

# INTRODUCTION

JULY 7, 2018

SEOUL

Claire Kim pumped her fist into the air, a mixture of sweat and tears streaming down her face. Like many other women in the crowd, she'd been sitting on the sunbaked tarmac at Seoul's theater district of Hyeohwa for hours. The mercury hit one hundred as the summer sun beat down on their heads, but their number kept growing, reaching tens of thousands.

"Molka\* filming us illegally! Those bastards who film them! Those who share them! Those who watch them! Those who sell them! Punish them, right now!" Kim, a twenty-one-year-old college student, chanted with the others, thousands of fists shooting up towards the sky in unison.

Moving rivers of red-clad figures endlessly streamed out of the nearby subway station and chartered buses from all across the country, joining the sea of protestors brandishing handwritten banners that declared, "My life is not your porn" and "Angry women will change the world."

At the same time and about 1.5 miles away, another five thousand people were rallying at Seoul's Gwanghwamun Plaza, an iconic site of public demonstrations. This assembly wore all black and waved banners proclaiming, "Women's wombs are not public properties" and "We are not baby-making machines to boost the birth rates."

"Decriminalize abortion!" roared thirty-nine-year-old activist Na-Young and her legion as they marched towards the giant gray-brick courthouse of the Constitutional Court. "Let's end the abortion ban here, now!"

\* Korean slang term for "spycam."



Welcome to the loud, raucous world of South Korean feminists. Powerful scenes of female anger and solidarity like these were part of a massive, unprecedented wave of feminist awakenings that rocked the economically advanced yet deeply patriarchal country.

South Korea is the world's tenth<sup>1</sup> largest economy, a tech giant that is home to Samsung, the top smartphone maker internationally, as well as some of the fastest internet connection speeds and densest high-speed railway networks on the planet. It is also a cultural juggernaut whose cinema (e.g., *Parasite*), television dramas (e.g., *Squid Game*), and music stars (e.g., BTS) have enormous social influence and huge global followings. But behind the facade of its economic, technological, and cultural dominance also lies a history of deep-seated gender discrimination that, despite all the country's modern advances and reputation, has changed relatively little over the years.

South Korea has such dire records in women's rights within the industrialized world that it hovers at the bottom of many surveys on women's status among advanced nations. The country has recorded the largest gender pay gap in the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s annual survey every single year since its inception three decades ago. Similarly, it has remained at the bottom of the *Economist's* glass-ceiling index without fail since the magazine's annual measure of the "role and influence of women in the workforce" was launched in 2013. The *Economist* describes the obstacles faced by working women in East Asia—including South Korea—as "a ceiling that appears to be made of bulletproof glass."

Not surprisingly, the World Economic Forum places South Korea at number 102 out of 156 countries in terms of gender parity.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 70 percent of the companies listed on South Korea's stock markets have no female executive, and women account for only 19 percent of the parliamentary seats—just slightly more than in North Korea.

Aside from suffering institutional challenges such as income inequality, career barriers, and lack of representation in leadership roles at work and in the government, South Korean women also experience numerous hardships in their daily lives. Sexual harassment and sex-based crimes are rife, especially



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with hidden cameras that secretly film women in almost every imaginable space, from public transportation to bathrooms in offices and schools—and even in the privacy of their own homes. Single women and women who live alone are often judged for their singlehood; meanwhile, married women are expected to sacrifice their careers and personal lives to care for their families. And women face enormous pressure to look perfect at all costs, sustained by South Korea's reputation as the world's capital of plastic surgery and its homogenous society's strict beauty standards.

To be fair, South Korea is not the worst place for women to live. Girls do not have to risk their lives to go to school. Women do not need male guardians' permission to drive or travel. Women and girls in the country, known for its esteemed universal healthcare and obsession with education, enjoy greater access to medical services and higher education than others do in many parts of the world. South Korean women record one of the longest lifespans compared to those in other economically advanced countries. Many of the problems bemoaned by South Korean women may appear to be so-called "first-world problems," albeit more extreme than those of most first-world nations.

But South Korea's reality also represents a unique case wherein a well-run nation that has achieved great economic, technological, and political advances has seen its patriarchal values changing at a surprisingly slow pace, challenging the widely held belief that women's overall status in society tends to improve in tandem with such progresses.

Yet over the past few years, South Korean women have pushed back like never before. Inspired by the #MeToo campaign in the United States and a surge of feminist movements at home, South Korea's #MeToo story is one of the most successful in Asia and beyond.

Women like Kim and Na-Young have fought to bring down countless men accused of sexual misconduct, including a powerful presidential contender; put the country on the forefront of the global battle against tech-based sexual abuse; ushered in a rare victory in women's rights to access abortion; and launched a homegrown movement against the impossible beauty standards imposed on them. A growing number of women have also vowed not to marry or give birth in a so-called "birth strike," defying the pressure on them to be self-sacrificing caregivers for their families. Together, these women have built a powerful tale of

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a feminist revolution with its own unique history and magnetic energy—a story that also challenges the widespread stereotypes of Asian women.

In the Western imagination, Asian women are often portrayed as innocent, passive, and compliant creatures who silently suffer under men's rule with little to no voice of their own—or as selfless, uncomplaining caregivers who sacrifice themselves for others. But the reality on the ground in South Korea could not be more different than those fantasy-fueled stereotypes, which are seen by many women as utterly laughable and farcically outdated. One woman told me, "For all the Westerners who still fantasize about the sweet and docile Asian women like Miss Saigon, I'd say, 'Wake up! Your Miss Saigon was dead and gone a long time ago. She's not here anymore.'"



Of course, neither the problems of living in a patriarchal society nor successful resistance are unique to South Korea. The global momentum created by the #MeToo movement has encouraged many women around the world to speak out about the violence, misogyny, and discrimination they face in their daily lives. And many of their stories share eerie similarities across borders: growing threats of tech-based abuse, legal backlash faced by sexual-assault victims who speak out, and criminal justice systems—and wider societies—in which victims' voices are often met with suspicion and abusers' downfalls with sympathy.

Furthermore, many hard-won advances made in women's rights have been rolled back or come under unprecedented threat in recent years, bringing new urgency to feminist activism. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed much of the progress women had made, as it eliminated far more jobs typically held by women than those by men, dramatically increased the burden of unpaid domestic work, and stoked a tide of gender-based violence during lockdown. In the United States, some of the attacks on women's rights unleashed under or emboldened by the Trump administration have had a lasting impact on the lives of many women, most notably over abortion rights. Similar attacks on women's rights and activism by right-wing or authoritarian rulers have raged on in many other countries, including China, Turkey, Hungary, and Brazil, just to name a few.

In South Korea, the outburst of women's advocacy has angered many young men who think these activists have gone too far, with feminists often