of the young generation's future, the period of compulsory military service came to be perceived as a disadvantage for job preparation or career management. As a consequence, the traditional gender norm that men should serve in the military has weakened. However, young people's anxiety over the future as escalated by neoliberalism forces them to comprehend gender not as a social structure but as an individual identity and reinforces self-protection strategies such as calling for women to go through the same suffering caused by fulfilling one's military service or maintaining identity politics exclusively for women. As a result, substantive criticism of the gendered military system and militarism, which construct gender, continues to be impeded.*

**Keywords:** neoliberal feminism, military conscription, fairness, identity politics, gender equality

## Male Military Conscription and Anti-Feminism in the Young Generation

Male military conscription is at the center of the conflict between feminism, which is spreading among members of the young generation (people in their 20s and 30s), and the backlash against it in South Korea. The question remains, however, as to why concrete attempts to transform the conscription system and the gendered military organization have yet to appear. This article aims to answer this question with regard to the impact of neoliberalism on the lives of young people in Korea.

According to a survey conducted in 2019, 34.5% of young Korean women (aged 19-34) support feminism, compared to 38.7% of young Korean men who are opposed to it (Ma et al. 2020a, p. 317). Both support for feminism and hostility towards it are particularly strong among those who belong to the young generation.<sup>1</sup> Korea's press and politicians have termed this phenomenon the "gender conflict (*jendeo galdeung*) of the young generation." However, at the center of men's hostility towards feminism there is a public sentiment that the conscription system, which applies only to men in Korea, is unfair. This impression is directly reflected in lyrics such as "Why don't *you* go to the military?" from a song entitled "Feminist" that was released in 2018 by a well-known 33-year-old Korean male rapper. The song's music video was viewed over 150,000 times within three hours of being uploaded, and women who support feminism furiously reacted to it. Nonetheless, specific practices aimed at transforming the conscription system are still not visible in the young generation.

For decades, many feminists have highlighted how militarism, colonialism, and demands for intensified security intersect with gender. This branch of research is based on the analysis of violence against women during war, women's mobilization and representation in terrorism, the effect of women's participation in military administration and industry, and transitional justice (Sjoberg 2010; Enloe 2000; Herbert 1998; Young 2003). These studies have revealed that the military system is a key factor in the reproduction of heterosexuality and gender-based citizenship through the mobilization of men into military service (Enloe 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997;

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<sup>1</sup> The term generation in this article follows Mannheim's definition of a socially and culturally constructed group that shares historical experiences, not reduced to cohort of birth or age (Mannheim, 1952).

Kwon 2009; Sasson-Levy 2003; Moon 1997). Gender is expanding into a critical tool that is conceptually, empirically, and normatively essential to studying international security and peacebuilding (MacKenzie 2009; Parashar 2009). Notably in South Korea, such analysis continues through the campaign over Japanese wartime military sexual slavery (i.e., “Comfort Women”), and the movement against prostitution in military camp towns which were systematically managed by the developing country even after the Korean War.

Many feminist scholars have also attempted to establish peace through the reconstruction of gender as it intersects with post-colonialism and militarism (Lee 2010, 2018; Kim 2016; Kwon 2009). However, the military conscription system, which was at the heart of the process mentioned above, has not been a major issue in the minds of young women despite the apparent “feminism reboot” that has seen a fast-growing awareness of feminism in recent years. In order to comprehend this newly emerging feminism and to relate it to former feminist projects, it is necessary to understand the specific conditions of life for women situated in the here and now (Winch, Littler and Keller 2016, p. 561). To explain the lack of Korean digital feminism’s problematization of the military conscription system, this article focuses on the fact that the current generation of young people was born and raised in an environment exposed to the rapid changes of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s under the influence of neoliberalism.

## Gender and the Military Conscription System in the Neoliberal Era

Our inquiry must begin with asking what kinds of changes neoliberalism generates in the realms of gender relations, perceptions of gender relations, and the military system. Many researchers have focused on the process by which neoliberalism motivates women and men to recognize the contradictions of gender relations. For instance, McRobbie argues that the perception that structural inequalities can be resolved through individual achievement has encouraged the “undoing of feminism” in neoliberal society. She maintains that neoliberalism urges us to define sameness, instead of the social relationship of gender, as equality (McRobbie 2009). It has also been pointed out that even though a number of young women tend to share the problems of sexism and gender inequality, they understand feminism only as a means to correct gender discrimination in the sense that it hinders an

individual's ability to succeed, or believe that the success of individual women will lead to a change in gender relations (Rottenberg 2018; Lee 2017; Kim 2018). This tendency extends to studies on "neoliberal feminism."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Baer suggests that the increasing sense of precarity among women and minorities, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, triggered the sharp rise in transnational feminist protest movements in recent years. She suggests that recent feminist protests are in a sense "redoing feminism," not "undoing gender in a neoliberal age" (Baer 2016). More in-depth analysis is needed to understand the ways neoliberalism affects feminist identity in particular social and historical contexts.

Neoliberalism is not only changing feminism, but also men's attitudes toward traditional gender norms. Critical gender research has attempted to explain the process by which neoliberalism encourages particular forms of masculinity and anti-feminist attitudes. Neoliberal ideology treats men and women as equivalent market agents, thereby forming the illusion that there is no discrimination. This is why negative attitudes towards so-called politically correct policies such as the redistribution of income or extending welfare to socially disadvantaged people, including women, remain (Hubbard 2004). Andrea Cornwall, whose research focuses on the diversity of masculinities, asserts that subordinated masculinities may disproportionately suffer the costs of existing gender regimes and these tensions and disjunctions have been exacerbated by a facet of neoliberalism. Since the market offers the possibility of liberation from the constraints of marriage and life "under a man," in certain circumstances, it magnifies men's "uselessness" (Cornwall 2002). Lindisfarne and Neale (2016) mention three processes through which masculinities transform under neoliberalism despite the hierarchy between masculinities and class differences: the naturalization of inequality; the reinforcement of gender marking as a tool for identifying the individual and searching for the responsibility for failure and justification for suffering in the individual; and the confusion of men who cannot find alternatives in new circumstances. These studies indicate that men's identities and ideals of manhood end up being reshaped.

How, then, does the precarity that the current generation of young people face in their lives affect their attitudes towards compulsory military

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Rottenberg reveals that a particular variant of feminism which she calls neoliberal feminism has come to dominate the cultural landscape, one that is not interested in a mass women's movement or struggles for social justice. Rather, this feminism has introduced the notion of a happy work-family balance into the popular imagination, while transforming balance into a feminist ideal (Rottenberg 2018).

service or changes in military function and masculinities? A great deal of research points out that even if the neoliberal restructuring of the state defines military service as seemingly gender-neutral military professionalism rather than a construction site of military masculinity, in effect it reaffirms the military as a male-defining institution despite efforts to integrate women. Not only military professionalism but how enhanced security affects “women and conscription” is also judged to play the same role (Sjoberg 2010; Perera 2008; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012). Thus, Raewyn Connell (2010) claims that gender change under neoliberal regimes has not been consistently negative. However, even if women’s participation in the military may expand thanks to neoliberal ideas, neoliberalism is the main vehicle for contemporary social conservatism because social changes achieved through equal opportunity measures are usually blocked by neoliberal politics. In the United States, for example, there are Black generals in the military as well as a scattering of female judges and heads of government departments thanks to the equal opportunity policies that neoliberalism selected from the previous generation’s equity initiatives based on their compatibility with market logic. However, neoliberalism is still opposed to the politics of minority, as these changes mentioned above are made possible only when they are compatible with commodification.

The way women relate to the country varies depending on the country’s regional and political contexts, and the relationship that women have with peace, war, and security is also complicated (Cockburn 2012). Discussions about neoliberalism and military sectors in the West mainly discuss the private military industry, changes in combat technology, and women’s military participation. However, despite complaints, Korea’s conscription system is still far from being privatized, with the exception of a few partial realms of selection. In Korea, there have also been increased calls for women to have more opportunities to volunteer in the military and become professional soldiers. The neoliberal idea that everyone should be able to demonstrate their abilities, combined with the goal of gender mainstreaming strategies to empower women, lent strength the claim that women could also become professional soldiers. Currently, however, the percentage of women in the military is approximately seven percent, and discussions about how gender can change the function and the nature of the military are not expanding.

It should not be suggested that this situation is merely derived from the division of Korea and militarism, for many people—both men and women and especially those belonging to the young generation—advocate that the

conscription system should be reformed, which will be discussed in more depth below. In addition, feminist practice as a unification and peace movement has continued amid a critical awareness of the intersectionality of militarism, nationalism, and gender, despite such practice being conducted by rather small groups of activists and scholars. Rather, what must be explained is the main factor hindering critical discussion of military conscription and militarism from expanding sufficiently.

## How Neoliberalism has Compelled the Transformation of Manhood Regarding Military Service Fulfillment

In this context, it is quite curious that neither women nor men have proposed a movement to transform the conscription system. It should be noted that criticism of conscription has not always been considered a gender issue in Korea. The precarity of life caused by neoliberalism has affected the process in which conscription, in particular, compulsory enlistment for men in their 20s and 30s, began to be treated as a gender issue and the emergence of discourse on it as a disadvantage solely shouldered by men.

### *Beginning of the Debate on the “Unfairness” of Military Conscription*

It was during the period of Japanese colonialism that military service for men only was first established in Korea. After the Second World War, and with the political objective of ideological reformation of anti-communism, the Syngman Rhee administration selectively conscribed parts of the military who retained a “clear ideology and fidelity” rather than conscripting citizens in general (Kang 2019). Since then, as the objective to ideologically reform all the citizens “from the inside” combined with the conscription system to prepare for war against the outer world of nation states, it was inevitable that general recruitment would be considered (Kim 2004). The Military Service Act was established in 1949 to impose compulsory military service on men of appropriate ages; this law came to be more strictly applied after the eruption of the Korean War.

However, even if the principle of universal male service was stated in the law, in its actual operation, conscription could be delayed according to one’s educational level. By then the government would delay the conscription of university students or manage them as reserve forces under the pretext that they were worried about falling behind in national development. Doing so

even led to the period of service being prolonged for the forces drafted during the war. At that moment in history, the controversy over the fairness of the conscription system was focused on social status, such as education level, rather than gender (Kang 2019).

In 1961, Park Chung-hee took over the government via a military coup d'état. He routinized military culture and made anticommunism the aim of the state. Park also promptly enacted a law to provide extra points to discharged soldiers when they took examinations for positions in civil service or public enterprises. In 1969, the law on the employment of military support actors was revised to add an article called the "veterans' extra point system." Originally introduced as a reward system for discharged soldiers, including youth who had fulfilled their compulsory military service, it played a verifiably decisive role in the examination for civil service recruitment. However, this system later inevitably raised the question of discrimination against those who were not subject to conscription, such as women and disabled people.

The government's ideology emphasized anti-communism and economic development and constructed military service as a critical element of masculinity, erecting it as something that is the national, civil, and sacred duty of all Korean males (Kwon 2001; Moon 2002). Subsequently, controversy over the standard for selecting the subjects of conscription has continued, with questions regarding its fairness. For instance, there have been accusations of corruption that has allowed certain people to evade military service. It was not until the 1990s that this problem was considered not a matter of discrimination based on social status, but one of gender (Kang 2019).

### *Gendered Controversy over Fairness*

The process by which the conscription system emerged as a gender issue in the period following the 1990s is essential to understanding the issue today. It was from this moment in time that Korea accelerated its democratization. Social movements diversified into a variety of fields such as gender, disability rights, queer rights, and the environment. Furthermore, a peace movement began that called for a reduction in Korea's defense budget, opposed arms imports, demanded a reduction of costs resulting from U.S. military presence, and opposed the dispatch of troops to Iraq. Additionally, feminist groups who criticized militarization in everyday life beyond opposition to war and were new voices in the national security discussion gradually

developed a transnational movement regarding the “Comfort Women” issue. The late 1990s is also the moment when Korea entered into its IMF regime. Economic crisis and structural adjustment contributed to massive layoffs, unemployment, and poverty, solidifying the dual structure of the labor market (Jung et al. 2012). This influence was even significant for women who were marginalized in the labor market. Nonetheless, the discourse on the pain of men who were struggling to support their families and the wounds of the pitiful men who came to be neglected due economic incompetence prevailed (Jang 2014; Lee 2017). From this moment on, women began to be seen as competitors to men with the advantages of gender-quota policies and affirmative action that were often encouraged by the government.

When labor market conditions were rapidly declining in 1998, the time which constituted the social backdrop for conflicts over veterans’ extra point system, five female university students and one disabled male student questioned whether it was constitutional for military service to provide extra points in future recruitment processes. This prompted a debate about unfairness, not only regarding the veterans’ extra point system, but also about the conscription system itself. The argument initially put forward by men in support of the veterans’ extra point system was that women should join the women’s military if they needed the extra points. This claim then gradually broadened to include the idea that women should also be required to join the military in order to assert equality, as it was unequal for only men to join the military (Bae 2000). The Constitutional Court of Korea judged that the veterans’ extra point system was unconstitutional as it violated the constitutional right to public service, which ensures that any citizen may become a civil servant, as well as the right to equality, as it unfairly discriminated against women in the employment process.

The conflict over the veterans’ extra point system brought about further discussions between men and women on “reverse discrimination,” feminism, and gender in online spaces. It is estimated that the current war being fought over misogyny and feminism seen on social networking sites is rooted in the controversy over the veterans’ extra point system of the 1990s. Moreover, it is also from this moment that women began to form spaces of resistance against misogyny and exhibit collective reactions in online spaces (KwonKim et al. 2017).<sup>3</sup> Along with neoliberal reforms to the labor market, the argument over

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<sup>3</sup> More analytical explanation is required on how the feminist activism from that moment is affecting the current movement of young generation women since 2015, which is regarded as a “reboot” by some. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that these experiences of debates taking place online have encouraged many women to recognize that their lives would not be easily changed



the unfairness of conscription was connected to antifeminism and began to appear in Korean society at large, principally among the young generation preparing to enter the labor market.

*From Manhood to Suffering: Contradictions between the Maintaining Male Privilege and Demanding Fairness*

As two decades have passed since the controversy over conscription system was first raised in relation to gender, let us reflect on what has changed. While the dejection and reluctance related to the conscription system persist among men, unlike the men who came before them, young men today do not consider the fulfillment of military obligations as a qualification for manhood.

Due to neoliberal structural pressure, the strategy of familism changed as well. As a social security system was practically non-existent in Korea, people were inevitably forced to rely on the survival strategy of the family unit in order to manage social risks such as unemployment and poverty. The majority of men and women participated in the labor market endeavoring to support their family, thereby having fewer children and investing greatly in the success of the children they did have. At least for those born after the late 1990s, they were raised within the family according to the neoliberal ethics that each individual could succeed according to their own capacity regardless of their gender, and it in fact seemed that visible discrimination had diminished until entering their young adult years, a transition which was represented by the increase in female enrollment in higher education (Chang 2009). Those raised during this social transformation constitute the young generation of today.

An economic crisis which had been accelerated, and the consequent insecurity of labor market became the reality for the young generation, who feared that they would become temporary employees even after graduating from university, alongside the difficulties in finding employment. Unlike older generations, to whom dating, employment, marriage, and starting families were all easily achievable with a college education, these goals became a complex and difficult project following such a gendered life course track for young men during this time. As a result, Korean society eventually

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unless they liberated themselves in online spaces, and allowed them to learn the political efficacy of collective activity (KwonKim et al., 2017).

became interested to the problem of the “young generation.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, neoliberalism has created a new sphere for men to become somewhat freer from traditional gender norms and practices. Nowadays more men appear to embrace nontraditional gender norms. The insecurity of the labor market makes it more difficult for men to persist by sticking to existing paths, such as the romantic relationship to marriage to male-breadwinner model, thereby driving the increase in single-person households.

In line with this tendency, the implications of men’s participation in military service has also changed. According to the KGSS (Korea General Social Survey) conducted in 2004, when asked how much they agreed that performing one’s military service is an important civil virtue, the average response was 4.85 points (on a 7-point-scale where 7 points denoted ‘very important’). On the other hand, according to a survey in 2018, 82.6% of men in their twenties and thirties agreed that it is better not to serve the military if possible, which is a larger proportion than that among respondents in their fifties (51.8%) and forties (70.6%). Of men in their twenties, 68.2% agreed that the military service is a “waste of time,” compared to 52.8% of men in their thirties who responded the same (while only 42.7% of men in their forties and 33.8% of men in their fifties agreed with this) (Ma 2019).<sup>5</sup> Compared with the generations who came before them, the attitude of today’s young men regarding the fulfillment of one’s obligatory military service as a component of manhood has weakened substantially. Furthermore, according to the analyses in this survey, 93.7% of young men (aged between 19 to 34) answered that men and women should have the same opportunities and rights in order to realize gender equality, and 72.1% thought that women should perform physically demanding work just like men. Young women shared the same attitudes on these topics (93.7% and 73.9% respectively) (Ma et al. 2020b, pp. 183-184). As compensation based on ability and effort is judged the essential standard of fairness, the majority of the young generation interpret gender equality through the frame of “fairness” based on their belief

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<sup>4</sup> By 2007, there had been already a variety of names given to the young generation, neologisms that emphasize how, unlike former generations, members of the current generation have abandoned many things, such as the “3-abandonment generation” (*sam-po sedae*, abandonment of romantic relationships, marriage, and having children), the “5-abandonment generation” (*o-po sedae*, abandonment of romantic relationship, marriage, having children, owning a home, and personal relationships), and the “n-abandonment generation” (*en-po sedae*, abandonment of any number of things).

<sup>5</sup> 73.5% of men in their twenties and 62.4% of men in their thirties agreed that military service provides more disadvantages than advantages in general (while only half proportion on men in their fifties, which is 34.9%, agreed).

**TABLE 1**  
**MEN'S PERCEPTION ON MALE-ONLY CONSCRIPTION**

Agreement (%)	20s	30s	40s	50s	Total
Man must fulfill the military service in order to be a genuine man	50.0	56.6	53.2	67.6	57.0
It is better to avoid military	82.6	75.3	70.6	51.8	69.6
Military service period is a waste of time	68.2	52.8	49.7	33.8	50.1
There are more losses from military service than advantages	71.5	62.4	51.9	34.9	55.0
It is discrimination that only men join the military	72.2	62.9	55.0	50.1	59.7
Women also should join the military	64.7	59.7	54.3	49.5	56.8

Source: Ma, Kyong Hee, 2019. "Changing Masculinity and Gender Discrimination." Paper presented at the seminar of Korean Women's Development Institute, Seoul, April 18, 84.

Percentage in the cell is based on the number of respondents.

in meritocracy (Ma et al. 2020a). Accordingly, the current young generation is now often called the "fairness generation" by mass media (Park and Cho 2018). The expectation of fairness which emphasizes equal opportunities and accepting their consequences is also expressed in their attitudes towards the conscription system. As shown in the table below, men in their 20s and 30s consider the fulfillment of military service to be a waste of time and a disadvantage when planning for their future. This perception is different from that of the older generation, who interpret it as one of the characteristics of masculinity. Thus, young men assume that both men and women should equally share the responsibility of military service. In other words, they are asking for the democratization of suffering (Illouz 2002).

This begs a number of important questions. Why, then, does the demand for equal distribution of suffering not result in the argument that opportunities for women to serve in the military should be increased? Why has it not transformed into collective activism to improve the conscription system? Despite the vehement anti-feminism, why did a petition asking that both men and women be made to enlist in the military fail to win support on the official Cheong Wa Dae national petition website, a widely used method of advancing issues in South Korea?

**TABLE 2**  
**YOUNG GENERATION (AGED 19-34)'S ATTITUDES REGARDING CONSCRIPTION SYSTEM**

Agreement	Men	Women
Conscription system reform	85.6	85.5
Sharing physically demanding work equally	71.7	73.8
Expansion of women's proportion in occupational fields with high proportion of men (e.g. military, police, etc.)	38.6	73.7
More compensation for men	88.4	77.4

Source: Ma et al. 2020b. "Tables of Results: Gender Analysis of 'Gender Conflict' within Younger Generation and Policy Recommendations for Inclusive State. National Research Council for Economics, Humanities and Social Sciences, 304, 185, 295.

Percentage in the cell is based on the number of respondents.

The following table shows the reorganized data from a study conducted in 2019.<sup>6</sup> In this survey, regardless of gender, members of the young generation (those aged 19-34) supported the ideas that conscription system reform is necessary and that both men and women should equally share physically demanding work. However, 61.4% of men have reported to disagree with the expansion of women's participation in military or police forces, both of which are typical gendered organizations (Acker 1990; Choo 2019b). This contrasts with women's responses: 73.7% of women reported to agree with the idea. At the same time, young men have expressed intense opposition to increasing the proportion of women in fields that require affirmative action, such as among legislators or high-ranking government officials (49.5%) or among executives of private enterprises (49.0%), which are not directly linked to military service. Such a contradictory response which opposes the expansion of women's share in the military while agreeing that women should participate in the military stems from an attitude aimed at protecting the realms currently occupied by men. To acknowledge that women are qualified to serve in the military or the police also indicates that

<sup>6</sup> Ma et al. 2020b p. 304, p. 185, p. 295, and p. 188 are used as the reference data. Despite directly participating in this research by designing survey questions, analyzing replies, and authoring the findings, it is impossible for me to utilize the raw data due to the restrictions from the research client. Therefore in this article I provide explanations based only on the open-access percentages.

men are in peril of losing posts previously held nearly exclusively by men. Even if traditional gender norms have weakened, men's anxiety over losing their privilege remains high (Um 2011; Bae 2015). Therefore, specific measures to reform the conscription system result in calls advocating more compensation for men without changing the male-dominated organization of the system itself. This shows that changes in traditional masculinity provoked by neoliberalism are not necessarily connected to gender equality (Lindisfarne and Neale 2016). What young men are demanding is not strictly "equal opacity," but "equal suffering."

### How Digital Feminism Constructs Military Conscription as an Exclusive Issue of Men

What is the implication of the conscription system for many digital feminists that it does not reach the level of social activism despite it contributing to the main argument of anti-feminism? Many women deem the conscription system to be an issue of equal participation rather than one of militarism. That is to say, they share the frame of fairness. Moreover, digital feminists who lead the issue-making practices for feminism possess a perspective that defines the military as an issue exclusive to men. This is influenced by the idea that feminism is a tool for the interests of "biological women," not for changing gender relations.

#### *The Trap of "Fairness" Wavers between Equal Distribution of Suffering and Expanded Opportunity*

As shown in Table 2, there was widespread agreement on the idea that the men-only conscription system should be reformed, regardless of generation and gender (90.5% of anti-feminists and 85.3% of people who identify as feminists agreed on the need for reform). Many young women also agreed that compensation is needed for men-only obligatory military service or that women should also perform this burden "in the same way." However, there is one notable difference between digital feminists and young men in that the former believe that women are capable of serving in the military and their participation must be increased. In other words, the anti/feminism controversy between young men and women originates not in the function of the military but in the women's participation in a task assumed to be male-dominated.

The indication that the majority of young women are trapped in the “fairness” frame reinforced by neoliberal ideology provides sufficient explanation for the current situation. The neoliberal paradigm that transforms everything into the product of individual competence and effort strengthens the frame of fairness under which the conscription system has been interpreted by both feminists and anti-feminists belonging to the younger generation in Korea today.

*The Myth of the “Biological Woman”: Demand for Reinforced Security and Disinterest Towards the Military System*

Through which mechanism did the conscription system come to be perceived not as a gender-neutral issue but as a male-only issue for digital feminists? The meritocratic perspective leads many to interpret feminism as a method for eliminating the obstacles that interfere with the pursuit of individual interest, rather than transforming gender relations (Kim 2018; Lee 2019). Even the women who support such meritocracy resent sexual violence against women most of all. The young women of this generation began to realize that the neoliberal message does not functionally operate in society and that women cannot achieve success and stability merely through their individual abilities and effort. So long as the sexual double standard persists, no matter how capable and stable their social status is, young women are vulnerable to abuse and can be criticized for being “promiscuous women” at any time. Thus, many young women at this moment in time point out that gender-based violence is the foremost problem impeding gender equality, compared to gender discrimination in the labor market (such as regarding promotions or wages), or discrimination in groups such as the family, the workplace, or parliament (Ma et al. 2020a, pp. 252-253).

Although this has been the main basis for criticizing male-dominated militarism, in recent times many women seem to perceive the problem not through the frame of the social conditions which enable a culture that condones violence, but through the lens of anxiety and victimhood experienced by biological women. This results in an obsession with distinguishing biological sex, neglecting the issue of the military which has served as the core foundation of the system generating androcentric culture.

It is already widely recognized that women’s rage and anxiety about gender-based violence is situated at the heart of the spread of feminism today. As the fear of MERS spread in the summer of 2015, misogynist discourses began to appear online, with a rumor that MERS was proliferating in Korea

because female university students who had returned after travelling abroad had flouted the quarantine measures. This became the spur that unified women who felt aggrieved by online misogyny. In addition, when a femicide occurred in May 2016 in a restroom near Gangnam Station in Seoul where the floating population is staggering, many women organized movements based on digital media to question and call out everyday misogyny, such as the suffering of married women, sexual harassment on- and offline, and pressure stemming from evaluations of women's appearances and having to perform appearance management. In 2018, a demonstration led by women demanding fair investigations and punishment of digital sexual violence such as illegal photography and filming and revenge porn was attended by 250,000 participants, as estimated by the organizer. The spread of the term "Me Too" and the #MeToo hashtag movement<sup>7</sup> was made possible through this context in 2018. Through these processes, terms such as "feminism reboot" and "popularization of feminism" cropped up. Feminist books began to make their way onto bestseller lists, with sales and publications of related books also increasing.<sup>8</sup>

What is noteworthy is that among the digital feminists involved in this process, the belief that biological males are destined to be offenders and thus that biological women are destined to be victims appeared, as did a movement to exclude biological males (Lee 2017). Many young feminists are not able to stretch their imagination beyond the concept of the woman as a sexed body due to fears and a desire for security. Thereby the notion of the so-called biological woman is reinforced as an evident and inevitable condition. In this context, discrimination against and exclusion of gay men as well as transgender women (MTF), who are not perceived as women, from so-called feminist spaces were totally detached from any comprehension of the mechanisms generating gender-based violence. As much research has noted, the mechanism behind sexual violence against woman, gay men, and

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<sup>7</sup> In Korea, the #MeToo movement began with disclosures made by one female prosecutor in January 2018. This movement is broadening into criticisms of the criminal justice system—which determines instances of sexual violence based on narrow standards such as the existence of irresistible assault and threat, while neglecting the existence of consent—and law reformation movement. In this process, the court convicted Ahn Hee-jung, a prominent president candidate and governor of South Chungnam province at the time, of sexual assault.

<sup>8</sup> In 2015, books on feminism began to enter the top 20 best-sellers in the politics, society, and social sciences category. One online bookstore selected feminism as one of the four elements which led publishing industry trends in 2016. In 2017, after the Gangnam Station femicide, the sales of books about feminism increased to the extent that it reached more than seven times of that of the previous year (2017).

transgender women is no different from the historical construction of the gender system which categorized human beings based on a gender dichotomy and established a hierarchy of these categories. The routinization and normalization of sexual harassment against women and gay men as well as prostitution have been justified as a reward for enduring the grueling military service in Korea, and as a result, the conscription system has been a key mechanism for reproducing gender relations (Kwon 2001, 2009; Moon 2002). That is, gender intersects with sexuality, nationalism, and militarism.

Nonetheless, this was assumed to be an issue solely related to sexual minorities who are not considered women. Even during the period since the mid-2010s in which feminism has been expanding around the younger generation, the problem of the gendered military system has continued. Korea's sodomy law has endured for nearly 80 years since the establishment of the Military Criminal Act, and lawsuits decrying the unconstitutionality of this clause have been raised time and again. Moreover, in the litigation over this claim, there were not only over-sexualized perceptions of gay men, but also contradictory perceptions of women. That is to say, the military's prohibition of homosexuality not only naturalizes heterosexuality but is also rooted in a contradictory interpretation of the law regarding women's victimization and an individual's right to sexual self-determination. This also illustrates that the limitation of laws, policies, and the nation-state would be better comprehended when the problems of sexual violence in the military under male-only conscription and the problems of misogyny experienced by women are discussed in concert with one another (Choo 2013). However, online feminists were indifferent when yet another lawsuit was filed challenging the anti-sodomy clause of the Korean Military Criminal Law, and even remained silent in April 2017 when the Ministry of National Defense ordered a "gay witch-hunt" in the military to investigate more than 30 people based on the clause. Online feminists strictly ignored issues regarding people who did not qualify as biological females, thus reifying gender identity. They assert that only biological women are able to completely comprehend the pain and fear women experience. Discourses on who woman is and what makes a woman are removed from their feminist projects. They call feminists who attempt to understand the intersectionality of such factors as gender, class, race, sexuality, and the metrics of dominance "*sseukka* (mixed and blurred) feminists," deriding them as people who regard women's interests as insignificant. This attitude is also an attempt to avoid trying to comprehend the complex operation of gender (Mohanty 2013; Collin 2000), and its relationship with elements such as the military system and the state.



This way of understanding biology as antecedent gender and restricted to a rigid gender dichotomy is also manifested in transgender exclusive radical feminism (adherents of which are commonly known as TERFs) which excludes transgender women from feminist activism on the grounds that they are not considered genuine women and contribute to patriarchy by imitating femininity (Lee 2019). Historically, the control and suppression of women's sexuality was executed through methods such as the prohibition on exercising rights to contraception and abortion, eugenic measures, and wartime rape. Studies on technologies of power such as law and science continue to be pursued because gender is re/produced in the modern timespace thanks to the diverse operation of knowledge, institutions, and discourse of sex and sexuality based on the state and the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997; Mosse 1985). As the nation-state requires a gendered body, mandatory military service adds pressure on transgender people to have sex reassignment surgery. Currently, there is no explicit law restricting transgender people from serving in the military in South Korea, but the regulations on physical examinations for conscripts defines people with "gender identity disorder and sexual orientation disorder" as subject to distinct physical examinations.

In 2015, the Military Manpower Administration demanded that transgender people undergo orchidectomy if they wish to obtain an exemption from service. In January 2020, a transgender woman who underwent gender affirmation surgery while serving in the military held a press conference asking for support so that she could fulfill the remainder of her obligatory military service, but the Ministry of National Defense swiftly discharged her. The grounds for discharge measures according to the regulation above was the so-called disability of losing her male genitalia. Even then, many digital feminists remained silent. As such, the problem of the gender dichotomy produced and performed in the military system was considered a matter relevant to the LGBTQ community only and has not been understood as a factor of gender relations. Such an outcome reflects the "queer victory [and] feminist defeat" already diagnosed by Huffer (2009).

Even until this moment, a transgender woman who was accepted to the department of law at a women's university forfeit her enrollment due to the criticism she received from so-called radical feminists who asserted that she is not a genuine woman. Many researchers have pointed out that the wall of (national, human, public) security is strengthened due to the re-naturalization of social identity (Zizek 2005; Appadurai 2006) urged on by neoliberalism and neoconservatism, which tend to distinguish heterogeneity

in “us” and “others.” Some young feminists are no exception. At the time, the argument that trans women are not genuine women was justified by the fear of violence against biological women and the claim that the positions allocated to women should no longer be taken away from men. Such tendencies to recognize gender inequality, however, understand feminism as a project for individual happiness and responsibility while neglecting gender as a socioeconomic and cultural structure. This stream of thought was given the name neoliberal feminism by Rottenberg (2018).

While fighting against anti-feminism based in conscription, women are claiming that “Women get pregnant and give birth instead of going to the military,” and, “If you think it’s unfair, suggest it as a political agenda, just like feminists did.” In the argument that assumes pregnancy and childbirth as grounds for women’s universal experience, or that supports the identity politics of men and women, femininity is presumed as inevitably caused by biological body differences.

### Conclusion: Rearticulating the Relationship of Gender, Fairness, Manhood in the Neoliberal Era

The neoliberal labor market and the resultant obsession with meritocracy, both of which impel many to perceive the period spent fulfilling one’s military service as a waste of time when it comes to preparing for the future, affect this transformation process. As a result, the assertion that women, along with men, should also share the suffering and sacrifice that result from obligatory military service has gained strength. However, strictly speaking, this is a call for the equal distribution of suffering, unrelated to the demand for equal opportunity to participate in the military service regardless of gender. This is why calls for reforming the conscription system merely end in demands for more compensation for men, failing to move forward to a discussion on the purpose, function, and qualification of the military. Men belonging to the current young generation began to experience a crisis of masculinity, anxiety, and started to bear hostility towards feminism. However, no alternative masculinities can replace the old hegemonic ones while modern gender relations are reconstructed in neoliberal era, and this is the main reason for the amplification of frustration and anxiety among young men in Korea today.

For young feminists, conscription is regarded merely as the main retort made by anti-feminists. These feminists also think that the current

conscription system is unfair, but they regard the military as an issue that has nothing to do with women. More importantly, when fighting against men who argue the unfairness of conscription, women are constructed as referring to those who share common experiences of pregnancy and childbirth and, thus, they maintain the exclusionary attitude that solely biological women can experience and understand womanhood. Young women with such attitudes are limited to seeking to eliminate discrimination and violence that hinder an individual's well-being and place responsibility on the individual, rather than reconstructing gender, which is a principle of organizing society.

This article affirms that neoliberalism is transforming gender relations through the reinforcement of gender marking as a tool of identifying the individual and searching for the responsibility for failure and justification of suffering in the individual (Lindisfarne and Neale 2016). Consequently, the demand for equal opportunities has emerged in the military system as well. Nevertheless, so long as the anxiety of men struggling to secure their existing privilege melds with digital feminists' disinterest in pursuing changes to the conscription system due to regarding it as the responsibility of men, improvement of gendered organizations and further criticisms toward the conscription system itself will not progress.

Many feminists have striven to go beyond the arguments that assume conscription to be an issue of fair opportunity for participation and assertions on the sameness and difference between men and women, by trying to transform the premises of these discourses, which are the value of conscription as a job, its vocational qualification, and the military system, from the gender perspective (Kim 2019; Sjoberg 2010; Perera 2008; Parashar 2009). Furthermore, they have proven that these attempts are indispensable for halting the wars and conflicts that colonize women's bodies as well as for peace-making (Moon 2002; Cockburn 2012; Yuval-Davis 1997; Shepherd and Sjoberg, 2012). How, then, can we maintain feminism as a threat to the many forces that continue to oppress, exclude, and disenfranchise whole segments of society? Now is the time to link the criticism and energy between today's feminists (whose main concern is the violence against women) and the established feminists who have noted that the violence current feminists are furious over is not the result of sex but is rather gender based and intersects with capitalism, militarism, nationalism, and heterosexism.

For established feminists, peace refers to the reconstruction of society from this perspective. Amid the flood of digital information, some young feminists today are more willing than ever to pay attention to knowledge that enables them to understand their position (Choo 2019a), and are expanding

their interests to sexual violence during wartime, sexual slavery issues such as the use of “Comfort Women” by Japanese forces, and the global peace-making movement. The pressing question now is how we can sustain and broaden the mass feminist renaissance as resistance, while rejecting the logic of neoliberal feminism. Thus, there must be a critique of gender-based violence, which is the most popular topic among young feminists today, that explores how it is related to military activities, as well as the neoliberalist ideologies that constitute the status and job value of women in military organizations.

Moreover, with COVID-19, our understanding of security is steadily changing. Beyond the perception of peace as an object achievable through preparation for war and fortified military force, it is beginning to be widely understood as a matter of social justice that can be achieved through mutual care and through the recognition of the fragility and interdependence of the human body. The feminist peace movement also suggests that the conscription system should not be linked to manhood or civil rights, and that the military service system should be redesigned to operate with an aim for all citizens to develop their capacity to care for others, that is, as a social service agency system in Korea (Kim 2019, 2020).

The task that lies ahead for feminists is to utilize the debate about anti/feminism as an opportunity to enrich conversations and discussions on diverse issues surrounding the military rather than regarding it as a conflict to be resolved through the lens of what is fair.

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