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## **Riding the Anti-Feminist Wave: Dividing a Country for Political Gain**

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**Riding the Anti-Feminist Wave: Dividing a Country for Political Gain**

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# 1. Introduction

On March 9, 2022, South Korean (hereafter Korean) voters elected their next president. In Korea, a president is restricted to a single term of five years, so there is a lot at stake each election. Just like any other presidential election that is decided by majority vote, campaigning can get nasty. Candidates go to great lengths to secure their voter base. They are prepared to do anything what it takes to win, even deviating from their party's core issues by playing into recent events that are highly relevant to the population to net a large group of voters in one swoop. Korean candidates are no different. In 2017, most of the candidates ran on issues centered around the economy, North Korea, and tackling corruption in the government. The presidential elections were preceded by the impeachment of president Park Geun-hye, daughter of late authoritarian president Park Chung-hee, on charges of her being involved in multiple scandals, including bribery, coercion, abuse of power, and leaking government secrets, turning even her party members against her.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, at the time, one of Korean voters' main concerns were untrustworthy and corrupt politicians. Secondly, while being an ever-looming threat over the East Asia region, North Korea had grown to become a global issue as they were publicly provoking the world by conducting various nuclear tests. Many Koreans still believed the two states could one day reunify and so the issue had to be handled with care.<sup>2</sup> The economy was stumbling as well due to high household debt, stagnating wages, and high youth unemployment rates. Due to issues like these, Korea has not been able to undergo the final transition from Asian tiger

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Campbell, "South Korea's Loathed President Park Geun-hye Has Been Impeached," *Time*, December 9, 2016, <https://time.com/4596318/south-korea-president-impeachment-park-geun-hye-corruption-choi-soon-sil-protests/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Jackson, "'One Nation' Dream: Do Younger South Koreans Want Reunification?" *Korea Exposé*, published March 7, 2018, <https://www.koreaexpose.com/younger-south-koreans-still-want-unification/>.  
Chaewon Chung, "South Korean support for reunification drops to record low, poll finds," *NK News*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/10/south-korean-support-for-reunification-drops-to-record-low-poll-finds/>.

economy to developed society.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the country was tangled up in a conflict with China over their national security interests in regard to the deployment of THAAD, a United States missile deterrent system. Many feared similar sanctions to the ones China had imposed on Japan just a few years prior. The people longed for change.

Enter presidential candidate Moon Jae-In. He had run against Park in 2012 and thus had an advantage over the other candidates, having been her direct opposition before. Moon was a progressive liberal, leader of the Democratic Party of Korea, a former civil rights lawyer, and chief of staff to former president Roh Moo-hyun.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he called himself a feminist, which is peculiar for Neo-Confucianist Korea. Moon won 41% of the votes, which were almost equally distributed among both genders, with women having a slight majority.<sup>5</sup> This was a substantial feat in an election in which voter turnout was about 77%, the highest it had been since 1997.<sup>6</sup> For the people this was a protest vote, signaling they wanted a president who would enable economic reform and bring an end to the corruption and corporatocracy. Youth unemployment being at a record 9.8%, people wanted jobs, which is what Moon had promised them time and time again during his campaign.<sup>7</sup> He underscored he would try to become a president for all South Koreans.<sup>8</sup>

In 2022, after overcoming multiple political challenges, among which the Chinese THAAD sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic, the #MeToo revolution, and the failed peace talks with North Korea, Moon's term came to an end. A Gallup Korea opinion poll pointed

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<sup>3</sup> Motoko Rich, "In South Korea, New President Faces A Tangle of Economic Problems," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/world/asia/south-korea-economy-moon-jae-in.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Moon Jae-in: South Korean liberal claims presidency," *BBC News*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39855956>.

<sup>5</sup> L. Yoon, "Result of the 19th presidential election exit poll in South Korea in 2017, by gender," Statista, published March 5, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/706059/south-korea-2017-presidential-election-exit-polls-by-gender/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Landslide win for Moon Jae-in in South Korea vote," *Al Jazeera*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/5/10/landslide-win-for-moon-jae-in-in-south-korea-vote>.

<sup>7</sup> L. Yoon, "Unemployment rate of people aged 15 to 29 years old in South Korea from 2005 to 2021," Statista, published April 19, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1233398/south-korea-youth-unemployment-rate/>.

<sup>8</sup> *BBC News*, "claims presidency".

J. James Kim and John J. Lee, "A Primer on the 19<sup>th</sup> South Korean Presidential Election in 2017," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, published May 4, 2017, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08156?seq=7>.

out that his approval rating of 41% stood almost 20 percent point higher than any of his predecessors at a similar time in their presidencies. Moon's successor would have big shoes to fill.

The new candidates started campaigning in the second half of 2021. Voters expected them to tackle challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the housing crisis, and the economy.<sup>9</sup> The election turned out to become a duel between Lee Jae-myung of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and Yoon Suk-yeol of the conservative People Power Party (PPP). The two offered no clear plans for the future, and instead were constantly at each other's throat, accusing the other candidate of corruption and suggesting they should be jailed after the election period was over.<sup>10</sup> It became clear there was not going to be a favorite candidate and the election would only function as a measurement tool of which of the two candidates Korea would consider to be the more bearable option. The two were forced to differentiate themselves on more atypical matters, and the one who did this best was Yoon.

By transforming feminism into a wedge issue, Yoon was able to edge out his competition. The 2022 election turned out to become the closest presidential race in Korean history, with Yoon's trump card being the deciding factor in the race: men aged 18 to 29.<sup>11</sup> Anti-feminist sentiment was surging in Korea after the emergence of online radical feminist forums and the #MeToo movement. Young men were fed up with feminism and were waiting

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<sup>9</sup> "deilli opinieon je478ho(2022nyeon 1wol 1ju) - daeseon hubo jijido, daetongnyeong seontaek gijun, inmul gaebyeol hogam yeobu, chagi daetongnyeong gukjeong useon gwaje 데일리 오피니언 제 478 호(2022년 1월 1주) - 대선 후보 지지도, 대통령 선택 기준, 인물 개별 호감 여부, 차기 대통령 국정 우선 과제," [Daily Opinion No. 478 (first week of January 2022) – Presidential candidate support, presidential selection criteria, individual likability, national priorities for the next presidential election], Gallup Korea, published January 7, 2022, <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1264>. (For a translation of Korea's sources, use [www.papago.naver.com](http://www.papago.naver.com)).

<sup>10</sup> Hyung-A Kim, "S Korea presidential poll: Choosing the lesser of two evils," *Al Jazeera*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/12/22/sk-presidential-election-choosing-the-lesser-of-the-two-evils>.

<sup>11</sup> Shin Ji-hye, "Exit polls show neck-and-neck presidential race," *The Korea Herald*, March 9, 2022, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220309000436>.

Kim Joo-heon, "Conservative opposition candidate Yoon elected as president in close race," *Aju Business Daily*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.ajudaily.com/view/20220310095013019>.

Michael Lee, "[WHY] The election verdict is out, but how did we get here?" *Korea JoongAng Daily*, March 14, 2022, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/03/14/why/Yoon-Sukyeol-Lee-Jaemyung-real-estate/20220314185407967.html>.

for a politician who would echo their beliefs. Yoon decided he would be the one to pull in these unclaimed voters by declaring he did not believe that systematic discrimination based on gender on a systemic level exists in Korea, despite the country being at the bottom of multiple socioeconomic OECD indexes, and he blamed feminism for the country's low birth rate.

Him being fully aware that feminism is dividing young Koreans to great extent and still deciding to twist this issue in his favor for political gain is an interesting development in Korean politics to say the least. Therefore, this thesis will provide an answer to the following questions: How can it be that in a society where women formally have equal rights to men, an anti-feminist campaign can become the deciding factor in a presidential election? How can it be beneficial for one's campaign to turn against half of the population?

## 2. Historical Context

Societies in East Asian countries are built on the morals and ideals of Confucianism. In Korea specifically, Neo-Confucianism was a particularly strong influence during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), until the Japanese invasion brought an end to the era. The presence of Confucianism provides a rigid tradition of hierarchy, authority, and patriarchy. The philosophy focusses on the importance of family, resulting in the subjugation of women.<sup>12</sup> Women were under the guidance and control of men, their father, husband, and then sons, in all stages of their lives.<sup>13</sup> When a woman got married, she would become an outsider to her own family. Her only duties were serving her husband and his parents, educating their children, and maintaining their family's reputation and traditional customs. The husband's last name would be passed on to the children, while the wife kept the name of her own clan. This made it important for families to give birth to sons over daughters in order to preserve the clan's existence. Besides practicing the "feminine virtues" including obedience, modesty, and chastity, they were expected to pursue the "ideal of womanhood", being a wise mother and a good wife.<sup>14</sup> Women at the time were prohibited from going to school and were illiterate.

After the Korean War came to its conclusion in 1948, Korea became an authoritarian state under the rule of presidents Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee, and finally Chun Do-hwan until 1988, when under growing pressure of civil groups and the international community Korea transitioned into a democracy. Under Park's rule, Korea's economy exploded. Swift industrialization and urbanization pushed women into the job market, thrusting them into this heavily western influenced, modernized world that challenged the traditional values

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Y. J. Chung, "Modern Korean Women and Confucian Values: Change and Assimilation," in *Understanding Korea Series No.3 – Korean Confucianism*, CEFIA, last edited January 19, 2017, [http://cefia.aks.ac.kr:84/index.php?title=Korean\\_Confucianism\\_-\\_8\\_Modern\\_Korean\\_Women\\_and\\_Confucian\\_Values:\\_Change\\_and\\_Assimilation](http://cefia.aks.ac.kr:84/index.php?title=Korean_Confucianism_-_8_Modern_Korean_Women_and_Confucian_Values:_Change_and_Assimilation).

<sup>13</sup> Peter H. Lee et al., *Sources of Korean Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Chung, "Change and Assimilation."

associated with Confucianism. The identities of women changed rapidly alongside newly imposed expectations and needs. A university education was no longer a basic requirement but essential to compete with men and other women. They stepped away from tradition and embraced western modernity, creating a big generation gap with their mothers. Women going to school and working full time resulted in a trend where they decide to delay marriage and have less children, as they simply can no longer afford to start a family.<sup>15</sup> The modern-day Korean woman ignores traditional role expectations and instead strives for opportunities and full freedom, doubting whether motherhood and marriage would even represent women's self-fulfillment at all.

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<sup>15</sup> Hyonhee Shin, "South Korean birth rate world's lowest in struggle for balance: report," *Reuters*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-women-idUSKBN2410YR>.

### 3. The Growth of Korean Feminism

From the very beginning, feminism was unable to gain footing in Korea as the population gave priority to shared Korean struggles, such as the Japanese colonization, the economic boom, industrialization, and political instability. Only in the 90s, when Korea had fully democratized, a ‘gendered perspective’ became institutionalized within the women’s movement. From here on out till the end of the 00s, feminists would mostly focus their attention on combatting sexual violence.<sup>16</sup>

While women in Korea legally have the same rights as men many argue they still face discrimination in many aspects of their life. In 2020, it was reported that 74% of women had faced gender discrimination in the workplace, including sexual harassment and wage discrimination.<sup>17</sup> While young women are more highly educated than their male peers, they underperform in the labor market.<sup>18</sup> In 2019, only 62.3% of women in their 30s were employed, which likely indicates a lack of opportunity rather than a lack of ability, and points to a waste of human capital and economic resources.<sup>19</sup> On a global scale, Korea scores 108<sup>th</sup> out of a 153 countries on the Global Gender Gap index and has the largest gender wage gap out of the OECD countries as women on average are paid 31.5% less than their male counterparts.<sup>20</sup> There have been reports that women are asked inappropriate personal

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<sup>16</sup> Kyungja Jung, *Practicing feminism in South Korea* (London: Routledge, 2013).

Hoin Lee, “Workplace sexual harassment,” Diversity and equality: recent development in Korean law, International Bar Association, published October 29, 2021, <https://www.ibanet.org/korean-law-diversity-and-equality-recent-developments>.

<sup>17</sup> Nam Kyung-don, “[Graphic News] 74% of women face discrimination: survey,” *The Korea Herald*, March 8, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200308000270>.

Timothy S. Rich et al., “South Korea Split Over Perception of Workplace Harassment,” *The News Lens*, October 7, 2020, <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/141566>.

Eun-Young Jeong, “South Korea’s Male-Dominated Workplace in Spotlight After Sexual Harassment Accusations,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-koreas-male-dominated-workplaces-in-spotlight-after-sexual-harassment-accusations-11597915806>.

<sup>18</sup> Willem Adema and Valerie Frey, “The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle – How does KOREA compare?” OECD, published October 4, 2017, <https://www.oecd.org/korea/Gender2017-KOR-en.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> “Female employment rate in Korea is M-shaped,” *The Dong-a Ilbo*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20210319/2511793/1>.

Estimated by calculation:  $(64.6 + 59.9) / 2 = 62.25$

<sup>20</sup> Cho Ki-weon, “Where does S. Korea stand in terms of gender inequality?” *Hankyoreh*, March 8, 2021, [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/985908.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/985908.html).

questions during job interviews on a large scale, and that even if they initially pass the interview stage, companies deliberately lower their interview scores causing them to still get eliminated.<sup>21</sup> The Korea Employment Information Service (KEIS) describes how it is very hard for women who have taken a break from work following child birth or marriage to return to the job market as they now have a hole in their resume. To avoid this, many women decide to not have children, which partly explains why Korea's birthrate is the lowest among OECD countries, being the only state with a fertility rate below 1.<sup>22</sup>

Korea did not experience similar feminist waves to the ones in the west. There has not been a sexual revolution, and women's suffrage was immediately granted when the country democratized in '88. As a result, Korean women do not have the same experiences as western women, which has led Korean feminism to be in a state of dormancy. They needed a catalyst, and unfortunately it took the murder of an innocent, unsuspecting young woman to get the ball rolling. The Seocho-dong public restroom murder case, also referred to as the Gangnam Station murder case, took place at the public restroom of a karaoke bar in Seoul on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 2016.<sup>23</sup> The incident involved the 34-year-old Kim Seong-min who had stabbed to death a woman he had never met before, claiming he did so because women had never paid him

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"Gender wage gap (indicator) 2022," Data, OECD, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/gender-wage-gap.htm>.

Kim Yon-se, "[News Focus] Korea to top OECD gender pay gap, again," *The Korea Herald*, November 16, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211116000430>.

<sup>21</sup> Jenna Gibson, Gender Discrimination in Job Interviews Contributes to Workforce Inequality," KEIA, published November 4, 2015, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/gender-discrimination-in-job-interviews-contributes-to-workforce-inequality/>.

Chae Sang-u and Kim Bin-na 채상우 and 김빛나, "'yeodae=pemi' pyeongyeoni chwieop maga? gyesokaeseo tteoreojineun yeodae chwieomnyul 여대=페미' 편견이 취업 막아? 계속해서 떨어지는 여대 취업률" ['women's university = feminist' prejudice blocks employment? The decreasing employment rate of women's university graduates], *Hereoldeu Gyeongje* 헤럴드경제, February 14, 2022, <https://news.v.daum.net/v/20220214113508339>.

Joohee Kim, South Korea shows workplace gender discrimination is alive and kicking," *Nikkei Asia*, October 15, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/South-Korea-shows-workplace-gender-discrimination-is-alive-and-kicking>.

<sup>22</sup> Takeshi Kamiya, "South Korea's birthrate drops to new low amid economic anxiety," *The Asahi Shimbun*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14556684>.

<sup>23</sup> Shin Soo-yeon, Yun Jung-min, and Seo Jun-suk, "Murder becomes symbol of Korean misogyny," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, May 19, 2016, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2016/05/19/socialAffairs/Murder-becomes-symbol-of-Korean-misogyny/3018936.html>.

much attention and had humiliated him all his life.<sup>24</sup> The police, however, refuted his claims and said the man was schizophrenic, and that it thus was a motiveless crime and not a hate crime.<sup>25</sup> This conclusion sparked outcry among the public, many not believing the police analysis, arguing that Kim could have unconsciously developed hatred against women and that labeling the crime as stemming solely from his mental illness might create prejudices to others who are suffering from mental problems. It was a shocking experience for Korean women, leading them to read up about women's issues and identify themselves as feminists en masse. The result? An explosion of long latent anger and anxiety.

From this point onward, gender equality became a mainstream topic. Both women and men became more vocal about women's issues. Moon Jae-in even referred to himself as a feminist during his campaign, and after he was elected, as Korea's first feminist president.<sup>26</sup> In the same year, two feminist books, "Reclaim the Language: How to deal with a sexist" and "Kim Ji-young: Born 1982" were written and published, and both ended up becoming bestsellers. The latter was gifted by floor leader of the Justice Party to Moon with a note telling him to embrace the message.<sup>27</sup> And while this exposure was great for sales, the book also became the center of controversy. Although many women recognized their own experience from the book, men complained that it was not realistic and that it depicted the male population as a whole in a bad light. When Irene, leader of the K-pop group Red Velvet, told a fan she was reading the book, male fans criticized her, going as far as burning and

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<sup>24</sup> Im Seong-yo 임성요, "Pink elephant's 'Zootopia' protest aggravates Gangnam murder controversy," *The Korea Herald*, May 23, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160523000910>.

<sup>25</sup> Ock Hyun-ju, "Gangnam murder was not a hate crime: police," *The Korea Herald*, May 22, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160522000287>.

<sup>26</sup> "What Moon Jae-in pledged to do as president," *The Korea Herald*, May 10, 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170509000521>.

Ha Eo-yeong 하이영, "Mun Jaein "peminiseuteu daetongnyeong doegetda 문재인 "페미니스트 대통령 되겠다" [Moon Jae-In "I want to become a feminist president], *Hankyoreh* 한겨레, February 16, 2017, [https://m.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics\\_general/783028.html#ace04ou](https://m.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics_general/783028.html#ace04ou).

<sup>27</sup> Shin Joon-bong, "Bringing to light the subtle sexism in modern Korea: Cho Nam-joo's book reflects the discrimination many women face daily," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 5, 2017, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3038016>.

cutting up her photos and merchandize.<sup>28</sup> And her experience was not unique. Openly feminist idols are often viciously berated, attacked, and harassed online, one of whom, former K-pop group member Sulli, would eventually succumb to the pressure.<sup>29</sup> In the wake of her death, online platform Naver decided to no longer allow comments on articles covering celebrity news, as those would often get brigaded by hateful netizens.<sup>30</sup> While hoping to bring a stop to this issue, it caused the hate groups to disperse even further and continue their harassment on other platforms like YouTube.<sup>31</sup> Even gold medalist An San, who became the first archer in history to win in three events on the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, was unable to escape accusations of being a feminist due to her short hairstyle not adhering to traditional gender norms and her enrolment at Kwangju Women's university, which netizens argue discriminates against male students.<sup>32</sup>

These attacks on women are often spurred on by male dominated online forums, the most prominent and popular being Ilbe Storehouse, which is known for its predominantly alt-right, anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, and anti-LGBT userbase.<sup>33</sup> The site's users have gotten into countless controversies which include vandalism, hacking, defamation suits, harassment, and illegal activities that exploited women.<sup>34</sup> Revenge porn is spread on a wide scale and

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<sup>28</sup> Claire Lee, "[Feature] Feminist novel becomes center of controversy in South Korea," *The Korea Herald*, March 27, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180327000799>.

<sup>29</sup> Yvette Tan and Wonsang Kim, "Sulli: The woman who rebelled against the K-pop world," *BBC News*, October 18, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50051575>.

<sup>30</sup> Yim Hyun-su, "Why Naver is finally shutting down comments on celebrity news," *The Korea Herald*, February 20, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200220000937>.

Claire Lee, "Misogyny in Korean online communities a serious concern: report," *The Korea Herald*, July 31, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180731000789>.

<sup>31</sup> Yim Hyun-su, "[Newsmaker] After being called feminists, these women faced online harassment," *The Korea Herald*, February 11, 2022, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220210000628>.

<sup>32</sup> Kaylin Kim, "South Korea's anti-feminism surge offers political gain, but long-term pain," *East Asia Forum*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/01/06/south-koreas-anti-feminism-surge-offers-political-gain-but-long-term-pain/>.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly Kasulis, "Inside Ilbe: How South Korea's angry young men formed a powerful new alt-right movement," *Mic*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.mic.com/articles/184477/inside-ilbe-how-south-koreas-angry-young-men-formed-a-powerful-new-alt-right-movement>.

<sup>34</sup> "Misogyny, molka, and victims of domestic violence," Moonshot, accessed May 5, 2022, [https://moonshotteam.com/wp-content/uploads/Misogyny-molka-and-victims-of-domestic-violence\\_Moonshot-Solutions.pdf](https://moonshotteam.com/wp-content/uploads/Misogyny-molka-and-victims-of-domestic-violence_Moonshot-Solutions.pdf).

Claire Lee, "South Korean authorities face backlash over warrant for radical feminist site operator," *The Korea Herald*, August 9, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180809000531>.

many of the videos captured illegally through spycams are also platformed here. Women are filmed in restrooms, hotel rooms, changing rooms, even through the windows of their own homes, and the videos are posted online for everyone to see.<sup>35</sup> Sex crimes like these are an epidemic; between 2013 and 2018 over 30,000 cases were reported to the police.<sup>36</sup> In 2019, a second sex crime scandal was brought to light when the Electronic Times reported on the Nth Room Case which involved blackmail, cybersex trafficking, and sexually exploitative videos that contained images of at least 103 women, of which 26 minors, that were spread through Telegram.<sup>37</sup> The report ignited nationwide fury; over 2 million people signed a Blue House petition to demand the unveiling of the identity of the man behind the chatroom.<sup>38</sup> As a result of numerous protests against spycam porn and the Nth Room, the Moon government increased the severity of punishments for digital crimes.<sup>39</sup> However, in 2020, 79% of people who were convicted of creating sexually exploitative videos only received a fine, a suspended sentence, or in some cases a combination of the two. The crimes still affect women's lives to

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Jeong Dae-yeon 정대연, ““anyeongdeul hasimnikka” jabo jjijeotdaneun ilbe injeunggeul nollan “안녕들 하십니까” 자보 찢었다는 일베 인증글 논란,” [“Hello everyone.” Controversy about Ilbe ripped Jabo proof], *Kyunghyang Shinmun* 경향신문, December 14, 2013, <https://www.khan.co.kr/national/national-general/article/201312142122551>.

Yoon Min-sik, “Major Korean community website attacked by hackers,” *The Korea Herald*, April 8, 2013, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130408000916>.

Lee Jae-wook, “Conservatives protest Sewol families by gorging on pizza and kimbab,” *Hankyoreh*, September 10, 2014, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/654589.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/654589.html).

Jung Hae-myung, “15 booked for posting ‘girlfriend shots’ on far-right website,” *The Korea Times*, December 26, 2018, [https://koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/09/251\\_260984.html](https://koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/09/251_260984.html).

<sup>35</sup> Erika Nguyen, “From Schools to Motels, Nowhere is Safe from Spycams in South Korea,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/04/schools-motels-nowhere-safe-spy-cams-south-korea>.

<sup>36</sup> Amy Gunia, “‘It Breaks My Heart.’ Confronting the Traumatic Impact of South Korea’s Spycam Problem on Women,” *Time*, March 7, 2022, <https://time.com/6154837/open-shutters-south-korea-spycam-molka/>.

<sup>37</sup> “Ruling party, gov’t push for abolishing statute of limitations for child sex crime,” *Yonhap News Agency*, April 6, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200406002200315>.

<sup>38</sup> “Sex crime chat room ignites public fury,” *Yonhap News Agency*, March 23, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200323002900315>.

Nicole de Souza, “The Nth Room case and modern slavery in the digital space,” *The Interpreter*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/nth-room-case-and-modern-slavery-digital-space>.

<sup>39</sup> Laura Bicker, “‘I was humiliated’: The continuing trauma of South Korea’s spy cam victims,” *BBC News*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57493020>.

great extent; many do not feel safe in public, on transportation, and in bathrooms. They are careful of what they wear and who to trust.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## 4. Feminists, Feminazis, and Anti-Feminists

Britannica's definition of feminism is the belief in the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes.<sup>41</sup> But, depending on who you ask, you will find that not everyone agrees to this interpretation of the term. Although the feminist movement has mainly focused on improving women's rights, to many the belief is an ideology that hates men and glorifies women. This misunderstanding is the main cause of friction between feminists and anti-feminists. The word anti-feminist is chosen carefully here, as, at least in Korea, many men claim to care about women's issues and want to fight gender inequality, but do not feel comfortable with the feminist label.<sup>42</sup> In Korea this stigma was given wing by the #MeToo movement and radical feminist platforms Megalia and Womad. Sites that are, like Ilbe, similar to the western website 4chan.

Megalia was launched when part of the user base of DC Inside, another online forum, split off for enacting rules that some members thought to be too restrictive and discriminatory against women.<sup>43</sup> After the launch, Megalia started a movement to petition the shutdown of spycam sharing website SoraNet and led the campaign to ban the sales of high concentrations of hydrochloric acid, which is sometimes used in acid attacks.<sup>44</sup> While the platform, at first, mostly consisted of very proactive feminists, its behavior became more radical following the rise of Ilbe Storehouse and the Seocho-dong public restroom murder case.<sup>45</sup> The logo of the

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<sup>41</sup> Elinor Burkett, "Feminism," Human Rights, Britannica, accessed on May 5, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>.

<sup>42</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, "The New Political Cry in South Korea: 'Out With Man Haters'," *The New York Times*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/world/asia/south-korea-men-anti-feminists.html>.

Asian Boss, "Being A Radical Anti-Feminist In Korea | Stay Curious," interview by Leonid, YouTube video, December 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzvUEGGiLys>.

<sup>43</sup> Jungmin Seo and Seoyoung Choi, "Introduction," *Journal of Asian Sociology* 49, no. 4 (December 2020).

<sup>44</sup> Kim Ing-myeong 김익명 et al., *geunboneomneun peminijeum - megalliabuteo womadeukkaji* 근본없는 페미니즘 - 메갈리아부터 위마드까지 [Feminism without Foundation – From Megalia to Womad], (Seoul: IfBooks 이프북스, 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Cho Eun-Ae, Sohn Guk-hee and Esther Chung, "Korea's biggest porn site gets shut down," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 7, 2016, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3017216>.

website is a hand making a pinching gesture with the thumb and the pointer finger, making fun of the size of Korean penises. The logo generated a huge debate surrounding multiple companies that used a similar gesture in ads.<sup>46</sup> Men's rights groups forced companies to apologize, often creating controversy when there was clearly no intention to offend.<sup>47</sup> Megalia's main tactic is mirroring the actions of Ilbe users, which often results in hateful, provocative, insensitive, and gory posts that make fun of men.<sup>48</sup> Womad split from Megalia due to the latter issuing a ban on the use of explicit slurs against gay men and transgender people.<sup>49</sup> The users that migrated to Womad are fiercely anti-LGBT and can be regarded as Korean Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs), although they do not consider themselves to be feminists.<sup>50</sup> The group uses the same mirroring tactics as Megalia which resulted in multiple controversies including the reported spread of male spycam videos, the targeting and killing of men, and the sexual abuse of an Australian boy.<sup>51</sup> While the total number of members on the radical feminist platforms is unknown, Megalia had 315,400

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Kim Jae-hui 김재희, "ilbedo seoreopge mandeun, 'megalliaui ttaldeul' 일베도 서럽게 만든, '메갈리아의 딸들'" [The ones who made Ilbe sad, 'Megalia's Daughters'], *OhmyNews*, June 23, 2015, [http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002120985](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002120985).

<sup>46</sup> Lee Wei Lin, "Korean Brands Remove Ads Featuring This Hand Gesture After Men's Rights Activists Complain That It's "Anti-Male"," *TODAY*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.todayonline.com/8days/sceneandheard/entertainment/korean-brands-remove-ads-featuring-hand-gesture-after-mens-rights>.

<sup>47</sup> Neha Banka, "Explained: How an emoji fueled a widespread sexism debate in South Korea," *The Indian Express*, June 24, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-how-an-emoji-fueled-widespread-sexism-debate-in-south-korea-7362258/>.

<sup>48</sup> Donna Do-own Kim, "Mirroring the Misogynistic Wor(l)d," in *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, and Gabriel Peters-Lazaro (New York City: New York University Press, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> Ashley Kim, "Womad: The New Face of Feminism in Korea?" *Berkeley Political Review*, September 8, 2019, <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2019/09/08/womad-the-new-face-of-feminism-in-korea/>.

<sup>50</sup> Kim Jae-heun, "Controversy over radical feminist website growing," *The Korea Times*, August 12, 2018, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/08/356\\_252784.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/08/356_252784.html).

<sup>51</sup> Lee Jae-gil 이재길, "'Namseongdeure budongaeng tameogija' tnamseonghyeomo saiteu chunggyeok "남성들에 부동산 타먹이자"...남성혐오 사이트 충격" [Let's cover men in anti-freeze. Misandrist site causes shock], *Nocutnews* 노컷뉴스, July 28, 2016, <https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/4629765>.

JiHae Koo and Minchul Kim, "Feminism Without Morality, Neoliberalism as Feminist Praxis: A Computational Textual Analysis of Womad, a South Korean Online "Feminist" Community," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021).

Lim Jeong-yeo, "'Womad' woman could face new charges in Australia," *The Korea Herald*, November 24, 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171124000779>.

unique visitors at its peak in November of 2016, of which a quarter were referrals from other sites. Therefore, it is likely the actual members only made up a small minority of women, as many found their tactics to be unproductive and divisive, ruining the reputation of real feminists.<sup>52</sup>

As an increasing amount of Womad and Megalia posts reached the mainstream public, a large group of people, especially young men, turned away from feminism, and instead became anti-feminists.<sup>53</sup> Many already felt underrepresented in the feminist movement as barely anyone ever spoke about issues men face in Korea. One of the biggest gender inequalities, they argue, is the fact that all men between the ages of 18 and 28 are required to serve in the Korean army.<sup>54</sup> Depending on which department they choose to enlist in, men have to serve between 18 months to 3 full years.<sup>55</sup> While they receive payment for their military service, their professional career is set on hold. Because of that, many serve in their early 20s, either during or after college. However, once they enter the job market, men who served receive bonus points on their job tests, giving them an advantage over women during the job application process.<sup>56</sup> This regulation has been criticized, as it would make it more difficult for women to get hired.

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<sup>52</sup> Yim, “Neglected.”

Emily Singh, “Megalia: South Korean Feminism Marshals the Power of the Internet,” Korea Exposé, published July 30, 2016, <https://koreaexpose.com/megalia-south-korean-feminism-marshals-the-power-of-the-internet/>. Estimated by calculation: 83% of 380.000 = 315.400 Korean visitors.

“Population, female – Korea, Rep.,” The World Bank, accessed May 28, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.IN?locations=KR>.

“Population, female (% of total population) – Korea, Rep.,” The World Bank, accessed May 28, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=KR>.

Female population of Korea is 25.886.511, which makes up for 49.9% of the total population.

<sup>53</sup> Asian Boss, “Radical Anti-Feminist.”

<sup>54</sup> Jake Kwon, “South Korea’s young men are fighting against feminism,” CNN, September 24, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/21/asia/korea-angry-young-men-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>55</sup> “Dodging Compulsory Military Service in South Korea,” *Al Jazeera*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/101-east/2022/2/3/dodging-compulsory-military-service-in-south-korea>.

<sup>56</sup> Janet M. Rives and Mahmood Yousefi, “Export-Led Growth and the Persistence of Gender Inequality in the Newly Industrialized Countries,” in *Economic Dimensions of Gender Inequality: A Global Perspective* (Westport: Praeger, 1997).

A second issue in Korea that made men wary of feminism is the #MeToo movement, and multiple high profile fake rape allegations that it left in its wake. #Metoo made headlines as multiple Korean celebrities and politicians were accused of sexual misconduct and rape.<sup>57</sup> Just like anywhere else, the movement was supposed to bring truth and justice to victims, and while that initially was the case for South Korea, the situation took a turn for the worse as men were sentenced even with little evidence beyond the victims claims. Some became the target of false accusations, and several accused men committed suicide, one of the most prominent being the mayor of Seoul.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, while it is highly likely a great deal of the stories in Korea, an extremely patriarchal society, are true, some women abused the movement in an attempt to unleash anger and find monetary gain. Men now feel like they have to walk on eggshells. Afraid of falling target to mob justice, they are hyper aware of everything they do and say, hoping to stay clear from false allegations being filed against them. This has only heightened the tensions between the genders even more. Anti-feminists turned the term “feminist” into a slur. They accuse people of “being femi,” as if they have a mental illness, or “doing femi,” like taking drugs or harmful, mind-altering substances.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Claire Lee, “[Newsmaker] Professor accused of sexual assault sues alleged student victim for defamation,” *The Korea Herald*, April 23, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180423000935>.

Laura Bicker, “#MeToo movement takes hold in South Korea,” *BBC News*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43534074>.

<sup>58</sup> Kwon, “fighting.”

Haeryun Kang, “Seoul’s Mayor Championed Women’s Rights. The #MeToo Allegations Against Him Have Bitterly Divided Korea,” *Time*, August 3, 2020, <https://time.com/5875265/seoul-mayor-metoo-south-korea/>.

Beh Lih Yi, “Seoul mayor’s death renews #MeToo debate in South Korea,” *Reuters*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/southkorea-women-rights-idUSL5N2EL1Q6>.

Yoon So-yeon, “Vicious voices scapegoat victims for speaking out : Korea’s legal system makes it easy to target those who have come forward with sex crime allegations,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 6, 2018, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2018/06/06/features/Vicious-voices-scapegoat-victims-for-speaking-out-Koreas-legal-system-makes-it-easy-to-target-those-who-have-come-forward-with-sex-crime-allegations/3049024.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Lee and Kim, “disavows label.”

## 5. The Winning Strategy

During a meeting of the People Power Party (PPP) on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021, presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol argued that the advocacy for women's rights in Korea had become too politicized, and that it prevented healthy relationships between men and women.<sup>60</sup> He went on to say that Korea's low birth rates were a consequence of the rise of feminism, and that handing out subsidies, the government's current strategy, would not increase birth rates. These remarks came as a shock to many. However, in order to not fully alienate the female voters, Yoon attracted Shin Ji-ye, a young feminist with liberal politics to his team.<sup>61</sup> The young politician had been a candidate in the race to become mayor of Seoul three years earlier and explained Yoon had promised her that he would resolve violence against women, address the climate crisis, and create a Korea without divisions between left and right if he were to become president. So far, both Yoon and Lee had pandered to anti-feminist sentiment in the population by promising to reorganize the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, but as the two parties remained nip and tuck in the December poll, Yoon made the first move to also get more young women on his side.<sup>62</sup>

This action was not well received by the leader of the PPP, Lee Jun-seok, as according to him, feminists like Shin Ji-ye are not liked by men in their 20s and 30s.<sup>63</sup> Jun-seok is a 36-year-old graduate from Harvard, the youngest-ever leader of the PPP and widely popular with young Korean men.<sup>64</sup> His debates with feminists on YouTube have garnered millions of views and thousands of comments, most of which are praising him. In 2020, he predicted that a

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<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Shim, "South Korean presidential candidate's feminism remarks generate controversy," *UPI*, August 2, 2021, [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2021/08/02/skorea-South-Korean-Yoon-Seokyoul-feminism-comments/6541627927142/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2021/08/02/skorea-South-Korean-Yoon-Seokyoul-feminism-comments/6541627927142/).

<sup>61</sup> Yim Hyun-su, "[Newsmaker] Yoon's feminist recruit under attack from all corners," *The Korea Herald*, December 21, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211221000905>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Yim Hyun-su, "Feminist waging vendetta against Lee Jun-seok by joining Yoon's team: friend," *The Korea Herald*, December 23, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211223000762>.

<sup>64</sup> Kwon, "fighting."

party with strong anti-feminist promises could surge in the near future, profiteering from the growing number of men that were dissatisfied with the policies of the Democratic Party. He later explained the losses of said party in the Busan and Seoul mayoral elections by their fixation on pro-women's issues.<sup>65</sup> According to him, the party had underestimated the passion and voter participation of men under 30. If not for Jun-seok, Yoon would have likely not adopted the strategy of actively appealing to young male voters into his campaign, effectively steering the elections onto the road of anti-feminism.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, the gender issue resurfaced after Yoon posted a simple message on his Facebook reading “The abolishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.”<sup>66</sup> Although the English name includes the term “Gender equality” the direct translation from the Korean title would be “the Ministry of Women and Family.” Yoon previously had promised to reorganize the ministry by changing its name to be more inclusive and rearranging its operations and tasks. Korea's Women's Political Solidarity, a civic group, criticized Yoon by saying that if he were to remove the word ‘women’ from the name of the ministry without specific plans, while ignoring the current situation in which the status as an independent ministry and its authority had repeatedly been called into question, he would be evading taking responsibility for women's policies.<sup>67</sup> The action in itself is not significant, but it came across to women as yet another attack. They feel like Yoon pays more attention to the wishes of anti-feminists than to women's justified concerns. Prime Minister Kim quickly defended the ministry, explaining how perhaps people in their 20s would not know the significant contributions the ministry made to advance gender equality in Korea.<sup>68</sup> He added

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<sup>65</sup> Kim Arin, “[Us and Them] Lee Jun-seok and the rise of anti-feminism,” *The Korea Herald*, September 6, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210906000932>.

<sup>66</sup> Joo Kyung-don, “(News Focus) Gender Issue heats up presidential race after Yoon's pledge to abolish ministry,” *Yonhap News Agency*, January 10, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220110004900315>.

<sup>67</sup> Bahk Eun-ji, “Gender equality ministry becomes lightning rod before election,” *The Korea Times*, October 26, 2021, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/11/356\\_317672.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/11/356_317672.html).

<sup>68</sup> Joo, “heats up.”

how he would support a discussion about a reorganization or even an expansion. While over half of respondents polled by Realmeter said they were in favor of abolishing the ministry, this move is seen by many as an attempt to impress young anti-feminists in particular.<sup>69</sup> In comparison to a week earlier, Yoon had lost 5.1 percent points support, while Lee had only lost 0.8 percent points.<sup>70</sup> Later that week, a Gallup Korea poll presented more distressing results for Yoon as he reportedly only had 10% support from voters under 30, while both of his biggest opponents received double the support. The decline in support was likely the result of Yoon's falling out with PPP's Lee, and to recover from this loss he needed a drastic turnaround to stay in the race. By making gender a key issue in the election he could capitalize on the societal divide, as young people were expected to be crucial swing voters.<sup>71</sup>

After Yoon reconciled with Lee Jun-seok, Yoon began picking up the pace, accusing the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family officials of treating men like potential sex criminals, promising to introduce harsher punishments for false claims of sexual assault, and calling for a return to meritocracy by abolishing Moon's hiring quotas.<sup>72</sup> He added that he believes women in Korea do not suffer from systemic "structural discrimination based on gender", despite international reports and indicators saying otherwise.

Lee took a more moderate approach. During his campaign, the liberal candidate stated that he was a gender equalist and opposed gender-based discrimination and hatred, but refused to call himself a feminist.<sup>73</sup> Similarly to Yoon, he had promised to reorganize the

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<sup>69</sup> Wesley Rahn, "South Korea gender divide becomes key election issue," *Deutsche Welle*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/south-korea-gender-divide-becomes-key-election-issue/a-60481392>.  
Kwon, "fighting."

<sup>70</sup> Joo, "Yoon's pledge."

<sup>71</sup> Rahn, "key election issue."

<sup>72</sup> Yim Hyun-su, "President-elect to break away from Moon administration's Cabinet gender quota," *The Korea Herald*, March 13, 2022, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220313000201>.

Amy Gunia, "How South Korea's Yoon Suk-yeol Capitalized on Anti-Feminist Backlash to Win the Presidency," *Time*, March 10, 2022, <https://time.com/6156537/south-korea-president-yoon-suk-yeol-sexism/>.

<sup>73</sup> Michelle Ye Hee Lee and Min Joo Kim, "South Korean candidate disavows 'feminist' label on International Women's Day after interview goes awry," *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/08/south-korea-presidential-elections-yoon-feminist/>.

Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and take out the term “women” from its Korean name, although he thought that Yoon’s plans to completely abolish the ministry were out of line.<sup>74</sup> In the last couple of days of the campaign, Lee realized he would not be able to gain the young male vote and decided to court young women instead. His office announced he had plans to create multiple gender-related policies for men and women, including benefits for new mothers, extended paternity leave, and a hiring quota to ensure that at least 30% of high-ranking public positions would be taken up by women.<sup>75</sup>

As the end of the election grew closer, both candidates tried to approach women once more. Lee vowed to become the “women safety president” by tackling systematic gender discrimination in Korean society, while Yoon declared a “war on sex crimes”. A week before the election a Realmeter poll pointed out how women under 30 preferred the more moderate Lee 39.1% to 26.7% over Yoon, indicating that Yoon’s anti-feminist policies likely discouraged them from voting conservative.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, 33% of the respondents, did not know who to vote for, were still conflicted, or said they would vote for Ahn Cheol-soo, who withdrew from the race a few hours after the poll was conducted. The race was incredibly close till the very end, but when the exit poll results were released on the evening of March 9<sup>th</sup>, it became clear that Yoon was Korea’s preferred candidate. The voting results showed a significant discrepancy in the votes cast by young men and women, although general voter turnout was nearly the same as five years prior.<sup>77</sup> While Lee used similar tactics to Yoon of pandering to the anti-feminist voters instead of taking advantage of female voters, Yoon was

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<sup>74</sup> Justin McCurry, “South Korea’s poisonous gender politics a test for next president,” *The Guardian*, March 7, 2022, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/07/south-koreas-poisonous-gender-politics-a-test-for-next-president>.

<sup>75</sup> Yoonjung Seo and Julia Hollingsworth, “How feminism became a hot topic in South Korea’s presidential election,” *CNN*, March 8, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/08/asia/south-korea-election-young-people-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Yim Hyun-su, “Once neglected, young women emerge as an important voting bloc,” *The Korea Herald*, March 6, 2022, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220306000064>.

<sup>77</sup> L. Yoon, “Voter turnout in presidential elections in South Korea from 1987 to 2022,” Statista, published March 11, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/704937/south-korea-presidential-election-turnout/>.

more extreme, and therefore many men's rights activists preferred him over Lee. The two parties did not just use anti-feminist sentiment to gain votes in the election, it was their main strategy.<sup>78</sup> Women were left only the illusion of choice. This led to many looking to find solace in Sim Sang-jung, the third candidate that had no chance of winning. When the final vote distribution was made public, it became evident that these votes would have been enough for Lee to surpass Yoon, who women under 30 would have preferred.<sup>79</sup> This fact left a bad taste in the mouths of many.

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<sup>78</sup> Gunia, "Anti-Feminist Backlash."

<sup>79</sup> Yim, "neglected."

## 6. Discussion

When looking at the entire picture, there is one person to blame for this gender divide in Korean politics: Lee Jun-seok. While Neo-Confucianism, online hate forums, and #MeToo laid the foundation for gendered issues, it was his idea to adopt the discontent among young men into the PPP's political campaign. He coursed Yoon on this path of anti-feminism and knew that it would evolve into a large enough issue to drive a wedge in the young voter base. Once politicians like Lee and Yoon take up these sentiments in their campaigns, online language gets converted into mainstream discourse.<sup>80</sup> It helped gain legitimacy and made it that anti-feminism was no longer just an online phenomenon. The true issues of Korean society do not lie in feminism, or anti-feminism for that matter. Korea is an aging society, less children are born each year, people cannot afford housing, the education system is a mess, there are not nearly enough jobs for everyone, and the government programs that were adopted to bring more women into the workforce led to the job market becoming even more competitive. In the last decade, the unemployment rate of people under 30 has gone up from 6.9% to 9.9% and by including those who are in school, the military, or in prison, that rate more than doubles to 21.8%.<sup>81</sup> Everyone is aware of the issues and yet, tackling these is not the main concern of politicians. They choose to take the easy road instead. Rather than take responsibility and come up with policies to solve problems young people face, they fuel the gender conflict, telling men that their issues all boil down to women receiving too many benefits.<sup>82</sup>

How could this have happened in a society where women have equal rights to men? Women's human rights are protected, they are equal for the law, they have the right to vote, the right to receive public education. Political theorists argue that since women have equal

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<sup>80</sup> Kim, "[Us and Them]."

<sup>81</sup> Kwon, "fighting."

<sup>82</sup> McCurry, "poisonous politics."

rights to men on paper, they cannot be discriminated against on a systematic institutional level. This patriarchal character of social contract theory is the foundation of modern democratic theory. The social contract was a pact between free and equal individuals, which could essentially be reduced to men who had a wife, who were the breadwinner of their family, and who were the heads of their respective heterosexual households.<sup>83</sup> Women were seen as unfit for politics and were confined to the domestic sphere.<sup>84</sup> However, by definition, terms such as citizens and individuals are gender neutral, which makes the patriarchal nature of social contract theories invisible to the eye. Therefore, political theory does not provide an explanation as to why women, in many aspects of society, are still treated like second-class citizens. In early societies, citizenship was shaped to a male central standard as it was granted to men who paid taxes and served in the military.<sup>85</sup> The remnants of such beliefs are still visible in Korea to this day, where military service is only mandatory for men. While women and men are biologically not the same, it is only natural, in an equalitarian society, that women and men should fulfill the same, or at least similar social duties. This is also the argument Korean anti-feminists make, which is more than fair. While Yoon did not mention extending mandatory military service to women, his campaign did include the importance of traditional gender roles in which the patriarchal, Confucian nature was clearly present.

Since Lee's campaign was quite similar to Yoon's many young women in particular did not feel represented by either of them. Who should they vote for, if neither candidate seems to care about the problems they deal with in everyday life? Should they abstain from voting? By doing so their silence could be taken as consent to whichever president gets elected. However, by making the decision of who to vote for based only on who the lesser of

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<sup>83</sup> Beth A. Rubin, "Shifting Social Contracts and the Sociological Imagination," *Social Forces* 91, no. 2 (December 2012).

<sup>84</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

<sup>85</sup> Carole Pateman, "Democracy, Freedom and Special Rights," in *Social Justice: From Hume to Walzer*, ed. David Boucher and Paul Kelly (London: Routledge, 1998).

the two evils is, you will still elect someone who you do not believe will be a good leader. Or women can vote for the third candidate, and know that their votes are lost immediately, without ever even been casted. Young Korean women were caught in a predicament, and the exit polls demonstrate that they were divided on which path to take.<sup>86</sup>

Although it must be noted that a sizable group of people not having any candidate they want to support in a presidential election does not necessarily mean that Korean democracy is deteriorating. Especially not when this is the first and only time it has happened to young Korean women on a large scale, and the elections were free and fair. In countries where there is a clear trend of democratic degradation, like Hungary, the United States, and Poland, not only elections but other political institutions show signs of democratic backsliding as well. People not knowing who to vote for, as they do not feel a connection to any candidate is commonplace in democracies all over the world. This would mean there is no need for concern, at least not just yet.

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<sup>86</sup> Shin, "Exit polls."

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the question as to how it can be that in a society where women formally have equal rights to men, an anti-feminist campaign can become the deciding factor in a presidential election. Based on a collection of voter and societal polling statistics it was found that Korea, a nation built on an extremely patriarchal Neo-Confucianist foundation, is still struggling heavily with systematic gender inequality. Moreover, the youth unemployment rate is very high, and women, while being more highly educated than Korean men, work relatively little. For the work they do, they are paid 31.5% less than their male counterparts. Together with the fact that women are often berated and harassed, and had to suffer through multiple sex crime controversies during the last couple of years, it is not surprising some feminists evolved into feminazis, using the provocative tactics Ilbe Storehouse employs as a mirroring strategy. The existence of these platforms, combined with the effects of the #MeToo movement on Korean society and the economic struggles of people in their 20s and 30s, gave rise to the anti-feminist movement. Men under 30 do not agree that women are discriminated against in Korea on a systemic level and instead believe that the government and employers are targeting men. Lee Jun-seok used these complaints to gain the upper hand over Lee Jae-myung in the nation's closest election in history. And while the anti-feminist sentiment within the young male population grew out to become the election's key issue, women's interests were paid dust. Yoon's extremely narrow win shows how Korean society is more divided than ever before.

With the local elections coming up, would the PPP be able to repeat its victory? Will the gender divide become a staple of Korean politics, and will it shape the next presidential elections as much as it did now? Or is this only a temporary hiccup that can be resolved under Yoon's presidency? How problematic is it for a democracy when a large portion of the population only votes for a party or candidate because they are the less harmful or unpleasant

option, or when a large group of people choose to abstain from voting altogether? It will be very interesting to witness how this gender divide will develop in the future. Hopefully, in the upcoming five years, Yoon will be able to calm the tensions and find a way to deal with the issues haunting Korean society in a satisfactory manner. And if not, there will always be next time.

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