Korea Journal, vol. 61, no. 4 (winter 2021): 75–101.
doi: 10.25024/kj.2021.61.4.75
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The Resurgence and Popularization of Feminism in South Korea: *Key Issues and Challenges for Contemporary Feminist Activism*

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the ways in which feminist activism has, since 2015, gained new momentum in South Korea in terms of its scope, reach, and range of agendas. Building on existing scholarly discussions of feminist movements and gender politics, I first situate the resurgence of feminism within the broader historical and socio-political context of Korean society, including the diversification of social movements generally in post-authoritarian Korea, women's precarious status, and the rise of misogyny. I then discuss the main characteristics of feminist activism on digital media and their implications, in particular, the broad range of feminist subjects, the extension of sites for and methods of struggle, and the emergence and centering of gendered issues within digital environments. Lastly, I assess the limitations of the term "young young feminist" and the diverse politics and controversies associated with contemporary feminist activism, with a focus on the critiques of raetpem (self-identified 'radical feminists'). The paper concludes with an argument for intersectional and transnational feminism and suggestions for future research into feminist activism.

Keywords: feminism, feminist activism, South Korea, gender, social movement, digital media, intersectionality

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I appreciate the efforts of the two reviewers of this paper for their valuable criticism and insightful suggestions. I also thank Drs. Ji-Hyun Ahn, Minwoo Jung, Jennifer Kang, Sara Liao, and the members of the Geopolitics of the Popular research group at CARGC for reading earlier versions of this article and offering constructive feedback.

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Introduction: The *Feminism Reboot* Since 2015

This paper provides an overview of the ways in which feminist activism has gained new momentum in South Korea (hereafter Korea) in terms of its scope, reach, and range of agenda. Specifically, since 2015, Korean society has witnessed the resurgence of feminist activism in what has been called a "feminism reboot" (Sohn 2017). Originating in film literature, the term "reboot" is suggestive of both the continuity of and differences between the feminist activism that has emerged since 2015 on the one hand and, on the other, earlier feminist movements in the country, for example, the cyber feminism staged by "young feminists" from the 1990s to 2000s (Sohn 2017).

A key moment of in the recent feminism reboot came in February 2015, when thousands of tweets with the hashtag #iamafeminist were posted on Twitter collectively reclaiming feminist identity in the face of the prevalent anti-feminist sentiment in Korea (J. Kim 2017). Since then, "An epic battle between feminism and deep-seated misogyny is under way in South Korea" that has involved a dramatic expansion of feminist activism against misogyny across the country (Steger 2016). Among the fronts in this battle, in August 2015, in the midst of an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), activists created *Megalia* (www.megalian.com), a website dedicated to challenging misogyny and employing in particular a gender-swapping strategy that involved "mirroring" hate speech so as to turn misogynistic discourse back on itself (E. Jeong and Lee 2018). Then, in 2016, thousands of people occupied and left sticky notes at the Gangnam subway station in Seoul to protest the misogynistic killing of a woman there and gender-based violence in Korea generally (N. Lee 2016). In 2018, more than 300,000 women participated in a series of protests against the non-consensual filming and distribution of images of women, setting a record for the largest series of rallies yet staged by Korean women's movements (H. Kang 2018). Further, feminist activists have placed the issue of sexual violence facilitated by digital technology on the national agenda, including the "nth room case," which involved the sexual enslavement and exploitation of underage girls and the dissemination of images of them on the encrypted messaging application Telegram (Y. Seo 2020). In such ways,

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feminist activism has been radically reshaping Korean society over the past few years, with the result that it has become nearly impossible to discuss any aspect of any sector, from politics and religion to culture and the economy, without raising gender issues.

This resurgence of activism has extended the reach of feminism, its popularization being reflected in the sheer numbers of self-identified feminists and participants in various protests. Thus, for example, nearly half (48.9%) of the Korean women in their 20s who responded to a 2019 survey by the Korean Women's Development Institute (2019) identified as feminists. Despite the progress and achievements of Korean feminists in recent decades, strong negative perceptions of feminism persist in the country. The situation remains dynamic, but, as the popularity of the 2015 #iamafeminist hashtag activism indicates, identifying oneself as a feminist in Korea has not only ceased to be taboo but is even trending and making an impact on popular culture. This popularization of feminism represents a significant and meaningful inflection point in the history of women's and feminist movements in Korea.

Building on the existing scholarly literature on feminist activism in Korea, I offer in this paper answers to a series of questions relating to these recent developments: How and why has feminist activism become popular at this juncture? What characteristics define the resurgence of feminist activism in Korea since 2015? What are the continuities and discontinuities of this activism with the long history of Korean women's movements? What is the significance of this activism within the broader context of Korean social movements and politics?

In addressing these issues, I first situate the resurgence of feminism since 2015 within the broader context of Korean society. Next, I examine the use of digital media for the popularization of feminism in terms of opening up new opportunities, spaces, and tactics for activism. I then survey and discuss the diverse politics and controversies associated with contemporary feminist activism focusing on a case study of the controversy over raetpem (self-identified 'radical feminists'). I conclude the discussion by considering some of the implications of recent developments and suggesting directions for future research into feminist activism.

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The Historical and Socio-political Context of the Recent Surge of Feminist Activism

I begin the discussion by historicizing and contextualizing the resurgence of recent feminist activism in Korea. My aim here is to identify the social, cultural, and economic conditions that have contributed to the popularization of feminism in Korea at this moment. Drawing on existing scholarly discussions, I explicate the key factors behind the resurgence of Korean feminist movements, including the diversification of social movements generally, the legacy and limitations of earlier women's movements, women's precarious status, and the rise of misogyny in post-authoritarian Korea.

The place of the resurgence of feminist activism in the broader context of social movements can be seen in the so-called "87 regime" following Korean democratization in 1987 (Bo-Myung Kim 2018a). In her study of youth internet activism in post-authoritarian Korea, Kang has pointed out the diversity in social movements introduced by the advent of new types of social actors and of various modes of political participation through use of the Internet as a "vibrant space for grassroots discourse" (Jiyeon Kang 2016, 46). In contrast to the social and political movements led by progressive students and activists in the 1980s, in the protests since 2010, ordinary citizens have taken the initiative. From high school students to young mothers, they have frequently mobilized as members of online communities and social networking sites (Cho 2019).

To be clear, Korean women have always participated actively in social and political activism, from the Korean Independence Movement to the female workers' movements in the 1970s (Ching and Louie 1995). However, their efforts have largely been framed as part of (or subsumed under) the broader efforts to achieve democratization and labor reform (Nelson and Cho 2016). It was not until the 1980s that women's movements in Korea began raising more gender-specific issues, including sexual violence, domestic violence, and discrimination against women in the labor market. This activism led, in 1987, to the establishment of Korean Women's Associations United as an umbrella group for various progressive women's organizations. In the 2000s, under a series of relatively progressive

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governments, Korean women's movements successfully raised such issues as equal employment, violence against women and girls, and the mainstreaming of gender-equality policies, their efforts culminating in the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001 (K. Kim 2002; Seung-Kyung Kim and K. Kim 2011).

Amid these rapid and numerous legal and institutional achievements, disputes have arisen among feminist scholars regarding the institutionalization of feminist movements (Hwang 2006; K. Kim 2002; Seung-Kyung Kim and K. Kim 2011). Thus, the mainstream women's movements have been criticized for emphasizing organization, weakening grassroots movements, and prioritizing women from privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Hwang 2006). As Han and Chun (2014, 246) put it, "despite the success of state feminism—that is, the promotion of gender equality in law, policymaking, and governance at multiple levels—there have been limited gains for women when it comes to the socioeconomic sphere."

This is an accurate description of the current conditions in Korea, particularly the precarity and hardship that have often characterized women's lives in the context of the long recession and neoliberal structuring following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (or 'IMF Crisis,' as it is called in Korea). In particular, critics have dramatized the difficulties and frustrations of young Koreans with such terms as "Sampo Generation"—the word *sampo* meaning "three things given up," the "three" being dating, marriage, and child-rearing—and "880,000-won Generation"—referring to the meager monthly salary (roughly US$750) earned by those navigating the increasingly flexible labor market that is indicative of the country's widening wealth gap. However, as feminist scholars have noted, this generational discourse often erases gender disparity within this generation by assuming the subject of the discourse to be young men (W. Han 2017; Ryu 2015; Bohyeong Kim 2021). Further, the post-feminist myth regarding women's power and agency and the neoliberal discourse about individual success and happiness have left unaddressed the structural issues of gendered precariousness and the specific frustration experienced by young Korean

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women (Bo-Myung Kim 2018a).[1]

What is worse, the rise of misogynistic discourse since the 2010s has mainly targeted young women, blaming them for the frustration experienced by young men with the economic recession and precarity and, especially, the decline in the male breadwinner ideology and challenges to hegemonic masculinity (E. Bae 2015; S. Kim 2015). Online misogyny in Korea became a subject of controversy and was recognized as a serious social issue with respect to the conservative community *Ilbe* (www.ilbe.com) (M. Kim 2014; Um 2016; Yun 2013). Since 2010, *Ilbe* is a notorious far-right populist community in Korea that has developed and hosted various forms of hate discourse and trolling culture directed against women and minority groups. For example, the *Ilbe* community turned a new coinage, kimchi-nyeo/n (kimchi girl/woman, bitch), into an online buzzword as part of its ongoing effort to homogenize, stigmatize, and berate Korean women generally as selfish, irresponsible, and materialistic (J. Kim 2018). Once popularized by *Ilbe*, the term and discourse came to be used more broadly in Korean society. Building on a long history of sexism on the web going back to the 1990s in Korea (KwonKim 2000, 2017), online misogyny has intensified recently in both scale and nature, becoming more vitriolic, prolonged, and organized.

Broadly speaking, the resurgence of feminist activism in Korea can also be situated within the current context of the global opposition to misogyny by transnational feminist activism. The power of hateful and misogynistic rhetoric has also been felt increasingly in politics worldwide in recent years, especially through digital media (Drüeke and Zobl 2016; Eagle 2015; Keller et al 2018; Nuñez Puente 2011). Within this intensified violent environment targeting young women, the term "misogyny" became a powerful word to articulate young women's everyday experiences, drew explosive responses from the public, and fueled anti-misogyny activism in Korea. Thus *Megalia*, the aforementioned website often considered the origin of the feminist

1. Since the 1990s, post-feminism has been discussed and characterized by the promotion of individualism, women's autonomous choice, and the emphasis on female success and empowerment, notions that are deeply entangled with neoliberalism (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004).

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reboot, was launched precisely to challenge this prevalent misogyny with its mirroring strategy (Jang 2016; E. Jeong and J. Lee 2018). In this sense, to the extent that popular misogyny has been a "reactive response to popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 37) in American and European contexts, popular misogyny has been serving, in turn, as a key driver of the resurgence and popularization of feminism in Korea. In the process, digital media have become a key battlefield for Korean feminists and misogynists.

Digital Media and New Practices of Feminist Activism

One of the key characteristics of the resurgence of feminism since 2015 in Korea has been its facilitation by digital media. Thanks to such platforms and tools as Twitter, Facebook, online communities, online petition sites, instant messaging applications, and Wikis, many current feminist issues are being widely discussed, and plans to deal with them are being organized and put into action. Media scholars have noted the potential of digital media for social movements in terms of providing mobilization tools and organizational opportunities without the need for formal organizational institutions and membership, as well as the potential for enabling alternative framing processes that bypass traditional mass media gatekeepers (Garrett 2006; Earl and Kimport 2011; Castells 2012; Lievrouw 2011). Likewise, digital media have extended the reach, scope, methods, and range of agendas of feminist activism in Korea, prompting Korean media and feminist scholars to emphasize the digital nature of the current feminism reboot (Sohn 2017; Bo-Myung Kim 2018a; Ae-Ra Kim 2019). For example, in her study of *Megalia*, Jang (2016) characterized the users of the site as "digital natives" born and raised within the digital environment after the popularization of the computer and Internet in Korea, for whom engagement with digital technologies is natural. So it was that the site's users actively repurposed media content and recirculated counter-speech to oppose everyday sexism and misogyny online.

Here, I draw attention to three main characteristics of feminist activism on digital media and their implications—in particular, the diversification of

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feminist subjects, the extension of sites for and methods of struggle, and the emergence and centering of gendered issues within digital environments. To start with, the increasing diversity of the groups organizing spontaneously through digital media has been extending the reach of feminism. For example, hashtag feminist activism such as #MeToo has been an effective tool and feature of current digital feminist activism globally (Mendes et al. 2019; Jackson et al. 2019; Eagle 2015; Lin and Yang 2019; John 2020). As the #MeToo movement has recently demonstrated, digital media have also facilitated the global circulation of transnational feminist ideas and activism. In my study of the hashtag activism #iamafeminist on Twitter (J. Kim 2017), I revealed the contribution of the hashtag as an affordance of digital media to the realization of the well-known feminist slogan "the personal is political" in Korea by connecting personal stories to the broader social and structural gender inequality and prevalent misogyny. Though the slogan is, of course, well-established, this hashtag activism on Twitter is distinctive in that it has brought together individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their concerns regarding gender issues, and thereby helped to lower the barriers to identifying as a feminist.

In this sense, the popularization of feminism has recently taken a distinct form and, as the word "reboot" indicates, is not a recent phenomenon. Young Ja Lee (2002) has discussed the situation in the 1990s, when women's movements emerged as a distinct force amid the broader progressive democratic and labor movement in Korea. By raising women's issues from the perspective of women as a collective identity, activists at that time sought to extend the reach of feminism. Lee drew attention to two main goals of that phase in the popularization of feminism: first, increasing the direct participation of those beyond the small circle of elite academic experts and activists in the movement generally and in organizational activities specifically, and, second, garnering publicity through popular media platforms so as to attract public support. The movement's strategy in this regard was based on the assumption that women's and feminist organizations would continue to take the lead. For example, some of the popularization efforts in the 1990s included efforts to abolish the *hoju* (traditional family-head) system and to organize irregular women workers as well as staging of the Anti-Miss

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Korea Festival. These efforts included outreach to the public in the form of organizing either marginalized women or public campaigns on their behalf.

By contrast, however, as seen in the example of hashtag activism, ordinary young women for the most part have initiated and led the current phase of feminist activism through grassroots processes without the direction of existing feminist organizations. In many cases, the existing women's organizations have united in support of grassroots approaches to gender issues that have been publicized through digital media platforms.

Second, digital media have helped feminist activists to broaden the scope of their efforts in terms of both sites of struggle and methods. However, this does not mean that feminist activism in Korea is limited to online contexts, for, contrary to the popular online/offline dichotomy, many newly self-identified feminists in Korea have participated in offline activism from the start. This convergence of online and offline activism is another distinguishing characteristic of contemporary feminism in Korea. Examples include the reaction to the aforementioned 2016 Gangnam Station murder case, with ordinary citizens expressing their rage and horror at the femicide with both sticky notes affixed to a wall near the murder scene and social media. Thus, after the idea of commemorating the victim emerged on Twitter and then was widely shared in various online communities, visitors to Gangnam Station left sticky notes and posted them on social media to encourage others to participate (J. Kim 2021). Likewise, for many of the participants in feminist activism, digital media have become but part of their daily lives. Thus, alongside the use of social media for such purposes as daily social communication, many accounts, pages, and groups on social media have been created for and dedicated to the discussion of feminist issues. For example, as part of the so-called "escape-the-corset" movement (Kuhn 2019), a collective rejection by women of the beauty standards called "K-beauty" imposed on them, participants actively posted and shared such symbolic practices as cutting their hair short and smashing their cosmetics and encouraged others to join the movement through various social media

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platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Ae-Ra Kim 2019).[2]

In terms of organization, this activism has been taking various forms online and offline. Some feminist groups have established offline NGOs (e.g., Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center, Flame Femi Action, and Femimonsters), while others have continued to network and organize action mainly through informal online communities. The 2018 protests against nonconsensual images and videos, for example, were organized through an online café called Uncomfortable Courage. While their organizational forms differ, these feminist groups have all been making extensive use of social media for their activism.

Lastly, as part of Korea's current feminist reboot, the key issues are being explored from increasingly diverse perspectives, including many that are unique to digital culture. An example is sexual violence facilitated by digital media (Yun 2020; H. Han 2018). Though the issue of cyber sexual violence has been raised in the country since the early 2000s, it has often been trivialized and deemed less worthy of attention than so-called real-world sexual abuse, such as rape, the common public perception being that cyber sexual violence somehow does not involve a real assault (N. Hong 2018; Seo 2017). Challenging this perception, recent feminist efforts have foregrounded the issue of digital sexual violence and placed it on the national agenda. Representative of this situation is the sexual violence involving the production and sharing of nonconsensual images and videos through digital technologies and platforms—one of the issues publicized by *Megalia* at its inception. Opposition to this practice led in 2016 to the shutdown of *SoraNet*, Korea's largest pornographic website and, in particular, a breeding ground for so-called *revenge porn*, nonconsensual videos, and images of gang rape and child sexual exploitation, which had been in operation since 1999 (Taylor and Kim 2018). The 2018 mass protests against the non-consensual filming of women and distribution of the images also reflected growing social awareness of and public attention to the issue of digital sexual violence. Also, opposition to digital sexual violence

2. These women liken social pressure relating to standardized femininity and feminine beauty ideals to a corset and, accordingly, have dubbed their movement "escape the corset."

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has expanded to take into account AI chatbot and deepfake pornography, further problematizing the impact of the development of new technologies on gender issues (McCurry 2021; M. Lee 2021).

The Diverse Faces of Contemporary Feminisms: The Controversy over Self-Identified Radical Feminists

In Korea as elsewhere, feminism has never been monolithic; rather, there have always existed plural feminisms corresponding to various politics and political aims. For example, the resurgence of feminist activism has also been a significant part of the context for the rise of queer feminism, including increased queer feminist identification, emphasis on intersectional feminist theory and praxis, and increased support for and solidary between queer and feminist activists (Queer Feminist Magazine FeRM 2017; D. Kim 2020). Highlighting diverse politics within contemporary feminisms, I first problematize and discuss the limitations of the term "young young feminist," which has been widely used to designate the emerging Korean feminists since 2015. Among various points of contention, I pay particular attention to the controversy over *raetpem* (self-identified radical feminists) regarding the use of biological sex as the basis for identity within feminist movements and the female-first politics of these particular activists.

The term "young young feminist" arose in discussions among scholars and journalists of the potential of this most recent wave of feminist subjects (H. Lee 2018), distinguishing them as (even) younger than the "young feminists" who drew attention to women's issues in the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. At that time, campus-based feminist movements formed and began working to reconstruct women's identity politics, challenge everyday patriarchal culture, and raise issues relating to sexual politics, media representation, and difference among women (Y. Jeong 2015; Bo-Myung Kim 2008; KwonKim 2017). The "young feminists" were distinguished, in turn, from the older feminists who started movements in the 1980s or earlier, particularly in that they, as mentioned, ceased to consider these movements part of broader democratic or labor activism but instead

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understood women to be a collective identity with the potential to serve as a subject of resistance. In this sense, these generational labels can help to situate the activists who have emerged since 2015 within the broader history of Korean feminist movements and distinguish them from the older generation of feminists of the 1980s and the "young feminists" of the mid-1990s to 2000s.

However, they are subject to limitations and risks in terms of downplaying differences among these activists as well as overemphasizing generational differences and conflict. It is undeniable that generation is among the key characteristics of current feminist activism, but an approach that privileges generational differences over other differences is problematic, in the first place, because the young young feminists do not share a common political philosophy or perspective. Moreover, they are confronting problems that have been raised in one form or another across generations of Korean women, such as sexual violence, access to abortion, oppressive ideals of beauty, and discrimination in the labor market. The history of feminist movements in Korea is not linear, with various issues persisting and evolving over time. Thus, the generational approach can reinforce an ahistorical perspective on the history of feminism and women's movements, while framing gender conflict as essentially playing out between older and younger women (Y. Jeong 2015; Winch et al. 2016).

The 2016–2017 Candlelight Movement against President Park Geun-hye provides an instructive example of the ideological heterogeneity among the young young feminists. On the one hand, some feminists established what they called a *femi-zone* in which they—in the name of women, youth, queer people, and people with disabilities—called for then-President Park Geun-hye to resign while at the same time opposing the misogyny and gender discrimination evident in the protests against her (Kwon and Hwang 2020; P. Kang 2016). On the other hand, some feminists refused to participate in the protests on the grounds that they reproduced and reinforced prevalent misogynist and patriarchal notions, while other self-identified radical feminists went further in their support, insisting on Park's innocence (Choe 2016). These latter, following Park's ouster, trial, conviction, and imprisonment, demanded her release and reinstatement,

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claiming that she had been unfairly accused of crimes simply because she was a woman. Thus, some "young young feminists" responded to the scandal that overwhelmed the conservative Park administration in a range of ways that defied easy explanation.

The controversy over *biological females* sheds light on a related set of issues regarding the nature of contemporary feminism. Again, the issue is not entirely new, in the sense that there have been extensive discussions of female representation and, in particular, its potential and limitations for feminist politics since the early 2000s, in which questions were raised regarding whether only a biological female can represent feminist politics (Chun 2003). Thus, it is helpful to acknowledge and look for both historical continuities and the diversity of feminist politics. Since the full complexity of an ongoing movement cannot, of course, be captured in a single study, I focus here on the controversy involving *raetpem*, which refers to self-identified radical feminists in Korea.

As feminist scholars have pointed out, the popularity of feminism always involves a specific version of it (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill 2016). In American contexts, for example, the dominant form of popular feminism has been white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heteronormative (Banet-Weiser 2018). Therefore, the popularization of feminism raises the question of exclusion in feminist politics, involving as it does the struggle for meaning. In Korean contexts, there have been increasing concerns over popular forms of feminism based on a strong female identity rooted in notions of biological sex, the pursuit of female-only and -first politics, and the refusal of solidarity with other social minority groups.

Scholars have traced the emergence of self-identified radical feminists from the *Womad* community, which was one of the successors of *Megalia* after that community split over the related issue of solidarity with gay men in December 2015 (Go 2019; Koo 2020; Bo-Myung Kim 2018b). *Womad* explicitly pursued an essentialist and separatist politics for women, advocating female superiority and a biological notion of women that excluded trans women. This essentialist politics thus shared commonalities with the politics of TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) activists in such countries as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia (Dalbey

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2018; Pearce et al. 2020)—though these latter radical feminists generally characterized TERF as a slur intended to silence women's voices (Murphy 2017). Similarly, for Joung (2018), the TERF label, which originated in Western feminist movements, represented an unfair accusation that this new feminist movement in Korea was queerphobic without due consideration of the specific Korean context. However, as Hyomin Lee (2019) has shown in her research on the construction of TERF politics in Korea, some radical feminists have not only excluded trans women from the category of *woman* but even antagonized and attacked them as a threat to their notions of *real women* and feminist politics on the grounds that they endanger (*real*) women's safety and undermine their political empowerment. Through false information about, and a homogenizing description of, transgender people, these claims have reinforced misconceptions about trans identities and communities and served to justify the mistreatment of transgender people.

Furthermore, these trans-exclusionary and transphobic claims have circulated widely beyond the *Womad* community and garnered the attention of the broader public, including women-centered communities organized on social networking sites such as Twitter and YouTube (Hyomin Lee 2019). For example, during the 2018 protests against the illegal secret filming of women and the distribution of their images without their consent, the organizing online community Uncomfortable Courage limited its membership to "biological females," again, supposedly for the sake of women's safety at the protests. Moreover, its official announcement of the protest included transphobic images and the request that participants report any "transgender-looking individuals" whom they observed at the rally (Transgender Liberation Front 2019). These trans-exclusionary arguments not only circulated within the feminist community, but also stirred a social controversy among members of the public, as was evident in the 2020 controversy surrounding the admission of a transgender woman student to Sookmyung Women's University. This case stirred debate within the university community and beyond regarding whether a transgender woman should be eligible to attend, and, after the student council received hateful messages and letters of protest, the student in question had to withdraw her application (Jae-gu Kang 2020).

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The arguments articulated in the course of this controversy have been increasingly heard in popular discourse, and even some academics have reproduced them in their social media posts and academic articles (Hyomin Lee 2019). Likewise, books that bolster transphobic claims have been translated into Korean, and the Australian radical feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys, who has written extensively on her anti-trans stance, was invited to Korea to give a talk. In the face of the rise of these anti-trans claims and practices among members of academia, the public, and even some feminist groups, numerous Korean feminist and queer scholars and activists have criticized the manner in which such approaches reproduce a heterosexual gender dichotomy based on biological notions of male and female that feminism has long questioned and challenged (Bo-Myung Kim 2018b; Go 2019; Ri-Na Kim 2017; Hyomin Lee 2019). These scholars have discussed and examined the rising popularity of TERF claims in relation to feminist politics in a few specific ways.

First, the popular forms of feminist activism as anti-misogyny activism are somewhat limited, for the popular discourse often simply mimics and mocks misogyny and its logics. JiHae Koo examined the limitations of the *Womad* community by situating it within the tradition of trolling in Korean internet culture and concluded that, since the rise of feminist counterpublics in Korea represents a "response" to misogyny and male-dominated communities, it has reinforced, rather than problematized, an "us versus them rhetoric that is divided along gender lines" (Koo 2020, 5). In this respect, the community was reinforcing an essentialist logic of Korean male inferiority rather than revealing the performative nature of masculinity as its precursor, the *Megalia* community, did. Similarly, Eunhae Go (2019) showed that the *Womad* community's "honorary male" discourse reinforced the mechanisms of dominant misogynistic discourse by homogenizing certain female characteristics.[3] Therefore, Bo-Myung Kim likewise argued, mirroring "fails to radically deconstruct the affective grammar of hate but

3. *Womad* users coined the term *hyung-ja* in Korean, which literally means "imitating dick" (i.e., men) and can be translated as "honorary male" in reference to a woman who represents the interests of men while remaining indifferent to the oppression of women (Go 2019, 56).

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only culturally appropriates it" (Bo-Myung Kim 2008, 31). This resonates what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) described as the deeply intertwined relationship between popular feminism and misogyny in her exploration of the ways in which popular misogyny reacts to and mirrors popular feminist discourse and strategies.

Further, in discussing the phenomenon of the exclusion of transgender people from feminist activism, scholars have pointed out that the strong identity of victimhood serves as the basis for popular feminism as well as for the deployment and mobilization of its politics. Although recent feminist activities have significantly raised social awareness about women's safety and gender-based violence, these efforts also constructed female identity mainly in terms of victimhood, failing to acknowledge that women are simultaneously inscribed within such intersectional power relations as cisgender privilege and heteronormativity. Hee-Jin Jeong has further argued along these lines that some women are "playing the victim" by merely approaching feminists as an "interest group" (Hee-Jin Jeong 2018, 235). Victimhood, then, is simply utilized as a resource and benefit with respect to both the subjectification and survival of women. On a related note, this notion of strong victimhood based on the biological role of women became combined with neoliberal notions of survival and success (Bo-Myung Kim 2018a). In other words, feminism became a sort of resource and tool for surviving and succeeding in a precarious neoliberal society by providing a collective identity, an affiliation, and powerful language for empowering women and helping them to respond effectively to everyday discrimination and violence. However, such identification has kept them from contemplating the complex social and historical context and processes through which the very category of *women* is produced or envisioning solidarity and resistance outside the context of an essentialized identity politics.

This essentialized identity politics also accompanies the phrase "*yeojaman chaengginda*" (women should only care for women), with its implication of a refusal to stand in solidarity with other social minority groups, such as refugees or transgender people. This stance is inconsistent with the ethos of solidary that has been an important ethical component

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of many social movement groups in Korea. Further, feminists who have advocated for the recognition of intersectionality and for solidarity across social minority groups have been dismissed as a *sseukka* (jumble), a disparaging term for those who would consider the rights of distinct groups together rather than prioritizing women's rights. Some of these *raetpem* groups, such as Women's Human Rights Campaign Korea, have even opposed the enactment of anti-discrimination laws on the baseless grounds that the law—in particular, the prohibition of discrimination based on gender identity—overlooks and thereby condones the violence and crimes against women committed by other social minority groups, such as transgender people.[4] Even as I complete this writing, in March 2021, however, the Korean transgender community has lost three members within the past month, including the country's first known transgender soldier (G. Bae 2021). These tragic reports are not irrelevant to the surge in transphobic claims and discriminatory policies against them.

Thus, those who exercise power within Korea's social, political, and academic institutions must understand and counter the claims of those who espouse this reactionary construction of gender. At the same time, we must seek to expand the scope of feminist politics in general. Again, it is important to acknowledge that this exclusivity is not characteristic of the newly emerged feminists in Korea as a whole, for the critical voices and interventions of many feminist scholars and activists have consistently supported transgender rights and stood in solidarity with transgender activists.

Conclusion

I have provided here an overview of the resurgence of feminist activism in Korea since 2015, focusing on its key characteristics and issues. First, I

4. See WHRC Korea: Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/whrcsouthkorea/; Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/WHRC-%ED%95%9C%EA%B5%AD%EC%A7%80%EB%B6%80-731315843714497/; Online Petition, https://linktr.ee/whrcsouthkorea.

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situated this *reboot* within the broader historical and socio-political context of post-authoritarian Korea, including the emergence of diverse subjects in social movements and the institutionalization of women's policies. Despite the efforts of women's movements over several decades, women's precarious lives and working conditions have improved little and, indeed, deteriorated after the economic recession. The rise of misogynistic social discourse has further aggravated the frustration and despair felt by Korean women, and provided them a lexicon to articulate their gendered experiences and speak up against the prevalent misogynistic culture as well as a threshold moment for them to do so. Second, I have discussed the role of digital media as a key battleground for these newly identified feminists to reach and mobilize diverse subjects, expand the sites and methods of their activism, and raise and highlight their specific issues, including sexual violence facilitated by digital media. Lastly, I discussed the diversity of political views and orientations among the contemporary feminist activists referred to by the umbrella term "young young feminists." Specifically, I have drawn attention to the controversy over the self-identified radical feminist (*raetpem*) and problematized their essentialist and exclusionary politics against other social minority groups, in particular transgender people.

The contemporary feminist activists have effectively raised and brought to the forefront a range of gender issues in Korean society within a relatively short time. Though Korean feminists have long been fighting to change a male-dominated and sexist culture and society, they have gained new momentum by focusing on the issues of misogyny and the widespread use of digital media technologies and platforms. As a result, feminism in Korea has been popularized and has extended its reach to impact the public discussion of gender issues. Given the longstanding negative social perceptions of feminism and feminists in the country, their popularization and the diversification of feminist activities represent significant developments in Korean society.

Furthermore, the growing social interest in gender issues has implications for and connections with the broader context of social movements and transformations in Korea. For generations, women's and gender issues have been neglected and trivialized, even under the

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relatively progressive governments and within social movements. Despite the ongoing #MeToo allegations against high-profile male politicians, the issue of sexual violence in Korea has often been considered limited to women, without attention to its relational aspect as a violation of labor rights and, even more broadly, a manifestation of a culture in which gender inequality extends to political parties across the ideological spectrum.[5] An accurate understanding of the role of gender in Korean society requires an intersectional understanding of it as a fundamental organizing principle for social relations, culture, and politics.

These considerations point to areas for future research into contemporary feminist activism in Korea. First, the ongoing social and political backlash against feminism and feminists, in part a result of the heightened visibility of feminism and gender issues, requires nuanced academic analysis and discussion. The criticism of anti-misogyny activists has often taken the form of framing them as an extremist hate group, man-haters, or bad feminists and ascribing to them partial responsibility for the stigmatization of feminism and silencing of feminists. Further examination is necessary, therefore, of new forms of anti-feminist backlash and strategies and their implications. Second, research from intersectional and transnational perspectives can assist in the development of an inclusive politics that supports feminist activism and other related social movements as a counter to the exclusionary politics that precludes solidarity with other social minority groups. In particular, there is a need to document how the concept of intersectionality is being understood and perceived in the specific Korean context and how the corrosive TERF ideology has circulated across national borders and manifested itself in local contexts.

5. Examples include prominent liberals such as the former provincial governor Ahn Hee-jung, who was sentenced to a three-and-a-half year prison term for sexually assaulting his former assistant, and the former mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon, who was found dead, presumably by his own hand, following sexual harassment allegations by his former secretary.

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Received: 2021.06.14. Revised: 2021.08.24. Accepted: 2021.08.28.

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