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South Korea

# Women's Movement in South Korea: How to Break the Structural Oppression

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**In 1995, Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing declared gender mainstreaming as major global strategy. The strategy aimed at making feminism to the mainstream in the context of the global neoliberal era. The strategy promoted abolition of discrimination against women in the institutional dimension. However, the fundamental problems for the majority of women were left with "self-responsibility." While gender equality in the institutional dimension progressed, the phenomenon of social inequality and increasing inequality among women emerged. The same phenomenon was seen in South Korea.**

Since the 2000, the institutionalization of government-led women's policies was rapidly promoted. In 2001, the Ministry of Gender Equality was started by agreement among the ruling and opposition parties. Ministry of Gender Equality changed its name to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2010. Moon Jae-in, who became president in 2017, declared that "I will be a feminist president" and made promises such as elimination of gender discrimination in employment and eradication of gender violence. After inauguration, Moon Jae-in enlarged organization and budget of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. As a result, progresses such as gender equality act and legislation on violence against women were seen.

On the other hand, problems of women such as low-wage female workforce became more serious. A few women tried to break the deadlock. But most women were stuck in poverty, discrimination and oppression. "Family-head (*hoju*) system", a symbol of patriarchy, was abolished in 2005. But it did not change the South Korean society, which had been built around patriarchy power. Liberation of all women will be impossible without the strategies to transform the underlying structure to overcome social or economic inequality. This article outlines the history of feminist movements and the current situation in South Korea to consider the possibility of feminist movements for social transformation as an alternative.

## History so far

The early feminist movement in South Korea remained primarily within the university faculty since the establishment of women's studies in 1977 at Ewha Womans University. And other feminist movements were also limited to some feminist claims and struggles. For many years, feminism had not been common for Korean women. And feminism was generalized among women by the murder of a woman which occurred near Gangnam Station in Seoul in May 2016. As a result of this incident, Korean women began to speak out one after another, and it became a big social movement. From 2015, a year before that, there were signs of a growing awareness of feminism. "Misogyny" was spreading online due to fake news that the first infected person by Mers was a woman in her twenties who returned from overseas. And in the same year, radical feminist launched an internet community site called "Megalia". Korean women expressed "Megalia" by combining "MERS" and "Egalia" based on Norwegian feminist literature classic "Egalia's Daughters". In Megalia, the words that men despised women were also applied to men as they are as a counterattack against misogyny. However, some excessive mirroring not only insulted men excessively but also ridiculed unrelated sexual minorities, which became a social problem in South Korea. After all, the site was closed in 2017.

However, people who used Megalia had developed feminism peculiar to South Korea in various ways, such as the opening and operating of a radical feminism site called "Womad". Since then, women's anger and struggles led to quantitative rather than qualitative growth of feminism in South Korea. In 2018, more than 70,000 women, the largest number for a single women's agenda, gathered at Gwanghwamun Square to protest against the police's partial

investigation of illegal filming and photography. From around 2018, the tal-corset movement began to spread in the South Korean society. Those who were angry at violence against women had embarked on aggressive actions to eradicate misogyny. A series of activities were different from the forces of the existing women's movements. It was an explosion of the cumulative victim's experiences of individual Korean women who were unfairly treated in the society. After that, the women's movements to have the same rights and status as men continued in South Korea. In addition, #MeToo movement that accused harassment worldwide made the movements more active [1]. But on the other hand, the future vision of the movements was not in the prospect of social transformation. Therefore, the movements did not develop beyond the struggles against patriarchal order by individuals.

## Government-led policies just for a privileged few

Since the year 2000, government-led women's policies have been institutionalized rapidly in South Korea. But the results of the policies were further deterioration of the living environments of most women such as low-wage and unstable working conditions and double duty imposed on women as wage and domestic workers. The inauguration of Park Geun-hye in 2013 as the first female president in East Asia symbolizes the disparity between women. Government-led policies have only fostered the advancement of a small percentage of elite women in the public sphere. Park Geun-hye's reactionary neoliberalism with a populist and feminist face enforced repression of the majority of women. And the repression is deeply rooted in the South Korean society in almost all fields such as politics, economy, and culture. At least there was no commonality between former Korean Air Vice President Cho Hyun-ah and the Korean Air female crew members (or Filipino housekeeper illegally hired by Cho Hyun-ah) in the nut-rage incident, also referred to as nutgate which occurred a year after Park Geun-hye's inauguration [2]. It was clear that there were large class differences instead of common elements between the woman who exploited and the women who was exploited. At that time, many South Korea's feminists could not explain differences among women, differences in class, and problems of domination and power among women. "Merit system" and "result-oriented pay system" with the success myth of a few women lowered the power for women's liberation.

Meanwhile, capitalism exploitation and patriarchy repression interacted and strengthened each other. As a result, feminist groups that hold existing political power, executives of major women's organizations, and some privileged women succeeded in advancing to the public sphere. However, the process is far from the human rights of women. It's just a power struggle for personal and political interests. The liberal feminism policies have highlighted the class differences among women. Meanwhile, neoliberals ignored the majority of oppressed women and continued discussions mainly in the public sphere in institutional reforms. It showed the limitations of "liberal equality".

## The mainstream in South Korea

Liberal feminism has been the mainstream in South Korea and has taken the initiative to make policies such as expansion of female labor. And representatives of women's organizations advanced to politics and government. These changes seemed to promote women's participation in the public sphere, but in actual fact the majority of women were left alone. Unfortunately, its neoliberal policies have converted service labor into market-oriented and expanded "traditional gender roles". And South Korea's neoliberal government exploited female labor force under low-wage and unstable working conditions in the name of "women's policy". "Gender mainstreaming" in "flexible work strategies" employed by capital served as a means of accelerating unfavourable living conditions for women. And the institutional reforms promoted by Korean liberal women's movements have not changed the lives of women.

It shows that the problems caused by capital cannot be solved by "equal measures" of institutional reforms. The "equal measures" wanted to find a few elite women who could provide a workforce "comparable to men". And

discussions mainly in the public sphere in the institutional reforms have disregarded near-daily discrimination, domestic work, and sexual violence in the private sphere as "personal problems." At the same time, liberal feminism has ignored issues such as racism and classism, denying the need to break the fundamental structure of women's oppression.

## For social transformation for working-class women

On March 9, conservative Yun Seok-yeol has won the South Korean presidential election. It shows that most South Korean voters allowed the next government to trample on the fundamental human rights and to lose respect for legal and administrative women's rights [3]. In the current situation, it remains to be seen what new rise can take place for a movement aimed at social transformation from a class perspective. Six years have passed since the murder occurred near Gangnam Station in 2016. During this time, feminist movements for gender equality have developed independently in South Korea under the influence of the global #MeToo movements. However, the reality of life for the majority of Korean women has not changed. Neoliberal policies by fake progressive forces have resulted in the creation of a small number of elite women, while driving the majority of working-class women into chronic and severe poverty and oppression. In the process, feminist movements are heading for unexpected directions. Some "radical feminists" took conservative direction to prop up exclusive separatism with anti-gender ideology [4]. They are not sufficiently radical. Some dominant feminist groups still remain stuck and varied in the course of the linear model of western feminism [5]. Also, many feminist scholars did not consider women activists to be equal in solidarity. Looking from above, they sought to strengthen the power and authority of a few privileged women, which was almost unrelated to improving the lives of the vast majority of women.

Until now, dominant feminists in South Korea have been insensitive to the oppression of women deepened by capitalism. Women's liberation is not obtained through dialogue with capital. Women's liberation is possible by socialism. And real socialism is possible for the realization of women's liberation. The 2016 candle light uprising which impeached "the first female president in East Asia" included the flames of many Korean women's willingness against social contradictions and hardships brought about by neoliberals. But it cannot necessarily be called a struggle launched by the class perspective. And there are many limitations to define it as a revolution. We must build a structured autonomous women's movement for social transformation that goes beyond institutional reforms or the limitation of liberalism in order to break the structural women's oppression caused by social relations of capitalism and patriarchy which are interacted and strengthened each other.

16 May 2022

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[1] This was a global phenomenon. In 2016, thousands of women in Poland had gone on strike in protest against a total ban on abortions. In the same year, Argentine women marched to protest the growing problem of violence against women. Not only socialist feminism, but also various feminisms resonated with the movement.

[2] An air rage incident that occurred on December 5, 2014, at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York onboard Korean Air.

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[3] Karen Yamanaka, ESSF (article 62269), 27 April 2022, [article 62269](#).

[4] Exclusion of minorities and socially vulnerable by some exclusive feminists unfortunately constituted grounds for Korean men's claims that feminism is just a movement regarding vested interests. At the time of writing, you can confirm the existence of the South Korea section of a European international organization which is clearly trans exclusive. In 2021, South Korea's first transgender soldier, who was discharged from the military, was found dead at her home. In Ms. Byun's case, anti-transgender campaigners held demonstrations urging the military to dismiss her and organized further demonstrations. South Korea is less tolerant of sexual minorities than its East Asian countries. The country has powerful conservative churches/other reactionaries and has no anti-discrimination laws against gender discrimination.

[5] Korea JoongAng Daily, 13 June 2018, "Korean feminism: 'Fourth-wave in form, but second in content'"