

# Article proposal for culture wars in Asia: Revisiting “Asian values” in gender politics title: “Gender wars” and populist politics in South Korea

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## ABSTRACT

The 2022 South Korean presidential election campaign saw populist politicians, especially conservative parties, leverage gender conflicts and misogyny to attract young male swing voters. But there has been limited scholarly attention to the connection between gender and populist politics, particularly in South Korea, with research primarily focused on women's voting patterns, their political party representation, and on populist politics in the US, Europe, and Latin America. Existing research identifies that common strategies employed by populist politicians include anti-feminist discourses, reference to crises in masculinity, and appeals to emotion and affect. This paper examines how South Korean populist politics has utilized gender conflicts since democratization, considering the evolution of ‘gender wars’ in the South Korean context. It specifically delves into the strategies employed by conservative populist politicians from the People Power Party (PPP) during the 2022 election campaigns. These strategies, although similar to those of right-wing populists in Europe and the US, emphasized three key issues unique to South Korea: compulsory military service, low fertility rates, and the dismantling of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. This South Korean case contributes significantly to academic discussions about populist politics and gender, contextualized within the local political, social, and cultural context.

## Introduction

Historically, South Korean voters have tended to align along regional and ideological lines, especially since democratization (Kim, 2022, p. 19). Previously, young men and women predominantly supported progressive candidates and parties over conservatives (Kim, 2022). For instance, in the 2017 presidential election, the progressive Democratic Party (DP) candidate, Moon Jae-in, received significant support from voters in their 20s (47.6 %) and 30s (56.9 %), compared to the overall vote share of 41.1 %. This trend continued in the 2020 general election, with 56.4 % of those in their 20s and 61.1 % of those in their 30s supporting the DP in constituency elections, surpassing the overall vote share of 49.9 %. However, a new trend emerged in the 2022 presidential election in South Korea, with younger voters diverging along gender lines.

The 2022 presidential election campaign is considered the epitome of the utilization of ‘gender wars’ in populist politics. Populist politicians, particularly the conservative People Power Party (PPP), fuelled gender conflict and misogyny to secure the support of the so-called ‘idaenam’ demographic (‘men in their 20s’), focusing on policy

promises tailored to young men. This group constituted approximately a third of eligible voters and have gained prominence in recent years. During election campaigns, the PPP notably exhibited staunch opposition to feminism. The closely contested presidential election concluded with a narrow victory for the conservative party, achieved by a slim margin of 263,000 votes. The PPP's strategy targeting male voters in their 20s and 30s proved successful, with Yoon Suk-yeol securing 58.7 % of votes from males in their 20s and 52.8 % from those in their 30s. In contrast, DP candidate Lee Jae-Myung garnered 58 % of votes from females in their 20s and 49.7 % from those in their 30s (Kim, 2022, p. 15).

This paper, drawing on theoretical discussions on gender and populist politics, investigates the employment of gender and gender conflicts in South Korean populist politics. The origins of the ‘gender wars’ and their progression within South Korean society are discussed to set the backdrop for the exploitation of gender in South Korean politics. The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, it offers a brief literature review on gender, feminism, and populist politics to lay the foundation for the subsequent analysis. Secondly, it examines the development of gender conflicts and misogyny in South Korea, leading into a discussion on the exploitation of gender conflict in South Korean politics. This

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section particularly focuses on the strategies employed by the PPP during the 2022 presidential election campaigns. Finally, the paper concludes by offering insights into the future landscape of gender politics in South Korean politics.

### Theoretical discussions of gender, feminism, and populist politics

While there has previously been a paucity of studies in the domain of gender, feminism, and populist politics, interest in the topic has been growing. Existing research on gender in conservative/right-wing populist politics indicates an obsession with gender in conservative politics in the US and European countries. Further, Apperly (2018) posits that conservative populists strategically utilize gender as a convenient proxy (Apperly, 2018) to establish alliances, to disseminate their ideologies, and to sow fear and discord. Research also suggests that populist politicians, particularly those of a conservative nature, utilize gender as a boundary-making strategy (Hadj-Abdou, 2019). Hadj-Abdou's study on Hungary's illiberal government's manipulation of gender demonstrates how it uses gender and gender mainstreaming to distinguish itself from the European Union's (EU) perspective on gender mainstreaming, framing it as a form of Western imperialism aimed at eroding Hungary's cultural identity (Hadj-Abdou, 2019). Gender is widely recognized as a significant tool wielded by populist politicians to create scandals, facilitate exclusion, and delineate external borders (Dieze, 2022, p. 283).

Previous research indicates that populist politicians often utilize resistance and opposition to feminism as key strategies. They capitalize on anti-feminist discourses circulated by conservative men's groups, both online and offline. In the digital era, these anti-feminist narratives and organized misogyny have gained widespread influence (Cabezas, 2022). The rise of internet communication technologies has provided conservative men's groups with anonymity and a platform, turning the internet into a breeding ground for extreme misogynistic discussions (Cabezas, 2022). These groups and populist leaders vehemently reject the idea that feminist concerns, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and gender-based wage disparities, stem from structural factors contributing to the oppression of women (Berns, 2001). They dismiss the notion that men bear any responsibility for perpetuating gender inequality (Berns, 2001). Instead, conservative populists argue that feminism has systematically reduced men's social, political, and economic opportunities, resulting in the marginalization of men (Cabezas, 2022).

Concerns regarding a crisis in masculinity, often referred to as 'endangered masculinity,' are a recurring theme in the literature (Dieze, 2022, p. 281). These terms suggest a sense of unease or disruption in the traditional understanding and practice of masculinity. Such concerns typically center on shifts in gender roles, expectations, and power dynamics, which some view as a threat to conventional male identity. However, criticism has been raised regarding the discourse on the crisis in masculinity. Particularly, it fails to acknowledge that social and economic precarity is rooted in neoliberal policies and practices, affecting not only men but also various other groups, including women. As Cabezas (2022) succinctly puts it, criticism directed at feminism is essentially a simplistic critique of a neoliberal political agenda that exploits gender for profit.

Populist politics have not only exploited anti-feminist discourses but also transformed discontented men into politicized collective identities. Anti-feminist discourses offer men spaces to foster community and cultivate a sense of oppositional consciousness (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 592) based on perceived victimhood and reverse discrimination. This oppositional consciousness empowers members of an oppressed group to challenge dominant systems (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 592), providing a framework to understand their grievances and potential remedies. Consequently, politicized collective identities emerge, connecting individuals to a larger community and cause, and

offering a rationale for political engagement (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 593). As a result, disgruntled young men's collective identities formed in opposition to women or feminism have become influential political groups in elections and politics.

Existing literature also emphasizes the frequent use of emotions and affects by conservative populist politics (Rico et al., 2017). Populist leaders often exploit people's insecurities, harnessing emotions like fear and anger to drive political engagement (Jasper, 2011). They manipulate the emotions of their followers, framing political involvement as an extension, or even an obligation, of collective identity (Benford & Snow, 2000). Specifically, conservative populists regard anger as a 'male virtue' and a legitimate 'political sentiment' that can be cultivated (Samela & von Scheve, 2017). The manipulation and cultivation of affect serve as potent tools of political communication wielded by right-wing populists (Samela & von Scheve, 2017). For instance, Eszter Kováts demonstrates how the Hungarian illiberal populist government fuels and reinforces negative sentiments among citizens toward foreigners and feminists (Kováts, 2020), employing this strategy of emotional manipulation.

In summary, populist politicians often manipulate gender dynamics to achieve their political goals. This involves resisting feminism, disseminating anti-feminist discourses, promoting organized misogyny, and creating boundaries, all endorsed by conservative male groups. These actions cultivate oppositional attitudes and contribute to a perceived crisis in masculinity, resulting in young men's formation of politicized collective identities. Informed by existing research, this paper investigates how populist politics strategically leverage gender dynamics in the South Korean context.

### Genealogy of 'gender wars' and misogyny in South Korea

A significant turning point for the Korean economy and society was the 1998 Korean Financial Crisis, in the wake of a wider Asian Financial Crisis. In response to the crisis, South Korea quickly embraced neoliberalism, transforming into a hyper-competitive society where collectivism intersects with neoliberal capitalism (Capelos et al., 2023). This shift from traditional collectivism to neoliberalism has unsettled the identity of young people, particularly young men (Capelos et al., 2023).

Young people have faced significant challenges in navigating this highly competitive, neoliberal Korean society. They can face precarious employment, with a lack of social safety nets, and many struggle to afford to move along the traditional path of family formation: romantic relationships, marriage, and parenthood (Jeong, 2020). They have been dubbed the 'Opo generation,' because of the deterioration in five key aspects: dating, marriage, childbirth, social connections, and home ownership ('o' being Sino-Korean for the number five). This situation is also referred to as 'Hell Choseon,' underscoring the difficulties of living and surviving in such an environment.

In this context, men struggle to fulfill their traditional roles as providers and protectors, impacting their pursuit of hegemonic masculinity (Jeong, 2020). Young men often perceive themselves as victims of feminism, reinforcing isolated masculinity. They tend to believe that the neoliberal model assumes gender equality, overlooking discrimination against women. Consequently, efforts to address gender imbalances, such as establishing a Ministry of Gender Equality or expanding welfare for women, can provoke contention and feelings of victimization among men (H. Kim, 2021a). Misogyny becomes an outlet for their frustration and masculinity crisis as they search for a scapegoat for their struggles in neoliberal society. They blame women rather than the neoliberal economy. Consequently, misogynistic discourses have proliferated both online and offline.

Discussions about anti-feminism and misogyny often revolve around men's mandatory military conscription, a national obligation for nearly all males aged 18 to 35 in South Korea (Kim & Finch, 2022). While male citizens in this age range are required to serve 18 months to two years in the military, their female counterparts are exempt. This gender-specific requirement creates hurdles for young men in pursuing education and

careers, and overall self-realization, resulting in frustrations (Kim & Finch, 2022). Research indicates that this compulsory service period instills aggression, suppresses femininity, and promotes patriotism during a crucial developmental stage for young men, leading to feelings of resentment, frustration, and an amplified sense of victimhood (Capelos et al., 2023, p. 259).

In 1999, the issue escalated significantly, especially due to a legal ruling regarding the military service incentives system. The Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the practice of awarding additional points (up to 5 %) to veterans undertaking public service exams, under the Veterans Support Act (Yoo, 2022). Many men perceived this additional points system as compensation for their military service and the ruling added to the frustration of young men. The fact that the legal action challenging the system was led by feminist groups made young men extremely angry toward women and feminists. The establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2002 further aggravated men's discontent and misogyny (H. Kim, 2021a). Men argued that this amounted to 'reverse discrimination,' as they felt excluded from government support.

Another key issue of gender conflict is the low birth rate. South Korea grapples with a persistently low fertility rate, often erroneously attributed solely to women by conservative men's groups, who argue that women are not fulfilling their necessary reproductive roles. The fertility rate, indicating the expected number of children a woman will have during her childbearing years, hit a record low of 0.72 in 2023, the lowest rate globally, exacerbating the country's demographic challenges. This decline contrasts sharply with the high rate of 4.53 in 1970, a number that gradually decreased following the government's adoption of family planning policies to boost economic growth. The decline accelerated notably in the 2000s, and has been below 1.0 since 2018. Conservative men's groups frequently attribute the record-low fertility rate to feminists and feminism, arguing that women's failure to meet their reproductive obligations disqualifies them from equal rights to men. However, the decline is closely linked to youth unemployment, along with steep costs for housing, childcare, and education, which discourage young people from marriage and parenthood (Yoon, 2022). With a lack of comprehensive social welfare, women are often burdened with domestic chores, childcare, and other caregiving duties, dissuading many from pursuing marriage and parenthood (Jeong, 2020).

Men's feelings of victimization and the emergence of misogynistic discourses are often observed in online communities discussing sexuality. Scholars frequently emphasize that men's resentment toward women often originates from sexual frustrations. Similar to Western Incel ('involuntary celibate') groups, young men experience anger when they perceive rejection from women, turning to online platforms to express these frustrations (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This intricate dynamic, where men feel frustrated due to perceived or real sexual rejection, primarily stems from a loss of their previous sense of entitlement (Capelos et al., 2023). In these communities, blame is often externalized, with hatred and anger directed toward women and feminists (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019).

In this context, what is known as 'gender wars' began online. According to scholars, the cultural war emerged on youth-centric online platforms like Megalia and Ilbe, where a narrative of division along gender lines circulated and persisted (Koo, 2019). The 'manosphere', along with misogyny, has mushroomed. Ilbe, founded in 2010, played a critical role in promoting gender trolling, hate speech, and even threats of violence, aimed at excluding women from active participation in society. For instance, this notorious group coined derogatory terms like 'soybean paste girls' and 'kimchi girls' to demean women as self-centered and overly indulgent (Jeong & Lee, 2018). Their agenda aimed to maintain rigid gender boundaries, upholding women's traditional, submissive roles. Ilbe, alongside other conservative groups, shared and promoted narratives of victimhood, often directing young men's negative emotions toward feminists and women (Capelos et al., 2023, p. 259).

Interestingly, anti-feminist and misogynistic discourses inadvertently sparked a resurgence in feminism. In one instance, a teenage Korean boy said in a January 2015 post on Twitter that he wished to be part of the Islamic State (ISIS) because of his hatred of feminists in South Korea (Kim, 2017). After the tweet went viral, the term 'feminism' became one of the most searched terms on major internet portals. Before this event, terms like 'feminism' were not commonly used by the general public and did not attract much attention until around the mid-2010s, as evidenced by searches for key terms such as feminism, misogyny, and gender conflict, in newspapers (Refer to Fig. 1).

In the neoliberal and 'post-feminist'<sup>1</sup> landscape, young women in South Korea placed a high value on individuality and personal choices over collective actions and were initially hesitant to engage in the women's movement. However, as they encountered the extreme misogyny, gender discrimination, and gender-based violence that is still prevalent in Korean society, they turned to feminism as an interpretive framework to comprehend their societal position and experiences in a gendered and inequitable environment. Additionally, a series of gender violence incidents and online/offline gender conflicts prompted a resurgence of feminism, bringing it into the public eye. This phenomenon, termed a 'feminism reboot' by Sohn Hee-jeong (Sohn, 2020), heightened the visibility of feminism.

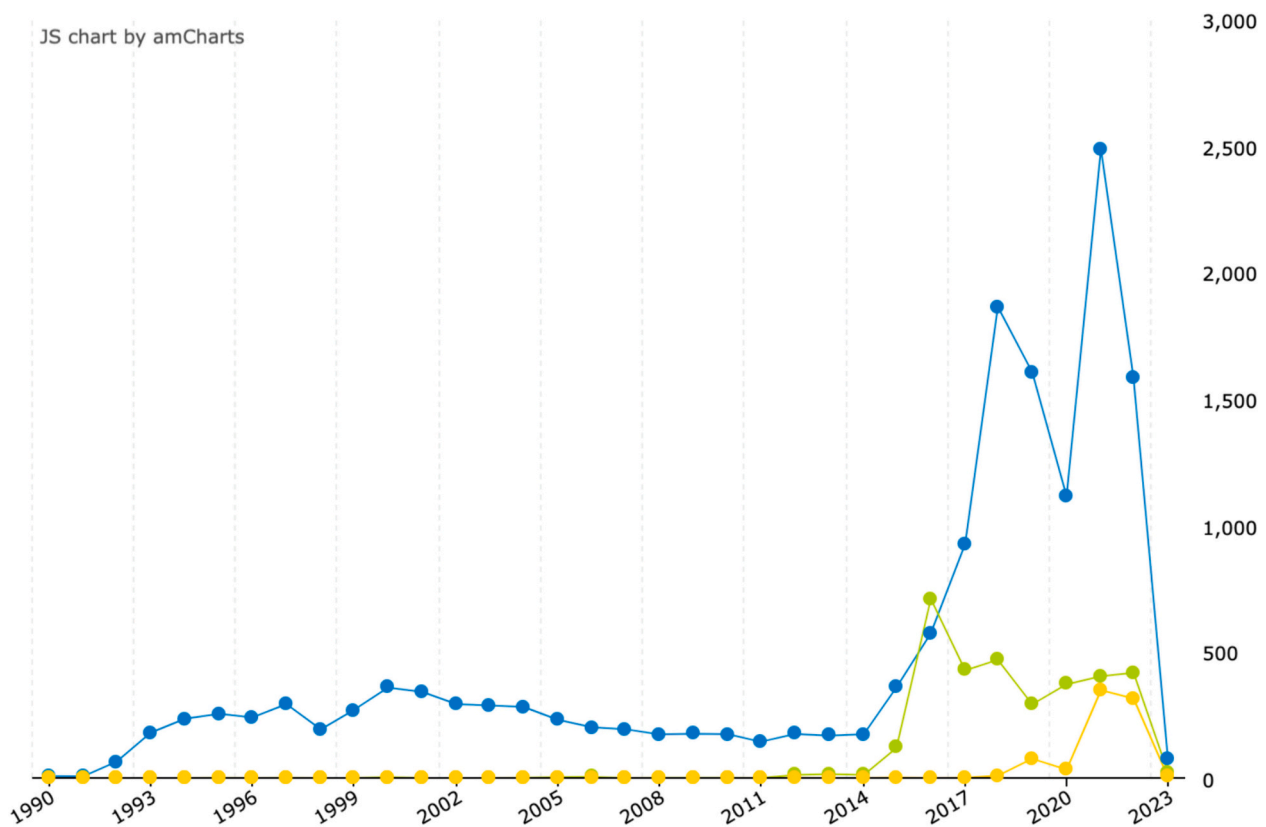
In response to the escalating misogyny and anti-feminist discourses, online feminist groups began to emerge in the mid-2010s, utilizing hashtags such as #IAmAFeminist and #GoWildSpeakLoudThinkHard on platforms like Twitter and in the blogosphere (Kim, 2017). This shift highlighted the increasing significance of cyberspace in the lives of young women in their teens, 20s, and 30s. Since 2015, social media platforms have witnessed a proliferation of feminist declarations. Feminist web forums have also gained traction, serving as battlegrounds against the heightened misogyny. Leading this online 'war' was Megalia, an online feminist group formed in 2015 by female internet users who experienced firsthand the rampant misogyny prevailing in male-dominated internet spaces, where women were subjected to ridicule, denigration, and bullying by male users (Jeong & Lee, 2018).

The Megalian movement stood out from previous women's movements due to its widespread popularity and adoption of radical tactics, including provocation and aggression (Jeong, 2020; J. Kim, 2021b). Members deliberately provoked and antagonized conservative Korean men by satirizing online misogyny and employing 'mirroring' techniques, which involved echoing misogynistic comments from male-dominated web forums but substituting terms to highlight their absurdity (Jeong & Lee, 2018). While these tactics succeeded in garnering attention and stimulating debates, they also faced criticism and allegations of promoting misandry or sexism toward men. Nonetheless, the emergence of Megalia underscored the growing prominence of feminist activism in South Korea, with young women challenging traditional gender norms and advocating for gender equality across various aspects of society.

#### *The 'Gangnam Station Exit 10' and #MeToo movement in South Korea*

The culmination of misogynistic sentiments reached a tragic peak in 2016 with a murder near Gangnam Station in the capital, Seoul, where a 24-year-old woman was killed simply because of her gender, allegedly due to the perpetrator feeling 'belittled' by women. This horrific incident sparked a wave of online and offline campaigns aimed at mourning the victim and addressing the pervasive issue of misogyny. Notably, women gathered near Gangnam Station Exit 10 to voice their experiences of violence, discrimination, and maltreatment. The significant

<sup>1</sup> Post-feminism embodies a neoliberal perspective positing that feminism has attained its objectives and thus, has become obsolete (Weitz, 2016, p. 220). Furthermore, it asserts that individuals possess unrestricted agency to make choices independent of structural constraints (Gill, 2007).



**Fig. 1.** Big data analysis (using term, Feminism, misogyny, and gender conflict). Newspaper/Broadcasting Service data from 1990 to 2023-01-15. Search terms: Feminism, misogyny, and gender conflict. Created by Big KINDS (News Big Data and Analysis).

mobilization of young women in these campaigns expanded gender debates across various platforms. Numerous young women's groups emerged out of the 'Gangnam Station Exit 10' campaigns, including the Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center, Flame Femi Action, Femimonsters, and various informal online groups (J. Kim, 2021b).

One remarkable aspect of these campaigns was the public speaking out of ordinary young women against gendered violence, inequality, and discrimination, as well as their active engagement in countering misogynistic discourses. Young women began sharing their personal stories online and offline, often using hashtags to amplify their voices. These initiatives, both at Gangnam Station Exit 10 and on online and offline platforms, paved the way for the widespread success of the #MeToo movement in Korea in 2018 (H. Kim, 2021a). The collective strategy of sharing personal experiences played a pivotal role in revitalizing the women's movement, particularly in combating sexual violence in Korea.

The #MeToo movement in South Korea was ignited by Seo Ji-hyeon, a prosecutor who made allegations of sexual harassment against a former Ministry of Justice official during a live interview with a news channel in January 2018. Following this revelation, numerous South Korean women have stepped forward to accuse influential male figures in various sectors, such as the arts, education, politics, and religion, of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Among the accused are a former presidential contender, a prominent film director, a highly regarded poet with regular Nobel Prize nominations, and potential presidential candidates. The #MeToo campaigns have not only shed light on gendered violence but also brought attention to other forms of gender discrimination, garnering significant coverage from both traditional and social media networks. One newspaper hailed this movement as a 'historic revolution against tradition' and a 'turning point' in South Korea.

For the first time in history, the ticking time bomb has exploded. There can no longer be a delay on the issue of sexual violence against women in South Korea. The #MeToo movement is a historic revolution against tradition in Korea, one that will be remembered as the turning point from a victim-shaming nation to a victim-supporting one.

(The Korea Times, May 23, 2018)

Moreover, digital sexual violence, which involves the creation and distribution of non-consensual images and videos through digital platforms, has become a significant concern for women in South Korea. Feminist online groups, such as Megalia, have been at the forefront of the battle against digital sexual violence. Their collective actions led to the shutdown in 2016 of SoraNet, the largest website in Korea known for circulating non-consensually obtained videos and images (Y. Kim, 2021c).

#### 'New' young women's activism

As previously discussed, gender wars and misogyny, ironically, facilitated the popularization of feminism by extending 'the reach of feminism' to ordinary women (J. Kim, 2021b). A significant number of young women have been more easily mobilized through social media and online platforms into activism compared to previous women's movements. This marks the first time that feminism has reached ordinary women in South Korea. The term feminism is no longer perceived solely as a Western concept. Instead, it is widely embraced by ordinary women to articulate their daily experiences and struggles.

Mass demonstrations in 2018 against illegal filming illustrate this phenomenon. In August that year, approximately 70,000 young women gathered at Gwanghwamun Square for the largest feminist protest in

South Korea's history. Organized by the online group 'Uncomfortable Courage,' these protests were triggered by a case of so-called illegal filming at Hongik University. In May 2018, a female model took nude photos of a male model in a nude drawing class at the university and distributed them on the radical feminist website 'Womad.' Ten days later the woman was arrested and indicted on charges of violating the Special Act on the Punishment of Sexual Crimes (filming using cameras) (Kim, 2019). In August, the court sentenced her to 10 months in prison and ordered her to complete a 40-hour sexual violence treatment program. The protestors claimed that the treatment of the female offender in the Hongik incident was unjust and discriminatory (Kim, 2019). The demonstrations addressed the lenient punishments often given to offenders of serious misogyny-related offenses predominantly committed by males. The online group highlighted the prevalence of women being victims of hidden camera recordings and illegal filming orchestrated by male perpetrators, with such images widely disseminated on conservative male platforms, websites, and illegal porn sites. During the protests, young women carried signs with slogans such as 'my daily life is not your porn.' The protests against illegal filming reflected women's anger toward the pervasive violence threatening their ordinary daily lives (J. Kim, 2021b).

Prior to the mid-2010s, women's activism and movements were predominantly organized by professional feminist activists affiliated with women's movement organizations. However, recent activism by young women, exemplified by various social media hashtags, along with movements like Megalia, Gangnam Station Exit 10, #MeToo, and Uncomfortable Courage, has been initiated by ordinary young women who are not academic students of women's or gender studies and not part of established women's collectives or organizations. These participants are primarily young women in their teens, 20s, and 30s who have experienced online misogyny culture on social networking services (SNS) and have engaged in spontaneous discussions about feminism online.

The subsequent discussion will explore whether political parties and leaders have alleviated, reinforced, or capitalized on these gender conflicts in electoral contests and for political gain.

### Gender, Feminism and populist politics in South Korea

In South Korean politics, the focus on feminism and women's issues emerged prominently in the early 1990s, coinciding with the country's transition to democracy after years of military and authoritarian rule. Previously, even within women's movements, these concerns often took a back seat to broader objectives such as democratization and addressing class-related issues (Jung, 2014). During the civilian government led by Kim Young-sam (1993–1997), women's issues, like sexual violence and discrimination, gained traction within the women's movements. The transition to democracy created more political opportunities and resources for these movements, especially during the administrations of progressive Presidents Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008). Working closely with civilian administrations led to significant policy advancements, including the enactment of legislation and the inclusion of feminist figures, referred to as 'femocrats,' in government.

A noteworthy development occurred during Kim Dae-jung's presidency in 2001 with the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality (MOGE), which was a significant milestone in the advancement of women's policies (Jung, 2014). It is important to recognize that since its inception, the gender ministry has remained a contentious issue in every administration and during electoral periods. During the Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2004, the scope of MOGE was expanded to cover childcare matters, which were previously overseen by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Under the Roh administration, initiatives such as gender impact analysis and gender budgeting were introduced to further promote gender equality and consider gender-related effects in policy decisions (Bae, 2016).

During the Roh administration (2003–2008), a remarkable

achievement was the abolition of the family-head system in Korea. Collaborating with the MOGE and other civil society groups, women's organizations campaigned against the patriarchal *hoju-je* (family register system), under which only a man was designated the legal head of a family, with all family members listed under the *hoju*. This effort culminated in the National Assembly amending the Civil Code in 2005 to eliminate the family register system. Originating in the 1950s, the movement for reforming family law gained momentum in the 1990s and 2000s through nationwide campaigns advocating for the use of both parents' family names, in constitutional lawsuits, and via lobbying efforts (Jung, 2014).

The subsequent conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2012) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) were characterized, however, as the 'dark ages of feminism' or the 'age of misogyny' (H. Kim, 2021a). During these years, feminist voices were effectively suppressed and marginalized through increased regulation, strict control of activities, and the promotion of sexual conservatism. Under the Lee administration, there was a notable and widespread backlash against the MOGE and its policies regarding women (Bae, 2016). Before taking office, President-elect Lee proposed downsizing or merging the Ministry with the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW). Despite strong protests from women's movements and groups, the Lee administration proceeded with the downsizing, halving the MOGE's budget and transferring childcare responsibilities back to the MHW. In 2010, the MOGE underwent further restructuring by merging family and youth affairs, excluding childcare. Throughout this process, the fundamental principle of gender equality, which was central to women's policies, was substantially marginalized, to the extent that it was barely recognizable beyond the English name of the ministry, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, or the MGEF (Bae, 2016, p. 32). Consequently, the distinct identity of women's policies as tools for advancing gender equality diminished further (Bae, 2016).

During the Lee administration, the government implemented confrontational tactics to control and monitor progressive women's movement groups. These tactics included cutting or completely stopping government funding, shutting down services without due notice, and increasing government surveillance through regulatory measures. This created a pressing need for survival among many women's movement organizations, as they faced worsening operating conditions and limited political opportunities to pursue feminist goals (Jung, 2014).

### *Park Geun-hye, 'a prepared female president'*

In the presidential election of 2012, the Saenuri Party, a conservative faction, strategically utilized 'women' as a tool to reshape their conservative identity. The ruling party presented Park Geun-hye, a female candidate and the daughter of South Korean military dictator Park Chung-hee (1963–1979), as a symbol of global political progress, gender equality, and women's rights advancement. Park promoted her leadership style as 'Mother Leadership,' likening the leader's role to that of a devoted and caring mother (Kim, 2013). Throughout her campaign, she consistently emphasized that the Korean people were her 'only family,' as she lacked a family of her own, stating her political involvement aimed to bring happiness to the Korean populace (Kim, 2013).

Park's portrayal of maternal leadership, emphasizing feminine attentiveness and readiness, appealed to female voters (Kim, 2013). Addressing various women's issues, including the lack of female representation and challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, Park pledged to create more opportunities for women to re-enter the workforce by establishing 'career coaching' centers and training 100,000 female workers by 2017. She also committed to incrementally increasing the proportion of women in Cabinet ministries and governmental committees, aiming to reform male-dominated power structures. Positioned as the 'prepared female president,' Park embodied the role of the pioneering first woman President in office. Through these strategic initiatives, Park secured significant support from female voters in their

50s and 60s, particularly those nostalgic for her father's era (President Park Chung-hee, 1963–1979), ultimately leading to her election as President (Lee, 2018). Park garnered more female votes than Moon Jae-in, the Opposition Leader, at 51.1 %, a 3.2 percentage point lead over Moon's 47.9 % (Kim, 2013).

The election of Park Geun-hye as the first female President, from 2013 to 2017, was initially hailed as a milestone for women's representation in politics. However, her presidency did not necessarily translate into significant advancements in women's policies. Despite being a female President, Park's administration did not align its gender policies with the goal of achieving gender equality. For example, there was a noticeable lack of female officials or ministers in her Cabinet. Throughout President Park's tenure, the percentage of women holding high-ranking government positions and the ratio of women in the Cabinet was either stagnant or lower than previous administrations. This trend was highlighted in the 'Global Gender Gap Report 2015' by the World Economic Forum (WEF), where South Korea's global ranking declined from 108th in 2012 to 115th out of 145 countries assessed. These developments fell short of the expectations of citizens, particularly women, who had hoped for substantial progress under the leadership of the country's first female President. Instead, it contributed to a gradual erosion of women's political representation. President Park's involvement in a corruption scandal exacerbated the situation. Her indictment while in office, followed by impeachment and removal from office, tarnished the legacy of the first female President and underscored the challenges faced in achieving meaningful advancements in women's political representation and gender policies (Lee, 2018).

During her grip on power, gender was appropriated to counter the criticism targeting her and to avoid impeachment. Criticisms of Park's lack of leadership were often brushed aside by labeling them as insults to all women, allowing the avoidance of accountability. This approach oversimplified intricate political matters as gender-related ones (Jang, 2017). Massive protests demanding that Park step down and be impeached emerged. Dubbed the 'candlelight protests', these began in October 2016 and lasted until April 2017. They were prompted by a political scandal involving President Park and her close confidante Choi Soon-sil. President Park's party also strategically exploited gender to her advantage during the impeachment phase. She countered the corruption allegations against her by stating, 'If I am not a woman, there's no reason to be subjected to such derogatory treatment.' (cited in Jang, 2017) She inappropriately invoked her gender while distancing herself from her public role as President.

#### *Moon Jae-in as 'feminist president'*

The establishment of Moon Jae-in's government, following Park's impeachment, further illustrates the complex dynamics of gender politics in South Korea. Moon Jae-in's characterisation as the 'feminist President' first emerged amid the candlelight protests. During the subsequent election campaign, he continued to position himself by appointing the first female head of the election headquarters and highlighting his commitment to gender equality. His declaration that he would be a 'feminist President' was influenced by the demands of existing women's movements, the rise of digital feminism challenging misogyny online and in popular culture, and the resurgence of offline feminist activism and campaigns (Gim et al., 2023). The embrace of feminism in the Moon administration could be seen as the result of the demonstration of women's power during the candlelight protests and of the 'feminism reboot' that emerged to fight against intensified misogyny (Sohn, 2020). In this context, the presidential election considered women's issues and the support of feminism crucial for electoral success.

While some perceived Moon's administration as implementing women-friendly policies (Lee, 2022), others argued that it fell short of being a truly feminist government (Lee, 2018; Moon, 2022). Although the Moon government initially set a goal of achieving 30 % representation of women in ministerial-level positions, and made efforts to

increase the proportion of women in high-ranking bureaucratic roles, as part of various gender equality policy implementations, these efforts were constrained by persistent male-centric paradigms. A notable example is the appointment of Tak Hyeon-min as a presidential secretary despite strong opposition and calls for his dismissal from various women's organizations and female lawmakers across the political spectrum. Tak Hyeon-min faced criticism for his derogatory writings about women, yet his appointment was not revoked (Lee, 2018). Despite President Moon's declaration as a 'feminist president,' there was a lack of substantial effort to implement policies that would genuinely promote women's status. Ultimately, this declaration appears to have been an empty pledge, with feminism used as a tool to attract the votes and support of young women.

During Moon's presidency, many young people, particularly men aged in their 20s, grew frustrated upon discovering ongoing preferential treatment and special opportunities in education and employment for the children and spouses of certain members from the '586 Generation', who formed the backbone of the Democratic Party (Moon, 2022). The '586 Generation' was comprised of politicians and activists who attended college in the 1980s and protested against the military regime at the time, playing a significant role in the democratization movement of the era (Kim, 2024a, 2024b). But their preferential treatment was particularly disheartening for young people who had hoped to see the realization of the 'world without privilege' promised by Moon Jae-in (Moon, 2022). Amid this disaffection, young men's support for the Moon administration declined due to perceived 'reverse discrimination' resulting from its focus on women-centered policies (Lee, 2022). Factors such as the lack of housing and job opportunities, coupled with several sexual harassment incidents involving former mayors supported by Moon, also contributed to young people distancing themselves from the DP.

Previously considered a core support base for President Moon, men in their 20s transitioned into a core opposition group, as indicated by a 2018 survey (Realmeter, 2018). The survey revealed that among men in their 20s, President Moon's approval rating was the lowest at 29.4 %, compared to women in their 20s, who demonstrated the highest approval rating at 63.5 %. Moreover, the survey highlighted differing perceptions of the most significant conflict in Korean society, with 57 % of respondents in their 20s identifying gender conflicts as the most critical issue, in contrast to income inequality/class conflict, which topped the list for all respondents (Realmeter, 2018).

#### *PPP's anti-feminist Rhetoric during the 2022 presidential election*

The 2022 presidential election stands as a prominent example of how populist politics leverage gender conflicts for political gains. By capitalizing on and amplifying growing gender conflicts among young people, politicians from the PPP successfully channelled the anger and frustration of South Korean young men toward the Moon administration and the DP. Consequently, the PPP effectively rallied support from young men for their conservative party in the presidential election.

In the context of a neoliberal Korean society, the rise of anti-feminism and narratives of victimhood among young men became increasingly intertwined with mainstream politics, particularly as they aligned with the populist strategies of influential conservative male politicians. This convergence marked a significant shift, with anti-feminism among men in their 20s gaining traction as a driving force in conservative political circles (B. Kim, 2024b, p. 184). A pivotal moment in this trend was the emergence of conservative figure Lee Jun-seok, born in 1985, who positioned himself as a champion for young men and criticized feminism as unjust. His election as the first-ever PPP leader aged in the 30s underscored the growing influence of anti-feminist sentiment within mainstream politics. This development illustrates how anti-feminist ideas, once relegated to online subcultures, or perceived as fringe beliefs, have now permeated mainstream discourse and significantly influenced the political landscape in Korea (B. Kim,

2024b, 193).

As previously discussed, the frustrations of young men were targeted at the political elites, particularly the so-called '586 Generation,' as well as women and feminists. The 2022 election not only capitalized on young men's anger and frustration, evident in conservative online communities, but also involved the forging of close alliances with conservative men's groups. For instance, during the 2022 presidential campaign, conservative parties enlisted Lee Myung-jun and Choi In-ho, representatives of the anti-feminist male group 'Hanseong Association,' to serve on their campaign youth headquarters' Gender Equality Special Committee. This demonstrated a direct alignment with anti-feminist ideology. Furthermore, the PPP organized a SNS comment brigade team through the 'New Men's Alliance,' further cementing their support for the anti-feminist agenda (B. Kim, 2024b).

The conservative PPP depicted Korean society as female-dominated and framed men as victims of reverse discrimination, labelling feminism as radical and misandrist (Moon, 2022). As discussed earlier, to appeal to young male voters, the PPP strategically invited Lee Jun-seok as a party leader, criticized feminism for its alleged role in declining birth rates, and opposed the #MeToo movement. This portrayal of young men as victims of feminism led to an increased alignment with conservative ideologies among young men.

The PPP's boldest anti-feminist approach during the election campaign was the proposal to abolish the gender ministry, the MGEF. Yoon Seok-yeol, seeking to appeal to young men with anti-feminist sentiments, pledged to eliminate the ministry, with the result being a pronounced division among voters along gender lines. Yoon's announcement on Facebook of his intention to abolish the MGEF significantly boosted his popularity. The PPP argued that the ministry had either fulfilled its mission or had no substantive role, suggesting it had unfairly treated men as potential offenders. Yoon consistently asserted that discrimination was primarily an individual rather than a systemic issue, rendering the ministry redundant. He maintained that structural gender discrimination was non-existent, effectively portraying gender equality policies as incongruent with the prevailing realities of Korean society (B. Kim, 2024b).

Yoon and the PPP also strategically leveraged military service issues, which resonate with young men, particularly in conservative online spheres. He committed to ensuring a monthly wage of 2 million Korean Won for soldiers during their military service (Kim, 2022, p. 17) and advocated that gender-focused budgets be reallocated toward defense expenditure (Gim et al., 2023). Additionally, Yoon promised to intensify penalties for false accusations or defamation related to sexual violence crimes. In particular, the PPP's opposition to affirmative action, encompassing gender quotas and equality policies, resonated significantly with a sizable portion of the electorate, particularly men in their 20s, who perceived such measures as an unjust governmental intervention disadvantaging men (Moon, 2022). During its election campaigns, the PPP strategically tapped into the anger of young men toward the Moon administration, the '586 Generation,' and women and feminists. In doing so, the PPP effectively mobilized discontented young men, using gender conflict as a means of political mobilization toward conservatism. The party strategically manipulated discourses surrounding 'gender wars' and misogyny to achieve this aim.

Following its assumption of power, the Yoon administration has persisted in downplaying women's issues and disparaging gender equality initiatives as unwarranted expenditure of taxpayers' funds. Such projects are often depicted as mere expressions of individual preferences devoid of broader public interest or market demand. Consequently, audits and budgetary reductions have been directed toward gender equality policies. The anti-feminist stance adopted by conservative politics, characterizing welfare and social justice-oriented public policies as frivolous expenses or commodities better suited for market selection, has manifested in tangible policy outcomes. These include budget cuts for initiatives related to violence prevention and victim support, and reductions in funding for various youth assistance

programs and employment support programs (B. Kim, 2024b, p. 194). The proposed abolition of the MGEF, pledged during Yoon's election campaign, was effectively suspended due to the robust protests launched by women's organizations against this initiative. Nonetheless, there remains a distinct possibility of this proposal being revisited, with abolition of the ministry likely to resurface as a political instrument in subsequent political endeavours (Kim, 2023).

## Conclusion

Studies indicate that populist politicians opportunistically appropriate and manipulate certain feminist or anti-feminist themes to attract more voters and secure political gains. This trend is observable in South Korean politics, as discussed.

Gender and gender conflict have been significant factors in South Korean politics, especially since the country's transition to democracy. Politicians have often exploited gender dynamics for political purposes, such as winning elections. This trend has been particularly evident from the Park administration through Moon's presidency to the current Yoon administration. Park, as the first female President, strategically used gender as a means to win elections and to seek to evade impeachment. Moon, by embracing 'reboot feminism,' won the presidency. However, despite Moon's self-proclamation as a 'feminist president,' there was a notable absence of substantial efforts to implement policies that genuinely advance women's status. This declaration appears to have been more of a rhetorical strategy, leveraging feminism to attract the votes and support of young women. Moon's failure to fulfill his promises led to disillusionment among young men, causing them to withdraw support from the ruling Democratic Party and President Moon.

In the 2022 presidential election, the opposition PPP capitalized on heightened gender conflict and dissatisfaction among young people, particularly men in their 20s. They intensified these gender conflicts to channel the anger and frustration of young South Korean men toward the Moon administration. This helped the PPP mobilize young men as a distinct political identity to support their conservative party in the election.

The PPP's conservative populist politicians used several key themes during their campaigns that were popular in conservative male online groups. These themes included reinforcing traditional gender roles, criticizing feminism, and highlighting a crisis in masculinity. While similar to strategies used by right-wing populist politicians in Europe and the US, the PPP's approach focused on three issues specific to South Korea: compulsory military service for men, the country's low fertility rate, and the proposed dismantling of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

As Mostov (2021) has argued, it is imperative to acknowledge that populism is inherently gendered and poses risks to both women and democratic values. In South Korea, there has been a growing interest in feminism among young women. This resurgence offers hope that feminism will effectively challenge the widespread misogyny and anti-feminist rhetoric across politics, media, and social platforms. Young women are expected to play a crucial role in advocating for the elimination of entrenched misogyny in South Korean politics and society as a whole.

During the preparation of this work the author used Chat gpt in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Kyungja Jung:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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