The Victims of Victims: Islamophobia in the South Korean Feminist Movement

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Abstract

This research attempts to introduce a new perspective on the complex relationships in South Korea's patriarchal society that produces "victims of victims". The patriarchal culture in South Korea stems from Confucian values that have demeaned women by branding them immoral (*hwanyang-nyeon/*화냥년). In modern times, these Confucian values perpetuate misogyny and create a second-class identity for women in South Korean society. Thus, the feminism movement was born as a form of emancipation to fight the enduring injustice against women in South Korea. By using Jürgen Habermas' perspective on moral discourse and Spinner-Halev's perspective on enduring injustice, this study aims to examine the formation of a victim mentality in South Korean women and its relationship with the label of 'patriarchy' pinned on Islam, which then contributes to intensified Islamophobia in South Korea. The construction of Islam as patriarchal and degrading to women is often expressed alongside acts of racism and xenophobia. This phenomenon constitutes a vicious cycle. Deep-seated trauma and hatred due to mistreatment and othering experiences over time has caused women in South Korea to internalize a victim identity. Ironically, this creates new victims through anti-Islamic campaigns in the feminist movement. This research seeks to analyze the relationship between enduring injustice due to patriarchal culture, mental formation of victims and Islamophobia in the South Korean feminist movement.

Keywords: *Islamophobia, feminist, victim mentality, patriarchal culture, enduring injustice, Confucianism*

Introduction

Irrational hatred of Islam and Muslims has grown and led to negative sentiment in many parts of the world. This phenomenon, known as Islamophobia, was initially prevalent in European countries. The term Islamophobia itself was first proposed by Etienne Dinnet in 1992 (Jaber, 2022; Taufiq et al., 2022). The underlying hatred behind Islamophobia is in the effort to 'categorize' groups of people. Efforts are made to show that there are differences between certain groups (the self and the other). According to Büyükgebiz, Muslims are the main target of Islamophobia (Büyükgebiz, 2021). The ongoing conflicts between the West and the Muslim world persist without addressing Huntington's broader assumption. The 2001 World Trade Center attack and the 'Global War on Terror' marked the beginning of the rise of Islamophobia in the 20th century. Hence, Islam and Muslims have been widely perceived as promoting violence as they have been accused of suicide bombings and terrorism (Aydin, 2016; Büyükgebiz, 2021).

Islamophobic sentiments that initially spread widely in Europe began to spread out to other regions, including East Asia. One example can be seen in the phenomenon of Islamophobia in South Korea in recent decades (Srimulyani, 2021). The emergence of Islamophobic sentiment in South Korea is supported by widespread negative stigma about Muslims. This stigma refers to the assumption that a Muslim who obeys the teachings of their religion is a fanatic and is likely to commit acts of violence against non-Muslims. Other than stigmatizing Islam's adherents, this sentiment also has negative impacts on the religion itself, which is then considered opposed to tolerance, equality of men and women as well as democracy (Putri et al., 2022). This stigma makes it difficult for Muslims to integrate into their environment (Paradays, 2022) due to the lack of acceptance from local people. Especially for those Muslims who are also immigrants (Büyükgebiz, 2021).

According to Dong-jin & Won-Jae, Islamophobic sentiments in South Korea are mostly directed at Muslim immigrants. A massive wave of immigrants entering South Korea began with the Seoul Olympics in 1988, for which the country invited foreign workers from various countries (Jang & Choi, 2012). The next wave was around the 1990s,

which was triggered by the "*Industrial Trainee System*" policy. The majority of these immigrants were from South Asia and Southeast Asia, such as Pakistan, Indonesia and Bangladesh (Jang & Choi, 2012; Srimulyani, 2021). Their motivations for migrating varied, either seeking work or pursuing higher education. The presence of immigrants led to intense competition for employment and concerns around the perceived dominance of migrant workers. As a result, opposition to immigrant groups emerged (Jang & Choi, 2012; Paradays, 2022). Muslim immigrants in South Korea faced double discrimination due to their dual identities: their nationality of origin and their religion (Srimulyani, 2021). Over time, the Muslim population has grown in South Korea leading to the establishment of the KMF (Korean Muslim Foundation) community (Ediyono & Fauddah, 2023). Furthermore, the Muslim population in South Korea not only includes migrants but also those who settled and became citizens as well as those who were born and raised in South Korea. This Muslim community is referred to as *'Koslim'* (Korean Muslim) (Jang & Choi, 2012; Paradays, 2022; Srimulyani, 2021).

The growing Muslim population in South Korea and the influence of Islam has not helped Islam become part of South Korean identity or resulted in the religion becoming easily accepted by society. Although Islamophobic sentiment was not particularly strong before the World Trade Center terrorist attacks, it became much worse after the 2000s (Jang & Choi, 2012). This was triggered by the increase of the *Koslim* population during that time. KMF noted that the Muslim population stood at approximately 195,000 in 2020, which was an increase of about 23% from the number of Muslims in 2017 (Paradays, 2022). The increase in the Muslim population in South Korea raised concerns from various segments of society. Groups which aggressively campaign against Muslims and Islam in South Korea include Christian groups and the radical feminist movement (Hae-Myoung & Min-ho, 2018; Jang & Choi, 2012; Srimulyani, 2021).

Radical feminists contribute to Islamophobia in South Korea (Hae-Myoung & Min-ho, 2018) and their involvement is closely linked to stereotypes that arise regarding Muslim immigrants. Radical feminists'

actions are linked to two main factors, namely enduring injustices and the role of mass media. Enduring injustice is defined by Spinner-Halev as an injustice that occurred in the past but continues to the present time. Thus, a discriminated group continues to undergo the same experiences that occurred in the past (Spinner-Halev, 2007). The experiences of women in South Korea reflect enduring injustice that has been rooted in South Korean society since ancient times and which is difficult to resolve. The discrimination and violence that South Korean women have suffered for centuries continues to evolve and transform into new forms over time. This has given rise to feminist movements (Yamanaka, 2022). One of these movements is the radical feminist movement that directs its anger not only to South Korea's patriarchal society, but also to the Muslim minority (Sheikh, 2021).

Spinner-Halev explains that enduring injustice can be caused by collective memories (Spinner-Halev, 2007). Repeated instances of discrimination that have taken place have been creating collective memories for South Korean women, which in turn have generated trauma, resentment and hatred towards everything related or perceived to be related to men and the patriarchal system (Eum, 2017; Manek, 2023; Sheikh, 2021; Spinner-Halev, 2007). Various forms of discrimination have led to the strengthening of South Korean women's collective memories. According to Manek, South Korean women have faced misogyny for centuries and it has become part of the culture that has developed over time (Manek, 2023). This has led to a 'normalization' of discrimination towards women in South Korean society (Rodelli et al., 2022). The collective memories and 'normalization of misogynic culture' increase the susceptibility of South Korean women to discrimination. Moreover, this often takes place in the private sphere, thus making it even more difficult to track (Jaeeun, 2024).

As women in South Korea have become susceptible to discrimination due to long-standing misogyny, violence against women has become embedded within the structure of patriarchal society in South Korea (Manek, 2023). This problem has been a focus of attention in South Korea since early 2000s, as evidenced by the various efforts to prevent

discrimination against women. Support for these efforts can also be seen in the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001. Furthermore, the President of South Korea from 2017 to 2022, Moon Jae-In, even said that he would be a 'feminist president', claiming that misogyny had become a scourge on society (Yamanaka, 2022). Despite this, women's participation in the workforce declined in 2018 and South Korea is ranked only 88th globally for women's participation in the workforce (Oyvat & Onaran, 2022). This has raised concerns due to the continued presence of the patriarchal system in society (D. O. Kim et al., 2020; Manek, 2023).

Spinner-Halev emphasizes that enduring injustice is conspicuous, but hard to resolve because it has taken place over a very long period of time (Spinner-Halev, 2007). This is also the case for women's discrimination in South Korea. Cases of violence against women remain high. In 2021, there were approximately 64 instances of intimate femicide in South Korea (Jaeeun, 2024).

Confucianism is frequently cited as being at the root of misogynistic tendencies and the foundation for the patriarchal system in South Korean society (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022; Jimin, 2024; Manek, 2023; Midha et al., 2018). Confucianism has been practiced in the East Asian region for approximately the past 2000 years (Jimin, 2024; H. Kim, 2015). It is believed to have had a major impact on the development of the Korean empire during this period. Confucianism has been used as a guide for the lives of South Korean people in every historical period until today. According to Heisook Kim, Confucianism occupies an important position in South Korea's history as a political ideology that has had deep roots in the government since ancient times (H. Kim, 2015). This perception remains today (Jimin, 2024; Manek, 2023). Confucianism indirectly contributes to a 'double burden' for women, especially those who do not originate from a wealthy families (Jimin, 2024). Typically, women were forbidden to leave the home and had to obey their husbands' orders and even honor and take good care of their husbands' families (Manek, 2023). This absolute attachment leaves limited space for women to live a decent life (N. Y. Kim, 2006; Manek, 2023). Those who are impoverished must work to support their families financially

while taking care of their children and their husband's family. Within the family, women are often seen as nothing more than 'tools' to do housework and fulfill their husband's desires. Their voices do not matter in the family because men are the decision makers (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022; Jimin, 2024; Manek, 2023). This patriarchal system, continuously nurtured by Confucianism, has contributed to the sense of enduring injustice among South Korean women. Victims who are constantly under the control of their abusers will gradually lose control and awareness of themselves and eventually perceive violence as something 'normal and natural' (Rodelli et al., 2022), as experienced by women in South Korea.

The complexity of trauma, resentment and hatred embedded as collective memories of South Korean women contributes to the extreme actions of radical feminists, who have displayed strong resistance against everything related to the patriarchal system (Novianty, 2024). This attitude encourages the generalization of all men as being ' evil'. Therefore, in the view of these feminists, all forms of male superiority and the patriarchal system must be completely uprooted (Novianty, 2024; Yamanaka, 2022). According to Suh Hyo-weon et. al, the trauma experienced by the majority of women in South Korea is positively correlated with irrational acts of anger, especially on issues perceived to be related to men and the patriarchal system (Suh et al., 2021). This affects women's communication patterns in society. This is believed to be part of the *hwa-byung* syndrome[1] (Lee et al., 2014) and explains the actions of radical feminists in South Korea, who tend to set their own standards for 'rational' acts without considering 'moral' aspects.

In this environment, the radical feminist movement in South Korea is particularly vulnerable to being influenced by media coverage, especially from Western media, which often tends to frame Muslims and Islam negatively. The most widely accepted stereotype about Islam and Muslims is that they are misogynistic (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Eum, 2017). Moreover, Islam is defined as a religion that promotes discrimination and violence against women (Eum, 2017; Koo, 2018). The

[1] *Hwa-byung* syndrome according to Lee et. al (2014) is psychological distress with some unique somatic and anxiety, e.g stress caused by marital conflicts.

hijab is also considered as a form of male control over women, so Muslim women in South Korea often experience discrimination and even violence because they wear *hijab* (Eum, 2017). Recently, the feminist movement has been very active on social media, with some sources referring to it as 'digital feminism' (D. O. Kim et al., 2020; Sheikh, 2021). One of the most widely used social media platforms is Twitter, now rebranded as 'X', where feminists there spread campaigns for women's emancipation interspersed with Islamophobic messages (Sheikh, 2021).

Media framing has reinforced the stereotype of Islam as a highly patriarchal religion that discriminates against women. This has encouraged the feminist movement in South Korea to develop a hatred for Islam and take part in Islamophobic campaigns. Initially, the radical feminist movement in South Korea was an attempt at emancipation, representing a form of protest against the centuries-old patriarchal system in society. Radical feminists claimed to be 'victims', arguing that all men and anything deemed to support the patriarchal system were evils that must be fought against. The radical feminist movement's generalizations inadvertently mirror the injustices they have endured, serving as a projection of their own trauma. This creates a cycle where 'victims' perpetuate harm by creating new victims, as seen in the Islamophobia propagated by this feminist movement.

The main objective of this paper is to provide a new perspective on the complexity of the problems resulting from the patriarchal system in South Korea, which indirectly contributes to the increasing Islamophobia there. This research will examine how the patriarchal system, deeply rooted in South Korean society, is shaped by the accumulation of Confucian values and influences daily life. As Spinner-Halev outlined about collective memories (Spinner-Halev, 2007), the continuous discrimination faced by women in South Korea has instilled trauma, resentment and hatred in them. This has led to the development of a feminist movement that is against men and anything that supports the patriarchal system. This feminist movement has also targeted Islam for its hate campaigns in line with the rising trend of Islamophobia and the stereotyping of Islam as being associated with patriarchy and discrimination against women (Hae-Myoung & Min-ho, 2018; Sheikh,

2021). These hate campaigns represent Islamophobic sentiments and influence South Koreans' views on Islam and Muslims.

Habermas proposed two principles of 'moral norms', by which to determine whether or not a moral norm applies in society, namely discourse and universalization (Rees, 2020). According to Habermas, morals are not something that only applies to and is good for only one group but is something that is true. Habermas emphasizes that 'morals' are a standard that is not unequal (Habermas, 1974; Muttaqien, 2023; Rees, 2020). Unfortunately, the radical feminist movement in South Korea does not determine what is categorized as 'moral' in the real context, but through what Peter L. Berger describes as identity internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), which is actually a result of traumatic experiences of past discrimination (Manek, 2023). Referring to Jürgen Habermas' constructivist perspective, the feminist movement's Islamophobic campaign in South Korea should not considered as a part of 'moral norms', because it does not meet the approval of all affected participants in the practical discourse and is not universally accepted to satisfy everyone's interest within the discourse (Rees, 2020). In this way, the Islamophobia campaign promoted by the feminist movement is not based on practical discourse directly referencing Islam and Muslims as they are. Instead, it stems from the enduring injustices they have experienced over time.

This paper seeks to understand the reasons for why feminist movements in South Korea contribute to Islamophobic campaigns and emphasizes that there is a cycle of 'victims of victims' generated by the historical experiences of women in South Korea and contemporary negative media perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Prior to examining the phenomenon of Islamophobia in South Korea, this paper will discuss the discrimination faced by women and the emergence of the feminist movement within the country.

Discrimination and the Emergence of the Feminist Movement in South Korea

Confucianism has often featured in the discussion on women's discrimination and the feminist movement throughout history. Confucianism entered South Korea during the Goguryeo Kingdom (37 BC - 668 AD) via China. It then developed further under the Baekje Kingdom and Shilla. It was further strengthened during the Joseon Kingdom in 1392, as this kingdom integrated Confucianism into its societal and governing structures (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022; Jimin, 2024; H. Kim, 2015; Manek, 2023). Confucian values did provide some degree of order to the lives of Korean society at that time, such as instilling respect for elders and various other basic ethics (H. Kim, 2015). However, some values in practice actually limited women, preventing them from developing and achieving their full potential, especially noble women (*yangban*) who were from respected families and related to the royal family (Hee-sook, 2004) (see table 1).

Confucianism emphasizes a strict social hierarchy in matters of family relations and affairs related to government (Jimin, 2024; Manek, 2023; Midha et al., 2018). Confucianism provided guidelines for governing the kingdom through a hierarchy of five human relationships (*wu lun*) (H. Kim, 2015). This hierarchy served as a guideline for the monarchy to manage the government and organize social life at that time (H. Kim, 2015; N. Y. Kim, 2006). Confucianism created a specific 'position' for women within the family (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022) where they were considered subordinate. In this context, men had great authority as head of the family and power over women in the family sphere (Manek, 2023). One of the most influential concepts in shaping the foundations of discrimination against women is the concept of filial piety, which places women in the position of being loyal to her family until marriage (Jimin, 2024; Manek, 2023). Moreover, the concept of patriarchy embedded within society has frequently extolled the position of men (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022; N. Y. Kim, 2006). Since ancient times then, Confucianism's influence in society degraded the position of women and tended to treat women as second-class citizens.

The Confucian concept of obedience is explained more clearly through the concept of '*san-kang*' ('three forms of obedience'), which outlines the three obligatory forms of obedience for women. First, they must obey their fathers until just before they get married. Second, they must then obey their husband after they are married. And third, women must obey their sons when their husbands have passed away (H. Kim, 2015; N. Y. Kim, 2006; Manek, 2023). Confucian concepts were held in high regard by Joseon society at that time. Growing adherence to these principles has led to a high level of discrimination in South Korea (see table 1). Through Confucianism, women are made to feel as if they do not have the choice to develop themselves and obtain the same kind of life as men (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022). This discrimination is not only physical but also psychological. This has led to women experiencing double discrimination, which has an impact on the quality of their lives (Jimin, 2024) and contributes to the fact that women in South Korea are twice as likely to attempt suicide as men (Sun-young, 2023).

Period	Context	Forms	Discrimination	Impact on Women
Joseon Kingdom (1392-1910)	Policies of the ruling government	*Naewaebop*	The discrimination faced by noble women included: 1. Restrictions on visiting temples; 2. Restrictions on performing shaman rituals; 3. Adhering to a strict dress code; 4. Direct contact with the opposite sex was prohibited.	According to the kingdom, this was aimed at instilling the 'concept of chastity' in Joseon noblewomen (*yangban*). But this severely restricted women's mobility and interactions.
		Chongbop system	Male-oriented moral system in governing the family, including a male-oriented inheritance system.	Increasing gender discrimination towards women within the family.
		Kyeongguk taejeon (National Code)	One of rule outlined that every noble woman who visited a temple, attended a festival by the riverside or mountain, or conducted a ritual ceremony (*yaje sanchon*) by herself would receive a punishment of 100 lashes.	Diminished the opportunities for women to find their own entertainment, explore new things or undertake activities by themselves.
		Kyeongjae Yukjon (Six Codes of Governance)	Women from the *yangban* class were permitted to interact immediately with their own parents	It curtailed the movement of women and established boundaries preventing women from exploring their potential.

			and siblings. They were also permitted to have direct interaction with maternal or paternal relatives. This regulation also outlined the limits on interaction between women and men in the society, including that men and women were not allowed to walk on the same road or met on purpose.	
Japanese Imperialism (1910-1945)	Japanese military comfort women (*wianbu/ hwanyang-nyeon*) during the Asia-Pacific war	Korean women were exploited to fulfill the sexual desires of Japanese military personnel	1. Japan forced hundreds women, including Koreans, to serve as 'comfort women' to satisfy the sexual needs of Japanese military personnel. 2. These Korean women were promised jobs such as nurse's assistants or cleaners. In the end, they were kidnapped and forced to work as prostitutes. 3. 'Comfort women' were also forced to leave their family and children in the	This affected the psychological well-being of the women kidnapped and forced to work as prostitutes. Women lost the opportunity to live with their family and children. They also faced discrimination due to rejection and humiliation by the community.

			village. 4. Former 'comfort women' who returned to their villages suffered discrimination.	
Before The Emergence of Feminism in 1980s	Invalidating regulations towards women	1948 Constitution and 1958 Civil Code	1. These regulations provided laws for South Korean families based on liberal democratic principles. However, they did not provide equal rights for women. This system was a remnant of the colonial era, which was based on the system of household heads (*hojuje*) 2. There was little participation from women in the drafting process for the 1958 Civil Code. The 1948 constitution suffered from severe gaps in terms of addressing women's discrimination.	These laws resulted in unfair treatment towards women structurally, which encouraged structural gender-based violence. They also strengthened the patriarchal system within the society.

Table 1. Discrimination Towards Women in South Korea from the Joseon Era until Before the Emergence of Feminist Movement Era. **Source:** analyzed from various sources (Hee-sook, 2004; Hur, 2014; E. Kim, 2020; H. Kim, 2015; Manek, 2023; Min, 2003; Park, 1993)

Confucianism's long history in Korea has enabled it to evolve into a deep-seated ideology to this day (Jimin, 2024; H. Kim, 2015; Manek, 2023). Since the Joseon era, women have had limits placed on three basic aspects of life that should be their right. The first is the restricted access to education on the grounds that the education of men should be prioritized (Jimin, 2024; Novianty, 2024). These education restrictions not only differentiate between women and men, but also outline internal discrimination based on status, namely between noble and common women. Common women were not allowed to access education at all (Manek, 2023). Meanwhile, noble women could learn about the rules of the household and receive a basic education. Second, the political and social roles of women during the Joseon period were also restricted. Women were prohibited from involvement in politics and instead expected to focus on domestic life (Manek, 2023). This meant the home was their only focus in life after marriage (H. Kim, 2015). These restrictions on women were also accompanied by the right for men and society to impose physical punishment and social sanctions on women who violated them (see table 1).

In addition to restrictions on education and political and social roles, women were discriminated against by burdening them with the labels of both mother and wife. During this time, Confucianism deeply shaped the way society viewed women. Women were seen as mere reproductive organs. They were not allowed to have dreams for themselves or even go so far as to imagine that they could have the space to develop themselves as men did (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022; H. Choi, 2009). Women were told to focus on giving birth to sons to continue the family line, further strengthening the patriarchal system. Even from birth, babies were placed in a hierarchy, where male babies had greater value in the family than female babies (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022; H. Choi, 2009; Manek, 2023).

In addition to their obligations as mothers and wives, women in ancient Korea were not even free to seek divorce. For a divorce to be granted, a woman had to prove they had genuinely suffered neglect or severe physical abuse. Divorce was very easily accessible for husbands, but almost impossible for wives (H. Choi, 2009; Shim et al., 2013). This was also

exacerbated by most women lacking access to education, thereby limiting their ability to defend themselves (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022; Manek, 2023). Beyond just discrimination in divorce, women also faced injustice in inheritance rights as they were not granted an inheritance unless there was no male heir in the family (Shim et al., 2013).

The injustices instilled by Confucian values and the patriarchal system it spawned did not end when the Joseon empire ended. Women's suffering continued and even worsened during the Japanese colonization from around 1910 to 1945 (see table 1). Most discrimination during this period took the form of labor exploitation and sexual exploitation. Labor exploitation included women being used as cheap labor in factories and agriculture under poor working conditions and without commensurate wages. Japanese authorities also sexually exploited women through the 'comfort women' system, a euphemism for sexual slavery (*hwanyangnyeon/* 화냥년) (Jimin, 2024; Manek, 2023). Women were housed in special locations referred to as 'comfort camps'[2] and suffered violent experiences daily. Japanese colonization marked a transformative period in physical discrimination, leaving a lasting trauma on South Korean women (Manek, 2023; Thomas, 2012) (see table 1).

Despite the development of South Korea over time, the Confucian values and patriarchal system nurtured by society have persisted, becoming embedded in the social structure of the country and placing women in an inferior position compared to men. This has resulted in an enduring sense of injustice that continues to overshadow women in South Korea. Even in the 1950s and 1960s, many women still did not have access to proper education (Jimin, 2024; Manek, 2023) and, as a result, did not have better career opportunities and remained trapped in domestic work. Even those who managed to get jobs still had to face injustice in the workplace because they were women. Women were trapped in a society dominated by a patriarchal system and were left with no space to voice their opinions (Arifahsasti & Iskandar, 2022;

[2] This comfort camps is used during Japanese colonization to fulfill the lust of Japanese soldiers while insulting the dignity of women which also refer to as the sex camps (Manek, 2023; Thomas, 2012).

Jimin, 2024). Moreover, they could not challenge male dominance, either in the family or in society. The only jobs available to them were menial tasks in the informal sector. As a result, stereotypes developed framing women as being suitable for and synonymous with 'menial and lowly jobs' (S. Choi & Park, 2019).

During the 1970s there was a change in the social structure of South Korean society due to massive industrialization, which in turn resulted in increased demand for labor. During this time, the share of females in the workplace increased rapidly, though their wages remained low and generally less than those of men (S. Choi & Park, 2019). Unfortunately, the increase in the proportion of women in the labor sector also led to an increase in harassment. This further illustrated the low position of women in South Korea due to the patriarchal system and Confucian values. As a result of the massive discrimination against women, organized voices of protest through feminist movements began to emerge in the 1980s (S. Choi & Park, 2019; Hur, 2014).

The Progression of the Feminist Movement

During the 1980s, the feminist movement emerged as a form of resistance to the enduring injustice experienced by women in South Korea. It was a form of protest against the patriarchal system in South Korea, where women persistently experienced discrimination in education, work and in the family. The prolonged and painful experiences endured by South Korean women over an extended period fostered resentment, hatred, and trauma toward the patriarchal system. (Manek, 2023).

Year	Case	Description
2009	Jang Ja Yeon Actress Suicide Case	Actress Jang Ja Yeon committed suicide and left a letter stating that she was forced to attend hundreds parties and provide sexual favors to 31 men who were journalists and entertainment figures. The case was

		reopened in 2019 (The Korea Times, 2019).
2016	Gangnam Station Murder Case	On 17 May 2016, a woman was stabbed by a man in a public bathroom near Gangnam Station because he felt ignored by all women. However, the murder was initially framed as a 'random killing' due to mental illness, triggering a public backlash. In response to the case, people gathered and initiated "sticky note activism." They placed post-it notes on Gangnam Station Exit 10, along with chrysanthemum flowers as a symbol of mourning. Most of the notes contained messages expressing sadness and anger over the incident. (J. Kim, 2021a; Yamanaka, 2022).
2018	Sexual Harassment Experienced by Seo Jihyeon	This case sparked a great deal of interest from South Korean society and encouraged other women to speak up about their experiences of sexual harassment through the #MeTooMovement. It gained momentum following the confession of prosecutor Seo Jihyeon during a JTBC interview, where she revealed the sexual harassment she had experienced in 2010. She admitted to enduring misogynistic treatment in her workplace, which had undermined her self-esteem and led her to blame herself for the incidents. Seo Jihyeon's courage inspired other women to speak out about their own experiences, amplifying the #MeToo movement across the country. (Saraswati et al., 2022).

2022 (year the report was published)	Sexism within Political Parties	This included the story of Park, a 28-year-old who joined the liberal opposition party at their request to help reform politics and improve the representation of young women. Unfortunately, she began receiving death threats and facing hostile treatment. When she reported these traumatic experiences to the party's stakeholders during meetings, she was ignored and told to focus solely on topics she was presumed to know, such as women's issues and gender discrimination.(Mackenzie, 2022).
2024	25 March Murder Case in Hwaseong, Gyeonggi	Kim Re-ah (26 years old) stabbed his girlfriend because she asked to end their relationship. Kim also attacked his girlfriend's mother (46 year old) causing severe injuries that required her to be hospitalized for weeks (Jaeeun, 2024).
	April Murder Case in Geoje, South Gyeongsang	A 19-year old man was found guilty of assaulting his 19-year old ex-girlfriend on 1 April. The attack led to the woman suffering a severe hemorrhage leading to her death on 10 April (Jaeeun, 2024).

Table 2. Several Examples of Discrimination against Women in the Contemporary Era. **Source:** compiled from various sources (Jaeeun, 2024; J. Kim, 2021a; Mackenzie, 2022; Saraswati et al., 2022; Sheikh, 2021; The Korea Times, 2019; Yamanaka, 2022)

Traumatic experiences generating resentment have served as the most significant factor galvanizing the feminist movement in South Korea. For example, the "Gangnam Station Murder" case in 2016 served as a key trigger for the emergence of radical feminism in South Korea (see table 2). The incident was a 'wakeup call' of sorts for the community,

especially women, who realized that the issue of discrimination against women rarely received attention from the government and society (Yamanaka, 2022). The gender injustice experienced by women has greatly impacted their lives, for example, many companies in South Korea prioritize men for managerial positions, even if there are more suitable female candidates with outstanding qualifications (S. Choi & Park, 2019; Jimin, 2024).

The resentment created by women's bitter experiences of gender-based violence fosters opposition to the patriarchal system or any system that provides support for gender-based discrimination and violence (Novianty, 2024). This can also be seen in the protests against South Korea's inhumane beauty standards. Beauty standards are considered a legitimate 'measure' in determining whether someone is attractive and a justification for humiliating and degrading others who are believed to not meet these standards. This led to the emergence of the "Escape the Corset" protest movement, where women discarded beauty products and cut their hair as a symbolic act, rejecting pressure to conform to society's beauty standards (Shin & Lee, 2022).

The feminist movement is not only driven by traumatic experiences but also serves as a medium for many to reduce the traumatic effects of their experiences. Women who often experience violence to the point of trauma often find the feminist movement to be a medium to strengthen themselves through sharing experiences and receiving mutual support. As a result, the feminist movement often advocates for regulatory reform to tighten protections for victims of discrimination and sexual violence. One of the most popular movements of this type was the "Me Too Movement". This movement aimed to provide space for victims to reveal their experiences of sexual harassment at the hands of influential figures, including actors and politicians (Saraswati et al., 2022; Sheikh, 2021) (see table 2).

The combination of enduring injustices—resentment, hatred, and trauma—has created a powerful emotional dynamic that has strengthened the feminist movement in South Korea. Over time, the movement has undergone various transformations, particularly in its focus on emancipation and equality (see table 3).

Period	Emancipation Focus	Progress
Colonial Japan (1910-1945)	Feminism at this time was focused on fighting for better education and emancipation from the roles of mother and wife (H. Choi, 2009; Manek, 2023)	The emergence of "new women" (*sinyeonseong*/신년성), who rejected the patriarchal system and pushed for gender equality in the family and education (Manek, 2023)
Post-Independence and Modern Era (1945 to 1980s)	Feminism at this time began to focus on fighting for legal and political rights to increase women's opportunities to work in the public sphere. Activists also protested against military dictatorships and launched pro-democracy movements calling for equal pay and social protections (Manek, 2023)	One of the advances achieved by the feminist movement during this period was the adoption of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1987, which became a milestone for gender equality in the workplace (Y. L. Kim, 2011)
Contemporary Era (1990s to present)	Technology has had positive and negative impacts on the feminist movement in South Korea. It has made it easier for activists to launch campaigns. However, cyberspace has forced feminists to deal with a wider range of issues. For example, emancipation has expanded to preventing *cyber bullying* and gender-based violence in cyberspace (D. O. Kim et al., 2020; Sheikh, 2021)	The "Me Too Movement" enabled victims of sexual harassment to speak up about their experiences. The "Me Too Movement" served as a wake-up call and an early milestone in reforming policies that did not accommodate gender equality and women's rights (Sheikh, 2021)

Table 3. The Development of Feminism from the Japanese Colonial Period to Contemporary Era

Based on this table, international developments have also influenced the development of feminism. In turn, the typology of feminism has also diversified over time, including the recent emergence of digital feminism. This form of feminism aims to make people aware of urgent gender issues by utilizing technology and social media. It has expanded the scope of feminism to encompass discrimination and violence experienced by women in cyberspace, which often does not receive appropriate attention. For example, digital feminists campaigned for the criminalization of technologies such as spy cams used for snooping purposes. (Jimin, 2024; J. Kim, 2021b; Manek, 2023; Mohajan, 2022; Novianty, 2024) (see table 3).

The contemporary feminist movement often internalizes the concept of being 'victims,' leading to a series of justifications for actions or ideas they perceive as failing to meet their 'moral' standards (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). According to Habermas, this process is 'non-moral' and undermines the true definition of morality (Rees, 2020). This tendency to justify and rationalize has contributed to the emergence of new victims, particularly in the context of the Islamophobia campaign. Here, feminists' communication and actions are significantly influenced by media framing, much of which originates from Western countries (Sheikh, 2021; Tavkhelidze, 2021). However, Islamophobia in South Korea exhibits unique characteristics compared to Europe and the United States, where it is often linked to national security threats. In South Korea, stereotypes are more closely associated with misogyny (Eum, 2017; Koo, 2018). This contributes to challenges in defining 'discrimination' and determining 'responsibility,' ultimately creating additional victims. As Giusta and Bosworth observed in literature on psychology, individuals with deeply ingrained prejudices are more likely to perceive situations as unfairly rigged rather than reevaluating their beliefs (Giusta & Bosworth, 2020). This cognitive bias further complicates the ability to objectively interpret or define key issues, leading to continued cycles of misinterpretation and victimization.

Feminist Movements, Xenophobia and Islamophobia

After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States on September 11, 2001, there was an increased focus globally on the alleged threat posed by Muslims (Büyükgebiz, 2021; Saputra, 2018). This was reinforced by the United States' call for a Global War on Terror (GWOT). The world became unstable and increasing distrust and suspicion began to be directed at Muslim communities in various parts of the world. The United States and Europe became initial points for the emergence of Islamophobic statements and associating the threat of terrorism with Muslims and Islam. Stereotypes also linked Islam to support for patriarchy and misogyny (Eum, 2017; Koo, 2018). These Islamophobic sentiments soon reached East Asia and were soon reflected in countries like South Korea. These sentiments were closely linked the role of the feminist movement and the surge in cases of violence against women (Manek, 2023; Srimulyani, 2021). Consequently, concerns surrounding these issues often focused on non-traditional security, particularly as related to gender dynamics. Additionally, the influx of migrant workers, the majority of whom are Muslims, exacerbated widespread xenophobia. This xenophobia has further fueled Islamophobic sentiments, strengthening their presence in South Korean society (Jang & Choi, 2012; Srimulyani, 2021).

The arrival of migrants from Muslim-majority countries began in 1988. As South Korea's economy grew, industries sought minimum wage workers prompting the government to relax its immigration policy. Most migrants came from Southeast and South Asia, or from Yemen in the Middle East. Prior to this surge in immigration, South Korea had been a largely homogenous society (Jang & Choi, 2012; Sheikh, 2021; Srimulyani, 2021).

However, the massive wave of immigrants resulted in a new form of discrimination, namely xenophobia. The ethnic and cultural homogeneity of South Korean society is a significant factor contributing to the emergence of xenophobia. The concept of "ethnic nationalism" serves as a natural defense mechanism for South Koreans, heightening awareness of external threats. The bitter legacy of the Japanese colonial era (1910–1945) reinforced the importance of national unity among

South Koreans, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. In addition to ethnic nationalism, South Korea has a family-level narrative rooted in the concept of *minjok* (민족), which emphasizes strong bonds of blood and descent within a shared geographical area. This concept is deeply ingrained within families, becoming a hereditary legacy that shapes societal mindsets and assumptions toward anything outside the *minjok* framework. As a result, xenophobia and racism have become prevalent phenomena in South Korea, shaped by both historical experiences and cultural narratives (Eum, 2017; Oppenheim, 2007).

Muslim immigrants, who were not only non-citizens but practiced a religion alien to Korean culture, often became targets of discrimination and violence. Prejudices against Islam and Muslims were a result of western media coverage absorbed by the South Koreans. According to Habermas, truth claims can occur in a dialogical process involving related parties. But in this case, Islam and Muslims are persecuted and generalized despite generally being a peaceful part of South Korean society (Eum, 2017; Koo, 2018; Rees, 2020; Srimulyani, 2021).

Islamophobic sentiments, amplified by unsubstantiated claims, underscore the imbalance of power in social interactions. Habermas said that discussion space is not created if there is an asymmetry of power. The more powerful party prevents social interaction (Kirom, 2020; Rees, 2020). This was reflected in South Korea, as Muslim immigrants were not equal to citizens and therefore did not have as much power as citizens in influencing public discussions (Srimulyani, 2021). Moreover, South Korean media largely focused its coverage on issues that reinforced negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. For example, media reports about *hijab* and *niqab* often framed this clothing as a form of repression against women or a symbolic form of patriarchal superiority over women (Eum, 2017). In addition, cases of forced marriages in Muslim-majority countries were also used to reinforce the stereotype of Islam as a religion that promotes discrimination and misogyny. The Muslim community was not given space to address these issues, either by the media or the local population.

The prevailing mindset in South Korean society toward Islam and Muslims was ultimately shaped by those who controlled communication platforms, which, in turn, influenced the women's emancipation movement. Media, societal, and structural reinforcement of negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims have formed the foundation for the feminist movement's Islamophobic campaigns. Additionally, the movement's strong desire to eliminate all forms of discrimination, violence, and patriarchal systems has further fueled their opposition to Islam and Muslims (Eum, 2017; Jimin, 2024; Koo, 2018).

This dynamic is compounded by systemic distortions in communication caused by media framing and enduring injustices, which prevent the creation of ideal conditions for communicative action, as outlined by Habermas (Rees, 2020). Generalizations and one-sided claims are evident in the feminist movement's reactions, such as through the "Me Too Movement," which has, at times, also targeted Muslims unfairly (Sheikh, 2021).

Islamophobia Campaign: "Victims of Victims"

Feminist movements' Islamophobia campaigns largely target Muslim immigrants, whether they are men or women, especially if they are pious (Srimulyani, 2021). Habermas said that there are many factors that cause distortions in achieving ideal communicative action, one of which is discrimination against the persecuted group while the group is excluded from the discussion. This limits their participation. Therefore, the opportunity for communication manipulation is even greater. The feminist movement has taken this approach by accepting one-sided claims from the media and reproducing them in the form of Islamophobia campaigns (Habermas, 1974; Kirom, 2020; Muttaqien, 2023; Rees, 2020; Sheikh, 2021).

A case in point in recent years is the "Me Too Movement", which started in South Korea in 2018. The South Korean "Me Too Movement" was pioneered by a prosecutor named Seo Ji-hyeon, who shared the story of the sexual harassment she experienced from her senior colleagues, triggering an outpouring of similar stories from other women across the

country (see table 2). The movement culminated in a large-scale demonstration held in April 2018 in the middle of Seoul City (H. M. Kim & Chang, 2021; Saraswati et al., 2022; Sheikh, 2021).

In March 2018, this movement became a 'trend' of sorts, as more women began sharing their experiences as victims of sexual harassment (Saraswati et al., 2022). In response, the South Korean government reformed the penalties for perpetrators of violence and sexual harassment against women in April 2018. This marked a turning point in raising awareness about sexual harassment issues in the country. However, this progress also led to unintended consequences. In workplaces, a new form of discrimination emerged as men became hesitant to interact with female colleagues, fearing they would be accused of violence or harassment (H. M. Kim & Chang, 2021; Saraswati et al., 2022).

This resembles a double-edged sword. On one hand, the movement contributed to reform of regulations related to sexual harassment, violence against women and increased public awareness on this issue. But on the other hand, it led to an increase in anti-foreign sentiment, particularly targeting Muslim refugees and immigrants. The anti-refugee movement is mostly dominated by feminists and reinforces stereotypes that Muslim men are perpetrators of violence against women. Activists also promote hashtags referring to Muslim men as *'rapefugees'*, in an attempt to frame Muslim men as being sex criminals who represent a threat to women in South Korea. Activists have launched Islamophobia campaigns in cyberspace targeting Muslim men. In these instances, the feminist movement has joined forces with right-wing Christian groups and anti-multicultural groups to spread fear of Muslim men based on fake news (Eum, 2017; Jimin, 2024; Koo, 2018; Sheikh, 2021; Srimulyani, 2021). Thus, the movement became a medium for the implementation of certain group interests, which in turn justified manipulation to achieve those interests.

The correlation between the resentment, trauma and hatred formed due to enduring injustice experienced by South Korean women with the Islamophobia campaign can be seen in the fear shown upon the arrival of 500 male Muslim refugees from Yemen (Sheikh, 2021). 'Muslim', 'male' and 'Yemen' were linked in the minds of many feminists with the

assumption of 'men from a patriarchal country are a threat to women', prompting an aggressive reaction from the movement. This is despite the fact that the "Me Too" movement did not start with cases of violence or sexual harassment committed by Muslims (see table 2) (H. M. Kim & Chang, 2021; Saraswati et al., 2022).

The feminist movement and anti-refugee protesters promoted two key slogans: "we do not want to be like Europe" and "kick out fake refugees!" (Sheikh, 2021). The first slogan highlights the influence of Western media in crafting negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. In this case, Western media created generalizations that anyone from Yemen was a supporter of extreme patriarchy (Koo, 2018; Perocco, 2018), which then exacerbated the stereotype that Muslims oppress women (Eum, 2017). The second slogan, meanwhile, featured a one-sided claim in the term 'fake refugee'. This phrase shows the projection of fear and trauma of past oppression, resulting in the manipulation of information to justify activists' proposal to deport refugees (Jang & Choi, 2012; Manek, 2023; Sheikh, 2021; Srimulyani, 2021). The messages contained in the feminist movement's Islamophobia campaigns correlate with the accumulation of enduring injustice they have experienced, namely resentment, trauma and hatred. This reflects the projection and reproduction of these emotions onto Muslims and Islam, which are perceived as embodying and supporting the patriarchal system.

The creation of another 'victim' from the resentment, trauma and hatred experienced by the feminist movement has obscured the way people define 'discrimination'. The feminist movement sees discrimination as something that is only caused by male dominance. As the Western media has portrayed Islam and Muslims as supporters of patriarchal systems and oppression against women, the feminist movement has started to see the issue from this side only. This is despite the fact that discrimination is often triggered by various factors, e.g. work environment, educational background or societal characteristics. Its roots are also varied and can involve prejudices or stereotypes or even simply attitudes categorizing certain individuals or groups in a certain way (Giusta & Bosworth, 2020; Yasar, 2024). Thus,

discrimination is caused by various factors ranging from social to political factors culminating in intersectionality. However, the feminist movement overlooks the definition and causes of the discrimination they have suffered due to a combination of factors, such as Western media portrayals of Islam and Muslims, homogeneity, ethnic nationalism and the patriarchal society of South Korea. Therefore, in South Korean feminist movements seeking to defend the rights of women, they have created another victim, contributing to the formation of a 'victims of victims' cycle.

Conclusion

The feminist movement in South Korea emerged in the 1980s as a form of protest against the deep-seated influence of Confucianism and the inherent patriarchal system in social life in South Korea. Protests born from resentment, hatred and trauma over the enduring injustice experienced from the Goguryeo kingdom to the contemporary era motivated the feminist movement to take an aggressive stance against all threats to women. These aggressive actions lead to one-sided claims and justification for various public campaigns, including reproducing Islamophobic sentiments introduced by Western media. As a result, the South Korean feminist movement has adopted anti-Islamic messaging and unconsciously repeats the oppression suffered by women in the past but this time targeting immigrants, refugees and Muslim communities in South Korea. This phenomenon creates a cycle, generating new 'victims out of victims'.

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