

# ***The Influence of Feminist Ideology on the Awakening of Women's Awareness of Equal Rights in East Asia: A Comparative Scope with China and South Korea***

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**Abstract:** In the preceding three decades, South Korea has shown intermittent advancements in the pursuit of gender equality, as seen by the enactment of legislation and implementation of policies in 2006 aimed at safeguarding women's rights, including the adoption of affirmative action measures. The Law for the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests in China, enacted in 2023, tries to establish parity between genders across all domains, thus safeguarding equitable rights for both men and women. Both South Korea and China have implemented legislative measures and social activities in order to advance gender equality. However, despite these efforts, both nations continue to face challenges in this regard. Gender disparity in the workplace is influenced by a multitude of factors, including deeply ingrained ideas, historical context, societal pressures, and instances of discrimination. These difficulties need the implementation of a comprehensive methodology to study. The research posits that the enactment of laws in itself will not be enough to eradicate deeply ingrained beliefs about male dominance.

**Keywords:** East Asia, feminism, equal rights

## **1. Introduction**

Gender equality issues have become increasingly important in both South Korea and China in recent decades. Over the past 30 years, South Korea has made periodic progress toward gender equality, with the government passing laws and policies in 2006 to protect women's rights, such as positive action. On the other hand, China's Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, which was implemented in 2023, aims to ensure equal rights for men and women in all areas of life. Despite these legislative efforts, the status of women in China remains controversial.

The historical background of gender inequality in both countries also reflects the current situation. In China, despite efforts to promote gender equality after the 1911 revolution and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the feudal system lasted for more than 2,000 years, leading to an inevitable decline in the status of women [1]. In South Korea, patriarchy based on Confucianism has created a patriarchal society that has led to gender inequality [2]. Although patriarchy was abolished in 2008, patriarchal values continue to influence Korean society as a whole. The impact of social pressure on beauty standards is another important aspect of gender inequality in South Korea.

Women face enormous social pressure to meet idealized beauty standards, which has led to the dominance of plastic surgery clinics in the country. This objectification of women reinforces gender activism and diminishes their empowerment.

South Korea's women's movement has focused on addressing gender inequality in education. The establishment of girls' schools, such as Ewha Women's University, was an important step towards achieving equal opportunities for women. However, digital media also provides a platform for feminism, allowing individuals to share their experiences in promoting gender equality.

Although both countries actively promote gender equality, gender discrimination still exists, especially in employment rates and wages [3-5]. Efforts to combat such discrimination through legislation have been largely ineffective and further measures are needed to address the problem. The consequences of gender discrimination are also widespread, not only affecting women's enthusiasm for work but also contributing to social imbalances. The promotion of gender equality is essential to achieving social balance and economic development and requires the joint efforts of the whole society. The study suggests that legislation alone will not be enough to eliminate entrenched notions of male superiority. To sum up, South Korea and China have made efforts to promote gender equality through legislation and social movements, but there are still problems in both countries. Deeply held beliefs, historical background, social pressures, and discrimination in the workplace contribute to gender inequality. A comprehensive approach is needed to address these problems. By challenging traditional perceptions and promoting gender equality, both South Korea and China can work towards a more inclusive and just society.

## **2. The Modern Progress in China and Deficiencies**

Since the topic of gender equality was brought to the public's attention in 1980, South Korean women have been gradually improving for nearly 30 years, and the South Korean government has also introduced a series of laws and policies to safeguard the equality of South Korean women, such as the Introduction Of Affirmative Action in 2006, the main reason is to improve the female employment rate, which emphasizes the correction of discriminatory employment behaviors [6].

The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, which will be implemented in January 2023, clearly states that men and women should enjoy the same rights as men in various aspects, including family and work, according to a report on the China Women's Network. And eliminate all exclusion and discrimination.

By contrast, South Korea passed a law to protect women around 2006, while China's law came about 17 years later. The reasons need to be considered in combination with many aspects, including the feudal system in Chinese society for more than 2,000 years so that the status of women continues to decline. After the revolution of 1911, people advocated open-mindedness and women's status began to rise. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, "equality between men and women" was written into the constitution.

However, after the legislation, the status of women in China does not seem to be fully implemented and comprehensively improved. People have deeply imprinted the words of male superiority and female inferiority in their hearts. There has been an endless discussion about the status of women in China in recent years. Among them is the well-known "Fengxian chain woman" incident. In this case, the woman was chained by the neck and had no personal freedom. The sources claim that the woman gave birth to eight children. This vicious incident is very representative. This proves that in some people's minds, women are used as a tool to have children. So it seems that it is far from enough to simply rely on legislation to solve the thoughts that have been engraved in the minds of Chinese people. If the country wants to completely eradicate the idea of "male superiority over female superiority", this study believes that the government needs to take compulsory measures. For example, companies that discriminate against women in the workplace should be fined. The government should

also set up relevant departments to manage the problem of female employment. The government should also take enforcement measures against bad social incidents. For example, "Fengxian chain woman". The government should sentence the person for such an incident.

In the Stone Age, men were in charge of hunting. Due to the lack of advanced weapons, the success rate of male hunting is very low, but the mortality rate is very high. At this time, the status of women is significantly higher than that of men, and we call this matriarchal society. Women dominate society. However, in the era of agricultural civilization, People's daily food was no longer dependent on male hunting, but on crops. At this time, the status of women began to decline. About 4,000 years ago in China, society gradually changed from matrilineal to patrilineal. In this case, the power of men is constantly increasing, and through forced or exchange marriages, men force women to have a long-term stable marriage relationship with them. At the same time, in addition to having children, women were limited to simple jobs such as cooking and weaving. Over the course of thousands of years, the status of women gradually declined. Around 2070 BC, the Xia Dynasty was founded. This represented the beginning of China's feudal system, and for the next four thousand years or so, men dominated society. All kinds of male privileges, such as polygamy, have marked the gradual decline of women's rights. By the time of the Qing Dynasty, women were required to have their feet bound (a cruel form of "beauty" that was extremely prevalent in the Qing Dynasty), and the social status of women reached its lowest point in Chinese history. The pattern of male superiority and female inferiority has been carved into people's minds.

An old Chinese is saying that one's skills are "passed on to men but not to women." In China's intangible cultural heritage, there is a special skill called "Shu embroidery", which is a special embroidery skill. But throughout history, this skill was taught only to the male members of the family. There are several possible reasons. First, in China, it is believed that once a woman marries, she does not belong to her family. All the skills will be lost. Second, women in ancient China generally did rough work, such as washing clothes, cooking, and cleaning. As a result, women in ancient China had rough hands, whereas the skill of "Shu embroidery" required delicate hands. It will not affect the quality of the finished embroidery. Such inheritance is wrong, and women also need to be part of the inheritance, each special skill should not belong to each family alone but should belong to the world. If people want a special skill to be passed on, they should try their best to make this skill flourish and let more people know about it. Through the analysis of this matter, we can also see that the traditional concept of China is very old-fashioned. People don't want to pass on what's unique to their family. People at that time did not realize the equality of men and women and how to truly promote the development of skills.

Chinese women also receive unequal treatment in terms of employment rate. It states that about 50 percent of Women are treated unfairly in the workplace and that the average salary of women in China is only 67 percent of that of men (All-China Women's Federation 2011). Although China has enacted laws to regulate and combat this practice, they are generally ineffective in most cases [7]. Taken together, the effects of women's mistreatment are profound. First, women's work enthusiasm in the workplace. Long-term unfair treatment of women will lead to a decrease in women's self-efficacy (an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce) specific performance attainments) [7]. As a result, women's willingness to work in the whole society is no longer strong, and the male-dominated society may re-emerge. After that, restrictions such as legislation will also become "decorations". In the meantime, the female productivity of the society will be greatly reduced. Second, long-term unfair treatment will cause women to lose their ability to work, and there will be more "housewives" in the family, and the expectation of society for women will become only those who can do laundry and cooking, thus the social balance will be broken. The meaning of empowering women is to eliminate the prejudice against women and the unfair treatment they receive in the family, workplace, and society. This not only contributes to social balance but also

to economic development. Second, in a workplace that does not respect the power of women and the family of domestic violence, the value of women is infinitely devalued, equal to the loss of the strength of women unique men do not have, which is the loss of the entire men and society. Women make up half of the world's population, and their productivity and workforce cannot be ignored. Society should make the best use of women's natural abilities. Gender identity should not only be noticed by men, it should be communicated to the whole society, so that women can enhance their self-identity. So that women are not imprisoned in the "trap" set by this society.

### 3. South Korean Social Background

The hoju system in Korean Confucianism formed a patriarchal system that resulted in gender inequality. Due to hoju, men are placed above women in families, with women playing a lesser role. Examples include the family wealth going to the oldest son rather than the oldest daughter (females only inherit when no surviving males remain), and daughters becoming part of their husband's family after marriage. Although the hoju system was abolished in 2008, the patriarchal system still prevails in the minds of South Koreans and influences their daily lives and education [6].

In South Korea, individuals have to be momjjang or oljjang, which means having perfect bodies or faces to succeed in life. Women in South Korea face societal pressures that limit their appreciation of beauty. As a result, South Korea has one of the world's highest numbers of plastic surgery clinics." Women in South Korea may not be aware that the "ideal models" they aspire to emulate are shaped by societal expectations of what a woman should be. This objectification of women perpetuates gender stereotypes and reinforces the notion that a woman's beauty equates to power and status in her life. As women seek to increase their social status, they unconsciously follow the trend of the "popular face," unknowingly contributing to the problematic objectification of women.

The South Korean women's movement began as a response to issues in education. Through obtaining higher education, women perceived gender inequality, societal stereotypes, and internal self-identity struggles. The establishment of Ewha, a school exclusively for women, was the first step towards providing women with equal opportunities and status as men, which served as the foundation of the future feminist movement.

A great promotion of feminism in South Korea is the growing up misogyny. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, South Korea is ranked 115th out of 145 countries (99th out of 146 countries in 2022) in terms of gender equality, which is lower than that of countries such as India and Japan. The report evaluates the status of women in 145 countries based on economy, education, politics, and health. The economic recession that happened in the 2010s challenged the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, which shook men's authority in their families. The appearance of the online community Ilbe gathered misogyny to publish hated discourse and mock to oppress women. They created new words which insulted women as a joke and spread their misogynistic ideas such as kimchi-nyeon/n which means kimchi girl/women and bitch [6]. With the generalized of this kind of misogynistic word, large-scale discrimination spread across South Korea and became more and more visual even in political events. This organized community irritated feminism and pushed the battle between misogynists and feminists, especially on digital media as Jane describes 'gendered cyber-hate has increased markedly since at least 2011' [6]. Nowadays, social media shows the polarization between misogynists and feminists in South Korea. Licentious misogyny drove the resurgence of feminism popular and approved than before.

Since the 2010s, digital media has emerged as a significant platform for feminism, providing opportunities for belief and community-building among like-minded individuals [8]. The hashtag #Iamafeminist was created on Twitter in February 2015. Jinsook Kim explains that 'this hashtag became an important platform for feminist identification and activism against misogyny following its start in 2015 as a way to resist prevailing anti-feminist sentiment in Korea' [9]. Also, #Iamafeminist

offers a welcoming community where individuals can connect with people from diverse cultures and traditions to express their motivation and personal stories about their feminism. By reducing obstacles to becoming a feminist and broadening the definition of feminism, #Iamafeminist has made the term more attainable to the general public, thereby increasing the impact of feminism. This label expands the definition of 'feminist' beyond scholars of women's rights to include anyone who advocates for equal treatment and empowerment of women. While the hashtag #Iamafeminist spread on Twitter, the anti-feminist movement in South Korea gained global attention and became increasingly internationalized. Additionally, discussions on gender equality have grown more frequent and intense. The hashtag's openness encourages people worldwide to support women's rights and values, combat stigma against feminists, identify as feminists, and participate in a small-scale feminist revolution.

When communities become large and diverse, and adopt slogans, extreme events tend to occur. Large-scale feminist movements not only occur online, but the combination of online and offline activism is a distinct feature of the development of feminism in Korea. The Seocho-dong public restroom murder case, commonly called the Gangnam Station murder case, is a noteworthy event that prompted a feminist resurgence. A 34-year-old South Korean man, Kim Seong-min, fatally stabbed a woman in the public, all-gender restroom of a karaoke bar in Seocho-gu, Seoul. He claimed that he did so because of the woman's neglect of him and his hatred of women. This case of random murder has caused great concern in society and has reignited gender tensions in Korean society, viewed as representative of misogyny. Ordinary people expressed their horror and anger by posting stickers near the site of the crime and speaking out on social media, bringing attention to the issue of gender inequality in Korean society during that time. However, diverse viewpoints surfaced on social media and in news reports. Kyunghyang, Hankyoreh, and the police reported the man as mentally stable and emphasized that the motive behind the murder was not due to prejudice against a particular gender. Nevertheless, The Chosun and Dong-a newspapers reported that the man's motivation for committing the crime was a mental illness. It is important to note that this statement is subjective and may require further investigation. Therefore, it remains to be determined whether this case was caused by mental illness or misogyny. After that, South Korea can't get away from discussing and arguing about gender and equality in all kinds of events nowadays.

Both China and South Korea, as developing countries or countries following the egalitarian movement, have implemented measures to protect women's equal status through social surveillance. Both countries consistently utilize data to report on the status of women in their respective nations, facilitating the pursuit of equality and bringing women's rights to the attention of the government. At the same time, both countries support women actively, whether through social organizations or monitoring of public opinion. Although both nations are making progress, the degree of reports by organizations, women's rights, and feminism in China and South Korea differ significantly. According to Yao Lin, who stated that '...the government is eager to use the Sexual assault allegations to crack down on unruly publicists'. Relative to South Korea, China's underdeveloped civil society is easily monitored and controlled by the government with a strategy of limiting the direction of content on social media [10].

#### 4. #MeToo Movement

The hashtag #MeToo brought to light the issue of unprotected women who were hurt by sexual harassment worldwide. #MeToo originated in the United States and has raised awareness globally, including South Korea and China.

#MeToo in South Korea became a foundation to enhance female rights and foster more in-depth discussions on gender-related issues. The movement was sparked by the public revelations of sexual harassment made by female prosecutor Suh Ji-Hyeon in 2018. Her story about being 'sexually

harassed eight years ago by a senior prosecutor' has been offered a critique of bad performance in her career without any compensation and apology. Since female prosecutors are rare in South Korea, the Suh Ji-Hyeon incident has sparked controversy regarding sexual harassment and discrimination. Female victims, ranging from university professors with high positions to civilian women, have anonymously shared their experiences of sexual harassment. Women have organized public speaking and street protests to enhance awareness about sexual violence in Korea. As Linda Hasunuma and Ki-young Shin pointed out the #MeToo movement 'has a vibrant bottom-up grassroots movement resulting in concrete legislative proposals and partial legal reform'. The large storm created by #MeToo forced the Korean government to take action and legislate laws. At the same time, the government investigated the prosecutor's office and the National Assembly. Numerous guidelines and laws to protect Koreans from sexual violence have been proposed and passed. #MeToo has had a lasting impact on Korea and may continue to do so in the future [9].

In the same year, a female Ph.D. XiXi Luo reported publicly on Wechat's official platform that Xiaowu Chen, a professor at Beihang University, had allegedly sexually harassed multiple female students. After she gained attention on social platforms, she continued to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment towards Chinese women and shed light on the perpetrators. XiXi Luo's involvement and public opinions caused a wave of controversy on Chinese social media, ultimately leading to the formal introduction of the #MeToo movement. With a wide spread of #MeToo, several high-profile figures have come to light in the wake of sexual harassment allegations. At the same time, to calm down a future expansion of #MeToo, the Chinese government has proposed some anti-sexual harassment proposals. Specifically, the Supreme Court has incorporated sexual harassment damages into civil cases related to disputes. Also, some states have implemented mechanisms to address sexual harassment in schools. The #MeToo movement has led to improved protection for women's rights and status.

However, #MeToo is hard to sustain its impact on China, as Lin Yao pointed out that 'although there was a small upsurge of public discussion in July and August, the intensification of official control of public opinion brought an abrupt end to what had been expected to be an in-depth discussion' [10]. In this case, public opinion has interpreted the #MeToo incident as 'women are a voice, not a vulnerable group per se'. Therefore, to silence different opinions from today's societal philosophies, Chinese governments adopted measures to eliminate comments related to #MeToo on public platforms and the internet in September. Yao Lin from New York University revealed that 'Out of fear of the power of social self-organization and civic movements, the government has habitually taken stabilization measures, such as deleting posts and interviews, to suppress MeToo-related discussions and actions'. According to the measures, the spreading of the theme of #MeToo is unable to enlarge and nearly vanish in China. As the heat wore off, the frequency of allegations of sexual harassment declined, and the discussions of #MeToo faded into the public horizons [10].

At the culmination of #MeToo time, the density of sexual assault apologies elicited in South Korea was significantly higher than in China. Compared with both online and offline long-term impacts in South Korea, the protests of this international incident have not yet come to form a large onsite gathering in China, where #MeToo has only festered on the internet and has been suppressed over time. In addition, the sense of involvement of Chinese masses in the #MeToo movement is less than Korean masses. The reasons may include under coverage of the internet, low level of education, and habituation of living styles, for females living in remote areas, etc. All these factors may lead females living in remote areas unable to realize that their rights have been threatened. However, in both countries, the conflicts between genders became upgraded, more public realized the dilemma of females, and feminism been pushed further and further [11].



## 5. Female-involved Incident

The explosion of the 'Fengxian Chain woman' incident is more likely to be seen as a human rights issue since the omission of laws regulating trafficking in persons resulted in the tragedy of 'Fengxian chain woman'. Besides attributing the problem to weak female rights, the discussion of the 'Fengxian chain woman' should be more focused on human rights. Nevertheless, Chinese feminists who had long been suppressed seized this opportunity to advance the issue of women's rights. Under the leadership of feminists in China, the public discussion diverged the question from the major one. Rather than questioning how the 'Fengxian chain woman' was snatched by a man so easily, the public focused on why modern men still cling to traditional ideas that women are birth-making tools. Even though the 'Fengxian chain woman' incident represents a threat to women in recent years, it highlights that China's feminist movement still has a long way to go.

The portrayal of political correctness and value correctness by China's mainstream media is incompatible with feminism as an ideology. In Korea, feminism is often used as a tool in politics, and the government should engage in massive propaganda to support women's rights, which is more aligned with the current social mainstream. This approach could help political parties to earn votes from feminists. Chinese feminism lacks sustained advocacy due to the classic socialist ideology that prioritizes family and communal unity. Due to special events or festivals, mainstream media in China often shift their focus to promoting these occasions, instead of staying on the front topic of the story. The saturation of socialist ideology in all media hinders the public from feminist movements for a prolonged time without interruption.

## 6. Conclusion

The immaturity of civil society is unable to provide an encouraged environment for the public to organize protest events. Feminism's discourses primarily exist in the anonymous online world, with little real-world mobilization. The anonymity afforded to users decreases their social responsibility and diverts attention from feminist concerns. When capitalists control public opinion, any social media discussions will quickly fall apart. However, in-person gatherings can strengthen a stable team spirit to better support attention to the feminist movement. It can also enhance the interpersonal environment. The slogan of supporting women in China briefly erupted by rage of the public with some injustice to women. Many who define themselves as feminists are just victims of some incident who pretend as feminists and create an illusion of strong group spirits to the public. As time passes, 'fake feminists' disappear when the popularity of the event dies down, resolved, or doesn't threaten them. Yet feminist movements in Korea have maintained a consistent fervor, serving as a reminder to feminists and victims to safeguard the rights of women and themselves.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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