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Women

A Move Forward for the Korean Women's Movement

- Features -

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In response to high-profile accusations of sexual assault and the gathering storm around the prevalence of spy cam footage in the Korean porn industry, the past year has seen a snowballing women's movement in the traditionally conservative Korean society. In this article, So Yun Alysha Park looks at the tactics of the movement and its chances for enacting lasting change.

On August 4th 2018, more than 70,000 South Korean women gathered at Gwanghwamun Square to protest against the spy cam epidemic and the entrenched patriarchy of Korean society. This has led to not only the biggest but also the most persistent and demanding women's movement in Korean history. [1]

The event marked the fifth out of six protests that have taken place since May of this year. Although the protests have been given various names – from the Spy Cam Protest to Hyehwa or Gwanghwamun Women's Protests – they can best be seen as the snowballing products of the bigger #MeToo movement in Korea.

The Engine that Sparked It All: A Brief Timeline of the #MeToo Allegations

The kindling for the #MeToo movement in Korea was the public accusation of a former senior official in the Ministry of Justice of sexual harassment by Seo Ji Hyun, a female prosecutor in Tongyeong. On October of last year Seo addressed the painful experience from 2009 on JTBC, [2] one of the most widely watched news channels in Korea. The interview with Seo caught the public's attention not simply due to Seo's willingness to publicly reveal her identity but also due to the perpetrator's position in Ministry of Justice, one of Korea's most prestigious institutions. Seo also admitted that the Minister of Justice at the time was present at the incident, although merely as a bystander, and that she had received unfair treatment in the Ministry after asking the perpetrator for a formal apology.

Following the first accusation, thousands more followed in various sectors such as theatre, literature, and the film industry. Among the allegations were internationally known filmmaker Kim Ki-duk, talked of as a future prospect for the Nobel Prize in Literature, poet Ko Un, and veteran actor and professor Jo Min Ki. [3] [4] [5] The latter eventually committed suicide after accusations made by eight women including his own students.

In March, Korea was wracked with another high-profile political scandal when Ahn Hee Jung, at the time provincial governor and a leading presidential contender for Moon, was accused of having sexually assaulted his secretary five times since July 2017. [6] The victim, Kim Ji Eun, also made a public appearance on JTBC where she revealed that Ahn assaulted her again even after he mentioned the growing #MeToo movement to her. [7]

Just ten days after the record-breaking women's protest in Gwanghwamun, the fourth such protest, the Seoul district court ruled Ahn not guilty of the charges against him. [8] The ruling further infuriated the campaigners, sparking another gathering on August 18th.

This protest, which attracted about 20,000 women, was distinguished from those that preceded it in that the crowd's anger was directly mainly towards the ruling in the Ahn case. Of the #MeToo allegations that have occurred in Korea, Ahn's case is significant in that it points beyond the restricted laws around sexual assault in Korea, which are focused around physical coercion, and onto broader questions of the gendered power dynamics. Although Ahn may have

been acquitted by law, the dissatisfaction of the ruling persists with even the media questioning the gendered nature of the law and raising the question of who the laws are written for. [9] It is without doubt that for the first time the review of the sexual misconduct policies, which the court itself admits is not aligned with contemporary societal values, will gain national attention in the country. [10]

Solidarity in Seoul Protests: What is happening in Gwanghwamun and Hyehwa?

Aside from criticism of Ahn's ruling, the protest in Gwanghwamun and Hyehwa have been focused on the issue of spy cams or "molka" which have received years of persistent criticism for its huge presence in the Korean porn industry.

Between 2012 and 2017 16,201 people were arrested for illegal recording (98% being men). The sheer quantity of arrests for this crime tells of the prevalence and normalization of secret cameras for pornographic usage in public spaces in Korea. [11]

The continual refusal of the police force (over 90% of which are men) to take seriously spy cam cases has been criticized before. However, that anger accelerated in May when a female art student from Hongik University uploaded a nude image of a male model to an Internet forum. The female student was not only arrested swiftly within just few days but also had to make public apology in front of the full glare of the media. Such swift action on the part of the police has rarely been the case for the 98 percent of male perpetrators before.

As a reaction to the incident a website, now called "Uncomfortable Courage", was formed and eventually served as the organizer of the recent massive protests at Hyehwa and Gwanghwamun. [12] Without condemning the exceptionally speedy process of the case, the organizers have consistently voiced their criticisms of the sexist roots of the justice system and have demanded the treatment to be applied to all spy cam cases. [13] Reflecting this frustration, a petition on the Blue House Website demanding fair police processes regardless of gender was signed by more than 410,000 citizens. [14]

“Mirroring” as Performance: The Protest Tactic

The most notable characteristics of the protest are the conspicuous color code of red, provocative protest signs, violent languages and shouting, and most of all visibly radical performances including head shavings.

For example, a picture of an individually made sign used at the protest was uploaded on the "Uncomfortable Courage" site. The sign said, "If you ignore our voices again, I will at random kill 69 hannam [referring to misogynistic Korean men] on the street". Similar signs are widely made and used at the protest, not to mention the ubiquity of such language in spoken form as well. [15]

Such a tactic is common for Korean feminists. The tactic is notoriously known as "mirroring". The specific vocabulary it uses mirrors that of men on extreme right wing and openly misogynistic websites such as Ilbe and on the pages of DCInside. The "mirroring" tactic simply replicates the misogynistic languages and actions made by Korean men, reflecting the toxic reality of women-hatred that women have suffered through in silence for years.

This tactic has been adopted by the most popular feminist websites, including Megalia (since shutdown) and Womad, and has been highly criticized by popular media and scholars (as well as some of the movements supporters). [16] The attention was at its height when a member of Womad posted a picture of a fetus covered in blood after abortion processes with the wording, "I am not sure of what to do with it. Perhaps if I leave it outside, abandoned dogs will devour it. Haha." [17]

Homogenization of Feminism in Korea: "Are you a Megal?"

Although the organizers of the protest have restricted attendance of members representing certain groups and have only allowed participation as an individual woman, the tactic of "mirroring" used by the likes of Megalia and Womad is still widely seen at the protests.

For sure, the organization's claimed radical feminist ideology, with mirroring as its core, has worked to the extent that it has maintained the discussion of gender on a national scale. However, combating one form of gendered aggressiveness with another form of power that adopts an even more intensified the level of aggressiveness is bound to fail. Not only does it exacerbate the gender division by insisting on a gender binary but also incites even more animosity by normalizing their mere performances and translating it into action.

Perhaps the most dangerous part of this tactic is that it is now seen as the feminist ideology of Korea. In Korea, the first question one will probably be asked when identified as a feminist is, "Are you a Megal [the abbreviation for 'member of Megalia']?" – with no positive connotations attached. Other interpretations of feminism have always existed in Korea, like that of Son Kyung-I, a former sexual assault victim and sex-ed instructor who alternatively promotes gender sensibility and empathy education. [18] Yet, with its easy access and radical incitement, the popularization of Megalia has exploded and has accustomed Koreans to the Megalian ideology as the singular interpretation of feminism.

The homogenization process is also the most alarming when the "radical" movement consumes the #MeToo movement. As victims are currently at great social risk are in need of the utmost support, the movement that births disapproving sentiments not only towards the Megalian ideology but the women's rights as a whole is in fact burdening the entire movement.

As Nah-Yim (2014) claimed before, "becoming a communist in an anti-communist country would be a lot safer than becoming a feminist on a Korean campus." [19]

The singular narrative, which has unknowingly dictated even the everyday vocabularies of Korean women, seems to have gained much more for anti-Feminists than for feminists. Unless the options of Korean feminism widen, feminism risks remaining a national taboo.

Linear Model of Western Feminism: Can Korean Women Afford the Time?

The organizers of the protests have so far only allowed biologically female women to participate in the protest, in theory restricting trans women from entering. Although the restriction was due to safety concerns, the dominant feminist group Womad, also openly rejected the support of gay and disabled men, or any men regardless of their

identity.

As homophobia is also common on these websites, it is evident that – following Western standards – the Korean women's movement still remains stuck in its second wave variant. [20] The Western model of feminism has an inclusive and intersectional wave as the most recent variant, and has produced a strong linear narrative of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd waves. Korea's burgeoning feminism has been led by its most privileged strata. If the movement were to replicate the Western model of development, it'll be decades before it becomes a more inclusive variant. However, can Korean women afford the time? And must they adhere to the linear model of a women's movements that does not belong to them?

Such is a growing concern due to easy admiration and adaptation of Western Feminist practices by Korean women activists. In the 21st century where women have the privilege to reflect upon the various successes and failures of tactics used by previous women all over the world, Koreans cannot afford to wait another series of decades for the "next wave" to arrive when, for example, the growing LGBTQ+ movement in Korea is so obviously moving in parallel with the women's movement.

The current women's movement, predominantly led by groups like Megalia and Womad, is the most radical one Koreans have seen so far; however, it is radical in the most dangerous and conservative ways. Perhaps it is not radical enough.

Untangling Mirroring and Moving Forward

The complicated acceleration of the Korean women's movement within the last three years is so unprecedented that it is difficult for even long time scholars of feminism to predict its future development. It seems that at this point that the re-evaluation of the phenomena as a whole is necessary.

While it is extremely easy to criticize the visibly conspicuous performance tactics of Megalia and Womad, it is at the same difficult to fully discount them as feminist groups due to their tremendous efforts in advocating for women's issues. [21] These include making constant police reports, fundraising for donations to NGOs, petitioning for policy changes, successfully organizing boycotts, and more.

Instead of hastily condemning their language and actions, one must interrogate the origin of mirroring. Mirroring as a performance tactic only works when there exists an object to reflect in the first place. It must be realized that the origin are the culminated facets of discrimination men have created for centuries and that the outcry of the groups only manifests so clearly of the high intensity of this violent patriarchy we tend to easily condone. Then it is evident that it is not the destruction of Womad but the eradication of the origin itself that will make possible putting the end to the "Gender War" in Korea. [22]

In addition, it is necessary to question the actual representation of Megalia and Womad in the Korean feminist movement. So far, the media has played a critical role in equating the women's movement to a Womad's movement by selectively focusing on the provocative nature of these specific groups in their coverage. However, as previously mentioned, alternative forms of the feminist ideology – including those that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ communities and other social minorities - have always existed but have not gained the same amount of attention.

This is why it is essential for Korean women to continuously challenge each other's ideology and cultivate a diversification of the Korean feminist movement. Ultimately, the popularization of these variations and the

representation of the wide spectrum in the media will allow the entrance to the movement to be more accessible.

Lastly, the role of Korean feminist scholars must also be reflected on. Prior to the movement, Korean scholars had been criticized for being embedded in elitist outlooks and failing to see activists as "equal partners in knowledge production and solidarity"- what Nah (2015) calls, "dislocation of feminism from feminist practice". [23]

Scholars are evidently in a privileged position to be exposed to the various strands of past feminist movements, as well as being exposed to the danger of the naïve application of Grand Western Theories (Nah, 2015) in the non-Western world. [24] This is why their privilege, previously only passively consumed, means that they must be humbly attuned to the current movement and be in collaboration with the activists in cultivating a careful public education in the issues of the feminist movement. The current movement can, in fact, act as the momentum for the realignment of the seemingly exclusive groups.

This is a crucial moment in Korean history and for feminism in East Asia. The movement is not just about reducing the number of sexual assault cases or eliminating spy cameras. With the correct navigation of the already mobilized women by activists, it can serve as the pivotal moment for uprooting the patriarchal mentality that once seemed so impossible to dislocate. Further, the collaborative knowledge production of feminist scholars and activists in Korea may provide a fragment for a feminist pedagogy specific to not just Korea but also neighboring countries as well.

Many say that the women's movement is late on its progress towards challenging patriarchal lineages. However, such is only relative to the prominently western countries' timeline; Koreans can subvert this fact into a privilege and utilize the abundance of previously produced feminist practices elsewhere in finding our own unique Feminist Movement.

[Verso](#)

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