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The Gendered Infrastructure of Technology:

Sexual Violence, Feminist Resistance,
and Digital Conflict in South Korea

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Abstract:

South Korea's rapid technological transformation has reshaped the conditions through which gender relations, conflict, and power are both produced and contested. The emergence of digital sexual violence - from hidden-camera exploitation and the Nth Room case to AI-based sexual imagery generation and modification -, demonstrates how technological infrastructures may perpetuate existing gendered inequalities while expanding the scale, speed, anonymity, and persistence of violence. At the same time, digital spaces have become important sites of feminist resistance, political mobilization, and counterpublic formation, existing alongside the growth of misogynistic online communities and gender backlash.

The 'new technological era', which promised a borderless utopia, has instead given way to a new frontier defined by increasingly complex and growing dynamics between the genders. The concept of 'digital gender' is developed to capture these intersecting processes and to examine how technology mediates and facilitates the reproduction, contestation, and transformation of gendered power.

This analysis delineates the connection between historical gender inequality, modern digital sexual violence, feminist counterpublics, the manosphere, and evolving regulatory measures, revealing a persistent cycle of technological advancement, gendered victimization, political activism, institutional acknowledgment, and subsequent technological modification. This self-perpetuating cycle begins with the exploitation of women rooted in the nation's socio-cultural traditions and progresses toward the technological exploitation of the female body. Encrypted and semi-anonymous digital networks, along with technological improvements in artificial intelligence, have exacerbated pre-existing forms of voyeurism and allowed for the systematic reproduction and circulation of sexual violence, culminating in what is now known as digital sexual violence (DSV). In response, women have appropriated these same digital technologies to oppose patriarchy and gender injustice, forming groups that advocate for a shift away from conventional gender norms.

Taken together, these regularly occurring phenomena of violence, resistance, and backlash show that technology in South Korea is no longer viewed as a neutral tool for progress. Rather, it has become a fundamental infrastructure for producing and intensifying significant forms of social fragmentation, with implications that extend beyond gender relations to the country's demographic and democratic future.

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1. From Tradition to Platform Power: The Genealogy of Gendered Exploitation

Since the end of the Second World War, global economies have experienced unparalleled industrialization - notably in Asia. The economic success of Japan and the four 'Asian Tigers' - Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan - demonstrates how rapidly formerly peripheral economies could develop the productive capacity necessary to compete with established industrial powers in Western Europe and North America. However, modernizing a nation's production capability does not guarantee a beneficial shift in its social and political values¹. For which notion the Republic of Korea - often described as a hallmark of compressed modernity² - serves as an exceptional revealing case: within only a few decades, it transformed from a largely agrarian and war-ravaged society into a highly industrialized, globally integrated, and technologically advanced economy.

By the close of the 20th century, Korea had navigated a succession of tumultuous transformations: the dissolution of the Joseon Dynasty and the ensuing 35 years of Japanese colonization, a civil war and the subsequent national division; a succession of dictatorships, rapid industrialization, and ultimately, the emergence of liberal democracy. The swift modernization enforced by colonial authority contributed to the reshaping of the nation - institutions, labour, infrastructures and social relations - into an industrialized and contemporary state, facilitating women's very first emergence from the home sphere into public spheres such as educational institutions and workplaces. Displaced from traditional domestic life, women became 'silent catalysts'; a crucial component of the burgeoning workforce during Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, contributing significantly to the nation's building and development efforts. Yet, this emergence was less a liberation and more a re-spatialization of patriarchy; while the material culture shifted toward Western capitalist standards, the behavioral culture remained

¹ Marian Lief Palley, "Women's Status in South Korea: Tradition and Change," *Asian Survey* 30, no. 12 (1990): 1136-53.

² Term coined by sociologist Chang Kyung-sup to describe a social condition where multi-layered historical timescales coexist within a single, frantic present.

strongly anchored in Neo-Confucian dictates of submissiveness, filial piety, and gendered obligation.

Despite the rapid transition to a modern industrial society - driven by both desire and necessity stemming from the ravaged and extremely precarious reality in which the country was left -, there still persist, at times, socio-cultural values that are used to justify social institutions and expectations dating back to previous eras – not by definition a religious-focused notion of cultural values. In somewhat simple words, culture can be described in terms of material and behavioral components. While South Korea's material culture has modernized and been significantly influenced - or affected - by Western influencing factors, its behavioral culture retains and embraces certain traditions that impede progress and change. Perhaps most obviously, part of this culture is reflected in inequalities pertaining to women.

Gender inequality therefore persisted throughout, within a society whose material environment had changed at extraordinary speed.

This tension was intensified by the transformation of Korean national identity itself. Japanese colonial rule had violently disrupted existing cultural and political structures, while the post-war Western development project demanded that South Korea rapidly orient itself toward new economic standards and aspirations. The resulting process produced what may be understood as a form of cultural vertigo: a society compelled to move rapidly toward an imagined modern future while simultaneously negotiating the loss, reconstruction, and selective preservation of its historical identity. The consuming struggle for economic success under capitalist standards became the new ideal, providing a new direction after the collapse of the old political and social order. However, modernization did not occur within a cultural vacuum: existing gender expectations were adapted to the requirements of the modernizing state rather than simply discarded.

In such an environment of evolving identities and realities, women have emerged under the ambiguous role of both anchors of traditional culture and personal identity, as well as symbols of resistance to external encroachment. But also, as visible symbols of foreign influence, with bodies decked in the emblems of capitalist consumerism and transformed according to foreign aesthetic standards. Within this vision, the woman's body itself becomes a hub of global

culture, signifying her status as a member of the cosmopolitan and predominantly Western³ community, essentially becoming a capitalist body. Not merely a biological or social entity but a symbolic site through which the contradictions of modernization were expressed.

A nation that has experienced unparalleled economic, social, and technological advancement - an endeavor that secular states have taken considerable time to realize -, and that has subsequently evolved into a global, highly modernized economic powerhouse and technological frontrunner, perpetually endeavoring to remain at the forefront; nonetheless, a country that continues to grapple with deeply ingrained gender norms and conflicts that have proven stubbornly resistant to change. A cultural vertigo and rigid dichotomy of rapid industrialization and technological economic advancement that has undoubtedly provided educational and professional opportunities, but has not, however, translated into a proportional change in social attitudes and power dynamics - instead witnessing vehement opposition resulting in ever-increasing gender tensions⁴. A compressed modernity in which centuries-old Confucian patriarchies and hyper-modern capitalist aspirations - and expectations - clash, resulting in a distinct socio-cultural conflict. While the 'Miracle on the Han River' effectively reshaped the country's skyline and financial sheets, it did not demolish the hereditary structures that still determine women's private and public lives.

Rather than disappearing with modernization, these hierarchies were progressively reorganized through new - and potentially more invasive - institutions and technologies. The country's unparalleled technological expansion has thus aided the transition from physical to digital gender-based exploitation. The rise of AI-generated and manipulated sexual imagery, and the emergence of large-scale networks of digital sexual exploitation, have therefore demonstrated how technological infrastructures can transform older forms of gendered abuse into harms that are more scalable, persistent, and difficult to contain, creating a digital culture in which women's visibility can be weaponized rather than liberating them.

This digital takeover is not to be seen as a break from tradition-old exploitation,

³ Diane M. Hoffman, "Blurred Genders: The Cultural Construction of Male and Female in South Korea," *Korean Studies* 19, (1995): 112-38.

⁴ Jimin Kim, "Misogyny and Gender Conflicts in South Korea," *Communications in Humanities Research* 44 (2024): 19-28.

but rather a rapid refinement of it. It portrays the 'capitalist-feminine-body' that had previously been incorporated into the industrial economy as a form of labour now reduced to data, devoid of agency, and commodified on an industrial-wide scale. Its exploitation consequently becomes potentially scalable far beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of earlier forms of abuse. Digital circulation can make sexual humiliation persistent, replicable, and decentralized in ways that earlier social institutions could not achieve with the same speed or reach.

Consequently, South Korea persists in a state of cultural vertigo, equipped with the technological infrastructure of the future while navigating the gendered power dynamics of the past. The woman's body, hitherto the silent catalyst of the 1960s and the 1970s industrial growth, has now become the primary site of contestation where these tensions are most visible - caught between the role of a traditional 'anchor' and the reality of a 'capitalist body'.

Ultimately, the Korean experience demonstrates that while economic and technological modernization can occur within a matter of decades, the transformation and evolution of its behavioral culture, social expectations, and gendered power relations is a considerably slower and more difficult process.

1.1 Legacy of Neo-Confucianism: Gender, Family, and Social Hierarchy

Religious and ideological beliefs are components of a malleable culture that changes over time, and they act as a foundational architecture for human conduct. The ethics and morals of one religion within a given community and historical period may be very different from those of another, imposing distinct sets of rules on human conduct that are intrinsically intertwined with structural morality. Individuals, families, and communities are governed by such norms and values, albeit to varying degrees. One factor that unites these different realities is undoubtedly the way in which beliefs - whether explicitly dictated or naturally derived - influence the perception of women on a physical, psychological, and sociocultural level. In the specific context of the Korean peninsula, the institutionalization of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty transitioned gender hierarchy from a relatively malleable cultural norm into an increasingly

institutionalized social and legal order.

The status of women within Confucian society has always been a highly intricate discourse - as is the broader study and definition of gender in Confucian philosophy, given that there is no conceptual equivalent of the modern Western conceptualization of 'gender' in the classical Chinese linguistic construct. Instead of deriving from a set of natural dispositions or bodily functions, 'man' and 'woman' within the Confucian textual tradition are fundamentally kinship and ritual dependent⁵. Consequently, depending on critical position and personal inclination divergent assessments have been reached regarding women's positions within Confucian societies. Historical interpretations frequently oscillate between a society in which women possessed no public presence and their structural subservience to men was perceived as a necessary and sought-after trait, to contemporary perspectives disseminated through mass media - and occasionally endorsed by radical political and religious leaders -, which assert that Korean women are inherently strong and liberated, unlike their Western counterparts, thereby attempting to negate the necessity for modern women's feminist liberation movements⁶. Such competing interpretations demonstrate that Confucianism cannot be reduced to a single, historically uniform conception of womanhood.

Confucianism – or, that system of ethical philosophy and thoughts founded by Chinese philosopher Confucius around 551 BCE -, historically shaped East Asian cultures extensively through emphasis on hierarchy, social harmony, group orientation and filial piety; at the same time, it is notoriously questioned for promoting a hierarchical social structure that enshrines the primacy of male authority and the systemic subservience of women. In East Asian societies, these principles were progressively incorporated into political and social institutions, particularly those governing family organization and gender relations⁷. From China, Confucianism expanded to nations such as South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam over several centuries, where it provided a highly effective socio-political structure based on moral responsibility. As historian Martina Deuchler has noted,

⁵ Li-Hsiang Rosenlee, "Gender in Confucian Philosophy", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, Spring 2023 ed.

⁶ Madeline Copp, "60 Decibels Microfinance Index (2022)", *60 Decibels*, 2023.

⁷ Jimin Kim, "Misogyny and Gender Conflicts in South Korea," *Communications in Humanities Research* 44 (2024): 19-28.

no other nation in the East Asian cultural sphere was transformed by Confucianism as much and as deeply as Korea.

During the late Goryeo period, medieval Korea struggled between internal and external issues, ranging from brigand invasions, Japanese incursions and continuous pressure from Ming China to pervasive estate abuse from the Buddhist establishment and general woes of the population. In tackling these institutional failures, a newly rising scholar-officials establishment (*sadaebu*, 士大夫) embraced the particularly conservative principles of Neo-Confucianism as the foundation for a complete reorganization of society and ideology, directly confronting a stalling, corrupt and unsatisfactory Buddhist governance⁸. It marked an upheaval to the ancient pluralistic state of balance that had defined, to some extent, Korea's dynasties thus far: Confucianism supplied the vocabulary and techniques for actual governing, whilst Buddhism offered abstract metaphors and spiritual satisfaction, in a thin balance that was shattered by the newly emerging social class⁹ that sought a more rigid control mechanism.

The transition from Goryeo to Joseon is to be understood as a gradual process of 'Confucianization' that took several centuries to reach its most ossified form, rather than a sudden explosive overturning of social order. Such prolonged institutionalization is important because it demonstrates that the patriarchal family order later associated with 'traditional Korea' was itself historically constructed rather than an inherent, immutable feature of Korean society.

Goryeo society had been characterized by a bilateral descent and a comparatively flexible system in which women were afforded partial autonomy, social visibility and economic rights - that would be substantially restricted under Joseon's patrilineal order. Newly married couples often resided with the bride's family, following a matrilocal (or uxorilocal) residence custom known as *namgqwiyeogahon* (남귀여가혼), in an arrangement that proved generally advantageous for women as they remained in a familiar societal network and could safeguard their inheritance rights, equally shared among siblings. Goryeo women enjoyed comparatively greater autonomy and equal status in several

⁸ Young-jin Koh, "Neo-Confucianism as the Dominant Ideology in Joseon", *Korea Journal* 43, no.4 (2003): 59-86.

⁹ Christopher Lovins, "Monarchs, Monks, and Scholars: Religion and State Power in Early Modern England and Korea," *Journal of Asian History* 53, no. 2 (2019): 267-85.

areas of family and inheritance: they could freely mingle in the social sphere, own property independently, and even inherit land and slaves. They actively discussed and expressed their opinions within domestic and the communal - in the sense of community - governance, and divorce and remarriage were more socially accepted practices than the moral catastrophes they would become under Neo-Confucianism¹⁰.

Inversely, the emerging Joseon order challenged these practices by upholding inequality in all social axes - between generations, classes, and sexes - as a direct reflection of cosmic order (*li*) and a necessary condition for societal peace and harmony. Within this metaphysical framework, undifferentiated equality could be associated with disorder, whereas harmony was understood to depend upon the proper differentiation and ordering of social relationships.

The primary basis of Neo-Confucian ethics was rigorous awareness and fulfilment of one's relational duty rather than selfish pursuit of personal goals and desire, making hierarchy intelligible as an ethical rather than merely coercive arrangement; a submissive self-sacrificing approach to life was a virtue lauded and to be cultivated within the populace¹¹. Gender hierarchy was therefore not merely a matter of interpersonal relations but part of a wider conception of social and cosmic order.

Throughout the Joseon Dynasty, state regulations aimed at dividing society into gender-specific spheres and reorganizing the family to conform to principles of patrilineality and patriarchy; women were progressively secluded to the domestic sphere, men were designated as the sole heads of lineage, patrilocal marriage practices became increasingly normative, and the inheritance system was solidified upon male-lineage continuity and primogeniture. Prescribed gender roles described in the Confucian norm of the 'distinction between man and woman' (*namnyeoyubyeol*, 남녀유별) spatially manifested as well within the domestic architecture: within the traditional household, women were restricted to the inner chambers, or *anbang* (안방), and men in the outer *sarangbang* (사랑방).

The gradual institutionalization of Neo-Confucian gender norm was reflected

¹⁰ Martina Deuchler, "The Impact of Confucianism on the Korean Kinship System - A Reconsideration," *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 36 (2021): 5–23.

¹¹ Erin Cho, "Caught in Confucius' Shadow the Struggle for Women's Legal Equality in South Korea," *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 12, no. 2 (1998): 125-150.

in the regulative changes regarding marriage and divorce – also to enforce, and force, a feminine conduct and mores conforming to the new ideals. Within the Joseon order the *chilgeojiak* (칠거지악, ‘Seven Bases for Divorce’) and the *sampulgeo* (삼불거, ‘Three Grounds for Not Divorcing’) stipulated seven grounds upon which a woman may be divorced (disobedience to parents-in-law, failure to bear son, adultery, jealousy, hereditary disease, talkativeness, larceny) and three circumstances according to which a husband could not divorce his wife (if she had no home to return to, if she observed the three-year mourning period for her parent-in-law, or if the family had risen from poverty to wealth during the marriage). The point of these rules rests not only in the constraints they put on women in order to attain the desired Confucian alignment, but also in the integration of the gender hierarchy into the normative framework of familial and societal orders.

Interestingly, modern South Korean Family Law (Article 840 of the Civil Act) still maintains six legal grounds for judicial divorce - a framework considered by some legal historians as a secularized, distant echo of such traditional ‘faults’ categories, centered on faults such as adultery, malicious desertion or extreme cruelty.

The reorganization was extended and applied to the regulation of daily life gender relations through the customary laws codified in the *Gyeongguk daejeon* (경국대전, ‘The Great Code for State Administration’), in which were legislative measures specifically designed to institutionalize gendered behavioral norms - and thus further institutionalizing women’s isolation. *Yangban* women were subject to restrictions such as associating or conversing with men beyond a certain tightly defined degree of kinship, as well as from partaking in outdoor games, feasts, and equestrian practice. Engaging in such-like social activities required explicit permission to be attained from either the husband or the head of the household. Moreover, women regardless of social position were required to have their faces covered with garments like *jangot* (장옷) or *ssuge chima* (쓰개치마) when in public spaces - although the extent to which such prescriptions were enforced varied according to social position. Nevertheless,

these regulations should be understood with attention to social class: the surviving documentary record disproportionately reflects the experiences and regulations of elite women, while their application to common women must often be reconstructed indirectly¹².

Under the reign of King Taejo the state launched a campaign to officially convert traditional matrilocal marriage into the Chinese Confucian custom of receiving the bride into the bridegroom's home (*chinyeong*, 친영). Matrilocal marriage customs originated, according to transcriptions, during the Three Kingdoms Period, prevailed through Goryeo - where marriage itself was a looser institution - and during the Joseon Dynasty, and proved highly resilient persisting in various syncretic forms until the mid-to-late 18th Century. It is generally agreed upon that matrilocal marriage and the system of equal distribution of property between men and female heirs were key elements impeding the establishment of the patriarchal Confucian family system. But by the 18th century, proponents of the state-enforced patrilocal marriage system had succeeded in replacing the matrilocal custom, and for women the roles of '*virtuous woman*', '*obedient daughter-in-law*', and '*chaste widow*' became culturally powerful, state-sanctioned models through which their conduct was evaluated and disciplined, demanding absolute and perfect behavioral compliance¹³. A transformation that represents a stark departure from earlier East Asian social models.

The relationship between patriarchy and female authority was nonetheless more complex than a straightforward absence of women's power; patriarchal order did not necessarily erase female authority, rather it restricted legitimate forms of women's authority in the range of relationships and institutions compatible with patrilineal continuation. Matriarchal systems were no novelty at that point in time - anthropological evidence suggests that early Sinitic societies possessed distinct matrilineal elements, and the Chinese social order itself presented matrilocal elements, albeit on the traditional premises of the feminine

¹² Majority of what is known about the Joseon regulations comes from its dynastic history and applies with any certainty to royal and upper-class women. The influence on common women can be mostly presumed; but despite the paucity of documents on commoners, available sources suggest that the contradictions between social status, wealth, and cultural ideals were becoming apparent. A wealthy peasant family with no social standing might celebrate an elaborate wedding according to Confucian norms, while poor yangban family with limited economic resources could not provide proper dowry for their daughter.

¹³ Erin Cho, "Caught in Confucius' Shadow the Struggle for Women's Legal Equality in South Korea," *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 12, no. 2 (1998): 125-150.

figure being the sole being biologically able of bearing children, and thus procreation was their main purpose. Even Emperors, the majority of whom were advocates of Confucianism, had to kneel to show their respect to the female figure of the Queen Mother. Particularly, in the Korean context, the importance accorded to mothers within the family illustrates this contradiction: the authority of the mother could coexist with a broader system in which lineage, inheritance, and formal social authority remained overwhelmingly male-centered.

Despite the outward rigidity of Korean patriarchy, the otherwise unbending *samjong jido* (The Three Obediences, 삼종지도) - that is, to cultivate obedience to one's father prior to marriage, to one's husband during marriage, and to one's son following the husband's death - were mitigated by the mother-son dynamic, which emerged as a unique feature of Korean family structure. Korean society, in this specific aspect, may serve as an ideal case study on the complex interplay between maternal authority and woman power, as well as the mechanism by which such a rigid male dominated system could coexist alongside that specific feminine maternal power¹⁴. Yet, the recognition of women as being worthy of reverence in specific familiar instances is not to be understood as female emancipation. That type of authority remained essentially produced within a male-defined social order and was heavily conditional upon women's fulfilment of patriarchal and reproductive roles. A mother could be revered precisely because motherhood served the purpose of continuing the family lineage, hence, female authority was not inherently hostile to patriarchy; it could rather act as a tool with which patriarchal structures were reproduced and sustained.

A woman's social value was measured within a carnal reproductive structure that ultimately served the interests of patriarchal continuity through male lineage. And those who were not able to fulfil these reproductive expectations were correspondingly deprived of the familial status and authority attached to motherhood.

A unique subversion of such dominant ideology was that of the female shaman, or *mudang* (무당), who has exerted a significant influence on Korean society and daily life. Following a relatively peaceful coexistence with Buddhism

¹⁴ Theodore Jun Yoo, "Women in Chosŏn Korea", in *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labour, and Health, 1910-1945* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2008): 15-57.

and Confucianism during the Goryeo period, Shamanism ultimately came to be seen as incompatible with Neo-Confucianism; notably the *mudang*, as a prominent female religious figure, represented an alternative form of authority to the highly bureaucratized and male-dominated Confucian system¹⁵. The stigmatization of the *mudang* had broader social implications for women: shamanic practices were frequently represented as irrational, deceptive, or associated with 'old customs', and women were seen as particularly susceptible to them. Thus, *mudang* needed to be strictly controlled for their deception of other naive and uneducated women, as women at large were charged with enabling and promoting such heterodox practices and figures. Those women were viewed as closely tied to 'old customs', with a natural affinity for things un-modern, and a concern for the nation as they were perceived as carrying the social obligation to be competent bearers of future generations and mothers of the Korean people¹⁶. In some ways, shamanism represented the feminine principle in the religious realm, as opposed to Confucianism, which focused on the masculine character.

Despite numerous attempts over time to diminish the influence of shamanic figures and practices, the state's suppression was marked by profound internal contradictions. Historical records demonstrate that Joseon rulers themselves - in succession: Taejong, Saejong, and Seongjong - at various times resorted to the services of a *mudang* in one way or another. And that naturally transitioned along with the political structure changes of the nation - there are several cases in which major modern political figures turned to them, albeit covertly. The contradiction illustrates an important feature of Korean gender history: the formal ideological order could attempt to suppress alternative forms of authority while simultaneously relying upon the same practices it publicly delegitimized.

Society was at this point fundamentally divided into sex-based spheres, legitimized by the cosmic dualism of male and female elements. The introduction of Catholicism and Protestant Christianity inevitably contributed in further cementing such structure. Albeit the new religions brought a novel and different awareness to women, with church attendings serving as chances and opportunities to leave home, become literate, learn about the outside world, to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Merose Hwang, "The Mudang: The Colonial Legacies of Korean Shamanism" (lecture/paper presented at Hiram College, Hiram, OH, November 30, 2024).

work - also with men - and, finally, to become involved in society. Protestant missionaries founding mission schools for girls was a first concrete step toward improving the status of Korean women - the renowned Ewha Women's University would be later founded on such premises and objectives. However, while Christianity empowered women academically, socially and economically with a strong sense of pride and awareness of self-worth, a new religion itself was not enough to radically transform a men-based society. Conversely, the Christian core doctrine of the Holy Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), injected into a cultural context that already demonstrated itself to be highly male-dominated, could be read as further sanctifying the father-son alignment of patrilineality. Christian modernization therefore produced both opportunities for female emancipation and new forms of accommodation within established gender norms, demonstrating how new structures do not necessarily erase old power systems; they can bring new institutional or ideological forms.

The Japanese-enforced Kabo Reforms of 1894-1895 helped put an end to child marriages, legalized remarriage for widows and revised court dress codes for women, but no further discussion or interest regarding women were touched upon from a legislative point of view. The over 200 reform bills passed by foreign rule were primarily focused on breaking Korea's traditional tributary ties with China, reducing the local monarchy's power, and creating a capitalist economy subservient to Japanese interests.

As a modern nation-state began to coalesce concretely, drawing women into the early public sphere, it marked their identity as inextricably bound to the nation - on a wider spectrum, it also formed a complex relationship with gender as a notion itself. Gender discourses were closely subordinated to the imperatives of the nation itself, embedded within a much broader project of political transformation and foreign intervention.

On such premises at the turn of the 20th century, and through the convergence of Joseon Confucian ideal of *budeok* (부덕, womanly virtue), Japan's Meiji gender ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* (良妻賢母, 'good wife, wise mother') and Western Protestant women missionaries, came to be the Korean ideal of 'good mother, wise wife' (현모양처), which reshaped gender discourse and practices in the

country. First institutionalized in Meiji Japan (1868–1912) as an ideological apparatus to mobilize women to the service of the modern capitalist state while simultaneously maintaining their primary responsibilities within the boundaries of the household, such ideal expanded rapidly throughout East Asia. Its evolution and circulation – and its reversal in ‘wise mother, good wife’ – should be understood within the historical context of the late 19th and early 20th imperialism, where the onslaught of Western imperial power prompted reformers to overhaul the role of women in pursuit of a strong nation-state¹⁷. The resulting model did not simply reproduce traditional Confucian womanhood. Rather, it represented a synthesis of indigenous patriarchal norms with new nationalist and modernizing imperatives; thus, female modernization was encouraged insofar as it strengthened the family and, through the family, the nation.

In the long run *budeok*, *ryōsai kenbo*, and the Victorian notion of domesticity were shaped by their respective indigenous cultures and histories, and, as a result, the specific details of their peculiar notions of ideal womanhood varied. It is interesting to note that nationalist reformers - those with an extra-national education and training, and thus in line with contemporary Euro-Americans who placed Europe and the United States at the top of the hierarchy of ‘civilizations’ - began adopting school of thoughts that viewed the status of women and their treatment in every country as a judging standard for the degree of ‘civilization’ of each culture. The later emergence of ‘new women’ (*shinyeoseong*, 신여성), symbol of the advent of enlightened women as a social force, did not have a strong impact on the people’s perception of women. The ‘doctrine of inferiority of women’ - as Yun Chiho referred to it - still prevailed over time and over any other social philosophy.

Being a colonization driven by aggressive economic strategies and suprematist interests, most of early Japanese Ordinances issued purposefully left certain minor, less relevant socio-cultural matters to local Korean ‘traditions’ and customary laws¹⁸ – as far as it did not bring about clashes with their own Civil Code and the general intent of full colonial mobilization of the peninsula. Rather,

¹⁷ Hyaeweol Choi, “Ideology: ‘Wise Mother, Good Wife.’” in *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad: Protestant Modernity in Colonial-Era Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 36–72.

¹⁸ Certain instances saw Koreans themselves struggling with the management of issues regarding what was a tradition very often not only unwritten, but also of unsure origin – whether they were factually Korean traditions, or Chinese customs adopted and adapted to the Korean context.

by emphasizing Confucian tenets of filial piety, loyalty and submissiveness, the colonial state weaponized traditional philosophy to bolster the legitimacy of the foreign authority and rule. In such scenario, Neo-Confucianism occupied an ambivalent position: it was both a source of patriarchal authority and site of anti-colonial resistance. Under the weight of intense suppressive measures, in the shared struggle for liberation, the Confucian ideology of male superiority was momentarily replaced by egalitarianism, which welcomed women not only as participants but also in leadership positions.

Crucially, the historical reality of female isolation during this era was deeply stratified by class. Western observers noted that a Korean women's degree of physical confinement was directly proportional to their social standing; yangban women faced near-total isolation within the domestic interior. Conversely, women from lower socio-economic strata routinely crossed rigid gender boundaries out of material necessity, entering public spheres to work in fields, marketplaces, and factories, thereby establishing a precarious public visibility denied to their upper-class counterparts. That does not mean, however, that their 'social' roles and expectations ceased to exist.

Following national independence and the subsequent partition of the peninsula, women initially maintained an active involvement in national politics - in the first ever direct national elections of the legislative body, the highest number of candidates were women. However, upon the formal consolidation of power by the government of the newly established Republic of South Korea, women participation was strongly and systematically discouraged. The onset of the Korean War, the authoritarian regime of Syngman Rhee, and the following military junta-led powers collectively further dampened their involvement in politics, militarizing the public sphere and severely dampening women's political agency and subordinating gender equality to national security and rapid, state-led industrialization. The colonial-Meiji paradigm of '*wise mother, good wife*' was reintroduced into the Korean civic ideals, entrusting women with hyper-frugal household management as a manifestation of national and filial duty in support of the workforce. Interestingly, to curb population growth the military government began at the same time a birth control program with the introduction of family planning, that included diffusion of contraceptive devices, legalization of abortion and the sterilization of both women and men, effectively challenging the

traditional concept of family comprised of numerous members and the lineage system¹⁹. Simultaneously the same rhetoric of familial obligation and filial piety were exploited heavily to absorb the severe human costs of the 'Miracle of the Han river'. A moral imperative used to justify the systematic, state-led exploitation of an entire subclass of young female workers - structurally marginalized and derogatorily stigmatized as *gongsuni* (공순이, lit. 'factory girls') - who endured arduous shifts in labour-intensive export-oriented industries like textiles and electronics. Young unmarried female workers, who had left their rural homes and education in high hopes of upward social mobility in big, industrialized centers - and for that regarded as having a very low social status.

The rise in female factory workers led to the formation of a new social class status symbolizing class differentiation among women in industrializing Korea: those who worked and the '*samonim*'s (사모님) – the wives of factory owners, thus a respectable woman associated with economic privileges. A linguistic differentiation that showcases not only a class differentiation that was the result of capitalist industrialization, but also of patriarchal social relations and the dependency of women on men's class status in society²⁰.

Gender hierarchy thus operated differently according to class position, but industrial modernization did not abolish the underlying hierarchical order; rather, it reorganized how it manifested. In this sense, underpaid and sacrificial female labour not only contributed to the expansion of male-dominated capital-intensive industrial sectors, but also to financing the higher education and upward mobility of male heirs contributing to the continuity of the patrilineal family unit. The expansion of women's participation in the workforce could coexist with their continued subordination in the broadest terms.

The long-term institutional echoes of this historical trajectory persisted well into the 20th century, finding its ultimate legal manifestation in the incorporation of the *Hoju* (호주) system under the Civil Code of 1953, which institutionalized a male-headed family registration system under Civil Law. Profoundly grounded in a synthesis of colonial and Confucian concepts of absolute patrilineality, it was a

¹⁹ Kwang-yeong Shin, "The Discourse on Women in Korea: Episodes, Continuity, and Change," *The Review of Korean Studies* 5, No.2 (2002): 7-27.

²⁰ Ibid.

family registration framework wherein all family members were registered under, and thus legally subordinated to, the *Huju*, or 'family head'. For decades the *Huju* system structurally enforced the invisibility of women in the management of civil society and the family, regulating legal guardianship, inheritance, and identity according to a strict line of male descent. It took a decades-long, relentless constitutional campaign led by feminist legal scholars and civic groups in the post-liberation era to expose the framework not as an immutable ancient tradition, but as an oppressive biopolitical construct.

This system consequently represented more than the residue of ancient tradition. It was a modern legal institution through which a historically constructed conceptualization of patriarchal family organization was reproduced by the state. Its persistence into the late 20th century demonstrates precisely the contradiction at the heart of South Korea's compressed modernity: institutions associated with a technologically and economically advanced state could coexist with legal structures rooted in an older model of patrilineal authority.

The *Huju* system was formally declared unconstitutional in 2005 and officially abolished in 2008, finally and formally severing the State's explicit legislative enforcement of patrilineal supremacy - though its cultural and psychic structures continue to permeate the Korean social landscape.

The history of the *Huju* system therefore provides an important bridge between traditional and contemporary forms of gendered power. Its abolition demonstrates that institutional change can occur while also revealing that legislative reform does not inherently dismantle the social and cultural frameworks that first gave rise to the institution itself.

The persistence of these frameworks after their official legal dissolution is particularly noteworthy when analyzing the technological contexts in which gender dynamics are being recreated, challenged, and transformed in contemporary society.

1.2. The Infrastructure of Abuse: Digital Sexual Violence and Platformed Exploitation

Martin Heidegger, in his considerations regarding the essence of things, posed the question of what is technology for human beings – beyond the ways in which it chains them, whether through passive acceptance or proactive rejection. Two statements that provide a general answer: for one, technology is a means to an end, for one it is a human activity. Both are instrumental and anthropological definitions of technology. In this sense, technology does not exist outside human agency; it is shaped through humans' manipulation of technology, and simultaneously technology dominates the way of life, determining how human beings see and do nearly everything. If pre-modern technology worked more 'in harmony' with nature, modern technology is all about stockpiles of resources valued only for how useful they are in meeting humans' needs, in standby but ready and available to service human desires at a moment's notice with the touch of a finger. The resulting philosophical concern does not revolve around the physical implications of technology – fossil fuels destroying the environment, nuclear weapons, automation and AI, Internet effects on people's attention span, to name a few. Rather, the 'supreme danger' lies in how technology does not only provide tools, but it also changes the status of everything it touches, humans included. Arguably, this also transforms the way human beings perceive other human beings – particularly women.

Furthermore, despite the World Wide Web's (WWW) profound societal impact over the past decades, prior researches – just as individuals' personal opinions – often tend to fall into the trap of 'digital dualism', perceiving the cyberspace as distinct and separate domain that does not translate - necessarily - into the physical 'real' world; 'life online' has been understood as somewhat detached from the 'ordinary' aspects of human experience, ignoring the very apparent reality – when one eschews the naïve view of the Internet as a passive, fixed and somewhat insubstantial space – in which technologies affect even the most mundane aspects of human existence. Human experience has progressed as far as having digital materials give shape to human emotions, relationships, and even bodily identities²¹. This paradigm can very well be applied to the case of South Korea and its incredibly wide and worrisome crisis with digital crimes, which has evolved from the localized 'peeping tom' culture of *molka* – the use of

²¹ Viktor Arvidsson and Anna Foka, "Digital Gender: Perspective, Phenomena, Practice," *First Monday* 20, no. 4 (2015).

micro-cameras hidden in places like subway bathrooms, hotel rooms, gyms, libraries -, into the more sophisticated caches of devices embedded in fire alarms, ceiling lights, hair dryers and electrical sockets, with the intent of filming women without consent. *Molka* material commonly ranges from ‘upskirt’ images, taken while a woman is walking up crowded subway stairs, to videos recordings, and once they are uploaded to the web their removal is particularly difficult; the material proliferates on social media and websites, and this permanent feature leads to strong, devastating, and life-marking implications and consequences for the victims.

As digital and Internet technologies became embedded in South Korean everyday life, existing forms of sexual exploitation increasingly acquired digital dimensions. Digital sexual violence (DSV) – referring to various ways in which digital communication technologies are used to perpetrate criminal, civil or otherwise harmful sexually aggressive behavior²² - has been a persistent and pervasive problem. Evolving alongside digital technologies, DSV underwent technological transformation, expansion, and reconfiguration, extending and intensifying practices that previously existed in either analogue or physical forms. As the severity and scale of the violence of these practices has grown consistently, so too has public concern surrounding DSV. Smartphones, social networking sites, cloud services, video-posting websites, virtual worlds, wearable technology and fitness and health trackers are all commonplace in contemporary life. Few would dispute how drastically these technologies changed the way we live and communicate – with ourselves and the others. Current studies and critiques focus on understanding the immediate and long-term consequences of such technologies, as well as their relevance in contemporary life²³. A substantial body of research has also examined the emergence of digitally mediated forms of gendered violence, particularly image-based sexual abuse. Various practices fall under this umbrella, including the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (often referred to as ‘revenge porn’), the covert recording of women in spaces where they expect privacy (known as ‘spycam porn’, or *molka* in Korean), the coercive phishing and blackmailing of women and girls to obtain sexual

²² Inha Cha et al., “‘My Body Is Not Your Porn’: Identifying Trends of Harm and Oppression through a Sociotechnical Genealogy of Digital Sexual Violence in South Korea,” *arXiv*, 2026, arXiv:2602.16853v1.

²³ Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry, *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

content ('digital sextortion'), and, more recently, the creation of synthetic explicit images and videos of targeted women ('deepfake porn')²⁴.

Originally popularized in the 1990s through a 'Candid Camera'-style prank show titled *mollae kamera* (몰래 카메라) aired on MBC with an initial lighthearted and playful connotation, the term quickly became associated with mechanisms of structural violence against women's bodies. A development that stands in stark contrast to South Korea's contemporary reputation for pioneering optical technologies and data analytics in urban management and crime prevention. The widespread adoption of CCTV across East Asia represents some of the most advanced and extensive surveillance infrastructures in the world, with highly varied applications among what we could consider 'representative' nations. If China operates the world's most extensive video surveillance network, enhanced with Artificial Intelligence and Big Data – by 2026, it has evolved from simple monitoring to 'predictive' policing –, South Korea is often cited as having one of the highest concentrations of CCTV in the world, primarily motivated by a 'smart city' philosophy and high public demand for safety and crime prevention. Unlike the most often skeptical and cautious perspective of many Western contexts that regard CCTV with a certain degree of skepticism as a potential means of social safety, South Korea exhibits a generally high level of public trust in surveillance systems; the country is undeniably renowned for its remarkably low crime rates and high recovery rates for stolen property.

Safety – whether urban or private - remains, however, a very idealistic concept, and as with every form of resolution the statistical possibility of side effects or unwanted ramifications is generally very high. The implementation of CCTV systems implies a series of risks and dangers related to privacy regulations, cybersecurity threats and public scrutiny over worker surveillances. Subsequently, the rise in a more 'scientific security' discourse has spurred the use of optical technologies and data analytics in crime prevention, coinciding with a shift in smart city narratives, positing these developments as enhancing women's freedom and safety in urban spaces. However, such narratives often overlook the nuanced and embodied experience of safety and women's

²⁴ Yenn Lee, "The Digital Misogyny Pipeline: Deepfake-Based Sexual Violence in South Korean Schools and Universities," *Gender and Education* 38, no.6 (2026): 699–715.

ambivalent relationship with technology, while framing its use as a binary choice between privacy or safety. While enhanced legibility of the city may help visualize and predict crimes through algorithms, this focus on visual data-driven methods tends to ignore critical aspects of safety, especially those not directly observable conditions like domestic and gender violence²⁵.

Traditional patriarchal power structures combined with South Korea's postcolonial context have positioned women as needing to be in a constant state of vigilance and surveillance vulnerability. Imaginaries of women as perennial potential rape victims reinforced patriarchal control by legitimizing punitive measures aimed at chastising and restricting their mobility – physical and psychological - to private domestic spaces. A form of 'double marginalization'²⁶ that Korean women suffered since the start of postcolonial era society, oppressed by both the colonizers and the colonized men. To address the sorrow of their colonial history and restore a strongly perceived weakened masculinity, colonized Korean men constructed a militant masculine identity that eclipsed women's struggles while also rationalizing their subservient status to promote a certain national progress. A militarized modernization²⁷ and gendered citizenship that shows how the identity-building of 'dutiful citizens' roots in the gender discourse, constructing the ideal in which women are responsible for reproductive labour and the rational management of household, and that is their demonstration and embodiment of patriotism.

The socio-historical conditioning directly pertains to the contemporary politics of techno-scientific authority, namely the state's claims about scientific security, which reflects a commitment to believing in technological fixes that can solve the problem of feminine safety, portraying surveillance as a benevolent tool for ensuring women's safety and empowerment²⁸. While acknowledging the significance of women's safety, the prevalent discourse of scientific security (과학 차안) promoted by Korean – but not exclusively - government agencies and

²⁵ Chamee Yang, "The Techno-Optics of Safety: Surveillance and Women's Ambivalent Experiences in South Korea's 'Smart Safe City'," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 50, no. 6 (2025): 1140-1169.

²⁶ Seung-sook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ C. Yang, "The Techno-Optics of Safety: Surveillance and Women's Ambivalent Experiences in South Korea's 'Smart Safe City'". *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 50, no. 6 (2025): 1140-1169.

private vendors, often overlook how technology in itself can pose harm and prevent the exploration of alternative and relational conceptions of safety. The generalized framing of all women as potential victims serves to other and to render invisible vulnerabilities experienced by more marginalized groups exposed to conditions such as domestic violence or abusive workplaces. Any mechanism of urban security, no matter how universal, objective, and ethical it claims to be, still embodies power and normalizes a particular way of viewing the world; furthermore, these products – also apps, bracelets, rings – further tend to put responsibilities, theoretically ‘protective’, exclusively on women, individualizing defensive responsibility²⁹.

By the 1990s, pre-existing forms of digital sexual violence were steadily mediated through digital technologies such as illegal recording, distribution and consumption of non-consensual sexual material. The widespread use of smartphones and South Korea’s hyper-connected mobile Internet networks exacerbated the issue in the late 2000s, leading to a proliferation in both public and private spaces. In the 2000s less than 4% of sex crimes prosecutions involved illegal filming, but by 2017 the number of such cases had increased eleven-fold - 6,616 cases constituting 20% of sex crimes prosecutions overall. This demonstrates that early Korean online spaces already provided the ideal infrastructures through which sexual material could be stored, exchanged, and commercialized.

The 1997-founded ‘*Gateway of Yaseol*’ (야설의문) initially operated as an adult website that offered erotic fiction, while *Soronet* (소라넷) - a massive illicit portal that successfully maximized profits through the mass distribution of *molka* -, following its subsequent surge in popularity, quickly developed into a platform hosting illegal, exploitative, *molka*-like contents. Operating outside the legal network of the Republic of Korea, *Soronet* was nevertheless able to operate undisturbed for years, demonstrating how the architecture of the emerging online spaces could facilitate large-scale circulation of material that had remained relatively localized up to that point. Hence, the transition was not merely a matter of offline-to-online shifting, but rather a changeover from isolated acts toward

²⁹ Ibid.

increasingly well-organized infrastructures of storage, circulation, and commercialization. This infrastructural shift steadily progressed as Korean ‘webhards’ and encrypted messaging platforms have supplied increasingly sophisticated environments for distribution and monetization of sexually explicit material.

Between 2018 and 2020 - and still very much ongoing on a much wider scale -, chatrooms on *Telegram*³⁰ became hubs for distributing sexually violent content varying in subjects and degree of harm. The perpetrators extended their reach through not only Telegram, but also X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Discord, and cloud services like Google Drive and Mega Drive, exploiting their functionalities for trafficking, extortion, and distribution of abusive content.

The structural epicenter of this crisis materialized exactly between 2018 and 2020 through the ‘*Nth Room*’ case – a sprawling cybersex trafficking ring operating across encrypted Telegram chatrooms. Orchestrated by ringleader-like figures of Cho Jubin (or ‘The Doctor’) and Moon Hyung-wook (‘GodGod’), the operation systematically blackmailed, coerced and extorted numerous vulnerable women and minors into generating gruesome, non-consensual sexual content, which was then distributed to an anonymous paying user base – often through cryptocurrency transactions, designed to elude tracking due to the specific digital nature. Police investigations indicated that the material had reached networks involving approximately 260,000 digital profiles³¹.

The *Nth Room* case served as a major cultural and legal catalyst for the recognition of digitalized sexual crimes in South Korea, substantially redefining the public consciousness regarding online violence and exposing deep, structural deficiencies within the existing legal and judicial architecture.

Prior to this benchmark case, South Korean jurisprudence treated digital sexual crimes as peripheral infractions, overwhelmingly characterized by lenient sentences, minor administrative fines, or suspended probations for individual voyeurs – the shutdown of ‘*Welcome to Video*’, the largest website for child

³⁰ Cloud-based messaging app launched by Nikolai and Pavel Durov in 2013, with a strict core policy for the protection of user privacy to the maximum degree, making it highly resistant to requests from security agencies and governments. Its features include encrypted communication, private and group chats, large-scale channels, and the ability to share files and other digital content.

³¹ The number refers to digital IDs or profiles identified as connected to the distribution network and should not be understood as 260,000 unique individuals, as overlapping or duplicated accounts may have been included.

pornography by volume of content, in 2019, led to the arrest of its main operator Jeong Woo-son. However, cultural norms influenced the legal outcome of the proceedings against him, and his request for leniency due to his marriage resulted in a reduced sentence.

Although prior cases such as *Soranet*³², the aforementioned *Welcome to Video*, and the *Webhard Cartel*³³ (웹하드 카르텔) scandals had previously exposed facets of digital sexual crimes, the *Nth Room* was the definite turning point for the country; its decentralized, hyper-anonymous, and highly profitable nature forced the state to recognize digital sexual violence not as isolated, individualized passive deviations, but as a severe, coordinated form of organized cybersexual crime³⁴.

The *Nth Room* ecosystem also contributed to a broader transition from the circulation of recorded sexual material toward its synthetic production. By the late 2000s, high-profile cases surrounding sexual exploitation that involved merging synthesized faces of acquaintances with explicit images had already emerged – cases were heavily reported at Kyungpook National University in June 2017 and Hanyang University in January 2018³⁵. Synthetic sexual imagery subsequently emerged within exploitative networks that formed in response to the *Nth Room* case. Investigators discovered Telegram channels in which perpetrators classified women based on their social statuses and identities, transforming the female body into a commodity easy to order, produce, and circulate. By September 2019, one such room had disseminated over 5,000 synthetic pictures and 100 deepfake films, while participants discussed how to improve composition quality³⁶. Such development complicates a linear progression in which the

³² South Korea's largest illicit *molka* website, operated from 1999 to 2016.

³³ A deeply entrenched illegal network of peer-to-peer and cloud-based file-sharing platforms (webhards) that historically operated in collusion with digital filtering companies. The cartels were designated to maximize profit from the mass distribution of non-consensual sexual content and copyright-infringing material. It was violently exposed in 2018 during an investigation into Yang Jin-ho, CEO of WeDisk and KDisk.

³⁴ Ji-sun Kim, Min-ji Kim, and Se-eun Hong, 'Tijit'öl sömbömjae üi pyönhwa punsök mipt N-bönbang pangjipöp sihaeng ihu chöngch'aek ch'ujin gwa hyokwasöng p'yöngka [*Analysis of the Changes in Digital Sex Crimes and Evaluation of Policy Implementation and Effectiveness after the Nth Room Prevention Law*], Research Series 23-A-06 (Seoul: Han'guk Hyöngsa·Sajöng Yöng'guwön [Korean Institute of Criminology and Justice], 2023).

³⁵ So-hee Jung, and Hyeseon Noh, "From Grassroots Advocacy to AI Governance: Lessons from South Korea's 2024 Deepfake Sexual Abuse Crisis on Democratising Knowledge and Policy," *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 50, no.3 (2026): 299-336.

³⁶ Investigation Team Flame, "When We Call Ourselves 'Us': Tracking the Nth Room and Our Story" (2020).

significance of the shift lies in the changing of the status of the image itself: ordinary photographs became potential raw material for sexual exploitation, while the technological infrastructure both facilitated the circulation of existing violations and increasingly enabled the production of newer forms of sexualized harm from pre-existing digital footprints. Furthermore, online dissemination led to the emergence of a burgeoning 'market' where users paid for such content – often with prepaid cultural gift vouchers to avoid identity exposures³⁷.

This infrastructure rapidly consolidated into even more covert, automated operational models. According to reports from the National Office of Investigation and Korea's National Police Agency (NAP), between November 2024 and October 2025 authorities apprehended 3,557 individuals for cybersexual violence, with deepfake-related offenses emerging as the single largest category, comprising 1,553 cases. Mirroring the technological leap, the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC) noted that corrective enforcement requests for synthetic sexual media exploded from 7,187 cases in 2023 to 23,107 cases by the close of 2024 – a 3.2-fold spike. According to data from the National Police Agency the number of cases related to fake videos increased from 156 in 2021 to 297 by July 2024, and between January and October 2024 964 cases were registered as reported³⁸.

Concurrently, the Minister of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) through the Advocacy Center for Online Sexual Abuse Victims (ACOSAV) reported an annual support case surge to 10,305 victims, noting that cases strictly involving images synthesis and AI-driven manipulation grew by 227.2%, with teenagers and young adults under thirty comprising 92.6% of those targeted. In 2024 alone out of 682 suspects apprehended 548 (80.3%) were teenagers, and among them 104 (15.9%) were juvenile offenders under the age of criminal responsibility. Consequently, as per the Seoul Metropolitan Government Digital Sex Crime Support Center, among 2,514 victims 476 (18.93%) were teenagers, highlighting a shifting of the execution of digital violence from organized adult networks to underage peer groups using consumer-grade, cheap generative AI softwares.

³⁷ So-hee Jung, and Hyeseon Noh, "From Grassroots Advocacy to AI Governance: Lessons from South Korea's 2024 Deepfake Sexual Abuse Crisis on Democratising Knowledge and Policy," *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 50, no.3 (2026): 299-336.

³⁸ Taktin Naeil Issue Report Team, Han'guk ūi t'ipp'eik'ū sōmbōmjae t'aeng'e daehan hyōnhwang gwa sisajōm [The Current Status and the Implications of South Korea's Response to Deepfake Sexual Crimes'], (Seoul: T'akt'in Nae-il, 2025).

This automated pipeline was crystallized in high-profile crackdowns in early 2025, such as the dismantling of the '*The Vigilantes*' extortion syndicate, which weaponized Telegram from 2020 throughout the early 2025 to blackmail and exploit at least 234 victims – 150 of whom were minors – frequently entrapping them via synthetic images to coerce them into producing non-synthetic authentic explicit material.

The age of damage is gradually decreasing, with also an increase in the number of male victims – which should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of a consequent increase in female perpetrators³⁹.

The outrage surrounding the *Nth Room* galvanized a swift, systemic transformation within the South Korean judiciary, codified through a sweeping package of statutory updates known as the 'Anti-Nth Room Legislation' passed in May 2020 – whose implementation shaped the prosecution landscape through 2026. To address the continuous and rampant struggles with sex crimes, the law prescribes the strengthening of punishments against such offenders, holding accountable Internet service providers, responsible for illegal content distributed through their systems. Furthermore, the legal distinction between the creation and the mere consumption of illegal media was mended, transforming the act of possessing, purchasing, storing or actively watching non-consensual sexually explicit content into an independently prosecutable offense carrying prison sentences up to three years or statutory fines. A legislative architecture that overhauled both the Criminal Act and the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment, etc. of Sexual Crimes.

Complementing these punitive expansions, the judicial apparatus further revolutionized its handling of corporate and platform liabilities, extending law's reach into cyberspace infrastructures. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and value-added communications services under the Telecommunication Business Act were legally transformed into proactive gatekeepers, facing penalty fees and potential criminal liability if they are to fail the active monitoring, suppression and deletion of sexually exploitative content upon its identification. Furthermore, the standard of proof required for the forfeiture of illicit profits derived from cryptocurrencies has been lowered, enabling the State to target hidden sources

³⁹ Woo-chan Jun, "A Study on the Analysis of and Educational Solution for Digital Sex Crimes in Korea", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 3 (2023).

of funding that fuel dark web communities and activities.

Ultimately the legislative and judicial overhaul signals more than a mere refinement of criminal jurisprudence; it unveils a profound sociological transition as cryptographic protocols, decentralized servers, and automated generative pipelines converge, ceasing to function in their neutral role of instrumental channels. Instead, they form hyper-individualized, insulated micro-spaces where traditional societal oversight is nullified and the structural misogyny of physical institutions is reconstituted in an amplified, immutable state. Fundamentally, standard frameworks of ‘public versus private’ completely fall apart and regenerate into new enclaves, that Michael Foucault conceptualized under the concept of ‘heterotopias’ – originally to describe real ‘countersites’ within physical social space.

Foucault argued that our understanding of space – particularly in the relationship between environments, peoples, and things – has changed: if there once was a hierarchical arrangement of medieval spaces – with some being more important than others -, the ‘localized’ importance of a particular locale⁴⁰ came less with the emergence of modern spaces. A new perspective of space as ‘emplacement’ has arisen in the modern era, through which spaces are produced and arranged by choice of reason and necessity – called heterotopias. For Foucault, heterotopias were real, physically bounded ‘counter-sites’ that exist simultaneously within society, yet are entirely set apart from it, acting as mirrors that invert, contest, or neutralize normative social relations⁴¹. In a digital era, cryptographic networks re-engineer this spatial concept through distinct, exclusionary rituals of entry – Telegram links, cryptocurrency thresholds, or mandatory proof of complicity. Within these encrypted heterotopias, the legal and moral rules of the outside world are not just bypassed; they are systematically inverted. The violation of a woman’s bodily autonomy – reprehensible in a general public discourse – becomes the primary currency of status, ‘social’ cohesion, and economic profit inside an enclave, constructing a meticulously ordered alternative reality where absolute anonymity creates a frictionless playground of power insulated from State. While Foucault can help philosophically explain where this

⁴⁰ As in, a physical space.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997).

violence aggregates, Shoshana Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism posits an economic logic driving its automated acceleration, arguing that modern digital architectures operate by claiming private human experiences as 'free raw material' to be translated into data, computed into algorithmic predictions, and monetized⁴². The evolution from the localized, physical opportunism of *molka* to the automated, systemic exploitation like the *Nth Room* and deepfake cartels illustrate a clear, dark truth: when technology transforms human beings into a 'standing reserve' of consumable data, the ontological status of the victim is fundamentally altered. The digital materialization of emotion and trauma means that the violation is no longer a fleeting, bounded event, but a permanent, compounding artifact of the network itself. By rendering the female body an infinite, weaponizable resource for anonymous peer groups, these cryptographic networks do not merely bypass the State's panoptic scientific security, they actively subvert it⁴³. The everyday online presence of women – photos, casual videos, digital footprints – is treated as an unregulated natural resource to be harvested, processed through consumer-grade generative pipelines, and converted into synthetic explicit media. It's a process of radical dispossessing-separation of the individuals from the data they produce, leaving them with zero agency over by whom and how their digital space and presence is manipulated. When such weaponizations happen, the victim is stripped of both bodily and digital sovereignty, transforming one's identity into a highly fluid, infinitely scalable asset optimized for consumption and extortion. So, these spaces, these enclaves, do not merely observe; they actively alter physical worlds.

The contemporary crisis in South Korea serves as an important global example, demonstrating that while law enforcement can perhaps, and to a certain degree, lower evidentiary barriers and hold algorithmic infrastructures accountable, the deeper sociological challenge remains. In a hyper-connected world, the ultimate danger is therefore no longer that of a cyberspace that is too much detached from reality, but rather that its unregulated enclaves have successfully re-engineered the very texture of human relations, vulnerability, and social power dynamics.

⁴² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

⁴³ Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

1.3. The Deepfake Crisis: Technological Modernization and the Automation of Gendered Violence

South Korea's 'Miracle of the Han River', and all it comprised, has spurred extensive debate among scholars regarding its astonishing progress, macroeconomic transition and the lessons its trajectory offers to the rest of the world. While different interpretations emphasize different leading factors, such as the role of the State, the role of market forces and that of the international context amid aid programs and geopolitics, ultimately, what comes as strikingly true is that in little more than a generation the country rose from the ashes of war to become a vibrant industrial economy and an emerging democracy through a transformation predicated upon a highly gendered, state-engineered division of labour.

Various studies have so far touched upon the subject of the use of female workers as low wage and deskilled labourers in the export-oriented industry that overtook what was up until the 1960s still a fully agrarian reality. The literature on gender and development in itself greatly diverges regarding the impact of development on women, and vice-versa. The classical perspective generally posited that modernization processes would remove traditional constraints on women and change the traditional sexual division of labour, thereby fostering their liberation at last. The forces of modernization would 'act on men's attitudes and incline them to accord to women status and rights more nearly equal to those enjoyed by men'. Diffusing not only modern values but also capital and technology, economic modernization could – and in part did - contribute to giving women access to economic resources, modern labour markets, and the ability to acquire new skills - thereby enhancing their opportunities and independence. Much like Schumpeter's own sociological observations in theories like that in 'Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy', where he foresaw the rise of women's movements as a natural shift consequent the capitalist development rather than purely ideological whims. Capitalist rationalism would eventually erode all pre-

capitalist institutions, facilitating the rise of women in public, academic and economic life. However, as different liberal feminists, dependency theorist, and socialist feminists argued, in practice economic modernization has thus far not automatically improved women's status in society. Admittedly, there is a time lag between economic modernization and the trickling down of its benefits, particularly for women. In this, the South Korean case does not conform with the economic modernization perspective – renowned for being critically defined Eurocentric –, as women were in fact thoroughly integrated into the development process, albeit at the lowest levels and with the lowest regards, yet the development integration did not eliminate their subordination and marginalization.

Gendered innovation literature pinpoints numerous cases where gender plays a significant role in scientific discoveries and technological innovations; gendered innovation perspective does not presuppose a normative claim that gender 'should' matter but rather sheds light on why gender does or does not matter in innovation theories and practices, and why it should be considered an important dimension of innovation, nonetheless.

At the core of the heavy industrialization policy of the 1960s – and until the 1980s – was the challenge of supplying labour of different skill levels to perform various manufacturing functions. More than 90% of the labour hired were male workers who manned factories and shipyards as engineers, welders, production managers, etc⁴⁴. Women – particularly in the Southeastern region, covering Busan, Ulsan and the Gyeongnam province – were primarily relegated to family roles, supporting the male breadwinners. A phenomenon of gender-divided classification clearly facilitated by a series of gendered employment hierarchies that, if routinised, further produced a lock-in effect within local communities that led to gender segregation in both work and education. The gender-differentiated formation of economic and social functions in building the nation's industrial cluster led to the emergence of 'industrial patriarchy', in which social and cultural expectations and norms were thoroughly organized around male-dominated manufacturing industries⁴⁵ - women workers in industrialized centers were highly frowned upon. Industrial spatial divisions of labour reinforced gender-led

⁴⁴ Seung-hoon Yang and So-young Kim, "Gender, Engineering, and Innovation in South Korea: An Empirical Investigation of the Industrial Patriarchy of the Southeastern Region," *Asian Journal of Technology Innovation* (2025): 1–24.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

employment hierarchies particularly in manufacturing hubs.

The backwardness of South Korean women stems not only from the traditional cultural characteristics of patriarchy and the institutionalization of those traditional elements coupled with a lack of institutional mechanism from implementing sexual equality, but also from the structural patriarchal characteristic of capitalism as it is practiced in the country, that well underlines the status of women economically, socially, and politically – or rather, their marginalization⁴⁶.

Authoritarianism in East Asia's capitalist developmental state is highly gendered, and as a product of western masculinist capitalism and Confucian parental governance it consequently led to women facing three tiers of patriarchal authority and exploitation: family, state and economy.

The country's economic miracle can be defined by the co-existence of phenomenal growth and women's labour resistance, because despite how little mainstream history recounts to be known about how and to what extent women as workers and engineers contributed to the formation and maintenance of the nation outside of the light manufacturing industries, the country's development nonetheless greatly benefitted from women's working power; incorporated in a capitalist labour market, the female labour force has been described a 'reserve army of labour' available to be brawn into the market when necessary and withdrawn to the private sphere when unemployment rises⁴⁷.

Between the 1960s and 1970s the proportion of women in the labour force climbed from 28.7% to 35.2%, further increasing to 36.6% in the 1980s. However, if the female portion employed in capital-intensive industries increased from 15.2% in 1960 to 19.3% in 1980, the increase rate in labour-intensive industries was strikingly more impactful, going from 50.3% in 1960 to 57.3% in 1980. With time the sexual-based labour division only increased, with women apparel manufacturing workers reaching 76.7% in 1980 while retaining extremely low percentages in capital-intensive industries such as machine manufacturing; that also implies that, despite the significant contribution, women did not benefit the same privileges or rewards that men in such industries enjoyed, such as secure long-term employment, high wages, and upward career mobility. Furthermore,

⁴⁶ Kyung-ae Park, "Women and Development: The Case of South Korea," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 2 (1993): 127–45.

⁴⁷ Kyung-ae Park, "Women Workers in South Korea: The Impact of Export-Led Industrialization." *Asian Survey* 35, no. 8 (1995): 740–756.

the social consideration of women as secondary wage earners meant that they often received about 56% of their wages paid to their male counterparts; very few women were assigned managerial positions, as the factory regime believed paternalistic male figures to be more suitable to lead young female workers, and their less important and less prestigious work – compared to the male counterpart – was reason enough to justify their low wages. Considering that most labourers were unmarried young females in their 20s from a rural background – territorially and academically – non-dependent on their families, such economic dependence as primary wage earners did not in fact reflect in their economic power⁴⁸. Among newly industrializing countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, the wage differential between men and women has been the highest in South Korea. In addition, women worked more hours than men; among the countries for which data was available in 1983, South Korea was the only nation where women worked an average of 53.7 hours per week, while men averaged 51.7. Between 1975 and 1983 male working hours jumped 6.1% while women's went up by 9.6%. Women not only worked more hours but showcased a more rapid increase in percentages overall⁴⁹. Concurrently, it is to be noted that women who remained in the rural areas became a major agricultural work force; in the 1960s, the growth rate of the economically active female population in rural areas experienced a 48.2% increase. In the 1970s a 4.7% increase of economically active women contrasted strikingly a 7.8% shrinking of the same male population – an automatic response to the void left by the male migration from agricultural labour in the process of rapid urbanization⁵⁰.

Sexual job segregation has also always been an instrumental factor, as traditional patterns of gender differentiation in working roles remains unchanged despite female labour force participation somewhat steady in growth: in 1989 women occupied only 1.9% of positions traditionally male-dominated such as administrative and managerial sectors, where only 0.2% of the total working force was female. Women comprised 22% of professional sectors, that however represented only 5.9% of total female workers, and about 80% of those were

⁴⁸ Mi-kyoung Kim, "South Korean Women Workers' Labour Resistance in The Era of Export-Oriented Industrialization, 1970-1980," *Development and Society* 32, no.1 (2003): 77-101.

⁴⁹ Kyung-ae Park, "Women and Development: The Case of South Korea," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 2 (1993): 127-45.

⁵⁰ Mi-kyoung Kim, "South Korean Women Workers' Labour Resistance in The Era of Export-Oriented Industrialization, 1970-1980," *Development and Society* 32, no.1 (2003): 77-101.

teacher and nurses, roles traditionally believed to be feminine⁵¹.

The State's aggressive drive into electronics and semiconductor sectors between the late 1970s and the 1980s - which ultimately established the country as a global technological powerhouse - relied almost exclusively on young women's physical labour in the assembly lines. This structural asymmetry created a profound historical irony: the physical labour of marginalized women built the very computing infrastructures, network architectures, and digital economies that would later become vectors of their subjugation and social fragmentation.

In today's hyper-digitalized era, this matrix of physical and economic exploitation has undergone a profound technological transformation, positioning South Korea not as an atypical case of development, but as an illustrative global case of the global emergence of digitalized, technology-facilitated sexual crimes. Academic research on technology-facilitated gender-based violence highlights a structural asymmetry, noting that in 2023 approximately 98% of all deepfake videos hosted online were explicitly pornographic, with 99% of the individuals depicted being women. A comparison of deepfake-related Google searches in South Korea with those worldwide reveals that searches in the country exceeded global searches from late 2017 to 2023⁵². In the South Korean context, this crisis represents the manifest maturation of a continuous socio-technical lineage of digital misogyny, evolving fluidly from the *molka* epidemic of the 2010s, through highly organized and financially incentivized sextortion networks on Telegram, to the contemporary, decentralized proliferation of deepfake networks based on generative Artificial Intelligence. Feminist and sociological studies analyzing online violence conceptualize this current phenomenon as a form of rhizomatic harm - a digitized aggression that spreads horizontally across encrypted platforms lacking discernible centers or architectural boundaries, effectively making it impossible to contain, erase, or address through systematic legal intervention. A critical analysis of the discourse surrounding the digital ecologies underpinning these crimes reveals a deeply distorted behavioral logic among the perpetrators, the vast majority of whom are young men – often minors. In these virtual spaces, automated bots prompt users to extract mundane images from the

⁵¹ Kyung-ae Park, "Women and Development: The Case of South Korea," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 2 (1993): 127–45.

⁵² Ahmet Yiğitalp Tulga, "Deepfake Interest in South Korea: A Temporal Analysis of Google Trends from 2017 to 2024," *İletişim Kuram ve Araştırma Dergisi* 69 (2025): 220-238.

social media accounts of their peers, teachers, or relatives, translating interpersonal attraction or social familiarity into an algorithmic impulse to dominate, degrade, and synthetically consume the female subject's identity.

This pervasive threat of algorithmic violation introduces a profound socio-political friction that severely hinders women's ability to navigate the public, domestic, and economic spheres, exacerbating the historical marginalization to which they have been subjected. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of 'digital violation disparity', in which the ever-present risk of synthetic degradation induces severe state of socio-spatial anxiety that hinders women's advancement. When government investigations revealed that deepfake targeting affected hundreds of educational institutions, women began compiling collaborative risk maps, while up to 85.9% of 2,154 middle-to-high school female students respondents expressed acute psychological distress regarding their personal digital safety⁵³. To mitigate the risk of reputational annihilation, women have been forced into a widespread retreat from digital spaces: deleting images, erasing personal profile, eliminating online visibility. Being careful of one's personal data online, pictures and information sharing like one's own position, has been a constant memorandum in children's education since the early 2000s – particularly with the launch of Facebook. A constant warning made especially and above all for women.

In a hyper-digitized, knowledge-based economy, where social, political, and professional relationships are primarily negotiated through digital infrastructures, this forced withdrawal acts as a structural expulsion from the public sphere, compelling women to often choose between obscuring their professional identity or non-consensual sexual commodification risks – none of which are either way guaranteed protection and privacy.

Gender-based violence is in itself a longstanding socio-cultural issue, and it refers to a wide range of gender-based acts almost exclusively directed at women and girls that ultimately result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering – whether occurring in the public or private life spheres. What discerns abuse within cyberspace is its reliance on ambiguously produced content. The

⁵³ Kwon Hyŏng-jin. "Chung-go saeng 2myŏng chung 1in 'changnan·hosimshim ttaemun'e tipp'ep'aik sŏngbŏmjoe parsaeng." [One in Two Middle and High School Students Says Deepfake Sex Crimes Occur Because of Pranks and Curiosity]. *Financial News*, December 11, 2024.

word ambiguous defines the fake-realistic nature of such generated content. Synthetic sexual imagery occupies a space between the real and the artificial: it may depict an identifiable person without representing an actual event, yet its fabricated nature does not delete the consequences experienced by the person portrayed. It could be argued that being result of digitalized processes of image creation and modification automatically nullifies the truthfulness of the content, detaching it from what and how the subject is in its own private real life. The issue is, however, that notwithstanding the fake nature of such materials, their mere existence automatically impacts the victim on multiple aspects. Furthermore, the long-term nature resulting from the digital form of both the manipulation and distribution processes results in a type of violence that exceeds the time limits of the original act: once created and distributed, the content can be perpetually repurposed, distributed across various platforms, and resurface again beyond the victim's ability to control or limit it.

Economically speaking, the use of generative AI as a weapon serves as a highly efficient mechanism for workplace harassment and professional sabotage, actively reinforcing the glass ceiling and exacerbating the gender pay gap. Since corporate, political, and academic institutions remain extremely sensitive to scandals that threaten reputation, the targeted dissemination of high-fidelity synthetic pornographic material among the victim's colleagues or industry peers can rapidly undermine their perceived authority and destabilize their career trajectory. Victims are thus forced to expend critical time, emotional, and financial resources in attempts to prove their innocence, having to authenticate the fraudulent nature of their digital images before hostile or skeptical institutions. This reality has a dissuasive effect on women's ambition, acting as a strong deterrent for women seeking to enter highly visible, competitive, or male-dominated sectors, such as politics and STEM fields, where greater visibility can increase exposure to retaliatory digital violence.

The long-term institutional legacy of this historical trajectory is vividly reflected in contemporary socioeconomic data. In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap ranking report, South Korea has ranked among the lowest advanced economies, exhibiting the largest gap on economic participation and opportunity of any advanced economy.

South Korean women do four times as much unpaid work as men and face a

32.5% gender pay gap⁵⁴. Gender-based violence is widespread, even compared to the global estimates - 1 in 3 women experience violence, and in a 2017 survey of 2,000 South Korean men nearly 80% of respondents admitted to having perpetrated violence against an intimate partner. South Korea further presents an unusual demographic anomaly in global comparison, maintaining a homicide rate affecting men and women at comparatively similar rates⁵⁵, a stark statistical reality that underscores the enduring, lethal legacy of a deeply entrenched biopolitical patriarchy, whose negative effects are discernible across the entirety of the population, regardless of gender.

Politically, this crisis is exacerbated by systemic institutional inertia and a broader conservative backlash that deliberately reframes algorithmic misogyny as a neutral issue of platform accountability or technological deviance, rather than a manifestation of structural patriarchy dynamics. Sociological research indicates that these digital crimes are fueled by a homosocial online subculture characterized by a narrative of male disenfranchisement, wherein deepfakes are deployed as a political tool to neutralize feminist mobilization and punish female self-advocacy through morally motivated networked harassment. By reducing the crisis to a series of isolated technical malfunctions, state authorities have historically deflected systemic responsibility, frequently placing the burden of protection onto women by advising behavioral modesty online. Ultimately, because women remain structurally excluded from the primary development, ethical governance, and legal regulation of generative technologies, the underlying artificial intelligence architectures remain fundamentally imbued with patriarchal biases, standardizing computational systems in which the female form is disproportionately represented as a site for sexualized consumption, and ensuring that generative tools continue to automate the socioeconomic subjugation of women, replicating in a way the historical exploitations of the Han River miracle within the digital architectures of the 21st century.

⁵⁴ OECD. "Gender Equality in Korea." In *Rejuvenating Korea: Policies for a Changing Society*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021.

⁵⁵ Heather Barr, "'My Life Is Not Your Porn': Digital Sex Crimes in South Korea." *Human Rights Watch* (2021).

2. Digital Counterpublics: Feminist Resistance and the Reclamation of Gender Power

Over the past two decades, the emergence of Web 2.0 and the concomitant rise of global platforms fundamentally transformed the conditions under which both private and public life is experienced. The deep penetration of platforms into the fabric of everyday life has brought about a major shift in the way people relate not only to the larger social world but also the basic conditions under which contemporary political life and social identities are articulated. In South Korea, where Internet penetration (at 96% in 2018⁵⁶) and digital connectivity developed at an extraordinarily rapid pace, this transformation was particularly consequential. From online commerce and social networking to political campaigning and civic mobilization, digital infrastructures increasingly became inseparable from participation in public life. This transformation did not, however, produce an unequivocally more democratic public sphere. Rather, it altered the conditions under which individuals and groups could engage, contest, and reshape public discourse. Notwithstanding the numerous comparatively positive instances, a paradox has become increasingly apparent in South Korea: the more widespread access to information technology developed, the more digital platforms enabled individuals to express themselves, sharing freely, and in an unmediated, unmoderated manner all sorts of views. Broader access has increased participation while also expanding the range of perspectives, claims, and disputes that may be expressed and circulated in online spaces.

The perceived accessibility of digital platforms enabled historically marginalized groups to articulate experiences that had previously remained confined to private or semi-private spaces, while anonymity and interconnected communication simultaneously facilitated harassment, exclusion, and the

⁵⁶ World Bank, "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) – Korea, Rep.," *World Development Indicators*, accessed August 23, 2026.

reproduction of existing hierarchies. The digital public sphere therefore emerged as an inherently ambivalent political environment: a space capable of enhancing participation while reproducing, intensifying, and sometimes monetizing structural inequalities. This ambivalence is particularly significant when examined through the relationship between networked publics and counterpublics.

Since the advent of social media at the turn of the 21st century, critical scholars of communication, cultural and media studies have long been invested in the question regarding the relationship between social media and the discursive formation of *counterpublics* for social mobilization. The question, however, is not simply whether digital platforms provide marginalized groups with spaces in which to speak. It is also how the technological, social, and economic conditions of networked communication transform the very meaning and practice of counterpublics.

Nancy Fraser describes subaltern *counterpublics* as discursive arenas that develop in parallel to the official public sphere, in which members of subordinated social groups create and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs, operating as spatialized civic ‘training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics’⁵⁷. Counterpublics therefore emerge not simply because marginalized groups require separate spaces, but because participation in the dominant public sphere is shaped by inequalities that cannot be alleviated through the formal presumption of communicative equality.

The concept of subaltern counterpublics is a direct response to Jürgen Habermas’s concept of public sphere in critical social theory and democratic practice. Early modern European bourgeois public sphere was the conceptualization of a space in which political participation was to be enacted through means of verbal communication, leading to the formation of public opinion and, ideally, general consensus about the common good, ultimately enabling an easier, more direct communication with the State. Such argument was however faulted in its structure resting upon significant exclusions that included women, working-class publics, popular peasants’ publics, etc⁵⁸. Thus,

⁵⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, in *Habermas and The Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992): 109-42.

⁵⁸ Ioannis Kampourakis, “Nancy Fraser: Subaltern Counterpublics,” *Critical Legal Thinking*, 2016.

the public sphere was always composed of conflictual and antagonistic humanities; an instrument that translated into forms of political domination resting on social inequalities to the benefit of abstract political equality. The assumption that the public sphere interlocutors could deliberate as if equal ignores a reality that was far from equal in many aspects. Foucault's analysis of power relations similarly challenges the idea that transparent communication can be performed outside relations of power, as power is not external to communication but rather integral to the relations through which subjects speak, listen, and interact.

In such scenario the subaltern counterpublics formed as a response to exclusions imposed by the dominant forms of deliberation, functioning both as spaces of withdrawal and as bases for antagonistic deliberations⁵⁹.

Nothing of what has been said so far must, however, lead to a virtuous interpretation of such spaces; they should not be understood as inherently emancipatory, as the creation of alternative publics does not determine the political content circulating within it. As Fraser herself points out, counterpublics can easily become proliferative spaces for antidemocratic and antiegalitarian discourses and politics⁶⁰. By crafting a narrative centered on class marginalization from the decision-making processes, the presumed recovery of power by the 'people' against the 'establishment,' xenophobia, and narrow-minded view of community, subaltern counterpublics can be mobilized in populist and anti-egalitarian direction through the exploitation of structural exclusions built into liberal democracies.

The structural nature of counterpublics is therefore politically ambivalent: the creation of an alternative public does not, by itself, determine whether the politics articulated within it will be emancipatory.

This distinction becomes of greater significance when the concept of counterpublics is implemented into digitally networked environments. Networked publics should not be understood as counterpublics in themselves. Rather, they represent the broader digitally mediated environments within which multiple publics and counterpublics can emerge, interact, clash, and mobilize. The traits of permanent connectivity, anonymity, rapid circulation, algorithmic visibility, minimal entry barriers, and the ability to connect geographically dispersed

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

individuals can transform the spatial and temporal contexts in which counterpublics form. Online spaces can therefore serve concurrently as sanctuaries, platforms for organization, arenas of discourse, and channels for amplification.

Fraser further argues that public spheres, contrary to the bourgeois view, do not function exclusively as arenas for rhetorical contestation, but also as fertile ground for the formation and enactment of social identities⁶¹. Informal debates may create a communicative power that is translated into administrative power via the means of legislation, and subaltern counterpublics challenge notions of power that legitimate the production of norms in a hegemonic discourse, which is a product of structural inequality. Because the emergence of counterpublics has traditionally been understood as 'good' and 'progressive' in its offering of spaces for historically marginalized groups to come together and challenge public dominant discourses, the issues that have concurrently begun to arise with the recent ascend of racist, antifeminist and climate change denying counter-discourses has been overlooked. Online mobilization of prospective counterpublics frequently originates from disputes and grievances; underlying complaints and repressed desperation serve as significant catalysts for articulating thoughts and emotions in the digital realm. Similarly, social media may exacerbate disagreements among individuals and assist them in legitimizing their actions and assertions during social movements. As members of online communities and other people debate their own justifications and strategies, the contested processes of dispute and rationalization are not dominated by the system but instead are being generated based on participation and expanded into wider connections⁶².

As social movements develop, online spaces become multifaceted stages upon which people not only act as witnesses but are also active participants. Social networks and media provide efficient and innovative channels and opportunities through which to connect enormous numbers of people, expand networks, refine agendas, partake into activism and protests. But those very characteristics can also exacerbate hostility; online mobilization typically comes

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Su-young Choi & Young-han Cho, "Generating Counter-Public Spheres through Social Media: Two Social Movements in Neoliberalised South Korea", *Javnost - The Public* 24, no. 1 (2017): 15-33.

from conflicts, demands, and experiences of repression, while social media may offer users with groups through which their interpretations of events are validated and amplified. Members of online communities discuss their justification and strategies, and these processes of controversy and rationalization can generate identities and political practices that transcend the immediate circumstances in which the demands arose. Social media, therefore, do not just convey political discourse: they engage in the formation of communal identities and antagonism through which political discourse acquires meaning.

Prosumers, or those individuals who both consume and produce content, actively participate in online life by creating posts, writing reviews, offering feedback, and generating discussions through commenting. It is both a form of active participation that not only amplifies the diversity of voices but also bolsters freedom of expression on a global level, and a means facilitating the dissemination of content that may be offensive, denigrating, or hateful, which in turn contributes to documented patterns of online harassment and misogynistic discourse. The steady rise in digital harassment aligns with the *online disinhibition effect*, where perceived anonymity reduces the fear of accountability, giving users a false sense of empowerment to engage in harmful behavior.

Online harassment frequently falls under the category of hate speech, which according to the UN Strategy and Plan of Action defines as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor.” When harmful content specifically targets women, it is categorized as misogyny - manifesting as any form of communication that expresses hatred towards women through insults, sexual harassment, assertions of male privilege, demeaning remarks, acts of violence, body shaming, and sexual objectification. Further, online misogynistic discourse extends beyond broader terms like cyberbullying, cyberstalking, or cyberviolence as, unlike those categories, it explicitly captures the sexually violent and sexist dimensions of gender-based hate speech rooted in systemic and structural misogyny⁶³.

⁶³ Simone Di Zio et al., “Assessing long-term strategies to effectively counteracting online misogynistic speech using a Delphi-based future scenarios approach,” *Futures* 177 (2026).

Early discussions of digital media often described the Internet as an inherently democratizing infrastructure capable of leveling hierarchies in favor of a more equitable management and distribution of news and knowledge, as well as general interconnectedness; a genderless utopia where identity would transcend the dichotomy of male and female. However, the current economy of platforms is rather the result of the exploitation of that very potential in favor of a toxic crystallization of misogynistic counterpublics reinforcing a clear sociopolitical division between genders. Rather than simply providing neutral channels of connection, platforms operate through algorithmic architectures that often determine which forms of discourse are most easily discovered, distributed, and amplified. As a result, digital gender politics developed within an environment in which misogynistic and feminist counterpublics could emerge from the same networked infrastructures. Within this ecosystem, fragmented online spaces - ranging from explicit channels of radicalization within the manosphere to the algorithmic clusters of more mainstream social media - allowed users to share grievances, develop collective vocabularies, reinforce identities, and mobilize against perceived threats. This brings us into the realm of networked publics: digitally mediated spaces where groups and individuals engage in collective processes of sharing and assimilating ideas, debating, and mobilizing - often with no restraints of any type whatsoever.

The gendered nature of networked publics must therefore be understood against the longer history of male dominance over digital infrastructures. The material and ideological substructures of the Internet (computers, software, webspace, etc) have traditionally been dominated and managed by men, and, due to this greater representation in computing and technological fields, they have comprised majority of the users since its inception. As a result, women have been underrepresented in both usage and ownership - a gap that underwent challenging work for it to be shortened. Efforts have not resolved the structural challenges for women; rather, the notion of gender - and particularly its differences - has been discursively emphasized in the virtual world.

Material anonymity works relatively well, given that it allows and supports critique and opposing discourses in situations in which otherwise any type of dissent to dominant ideologies would not be possible. When entering the notions of gender, however, the cloak of anonymity has allowed for men to express

desires and ideas that they would not otherwise present in real life; without the presence of a physical body, flaming becomes an alternative sign of one's masculinity making virtual spaces violent, especially if confronted directly by the victims⁶⁴. Anonymity thus enables online masculinity to emerge more offensively and aggressively than offline stances.

In 1996, Hall outlined four primary configurations - or discursive strategies - of cybermasculinity through which online masculine cultures marginalize women and reinforce gender boundaries: conversational dominance over women-preferred topics, textual harassment through the means of sexist jokes, obscene language and unsolicited pornographic pictures; heterosexism, "a prejudice realized on the Internet through the proliferation of 'anti-homosexual'" discourses, and internal competition amongst men settled through "violent and sexualized verbal compensation"⁶⁵.

This should be understood against the backdrop of a society that, as early as the 1990s, was already on the cusp of a crisis of masculinity; an upheaval that, coupled with the increasingly stringent feminist reactions to issues of equality and violence, would result in the emergence of a performative masculinity to contrast femininity, especially in relation to men. As women's societal status evolved - particularly in traditionally male-dominated roles -, amidst a society actively pursuing progressive sociocultural policies, longstanding notions of masculinity result in a significant pressure point that generates a profound crisis in men, which they then confront through vehement attempts to maintain their dominance⁶⁶.

Women's growing consciousness has directly impacted efforts aimed at preserving and reconstructing traditional masculinity, leading to the emergence of the notion of digital masculinity. Digital spaces have also provided certain groups of men with environments in which masculine identities can be performed and intensified without threat of restriction associated with face-to-face interaction. In this novel domain, they express their cybermasculinity through an intense and profound want to exert control over women on both psychological

⁶⁴ Kwon Jung-min, "From Masculinity to Cybermasculinity: Marginalizing the Other in DCInside" in *New Times. Making Sense of Critical/Cultural Theory in a Digital Age*, ed. Cameron McCarthy, Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer, and Robert Mejia (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2011): 195-228.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

and physical fronts, which inevitably translates into various forms of digital violent tendencies.

The emergence of cybermasculinity therefore cannot simply be reduced to the actions of individual ‘trolls.’ It is also a social process through which users develop shared vocabulary, identities, and understandings of gender.

Online communities can transform individual resentment into collective grievance, and collective grievance into political identity. In this sense, misogynistic networked publics constitute counterpublics formations of their own: they emerge around perceived exclusion and marginalization, construct oppositional identities, and direct counter-discourses against an imagined dominant establishment. Their existence demonstrates precisely why counterpublicity cannot be equated automatically with progressive politics.

At the same time social media has become a key environment for the rise of feminist counterpublics. Women found in digital spaces a chance to reconstruct meanings and make requests that male-dominated institutions had historically precluded them. Yet, cyberspaces remain a space of unsafety and danger for women, reproducing many of the inequalities found in the offline world.

In the 1990s, relatively few Korean women participated in online activities - according to a 1998 survey, only 25% of Internet users were female⁶⁷. In terms of sheer numbers, the gender digital divide diminished in the present century, but the reasons as to why women still fear the digital sphere are the same: personal attacks, sexist posting, verbal abuse, online sexual violence, and stalking not only persist but have increased in terms of frequency and severity. A 2018 survey on women’s experiences of online misogyny showcased a staggering 97% of respondents reporting of having been exposed to misogynistic expressions online, while according to a survey conducted by the Korean Women’s Political Institute in 2021 about 14% of female respondents attested that online stalking had led to further online and offline offenses⁶⁸.

There therefore exists a ‘cultural domination of masculinity in online spaces’ influenced by not only physical and structural, but also cultural and physiological

⁶⁷ Jin-sook Kim, “Misogyny for Male Solidarity: Online Hate Discourse Against Women in South Korea” in *Mediating Misogyny. Gender, Technology, and Harassment*, ed. Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 151-69.

⁶⁸ Min-jeong Kim, “Online gender-based hate speech in South Korea,” *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 38, no. 2 (2024): 140-149.

factors. A male dominated digital culture forces female users to the margins of cyberspace in South Korea - and not only -, so that online communities have become gendered as either male-dominated or exclusive to women⁶⁹. And if in modern terms media literacy is a prerequisite to contemporary society and democracy, then defining a new technology as male domain 'informally' contributes to discouraging women from developing the necessary technological skills for sociopolitical participation. Consequently, the ideological form of masculinity crystallizes into a political-economic structure in which men dominate the material resources necessary for participation in the public sphere⁷⁰.

Female-dominated online communities emerged partly in response to such obstructing conditions. Since computer-mediated communication was popularized in the 1990s female users have been actively participating in online interactions through communities organized around shared interests and the wish to avoid the discomfort of being woman in male-dominated communities, in which they would be trapped by masculine expectations of feminine attitude, oscillating between being the object of masculine gaze and the docile feminine subject⁷¹. The resulting female-centered communities conferred a sense of belonging through shared support and comfort, and reliable interlocutors with and to whom share information and knowledge. And while these first communities were not explicitly feminist-oriented, they socialized the female users as proto-feminist subjects and furthermore became a milieu where feminist ideas and discourses could circulate and proliferate despite the intensified online misogyny outside⁷². The transition from protective proto-feminist enclaves to assertive counterpublics marks a pivotal transformation in the spatial dynamics of Korean digital feminism. Contemporary digital feminist counterpublics have transcended the limitations of confined, isolated forums, adeptly infiltrating mainstream platform frameworks via strategic visibility, leveraging hashtags, viral archiving, and collective digital whistleblowing, thereby bringing marginalized grievances into dominant public

⁶⁹ Jin-sook Kim, "Misogyny for Male Solidarity: Online Hate Discourse Against Women in South Korea" in *Mediating Misogyny. Gender, Technology, and Harassment*, ed. Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 151-69.

⁷⁰ Kwon Jung-min, "From Masculinity to Cybermasculinity: Marginalizing the Other in DCInside" in *New Times. Making Sense of Critical/Cultural Theory in a Digital Age*, ed. Cameron McCarthy, Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer, and Robert Mejia (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2011): 195-228.

⁷¹ Eui-sol Jeong and Ji-eun Lee, "We Take the Red Pill, We Confront the DickTrix: Online Feminist Activism And the Augmentation of Gendered Realities in South Korea," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 705-717.

⁷² Ibid.

discourse. By converting personal experiences of gender-based violence and digital harassment into collective political critique, these interconnected communities have challenged the conventional dichotomy between private and public realms.

Nonetheless, heightened visibility carries a structural cost. Because the intrinsic nature of platform algorithms prioritizes polarizing and emotionally charged material to drive user enhancement, feminist discourse can often generate reactive responses, hence accelerating the intensity and extent of aggressive cybermasculinities' reactions.

The emergence of feminist digital counterpublics must therefore be understood alongside the development of their antagonistic counterpart: the same infrastructures that enabled feminist women to articulate grievances and construct collective identities also facilitated the circulation of misogynistic discourse, the performance of cybermasculinity, and the formation of reactionary communities. Digital gender politics consequently developed not as a one-directional process of feminist empowerment, but as a mutually constitutive struggle between competing counterpublics. Feminist practices advanced in reactions to misogynistic practices, while misogynistic communities likewise adjusted in response to feminist visibility and mobilization. This antagonistic relationship is central to understanding the subsequent development of Korean digital gender severance and feminism.

The current landscape of digital counter-publics demonstrates the fundamental ambivalence of platform-based public life. Although social media provides marginalized individuals with diverse avenues to create oppositional identities, build transnational networks, and contest dominant norms, it also commodifies and algorithmically exacerbates the conflict between competing gender-political formations. Digital counterpublics are consequently neither inherently democratizing nor essentially destructive; rather, they are dynamic, power-laden spaces in which offline world's structural inequalities are constantly reinterpreted, disputed, and recreated in a continuous worsening loop.

In South Korea, the significance of these developments lies precisely in this tension: the very networks that empowered women to transform experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and violence into unified political action also facilitated the emergence of more structured forms of opposition. Digital feminism emerged

not in opposition to structures of power, but within a framework that simultaneously facilitated resistance, intensified conflict, and redefined the parameters of gender relations.

The subsequent trajectory of digital gender conflict in Korea can be understood not as a simple confrontation between technological emancipation and technological harm, but as an interdependent process in which feminist mobilization and misogynistic backlash perpetually reshape one another.

2.1 Mirroring: Megalia, Digital Resistance, and the Politics of Reversal

Digital media transformed the conditions through which misogyny could move from a form of interpersonal prejudice into an algorithmically amplified public ideology – social networking websites and applications like Facebook, X (ex-Twitter), KakaoTalk (specifically in Korea), have created opportunities for more near-instantaneous unmediated communication⁷³. Yet the significance of these technologies extends beyond their ability to circulate misogynistic discourse; they also altered the conditions under which such discourse could become collective. Online communities provided users not only with language and validation but with spaces in which these ideas could be shared, reinforced, and collectively reproduced. Algorithms do not create misogyny *ex nihilo*; they increase its visibility, repetition, circulation, and economic-political value.

With this transition, the concept of acquiescence and suppressed dissent, which had become deeply ingrained, particularly among women but also across society, was increasingly disputed. For decades, misogynistic remarks and actions – frequently violent, at times inhumane – have regularly been dismissed as ‘innocuous’ and attributed to ‘spontaneous’ impulses, enabling their unrestricted use due to a perceived lack of significant repercussions; however, the increasing prominence of communication and social media platforms, coupled

⁷³ Young-mi Kim, “Mirroring misogyny in Hell Choson: Megalia, Womad, and Korea’s feminism in the age of digital populism,” *European Journal of Korean Studies* 20, no. 2 (2021): 101-134.

with heightened concerns regarding personal privacy and the ramifications of one's digital identity, has rendered online misogyny and anti-feminism primary issues to be kept under close scrutiny, and the subject of extensive socio-political debates and legally regulated interventions. Digital media has therefore not only offered a new avenue for longstanding biases but has also radically altered the mechanisms of misogyny, its proliferation, and, most importantly, the ways in which it is challenged and resisted.

South Korean digital culture offers a particularly revealing case. Established in 1999 as an exclusively online space where people could share information on digital camera technology, DCinside rapidly expanded due to the absence of a dedicated space for sharing one's digital creations. Through the sharing of digitally modified parodied images the site attracted more users, steadily gaining social and political influence; during the 2002 presidential elections, parodied pictures of certain candidates greatly affected the public sentiment, demonstrating the capacity of online visual culture to influence public sentiment - having understood the power of digital incitement, opposing parties also started to exploit such images to gain votes and popular approval. While subversive Internet user communities based on humor and trolling have been popular worldwide, this loosely organized group of online protesters, critics, satirists, and trolls have thrived thanks to the anonymity offered by the platform – the users often referred to themselves through self-deprecating epithets such as 'Internet freaks' (int'ónet p'yein, 인터넷 페인⁷⁴), 'pathetic' (tchijil, 찌질), 'idiots' (pyöngshin, 병신), 'leftover human' (ingyöin'ga, 잉여인간)⁷⁵, while constructing an extremely explicit and aggressive language towards women – Herring describes such practice as 'flaming': the expression of strong negative emotion through the use of derogatory, obscene, or inappropriate language, and personal insults.

Given guaranteed immunity and anonymity, and a 'anything goes through' philosophy, the DCinside galleries have been fundamentally male-dominated and

⁷⁴ As per the National Institute of Korean Language's Naver Dictionary (Korean-English): crock, disabled person, loser, bum; as per Daum Korean Dictionary (다음 사전): 1. 쓸모없이 된 사람 2. 병 따위로 몸을 망친 사람.

⁷⁵ Sun-young Yang, "'Loser' Aesthetics: Korean Internet freaks and gender politics," *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no.6 (2019): 858-872.

male-oriented from the very beginning. The parody culture that lived in it was clearly a reinforcement of appearance-mocking and sexual objectification of ordinary women, and while rudimentary image-editing tools initially employed produced rather primitive and crude results, in the current digital landscape advanced software and artificial intelligence facilitate the creation of remarkably hyperrealistic images, amplifying their communicative and visual power tenfold. This represents a dual impasse: the inherent brutality of the initial period and the contemporary hyper-realistic portrayal have consistently led to the production of content - and thus, environments - in which the female body is objectified and commercialized indiscriminately, revealing the profound misogynistic attitudes embedded within these online environments.

At present, the DCinside website is fully operational, and direct examination of the platform reveals the persistence of such dynamics: male users employing highly aggressive language towards women, against which contrasts the women's dedicated sections where topics and discussions focus widely on entertainment or idol-focused activities. Particularly, the male-dedicated 'AI Images' (AI 이미지) section is saturated with artificially created or artificially manipulated images clearly intended for sexual purposes, descending into violent and immoral extremes – extremely sexualized images of adult women, adolescent, and children, regardless of age⁷⁶.

Against this backdrop of entrenched digital antagonism, online male spaces evolved from passive prejudice into explicit ideological radicalization. Eighteen-year-old Kim, who had gone missing in Turkey in January 2015 and later reported by South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) to have crossed into Syria to join ISIS, had left a few posts on Twitter before disappearing, reading: 'I hate feminists. Therefore, I like IS⁷⁷' (나는 페미니스트가 싫다. 그래서 IS가 좋다) and 'However, the current era is the era in which males are being discriminated against' (그러나 지금은 남성이 차별받는 시대)⁷⁸. The significance of these statements lies not simply in the ingrained extremity of the individual case, but

⁷⁶ Author's observation based on direct examination of DCinside's AI Images (AI 이미지) gallery, accessed July, 2026.

⁷⁷ IS stands for Islamic State.

⁷⁸ Hyeon-cheol Pak, 'T'ök'i siljong Kim gun 'nanün p'eminisüt'üga sir'ö IS hamnyuhagosipt'a" [Kim, Missing in Turkey: "I Hate Feminists, Want to Join IS"], *Han'györe*, (January 2015).

within the explicit causal connection made when using the word ‘therefore’ (그래서), giving the preceding sentence (hating feminists) the reason or condition for the following sentence (enrolling in ISIS), and thereby presenting the animosity towards feminism and feminists as a complete ideological premise capable of justifying alignment with an extremist armed forces organization. Kim's statements condensed into an unusually explicit form a broader relationship between misogynistic resentment, perceived male victimhood, and the search for ideological communities online.

The case immediately ignited considerable public discourse, highlighting various social issues ranging from teenagers’ failure to adapt to educational environments and their isolation – Kim himself was homeschooled, and what could be defined as a *hikikomori* – to the influence of social media and misogyny that reflected young men’s skewed discontent with, and perception of, society. Displeasure, social isolation and digital rabbit holes heavily intersect in the formation of radical anti-feminist worldviews. The ‘Kim Incident’ and the international political and digital communication frameworks pushed the Korean society to confront the truth that such events laid bare in front of them: ingrained misogyny and feminist activism retaliating openly.

The case further prompted terms such as ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ to surge at the forefront of public attention: following the controversy, it rose to the top of the most searched words on major Korean portals such as Naver and Daum⁷⁹. Regardless of consensus or dissent, and irrespective of whether feminism was accurately comprehended or significantly misconstrued, the general public had suddenly come to perceive the newfound peculiar word. Kim’s words and actions became the catalyst in presenting an ideological link that would become of significance for the future evolution of gender politics in the digital sphere: misogynistic animosity could be expressed via online platforms, associated with wider stories of male disenfranchisement, and assimilated into various political - and potentially extremist - identities⁸⁰. Since 2015, feminism in South Korea has radically transformed, being integrated into the social-media-driven economy

⁷⁹ Eun-ha Park, “‘Peminisūtū, öttök’e chōgi toeōnna” [How Did ‘Feminist’ Become an Enemy?], *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, March 6, 2015.

⁸⁰ Hye-young Cho, “‘Intermedial Feminism: Megalia and Kangnam Station Exit 10,” in *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, ed. Michelle Cho and Je-sook Song (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2024): 46-65.

where attention and information – both negative and positive - generate profit as a commodity. Antifeminist incidents like that of Kim's drew unprecedented attention to feminist concepts and practices, thereby provoking an increase in antifeminist attacks and hate speech on the Internet. At the same time many young women no longer restrained their rage, refusing the social expectation of silence and accommodation for gender discrimination and violence; on social media they freely and voluntarily expressed their opposition to gender discrimination and violence more loudly and clearly than ever before⁸¹.

The 2015 controversy surrounding adult men's magazine Maxim Korea for the sexualized and aestheticized representation of brutal violence against women in a cover page that had portrayed a staged scene suggesting a woman had been abducted and murdered by the featured cover model, and the campaigns in November that same year for the shutdown of Soranet, were part of an increasingly apparent feminine confrontation over and against the sexual representation of women online. An online petition demanding Soranet's closure attracted more than 70,000 participants⁸², and in April 2016 South Korean police, in cooperation with Dutch authorities, seized and shut down a core Soranet server in the Netherlands, followed by the site's official closure in June of the same year⁸³.

At the same time, in 2016, the distribution and public reception of Cho Nam-joo's novel 'Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982' offers insight on how feminism and attention in the digital information age can define and communicate women's experiences of discrimination, sexual violence and insecurity, particularly in a period of mounting tensions within the gender discourse a few months after the Gangnam Station murder on May 17th, when thirty-four-year-old perpetrator Kim Seong-min stabbed a woman completely unacquainted, motivated by his feelings or neglect from women in his everyday interactions.

The novel was widely acclaimed for its portrayal of women's experiences of gender discrimination in Korean society, becoming a major reference point for discussions surrounding gender inequality in South Korea – selling more than two

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² KBS News, "'Soranet' P'yeswae... Kyŏngch'al, Kukche Kongjo Ŭl T'onghae Haekshim Oeguk Sŏbŏ Apch'ŭ" [Soranet Closed... Police Seize Core Overseas Server through International Cooperation], April 7, 2016.

⁸³ Kwon Yŏng-jŏn, "'Soranet' T'ŭwittŏ 'Saiteu Kongshik P'yeswae' Sŏnŏn" [Soranet Twitter Account Announces "Official Closure of Site"], *Yonhap News*, June 6, 2016.

million copies in Korea. The author herself collected and adapted the most high-profile feminist issues and provided statistics about gender inequality through a structure similar to a medical report written by the psychiatrist counseling Kim Jiyoung. Its reception also demonstrated the increasingly polarized character of digital gender politics. Notably, boy group BTS's leader RM and girl group Red Velvet's Irene both openly acknowledged having read the book and recommended it to their fans, but the responses to such statements were astonishingly different. If RM expressing how he was positively influenced by the book contents received little to no reaction, Irene faced vehement criticism for expressing similar sentiments, with some fans contending that as a girl group member – or: a commodity – she bore the responsibility to avoid offending them, and engaging with such literature was perceived as a blatant betrayal. Some male fans went as far as uploading videos of themselves burning her photos to various social networks and communities. The juxtaposition revealed how feminism became intertwined with celebrity culture, gender dynamics, and commercialization: for certain male consumers, a female celebrity's declaration of feminist alignment was seen not merely as a political stance but as a violation of the gender norms associated with her public persona. It was a gender war; each side provoked one another's attention and rage in a feedback loop; feminist or gender-related issues became hot topics in news outlets, political discourse, and among the general public, concurrently resulting in the distortion of feminism through misinformation, oversimplification, and misleading claims of causality.

The observation that many online communities encourage the often-toxic performance of masculinity is not new; nonetheless, what is particularly significant in South Korea is how toxic masculinity becomes more than a virtual performance when such users engage in communal activities offline. Exemplary was their reaction to the amount of money the grieving families of the 2014 Sewol Ferry tragedy would receive from the government: Ilbe users bonded over their perception that the families' demands were excessively taxing for the government, and they subsequently resolved to troll the hunger-striking families by consuming pizzas in front of them.

As the feminist movement worked within a digital network environment new unprecedented methods of activism emerged; the intermediation between the material and immaterial, the virtual and the physical, and theory and practice,

exposing the immateriality behind the Internet space: they wanted real changes for gender equality and safety assured against gender violence in policy, institutions and law.

The resulting new feminist movement was predominantly online-based, a distinctive factor from former feminist movements. In the mid-1990s BBS⁸⁴ systems such as Hitel, Chollian, and Nownuri provided forums to discuss gender issues, often closely associated with, or made by, activists, social or student organizations. During the late 1990s to early 2000s, emerging feminists started to problematize the male-centric and violent online culture by establishing autonomous webzines or community portals that they could independently operate and sustain, including Dallara (달라라네트워크), UNNI (언니네트워크), feminist journal Ilda (여성주의 저널 일다), WOMAD (위마드), and Megalia (메갈리아). Therefore, the phenomenon of such communities should not be understood simply as a response to individual instances of online abuse; they developed within a longer history of women creating alternative communicative spaces in response to structural dominance of male-centered digital communities. These female-centric online groups offered women environments for connection, solidarity, and the sharing of information and expertise. And while they may have not been explicitly feminist, they nonetheless operated as spaces of withdrawal from the dominant digital public sphere, providing the conditions for the creation of an alternative communicative space that fostered a collective understanding of gendered inequalities and the circulation of feminist ideas.

While these spaces initially served mainly as places of withdrawal, communities like Megalia have catalysed a transition toward increasingly antagonistic forms of counterpublics, the significance of which lies in the shift from creating a space in which women could express themselves to using that space as a base from which to contest the dominant public discourse - embodying Fraser's idea of counterpublics as environments that serve as both sanctuaries and foundations for broader oppositional action.

Established in 2015 via the online discussion board DCinside, and specifically emerging out of the MERS Gallery, Megalia is particularly significant for Korean

⁸⁴ Bulletin-board systems.

feminism. In the summer of 2015 MERS-CoV (Middel East Respiratory Syndrome) swept through the Arabian Peninsula, eventually reaching South Korea. When two of the initial carriers failed to adhere to quarantine protocols due to a communication failure, media reports promptly highlighted the noncompliance of the ‘women⁸⁵’ involved, strongly stressing their gender. That incited DCinside users to verbally assault the women using pejorative slangs such as ‘Kimchi girl’ (김치녀, kimch’inyŏ) - a very widely used term among men for disparaging women by likening them to fermented cabbage. Prior to the emergence of 김치녀, the term 된장녀 (toenjangnyŏ, ‘soybean paste girl’) had been used to stigmatize and condemn young women as superficial, lavish, and materialistic – individuals reportedly choosing cheap meals such as instant noodles to finance expensive coffee drinks; ones that favor foreign luxury brands regardless of their quality and price; women devoid of personal economic means, thereby reliant on their male partners⁸⁶. As online forums proliferated, the notion of ‘Kimchi girl’ emerged, serving as a label for women perceived as expecting males to cover general financial support while refusing to provide equal effort or respect. The term gradually acquired a generally derogatory tone aimed at disparaging Korean women collectively; the condemnation expressed in such epithets was not directed at a specific person, rather at a woman – women implicitly: the suffix ‘-nyeo’ (girl/woman) adds the misogynistic implication that Korean women are inherently selfish, irrational, and irresponsible. The consistent use of ‘-nyeo’ contributed to the establishment of new targets of misogyny, in which the figure of the ‘-nyeo’ deserves criticism, and for which reason misogynistic hate speech and attacks are justified⁸⁷.

In response to this specific linguistic environment, women regrouped within the MERS forum on the DCinside platform, later turning it into a website where women parroted back the verbally abusive assaults men had launched on them. That type of action soon became the representing signature of Megalia, called ‘*mirroring*’; the appropriation of existing misogynistic phrases to redirect them

⁸⁵ Independent research by Korean feminists shows how the sex of the individuals discussed was used intentionally with negative connotations, while male individuals’ sex was not disclosed most of the time.

⁸⁶ Jin-sook Kim, “Misogyny for Male Solidarity: Online Hate Discourse Against Women in South Korea” in *Mediating Misogyny. Gender, Technology, and Harassment*, ed. Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 151-69.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

towards the very same men that produced them in the first place by just changing the gender of subject and object in the discourses.

Mirroring derived its disruptive efficacy from a precise operational reversal of symbolic power. Traditional sexist epithets operated by enforcing conventional female behavior, scrutinizing women's consumer habits, moral purity, and bodily conformity; they functioned as tools of discipline, boundary maintenance, and social containment. The intention was not necessarily to establish an alternative system of gendered insult for its own sake. Rather, mirroring sought to make the structure of misogynistic language visible by forcing users to encounter its logic from the opposite position. In order "to turn it around so men and women alike can witness it [discrimination] in its honest, raw form"⁸⁸. As Yoganathan explains in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement, the use of creative tactics to address systemic racism is directly and intrinsically linked to a dominant society that tolerates only those forms that align with the status quo, completely dismissing counterpublics that are 'too radical' – a definition of radical in this sense refers to forms and language accepted by the majority of populace. Megalia developed a novel vocabulary of expressions through the gender-flip of words and phrases directed at women; rather than trying to convince dominant audiences through politeness or restraint, they intentionally adopted the linguistic crude, sexually explicit, and deliberately provocative form of the environment it opposed. With the fundamental difference that it came to be considered politically controversial. Adopting 성고 (sönggoe), which originally referred to women that became botched due to unsuccessful plastic surgery, was subsequently used when referring to Korean men that paid for prostitution services – a compelling issue in the country. Terms such as 'Kimchi man' (쌈치남, ssipch'inam), the opposite to 'Kimchi girl', referred to males with small genitalia, for which a pinching hand (소추, meaning 'small penis') became the visual representative, or 콩치남 (kkongch'inam, lit. mackerel man) for men Dutch paying, a practice uncommon in South Korea; 자슬아치 (chasŭrach'i) for men who sexually take

⁸⁸ Ibid.

advantage of women, and 한남충 (hannamch'ung, Korean men vermin) were deployed as gendered counter-attacks. The significance extended beyond mere vocabulary use: they not only demonstrated that the apparently universal and disembodied language of online communication was itself deeply gendered but also highlighted the double standards that are deeply ingrained in public opinion.

The directly observable friction of this language emerged during major public controversies surrounding the game industry. In 2016, video game voice actress Kim was laid off for wearing a Megalia-branded shirt that read 'Girls Do Not Need A Prince' (여자들은 왕자를 필요로 하지 않는다), sold by Megalia4 to raise funds for legal fees for female abuse victims. Outraged male gamers accused Megalia of being a radical, anti-male group, demanding for the dismissal of the female worker while flooding the publisher company with complaints and refund requests; within hours Nexon⁸⁹ replaced Kim's recorded lines, followed suit by other game studios. In 2018, developer at IMC Games Sung became the target of male players for following a feminist group on Twitter and retweeting a slang term (한남충, li. Korean men vermin); internationally it was described as a slang term used to indicate sexist men, but within South Korean digital society it was renowned to have originated from female-centered communities as part of their mirroring strategy. Because the term directly equates men to insects (충), male gaming communities categorized it as extreme misandry and hate speech, inciting aggressive online campaigns for the developers' swift termination, while referring to Sung as a 'cancer-like/cancerous creature' (암적인 존재) adhering to a dirty ideology'. In Korean online culture labelling someone as '암적인 존재' (amjŏgin chonjae) is a highly derogatory idiom used to characterize individuals or groups as something that 'eats away at society from the inside', similar to how a malignant tumor destroys a body. In the context of the IMC Games issue and other anti-feminist reactions, male gaming forums extensively employed this specific terminology to categorize radical feminist organizations (such as

⁸⁹ South Korean-Japanese video game developer and publisher.

Megalia) and any personnel presumed to endorse them⁹⁰.

Although the National Human Rights Commission issued a recommendation on July 8, 2020, calling for the gaming industry to correct its misogynistic practices, the 2023 Limbus Company incident – in which a female illustrator was fired over her alleged allegiance to a radical feminist website, due to a summer update of the game lacking revealing swimwear for the characters - demonstrated the persistence of the pattern.

More recent, in May 2021, GS25 – one of the major convenience stores chains in the country – faced a major consumer boycott after the publicization of a promotional camping flyers that featured the illustration of a hand grabbing a sausage⁹¹. Internet users alleged the gesture was a misandrist symbol linked to radical feminist groups, which, recognizing the particularly fervent and emotional response to the image, incorporated it into their protest strategies. Such episodes showcase a noteworthy asymmetry in the reception of gendered language: expressions that had long been circulating online for years as commonplaces in male-dominated online culture were suddenly recognized as ‘hate speech’ when appropriated by feminist – or just, female – users against men. The DCinside gallery moderator, for instance, had turned a blind eye to the use of ‘kimchi girl’ for ten years, however within a few days of the emergence of ‘kimchi man’, it was swiftly banned and efforts were invested into deleting all ‘mirroring’ postings, deemed as ‘fomenting hatred’. This unbalanced enforcement highlights how digital platform governance can perpetuate institutional misogyny. Rather than serving as neutral facilitators of public dialogue, the architecture and moderating practices of online forums are imbued with male-oriented standards. For ten years the systematic devaluation and denigration of women through slurs was naturalized as normative online culture, benign banter, or safeguarded free speech. Nonetheless, the moment female users adapted these specific linguistic forms to address males, the platform’s administrators reclassified the language as toxic and disruptive. By categorizing female counter-language as an

⁹⁰ Similar cases occurred repeatedly: in 2016, *Destiny Child* (2016-2023); in 2018, *Girls’ Frontline* (2016-present), *Tree of Savior* (2016-present), *Azur Lane* (2017-present), *DJMAX RESPECT* (2017), and *SoulWorker* (2017-present); in 2019, *Arcana Tactics* (2019-present); in 2020, *Arknights* (2020-present) and *Chrono Ark* (2019) (J. S. Kim, 2019; M. Kim, 2020).

⁹¹ Hye-Jin Kwon, “GS25 iten’ü hongbomul namseöng hyömo nonnan...kyölguk che-öp-sagwa” [GS25 Event Promotional Material Sparks Controversy over Alleged Misandry... Ultimately Deleted and Apology Issued], *Yönhap News*, May 2, 2021.

unprecedented instance of 'hate speech', while regarding structural misogyny as an unnoticed norm, the platform actively enforced a double standard: male aggression was tolerated as standard ambient noise, whereas female linguistic self-defense was classified as platform violence.

The same dynamic can be observed in the gendered structure of anonymity itself. Unlike closed communities with an entry-approval requirement by the site's moderator – Ilbe bans female users from joining the community or revealing their gender⁹² – , on open boards like DCinside female users typically do not reveal their gender, as that type of specific identification would subject them to sexual objectification or verbal sexual harassments. One reason as to why the Internet in the early days was visualized as a utopia in terms of equality was its anonymity, which appeared to seemingly erase social and physical identities. In fact, a complete erasure of the body was unattainable, just as it was unfeasible to entirely erase gender and race when users expressed their perspective and thoughts. Furthermore, users were seen as male by default⁹³.

For a long time, men subjected women with the burden of physicality while perceiving themselves as free and disembodied – a tendency that positioned them as universal or standard, whereas women have become specific, commodifiable bodies that can be described, enclosed, and branded freely. In this perspective Megalia broke the unwritten rule through its users' voluntary display of their gender, which in turn resulted in those users that had been in an antagonistic relationship with them - through attacks and public harassment - to also reveal their gender: men. This can be seen as a mirroring of embodiment, a strategy in which one would expose one's own body for the other to do the same, thereby rendering them equally vulnerable. Particularly, in this optic such online embodiment had two outcomes: it rendered women stronger and united, while men – with less experience of physical exposure – were instead confronted with a form of gendered vulnerability that had traditionally been associated with women⁹⁴.

Megalia did not merely reveal gender; by mirroring the way in which women's

⁹² Ho-jeong Lee. "Relentless Villains or Fervent Netizens?: The Alt-Right Community in Korea, Ilbe," *Internet Histories* 5, no. 3-4 (2021): 268-286.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Hye-young Cho, "Intermedial Feminism: Megalia and Kangnam Station Exit 10," in *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, ed. Michelle Cho and Je-sook Song (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2024): 46-65.

bodies are displayed and sexually objectified, it also subjected men's bodies to critique and judgment. This is meaningful in two aspects: for one, the materiality of online spaces was exposed for not being the disembodied, immaterial space of equal values it was advertised to be, and secondly, it effectively disrupted the unspoken rules of misogyny among users. And this effectively exposed them as perpetrators embodying the structural and ideological problems of misogyny.

In a sense, Megalia's language led to its consideration as an extremist group - a definition never given to male-centered communities that were fundamentally the creators of that same language. In time, as Megalia and sidderent websites, and feminist movements expanded and arose anew, the contemplation and analysis of Megalia as a movement itself underwent a shift of its public consideration leaning towards a demonization still male-related. Megalia has been contested for its indiscriminate 'attacks' towards women self-representing on the other side of feminism or members of the LGBTQ community not necessarily of a modern stance on gender-related issues, using the very linguistic forms it sought to expose. A criticism that can be posed towards any type of socio-political movement or web portal condemning opposition, yet one that cannot be easily disregarded, as counterpublics are not inherently egalitarian or progressive. Fraser's observation that counterpublics might perpetuate exclusion is especially pertinent in this context. The political relevance of Megalia cannot rely on the presumption that all outputs from a female counterpublic are emancipatory. Its significance lies in the way it revealed the disputed boundaries of legitimate discourse and questioned the imbalanced distribution of communicative authority.

DCinside, much like Ilbe, bases off values of discrimination and mockery justified through parody - laughter and fun for its users. When Megalia co-opted these exact mechanisms using aggressive satire to poke and mock men as its mirroring strategy, male users initially responded with disbelief, coining the term 넷가마 (netkama) for those male that presented themselves online as female users, under the assumption that women were incapable of such brazen and funny wit⁹⁵.

By adopting a language that was neither subdued nor constrained by

⁹⁵ Ibid.

conventional expectations of feminine respectability, Megalia destabilized the normative expectation that women should respond to misogyny through civility.

Emerging feminist generation rejected the socially palatable rhetoric of persuasion in favor of politics of indignation as a means of raw defiance. Rather than a perpetual, compelled repression of anger, women merged indignation with satirical wit and collective fury against societal biases; an essential shift in forging feminist solidarity and reframing gender inequality as a systemic violent issue, while simultaneously resolving the burden of guilt and self-loathing from women – a psychological dimension frequently overlooked in mainstream academic discourse on feminist movements. Women's psychological health has been significantly affected by societal patriarchal and misogynistic perspectives, and hence by the emergence and development of feminism and associated movements. Society's negative response to women renewed and rediscovered self-awareness has further fueled the spirit of female protest and self-assertion.

This provides insight into the reasons for the intimidating nature of Megalia's rhetoric against its opponents. Mirroring not only challenged individual males; it also unsettled the unequal allocation of vulnerability that had defined online gender dynamics. Historically, women who were expected to endure sexualization, mockery, and physical examination have shifted these dynamics onto males, compelling male users to perceive themselves as gendered subjects rather than as universal and disembodied entities inside the digital public realm.

As intended, mirroring sparked intense outrage and indignation among users of communities like Ilbo and DCinside, who had never previously been insulted nor challenged by a woman through such explicit and rageful language. However, the shock also catalysed a violent anti-feminist backlash that persists today. Opponents weaponized Megalia's violence and sensationalism to denounce the entire movement as a 'hate group', using the term 'Megalia' as a catch-all slur to justify hostility against every and any kind of expression of feminism; the circulation of decontextualized screenshots and quotations intensified this process, since the highly networked and fragmented character of digital communication made it particularly easy to detach a linguistic intervention from the misogynistic context that had originally produced it. The same dynamic was visible in the harassment of women perceived to be feminist – numerous are the cases of Korean women brutally attacked because of their short hairstyle, which

males regard as a sign of feminism, throughout the years. Three-times Olympic gold medalist An San became the major target of intense online harassment from male communities (DCinside, FMKorea) due to her short hair; doubled with her attending a women's university, such short hairstyle proved to them she was a radical feminist. Internet trolls flooded the athlete's social media with malicious comments, demanding she apologize, and going as far as requesting the Korea Archery Association strip her of her Olympic medals. Furthermore, because mirroring relies on citational strategies where context is easily stripped and manipulated across digital realities, the boundary between the initial target and those who were targeted often became blurred. Consequently, Megalia's mirroring strategy proved to be a powerfully igniting but ultimately temporary fire.

The controversy raises an unresolved question at the heart of feminist counterpublic politics: can violent language be strategically appropriated without reproducing the structures of violence embedded within it? Megalia's importance does not require answering this question affirmatively. Rather, the tension itself reveals the difficulty of producing oppositional speech within a public sphere whose existing communicative norms are already structured by inequality.

Though the platform eventually collapsed due to its own ideological tensions and digital volatility, its structural and discursive legacy remains foundational for South Korean women. Megalia significantly undermined South Korea's patriarchal status quo by taking away male-dominated areas' exclusive control over digital language violence. It established a pattern of digital counterpublics and unwavering female resistance, demonstrating that undermining the very lexicon of misogyny may shatter the illusion of disembodied male authority and leave a lasting impact on modern Korean activism, women, and their social freedom from patriarchal constraints.

As a result, the movement constituted a defining moment in South Korean digital feminism: it shifted from creating safe places for women to actively contesting the larger networked public sphere. Its influence would go beyond mirroring itself, influencing later forms of feminist withdrawal, rejection, and collective mobilization. The following stages of this trajectory, notably the politics linked with 4B and digitally coordinated feminist protests, would shift away from Megalia's direct language confrontation and toward new forms of political activity. Nonetheless, they came to the same essential realization: that the digital realm

was not an immaterial or neutral area outside of social power, but rather one of the primary venues in which gender relationships were perpetuated, challenged, and reshaped.

2.2. Networked Feminism: Digital Counter-Publics and Collective Resistance

If Megalia's *mirroring* constituted a linguistic reversal of misogyny, the feminist mobilizations that followed increasingly transformed this reversal into a politics of withdrawal: rather than merely reflecting patriarchal violence back towards its perpetrators, women began questioning their participation in the social, sexual, and reproductive structures through which that violence was reproduced. The politics of refusal constituted a significant transformation in the repertoire of Korean digital feminism. Instead of responding to misogynistic discourse by producing an equivalent counter-discourse, feminist women increasingly questioned the social institutions through which heterosexuality, marriage, reproduction, beauty, and femininity were organized as normative expectations. This development became especially noticeable with the 4B movement, in which the letter 'b', a homophone of bi (비), meaning 'non-/not' in Korean, represents the movement's premise of refusal, or not doing, things that are socially expected of young women. It should not be understood as a single, centrally organized movement with a clearly identifiable point of origin. Rather, 4B emerged from a wider constellation of digital feminist practices, communities, and debates concerning marriage, sexuality, reproduction, beauty, and women's economic and emotional independence⁹⁶.

The four principles commonly associated with 4B are *pihon* (비혼, refusal of marriage), *pich'ulsan* (비출산, refusal of childbirth), *piyŏnae* (비연애, refusal of romantic relationships with men), and *pisaeksŭ* (비섹스, refusal of heterosexual sexual relationships). The movement encompasses not only an explicit critique

⁹⁶ Ji-eun, Lee and Eui-sol Jeong, "The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future with/in a Non-Reproductive Future in Korea," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 633–644.

of South Korea's pronatalist policies but also one of forms of self-help and everyday practice through which young feminists attempt to imagine futures outside the conventional trajectory of heterosexual marriage and reproduction⁹⁷. Importantly, this makes 4B different from a conventional protest movement as its political action does not necessarily take the form of a demonstration, petition, or demands directed at the state. Instead, the political act is located in the decision not to participate.

This distinction is particularly significant when understood through the concept of counterpublics. Fraser's formulation emphasizes the capacity of subordinated groups to construct alternative discursive spaces from which dominant institutions and norms can be challenged. Yet refusal introduces another dimension into this process. A counterpublic does not necessarily have to demand inclusion within an existing public sphere; it can also challenge the social arrangements that determine what participation itself is expected to mean. In this sense, 4B extends the function of feminist counterpublics from a space in which women collectively articulate grievances into one in which they can reconsider the desirability of the social institutions producing those grievances.

The importance of this transformation becomes clearer when considering the position of marriage and reproduction in contemporary South Korea. Women's lives have historically been structured around a gendered life-course in which education and employment were expected to culminate in heterosexual partnership, marriage, and motherhood.

In 2016, the Korean Government announced the 3rd Plan for Low Fertility and Ageing Society in response to widespread concerns over the deferral of marriage, declining birth rates, and demographic ageing. Its measures included policies encouraging earlier marriage and housing support for newly married couples⁹⁸. The launch of the online 'Korea Birth Map' (대한민국 출산지도) in December of the same year brought forth how women's youthful reproductive bodies are perceived as objects to be managed, stirring debate and criticism, and an online protest under the banner of 'refusal to be fertile' (가임 거부, gaim geobu) was

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Taehanmin'guk Chöngbu. *Che3ch'a Chöch'ulsan Koryöngsahoe Kibon Kyehoek: 2016–2020* [Third Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Aging Society: 2016–2020]. Seoul: Taehanmin'guk Chöngbu, 2015.

organized by feminist advocacy groups⁹⁹.

4B constitutes a lived critique of this arrangement: young, unmarried women are socially encouraged to understand singlehood as a temporary condition preceding the supposedly more legitimate stages of marriage and motherhood, while consumer capitalism and the patriarchal family structure make women economically and socially vulnerable within those institutions¹⁰⁰. Refusing them therefore becomes more than an individual lifestyle preference; it represents an attempt to interrupt the reproduction of the very social order in which women's identities and economic security have traditionally been tied to relationships with men – an attempt to detach from the taken-from-granted gendered life course.

The political significance of refusal was also visible in the contemporaneous and highly discussed *Escape the Corset* movement - or ETC-M (탈코르셋, tal-corset, where the word 'tal' (탈) means 'escape'). Following an illustration titled 'Out of The Corset' posted on Megalia's Facebook page in 2015 – inspired by Brazilian illustrator Carol Rossetti's 'The Woman Project' -, the movement has been largely developed by the country's young feminists, particularly those in their teens and twenties. Emerging prominently through social media from 2018 onwards, the movement challenged expectations surrounding makeup, fashion, hairstyles, and bodily presentation. Rather than asking men to change their perception of women's bodies, participants experimented with removing practices through which femininity itself was constructed and maintained¹⁰¹. Considering all styles defined by traditionalist ideas of 'womanliness' as antifeminist, it metaphorically refers to the collective of these styles as a corset – an historical fashion garment that is notorious for constricting women's freedom, physically and psychologically¹⁰². The movement metaphorically conceptualized these practices as a 'corset', an historical garment and mean for women to have their extremely small waist acknowledged and appreciated by men, even if it strained their body and heavily subjugated their self-awareness. Feminist activists and researchers have now expanded this image to modern practices such as

⁹⁹ Ji-eun, Lee and Eui-sol Jeong, "The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future with/in a Non-Reproductive Future in Korea," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 633–644.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ji-Yeong Yun, "Escaping the Corset: Rage as a Force of Resistance and Creation in the Korean Feminist Movement," *Hypatia* 37, no. 2 (2022): 257–275.

¹⁰² Yeong-yo Shin and Sel-ee Lee, "'Escape the Corset': How a Movement in South Korea Became Fashion Statement through Social Media", *Sustainability* 14, no. 18 (2022).

cosmetic surgery, dieting, and intense exercise, understanding them as methods by which patriarchal standards of femininity continue to govern women's bodies.

Research on the movement describes it as a feminist intervention against traditional gender norms surrounding appearance, while studies of participants have found that the practice could generate feelings of freedom, comfort, and independence from social expectations and the male gaze.

From 2018 onward the movement was intensely scrutinized, analysed and publicized, while national feminist discourse had increasingly challenged the extreme beauty standards around makeup, fashion, body shape, and femininity – the influence of K-pop and K-beauty still are the main factors that heavily influence beauty criteria¹⁰³.

The ETC-M did not remain confined within online discourses or lower-scaled groups of participants; rather, it expanded on social media to become a broader culture and fashion practice. Particularly, participation implied offline engagement actions that had one change one's appearance: women began cutting their hair, stopped applying make-up, posting images of themselves online to encourage others to participate in the movement.

The ETC-M moved through anonymity-based networking actions centred on online platforms – as it was tendency of the fourth-wave feminism; in 2021 approximately 18,000 posts were shared online with the hashtag #EscapeTheCorset, and at the Hyehwa Stations protests 12,000 women gathered dressed in red, condemning sexist bias in the investigation of an illegal filming case¹⁰⁴. The organizers of the protest shaved their heads leading to a nation-wide understanding of the action as related to feminists. The case in itself led to widespread discussions, with mainstream media, government officials and public opinion wondering questions such as to why women were so angry, so far as to take the streets. The 'Hongik University Hidden Camera Incident', or Hongik Incident, saw a male nude model being secretly recorded and posted on the Womad website by a female model, who was immediately arrested by police after an inquiry request by university authorities. The public identification of the female suspect by both police and the media was remarkable since suspects in both comparable and worse sexual-crimes were not typically subjected to the same

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

level of public exposure - South Korea is well renowned for its great effort in keeping suspects' identity informations secret. Such swift reveal of identity, not witnessed in male cases of illegal filming prompted immediate responses; calling for unfair law enforcement, a petition titled 'Women are Korean people, I request for the same government protection regardless of gender' was presented to the Blue House website with 342,292 signatures gathered within the first 5 days. Two days after the arrest, the first protest took over the streets nearby the Hyehwa Station with 10,000 protesters gathered¹⁰⁵.

The significance of *tal-corset* lies also in its relationship to 4B. Both can be interpreted as practices of de-participation; one refuses the obligation to make the body conform to patriarchal standards of femininity, while the other refuses the expectation according to which women should organize their intimate and reproductive lives around heterosexual men.

The gendered structures characterizing South Korean reality, shaped by the intersection of macho culture and authoritarian legacies, have been increasingly pushed by the disruption caused by women's united rage against silence and subjugation. Feminist rage should therefore not be understood merely as a destructive or reactive emotion. Rather, it may serve as a political force by articulating, sharing, and transforming experiences of injustice into demands for new social relations. In this sense, feminist rage has the potential to create new kinds of agency by challenging the mechanisms that have traditionally governed women's bodies, labour, sexuality, and reproduction. In South Korea, its relevance resides exactly in the ability to turn what may look as individual frustration into communal forms of resistance and alternative ways of organizing everyday life¹⁰⁶. What appears from outside as withdrawal can consequently constitute an active political practice of women that refuse to provide the labour, beauty, sexuality, reproduction, and emotional investment that patriarchal institutions have historically taken for granted.

Digital media was fundamental to this process because refusal could be transformed from an isolated individual decision into a shared vocabulary and collective identity, allowing women to circulate experiences, compare practices,

¹⁰⁵ Hye-won Kang et al., "Recalling the Past Within a Social Network's Collective Memory Work: How Did Korean Twitter Users Shape #Equal_Punishment_for_Equal_Crime From Their Experience?," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1-12.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

and develop terminology through which seemingly private decisions could be interpreted as structural political choices¹⁰⁷. This is particularly important for understanding the relationship between the private and public dimensions of feminist counterpublics. Marriage, sexuality, reproduction, and beauty are conventionally understood as intimate matters belonging to the private sphere. Yet digital feminist communities transformed these apparently individual experiences into collective objects of political reflection.

The movement therefore complicated the conventional distinction between private withdrawal and public activism. Choosing not to marry or reproduce may not resemble conventional political participation, but within a networked feminist counterpublics the personal decision acquires collective meaning. The individual woman does not simply decide that she personally does not want marriage or children; she can recognize her decision as part of a broader pattern of dissatisfaction with the gendered distribution of domestic labour, economic dependence, sexual violence, and reproductive expectations. In this sense, the personal becomes political through circulation rather than through formal organization.

At the same time, 4B should not be romanticized as a universally representative expression of Korean women's experiences. The movement has been highly contested, and its visibility online can make its actual scale difficult to determine. The distinction between women who consciously identify with 4B and the much larger number of women who may independently delay or reject marriage and childbirth for economic, social, or personal reasons is therefore important¹⁰⁸. The analytical significance of 4B does not depend upon demonstrating that a majority of Korean women adhere to its principles. Its importance lies instead in the fact that it politicized refusal: choices that had traditionally been interpreted as personal failures to conform could be articulated as deliberate forms of feminist agency.

This is also where 4B extends the trajectory established by Megalia. Mirroring challenged misogyny by forcing its language back onto its producers; refusal challenged the social institutions that made such misogyny materially

¹⁰⁷ Yeong-yo Shin and Sel-ee Lee, "Escape the Corset': How a Movement in South Korea Became Fashion Statement through Social Media", *Sustainability* 14, no. 18 (2022).

¹⁰⁸ Ji-eun, Lee and Eui-sol Jeong, "The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future with/in a Non-Reproductive Future in Korea," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 633–644.

consequential. The first strategy therefore operated primarily through linguistic confrontation, while the second extended feminist resistance through embodied and social withdrawal. Both nonetheless relied heavily on digital counterpublics for their circulation and intelligibility¹⁰⁹. The Internet did not merely provide a channel through which women announced that they were refusing marriage, sex, or conventional femininity. It provided the collective environment in which refusal could become recognizable as a political practice.

Yet refusal also contained an inherent limitation. Withdrawal can protect individuals from institutions and relationships perceived as oppressive, but it does not necessarily transform those institutions for those who remain within them. A politics of refusal might thus generate autonomy without necessarily producing institutional change. As a result, the political potential of digital feminism expanded beyond language conflict and private withdrawal, as dispersed experiences gained collective visibility and were translated into demands addressed at the larger public and institutions.

2.3. Online Mobilization: Feminist Refusal and the Politics of Withdrawal

If Megalia demonstrated that women could appropriate the communicative practices of misogynistic online communities, and 4B that participation itself could be refused as a form of political practice, the subsequent wave of feminist activism demonstrated that networked counterpublics could also expand beyond online communities, into streets, institutions, and mainstream public discourse.

The 2016 Gangnam Station murder was an important turning point in this process, and the culmination of misogynistic sentiments, providing a powerful symbol through which broader concerns surrounding misogyny and violence against women could be articulated. On May 17th, 2016, a woman was murdered in a public bathroom near Gangnam Station by an unrelated man who stated he had been ignored by women. Although the motivations and psychiatric dimensions of the perpetrator's actions were debated, many activists interpreted the murder not as merely an isolated act but within the broader context of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

gendered violence and the normalization of misogyny. The memorialization that developed around *Exit 10* of Gangnam Station transformed an individual victim into a symbol through which women could articulate experiences of fear, harassment, and vulnerability that had previously remained dispersed across individual lives¹¹⁰. Without retroactively assigning a legal classification that South Korea did not officially apply to the case, the collective interpretation of the murder can be understood in relation to broader feminist debates about femicide.

This transformation is crucial to the concept of feminist counterpublics. The murder did not in itself create Korean digital feminism; rather, feminist networks provided the interpretative framework through which the event could be understood as part of wider structural conditions¹¹¹. Personal experiences were accumulated, shared, and connected through digital communication, allowing women who had never previously participated in organized feminist politics to recognize similarities between their experiences. The resulting political subject was therefore not simply an individual victim but a collective 'we' constructed through networked testimony¹¹².

The same process became particularly visible through the South Korean *#MeToo* movement. Prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun's public testimony in January 2018 became a major catalyst for the movement, after which hundreds of women came forward with accounts of sexual harassment and abuse. Among the accused were influential male figures in various sectors, such as the arts, education, politics, and religion¹¹³, demonstrating the extent to which sexual violence and abuse could be connected to structures of institutional and social power.

Social media platforms became important infrastructures for solidarity, with hashtags such as *#WithYou* allowing users to publicly support survivors and connect individual testimonies to a broader political demand, without necessarily needing a direct connection or involvement with specific movements or

¹¹⁰ Na-Yöng Lee, "Yösöngghyömo wa chendö ch'aböl, p'eminisüm: 'Kangnam-yök sip pön ch'ulgu' rül chungshimüro" [Misogyny, Gender Discrimination, and Feminism: A Feminist Project of Social Justice surrounding the 'Gangnam Station 10th Exit'], *Munhwa wa sahoe* [Culture and Society] 22 (2016): 147–186.

¹¹¹ Kwang-yeong Shin, "The Discourse on Women in Korea: Episodes, Continuity, and Change," *The Review of Korean Studies* 5, No.2 (2002): 7-27.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Kyung-ja Jung, "'Gender Wars' and Populist Politics in South Korea", *Women's Studies International Forum* 104 (2024).

organizations¹¹⁴. Rather than functioning solely as spaces for the publication of individual accusations, these platforms enabled a cumulative process through which separate experiences became recognizable as manifestations of structural gendered power.

Korean research has emphasized that this digital mobilization should not be interpreted as a spontaneous phenomenon disconnected from earlier feminist activism. Schwartz's research on Korean *#MeToo* situates the movement within a much longer history of anti-sexual-violence activism beginning in the late 1980s, arguing that social media and the transnational *#MeToo* hashtag provided a new method through which longstanding feminist demands could enter mainstream society¹¹⁵. Similarly, Shin Ki-young argues that the movement was connected to a new generation of feminists while remaining embedded in longer histories of feminist organizing¹¹⁶. The digital counterpublics therefore did not replace the feminist movement that preceded it; rather, it altered the mechanisms through which feminist knowledge, testimony, and political demands could circulate.

This relationship between online and offline politics became particularly evident in the *Hyehwa Station* protests of 2018. Organized under the name *Uncomfortable Courage* (불편한 용기, pulp'yŏnhan yonggi), the protests emerged following the Hongik University Incident through decentralized participation rather than single affiliation to feminist organization. Anonymous and sporadic participants interacted, circulated information and coordinated action through social media and other online means. Feminist activists argued that the rapid investigation and arrest of the female suspect contrasted with the perceived institutional indifference surrounding the much larger problem of illegal filming, the circulation of sexual images, and the widespread nature of digital sexual exploitation¹¹⁷. The defendant was ultimately sentenced to 10 months' imprisonment and ordered 40 hours of sexual-violence treatment programme.

¹¹⁴ Ki-young Shin, "Beyond #WithYou: The New Generation of Feminists and the #MeToo Movement in South Korea," *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 3 (2021): 490-497.

¹¹⁵ Anat Schwartz, "Acceptable Activism: The History of the Anti-Sexual Violence Movement and the Contemporary #MeToo Protests in South Korea," in *The Other #MeToos*, ed. Gaby Scanlon et al. (Oxford: University Press, 2023).

¹¹⁶ Ki-young Shin, "Beyond #WithYou: The New Generation of Feminists and the #MeToo Movement in South Korea," *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 3 (2021): 490-497.

¹¹⁷ Young-min Park & Na-young Lee, 'Saeroun' p'eminisŭt'ŭ undong ŭi tŭngjang? <Pulpyŏnhan yonggi> ch'amyoja dŭl ŭi kyŏnghŏm ŭl chungsim ŭro [The emergence of a 'new' feminist movement? Focusing on the experiences of participants in <Uncomfortable Courage>], *Simin gwa segye* [Citizens and World] 34 (2019):135–191.

Online groups connected the Hongik University cases to wider prevalence of hidden camera recordings and illegal filming and selling orchestrated by male platforms, websites, and illegal porn sites, framing the incident as part of a broader pattern of gendered digital violence. Rallying under slogans such as ‘*my daily life is not your porn*’ (나의 일상은 너의 포르노가 아니다), women expressed their anger toward the pervasive violence threatening their ordinary daily lives.

The importance of the *Hyehwa protests*, however, lies not simply in their size. Their organizational structure demonstrated a new relationship between digital communication and collective action. The protest was not merely announced online and subsequently attended offline. Instead, online spaces functioned as sites where the political meaning of the event itself was collectively produced.

Research demonstrate how Korean Twitter users engaged in a form of collective memory work, connecting the Hongik University case with previous experiences of discrimination, feminist movements, and gender-based violence. Through this process, the hashtag *#Equal_Punishment_for_Equal_Crime* emerged by appropriating and recombining previous feminist slogans and accumulated digital memories¹¹⁸.

The significance of this process is theoretically important. A conventional model of political mobilization assumes that a pre-existing organization defines an agenda and then recruits individuals to participate. The *Hyehwa protests* instead demonstrate what can be described as a networked model of collective formation. Participants did not necessarily share membership in a formal organization, ideological background, or previous history of activism. Their common political identity was progressively assembled through interaction, repetition, testimony, hashtags, images, and shared memories¹¹⁹.

Korean research on the *Uncomfortable Courage* movement similarly emphasizes that many participants were not members of established women's organizations. Park Young-min and Lee Na-young, drawing on Internet ethnography, interviews, and focus groups with participants, describe the movement as a new form of feminist collective action and examine how online

¹¹⁸ Hye-won Kang et al., “Recalling the Past Within a Social Network’s Collective Memory Work: How Did Korean Twitter Users Shape *#Equal_Punishment_for_Equal_Crime* From Their Experience?,” *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1-12.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

communities and offline demonstrations became mutually constitutive¹²⁰. This distinction is important because it challenges the assumption that digital activism is necessarily less politically substantial than conventional organizational activism. In this case, the digital environment was itself part of the organizational infrastructure.

The *Hyehwa protests* also reveal how the boundaries between counterpublics and public sphere became increasingly unstable. A counterpublics initially provides a relatively protected space in which marginalized groups can develop their own interpretations of social reality. Yet its political effectiveness often depends upon its capacity to move beyond that protected space. The *Hyehwa protests* demonstrate this transition. Experiences that had circulated within feminist online communities were transformed into physical bodies occupying public space, visible signs, chants, slogans, and demands directed toward government and legal institutions¹²¹.

This process can be understood as a movement from discursive counterpublicity to embodied counterpublicity. The body, which had previously been central to the misogynistic digital gaze, became an instrument of political visibility. Thousands of women gathered together precisely around issues concerning the surveillance, representation, and sexualization of their bodies. At the same time, many participants wore masks or otherwise concealed their identities, reflecting the danger associated with being publicly identifiable as feminist in South Korea. Kim Joo-hee's analysis of the 2016 Ewha protests and 2018 Hyehwa protests is particularly useful here as, examining the political significance of women's masked faces, she argues that concealment itself can acquire political meaning within feminist protest¹²².

This creates an apparent paradox. Feminist protest requires visibility in order to enter the public sphere, while female participation can simultaneously require anonymity for protection. Digital counterpublics therefore produce a form of political visibility that is deliberately selective. Women become collectively visible

¹²⁰ Young-min Park & Na-young Lee, 'Saeroun' p'eminisüt'ü undong üi tǔngjang? <Pulpyōnhan yonggi> ch'amyōja dül üi kyōnghōm ūl chungsim ūro" [The emergence of a 'new' feminist movement? Focusing on the experiences of participants in <Uncomfortable Courage>], *Simin gwa segye* [Citizens and World] 34 (2019):135–191.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ju-hee Kim, "K'orona sitae, 'Masyuk'ü siwi' wa p'eminisüm üi ölgulsöng ūl chilmunhada" [In the era of COVID-19, questioning the 'mask protest' and the faciality of feminism], *P'eminisüm yōn'gu* [Journal of Feminist Studies] 21, no. 1 (2021): 7–45.

as a movement while attempting to keep individual bodies and identities unidentifiable. The mask does not simply hide the participant; it transforms the individual into part of a collective political body¹²³.

The importance of this distinction becomes even clearer when considering the backlash generated by these movements. Digital feminist mobilization did not simply expand the feminist public; it simultaneously generated new opportunities for counter-mobilization. Research examining South Korean *#MeToo* discourse on Twitter and online news comments found that user-driven platforms facilitated the proliferation of disparaging narratives against the movement, while the nature of this backlash differed according to platform affordances¹²⁴.

From a normative perspective, the discussion would revolve around supporting the victims and the accountability of perpetrators. The empirical findings, however, complicate the normative expectation: disparagement was not confined to those accused of sexual violence but also directed toward the very women who came forward, and the movement that sought to amplify their claims¹²⁵. The same networked infrastructures that enabled women to connect personal experiences and construct collective political demands also enabled opponents to contest, ridicule, and delegitimize those demands¹²⁶.

This confirms the central ambivalence established beforehand. Networked counterpublics are not spaces outside power; they are spaces in which power is reorganized. The visibility achieved by feminist activists could generate solidarity and political pressure, but could also expose participants to harassment, doxxing, surveillance, and professional consequences¹²⁷. The public sphere was therefore not simply expanded by digital technology; its boundaries were contested through struggles over who could appear within it, under what conditions, and at what cost.

The trajectory from Megalia to 4B, and finally to the Hyehwa protests, consequently reveals three distinct but interconnected repertoires of feminist political agency: mirroring contested the symbolic order by appropriating and reversing misogynistic language; refusal contested the social order by

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Soo-young Bae et al., "The Medium and the Backlash: The Disparagement of the *#MeToo* Movement in Online Public Discourse in South Korea," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 768–791.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

withdrawing from relationships, practices, and institutions through which patriarchal expectations were reproduced; and networked mobilization contested the institutional order by transforming dispersed experiences into collective political demands and physically occupying public space.

These forms should not, however, be understood as successive stages in which one simply replaced another. They continued to coexist. The women participating in Hyehwa protests were shaped by the linguistic and affective politics developed through earlier online communities; the politics of refusal circulated through the same digital networks that organized demonstrations; and the visibility generated by mass protest continued to depend upon hashtags, images, testimony, and online discussion. Rather than a linear progression from the Internet to the street, Korean feminist activism therefore developed through a continuous circulation between digital and embodied spaces.

This circulation is perhaps the most important transformation produced by the emergence of digital feminist counterpublics. The political subject was no longer required to belong to a formal organization before becoming politically active. A woman could encounter a misogynistic post, recognize her own experience in another woman's testimony, adopt a new vocabulary, refuse an expected social practice, participate in a hashtag campaign, and eventually join a mass demonstration without passing through the traditional institutional structures of feminist organizing. Digital networks consequently compressed the distance between experience, recognition, identification, and collective action.

At the same time, the process exposed the limits of digital counterpublicity. Visibility could produce institutional pressure, but it could also intensify polarization; anonymity could protect participants, but it could also facilitate harassment; networked communities could democratize access to feminist discourse, while it could also reproduce exclusion and antagonism¹²⁸. The Korean case therefore does not demonstrate that digital media simply liberated women from the limitations of the traditional public sphere. Rather, it demonstrates that feminist political agency was reconstructed within a new environment in which speaking, refusing, and mobilizing became technologically interconnected practices.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

3. Algorithmic Backlash: The Digital Transformation of Anti-Feminist Politics

The feminist mobilization that emerged in South Korea in the latter part of the 2010s did not develop within an unquestioned and politically neutral digital landscape. As feminist counter-publics proliferated via online communities, social media, and networked forms of activism, they faced a progressively structured backlash that repurposed the identical digital frameworks into arenas for anti-feminist activism. This reaction cannot be reduced to a collection of pre-existing isolated misogynistic communities. Rather, it is part of what has increasingly been described as the manosphere: a heterogeneous and decentralized network of online communities organized around grievances concerning masculinity, male victimhood, heterosexual relations, antifeminism, and perceived transformations within gender hierarchy¹²⁹.

The significance of the manosphere lies precisely in its lack of a single organizational structure. Unlike more conventional political organizations, its communities do not require formal membership, centralized leadership, or a unified programme; users can move between discussions concerning dating, sexuality, military service, employment, self-improvement, politics, and masculinity without necessarily understanding these subjects as components of one ideological system. Forums, memes, livestreams, short-form videos, YouTube channels, and recommendation systems allow fragments of these conversations to circulate between otherwise distinct communities. What connects them is therefore less a coherent doctrine and more a shared interpretive vocabulary through which women's emancipation can be represented as a source of male disadvantage and feminism as an institutionalization of

¹²⁹ Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (2019): 638–657.

female privilege¹³⁰.

The decentralized structure of these spaces nevertheless allows forms of informal alternative leadership to emerge. Rather than relying upon formal political authority, influence can be exercised by content creators, YouTube personalities, moderators, and other highly visible figures who become reference points for specific communities. A user may therefore encounter a discussion about romantic relationships or self-improvement and subsequently be exposed to more explicit claims concerning feminism, gender hierarchy, or male victimhood. What initially may appear as lifestyle guidance can become connected to a broader ideological interpretation of gender relations. At the same time, the manosphere should not be understood as a unified ideological movement.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant as it challenges the assumption that digitalization inherently democratizes public discourse: the same infrastructures that enabled Korean women to document sexual violence, organize demonstrations, develop feminist communities, and contest patriarchal institutions also enabled opponents to coordinate harassment, circulate anti-feminist narratives, and construct alternative explanations of gender inequality. Digitalization expanded access to public communication, but it did not eliminate the unequal social relations that shaped that communication. Instead, anonymity, low barriers to participation, algorithmic exposure, commercial incentives, and the unequal ability to attract attention created a new environment in which competing interpretations of gender could be produced and amplified simultaneously.

But digital engagement does not ensure an equal distribution of visibility or discursive authority. The important question is not whether digital platforms can enable people's communication, but whether types of communication are amplified, repeated, marketed, and integrated into collective identities.

South Korea serves as an exemplary scenario in which feminist counter-publics and anti-feminist countermobilization emerged concurrently within the same technological context.

The importance of this picture is elucidated when examining the concrete difficulties experienced by men in modern Korean society: mandatory military

¹³⁰ Ibid.

service, extremely competitive job markets, economic instability, shifting expectations regarding relationships, and uncertainty about a future family, are all sources of frustration. Challenges associated with job searching can become proof of female privilege, even where broader labour-market conditions do not indicate systematically easier job opportunities for women; compulsory military service can similarly become evidence of systemic discrimination against men, although the historical and institutional origins of conscription complicate a purely gender-antagonistic interpretation. Sentimental struggles can similarly be interpreted through claims that women's inflated expectations have become excessive, while critique of misogyny can itself become evidence that male suffering is socially suppressed. Individual grievances therefore acquire political significance when they are interpreted as manifestations of a broader condition of male disadvantage. The analytical question is not centered on the authenticity of these complaints, but rather on the way different experiences are structured via a shared gender-oriented perspective.

Digital communities are important because they provide a fertile environment in which these individual experiences can be aggregated. A young Korean man struggling with relationships may find countless other users experiencing the same frustrations; someone who regards military service as unfair can encounter a community that consider such obligation as evidence of a broader institutional disregard for men. The resulting narrative fundamentally supplies an interpretative framework through which otherwise unrelated experiences can be understood as a manifestation of the same problem.

The transformation of individual experience into collective identity is particularly important to the emergence of the *idaenam* (이대남, lit. men in their twenties), a term used to describe men in their 20s whose political attitudes have increasingly diverged from the progressive orientation historically associated with younger generations towards more conservative positions regarding topics such as feminism and gendered sociological attitudes. Therefore, it should not be understood as just a synonym for 'young Korean men' nor as an homogeneous demographic category. Rather, *idaenam* evolved to represent a sociopolitical salient identity that is much more than just a generational shift from left to right; it reflects the growing extent to which gender has become a framework through

which men understand questions regarding societal fairness, opportunity, social status, relationships, and political representation. Thus, it can be understood as a term that emerged from the process via which otherwise heterogeneous experiences are given a common interpretation through a shared language of unfairness and male disadvantages.

The language of *gongjeong* (공정, 公正, lit. justice, fairness) is central to this process. Antifeminists frame themselves as defenders of fairness, merit, and equal treatment, all of which they believe should be at the base of the meritocratic society they envision as ideal for South Korea. Gender-specific rules may thus be perceived as infringements of an ostensibly impartial doctrine of individual equality; the political question shifts from the existence of structural disparities to whether rectifying them grants any unjust benefits to women.

The Korean manosphere should therefore not be understood as an imported Western phenomenon; rather, the Korean case represents a localized manifestation of a wider socio-digital phenomenon whose manifestation has been shaped by rapid modernization, material insecurity and ideological interpretation. Its significance cannot be reduced either to pre-existing misogyny or to technological platforms themselves. Digital infrastructures provided conditions under which individual frustrations could be aggregated, interpreted, repeated, and transformed into collective identity, resulting in a form of backlash presenting itself not as a defense of patriarchy but of male-related fairness, rights, and individual merit. In this context, feminism may be presented not merely as a movement challenging gender inequality but as an institutional and cultural force responsible for men's perceived loss of social status.

The Korean manosphere case is of special relevance particularly because of a specific characteristic: antifeminist discourse progressively incorporated misandry in its language. Rather than an outright pacific rejection of feminism, many began to perceive it as indicative evidence of a wider system of female privileges and discrimination against men. The roots of this reaction, however, precede even the preferred contemporary YouTube ecosystem¹³¹.

In 1998, five female undergraduate students and a disabled man filed a

¹³¹ Min-jeong Kim, "Online gender-based hate speech in South Korea," *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 38, no. 2 (2024): 140-149.

constitutional complaint claiming preferential treatment in employment processes favoring men who had completed their compulsory military service, in a violation of the constitutional principle of equality¹³². Being outnumbered in both physical and online spaces, the debate surrounding the unconstitutionality of the law led to intense verbal abuse and online sexual harassment; in December 1999 the Constitutional Court declared the veterans' extra-points system unconstitutional ruling it as disadvantageous for women and disabled men during employment processes. The repercussions of such gender-focused debate started to become apparent in 2001, when, following the publication of an article criticizing the gendered culture surrounding military service and university life, online feminist magazine 'Woljang' (월장) was forced to shut down due to extreme online attacks, personal information breaches, threats and intimidations against the employees following – going as far as having employees' phone numbers used to advertise a fake sex trade. Website *Ilbe* then brought the issue of online hate speech and misogyny into the public eye, precisely through a highly unfiltered and extreme language that initially shocked most Koreans. It then developed into a hate speech-led community, with a particular focus on women; according to analyses of *Ilbe* posts between October 2011 and October 2020, 24% of the posts were directed at women and family, ranking as the largest proportion among specifically targeted groups¹³³. Recent comparative research examining hate speech across 11 South Korean online portals similarly identified *Ilbe Storage* as a major space of hateful expression, accounting for around 25% of the overall hateful expressions in the study's dataset¹³⁴.

Several studies that examine the content of online gender-based hate speech show how, similarly to the rest of the world, appearance, age, sexuality/femininity, political affiliation and threats of physical and sexual violence are recurring targets. At the same time, there are some features worth pointing out in terms of online gender-based hate communicative mechanisms aimed at showcasing that specific hate-speech as less threatening and more socially acceptable: humorous

¹³² Case 98Hun-Ma363, decided December 23, 1999.

¹³³ Min-jeong Kim, "Online gender-based hate speech in South Korea," *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 38, no. 2 (2024): 140-149.

¹³⁴ Jeong-woo Koo, Chan S. Suh, Jin-won Chung, Kyung-ah Sohn, and Kyung-sik Han, "The Hatred of All against All? Evidence from Online Community Platforms in South Korea," *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 5 (2024): e0300530.

features such as 짤 (zzal, meme) and 드립 (deulib, neologism derived from ad-lib) can justify certain posts as ‘*just for fun*’ and ‘*kind of a game*’ to reframe violence and aggression, allowing users to hide from the consequences of their speech. Visual material like photos and video clips can also be mobilized to support false claims against women, as most people tend to put a fairly high amount of trust and veracity in images as an accurate representation of reality and truth, ignoring contextual factors and situational conditions¹³⁵. Ultimately, the online ‘*sniper culture*’ that came to be further aggravated the harm of gender-based hate speech, leading to what is known in Korea as a ‘*cyberwrecker*’: a YouTube-based creator that produces highly critical clips that are uploaded as an attack on individuals – unsubstantiated allegations can generate attention, interactions, and advertising revenue, meaning that reputational harm may simultaneously become commercially valuable content while contiguously becoming a concrete concern for the physical world. The February 2022 case of online streamer Cho Jang-mi (known online as Jammi), who committed suicide after year-long continuous online harassment and accusations of being a ‘man-hater’ by *cyberwreckers*, illustrates the potentially material consequences of such dynamics. YouTuber PPKa (뽀까) published multiple videos questioning Cho and portraying her as a radical feminist; the videos reportedly accumulated nearly 3 million views, exemplifying how attacks on individuals could become commercially valuable forms of content¹³⁶.

The case also demonstrates how the boundary between digital hostility and physical-world consequences can become increasingly intertwined and difficult to maintain.

Similarly, Bae In-gyu - *New Men’s Solidarity*’s leader – had already established himself as a far-right ultra-conservative YouTube commentator before the organization’s founding. His transition from individual political commentary to organized antifeminist activism illustrates how influencer-based media activity can morph into a more refined and organized form of digital mobilization¹³⁷.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Min-sik Yoon, “Cyber Scarlet Letter: How Online Bullies, ‘Wreckers’ Drove YouTuber to Death,” *Korea Herald*, February 10, 2022.

¹³⁷ Hae-rin, Lee, “Gender-based Online Harassment’s Link to Violence Needs to Be Exposed,” *The Korea Times*, November 7, 2023.

At the Korean level, these aligned mechanisms have been employed by domestic antifeminist personalities and organizations specifically through the YouTube platform; the 2022 presidential elections demonstrated how digital grievance can be transformed into electoral capital, particularly through organizations such as *New Men's Solidarity* (NMS), which mobilized young men's perceptions of discrimination through influencer-driven political communication¹³⁸. Political sympathy not only resulted in a wider spread publicization of misandry-focused discourses, it also had physically concrete results like the election of an antifeminist politician as the leader of the main conservative party of Korea¹³⁹ and a candidate who pledged the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality as the president of the Republic.

Studies on Korean online based hate speech reveal the growing entanglement of gender animosity with political polarization, while further studies indicate the rise of a uniquely Korean male-victim mindset among the youth. What grabbed public attention was the aggressive and hostile nature of misandric communication that is often reflected in media coverage. Misandry thus operates within this discourse not just as a manifestation of animosity toward men, but as a political lens through which many grievances may be consolidated into a wider narrative of male victimization, and that is because many came to interpret feminism as evidence of a more comprehensive system of female privilege that discriminated against men.

The relevancy of these actors resides not just in the content of their messages, but in the technical framework through which those messages gain visibility. Digital platforms prioritize communicative styles that elicit prolonged engagement: outrage, dissent, moral indignation, mockery, and identity-driven hostility; within this context, visibility may progressively supplant institutional credibility, while emotional intensity transforms into a type of political capital. The 2021 *GS25 controversy* illustrates how platform dynamics can transform an ambiguous visual element into evidence of alleged gender hostility. A promotional advertisement featuring a hand holding a sausage was interpreted by users on male-oriented online communities as an encoded expression of anti-male

¹³⁸ Young-im Lee, "Blaming Feminists, Claiming Pain: Anti-Feminist Discourse and Electoral Mobilization by New Men's Solidarity in South Korea," *Women's Studies International Forum* 112 (2025).

¹³⁹ Lee Jun-seok, former leader of the People Power Party now founder of the Reform party.

discourse and misandry, generating intense online criticism and ultimately prompting changes to the advertisement. The episode did not remain confined to the specific company: antifeminist users started scrutinizing advertisements, products, campaigns, companies, and public institutions for similar gestures, fundamentally transforming an isolated controversy into a broader mechanism for identifying and policing allegedly feminist imagery¹⁴⁰.

It is interesting how the case illustrates the ways in which anti-feminist mobilization may appropriate and repurpose tools formerly associated with feminist activism.

Subsequently feminist users reacted through the mirroring appropriation of the same hand gesture as forms of symbolic retaliation. However, by that point boycotts, public criticism, and collective complaints - practices used by feminist groups to oppose sexist representation and corporate practices – had already been reframed by anti-feminist users as a legitimate consumer movement against alleged commercialized misandry. In this sense, the male reaction did more than just reject feminist techniques; it mimicked and appropriated them while also inverting their political direction.

In response, feminist groups organized their own boycott of GS25, criticizing the company's ready acceptance of what they believed to be groundless accusations; a response that was perceived as acceptance and reproduction of misogynistic norms¹⁴¹.

The episode perfectly showcases how an ambiguous cultural sign was detached from its original context, reinterpreted by opposing actors, circulated online, and incorporated into pre-existing narratives of male victimhood. And why the Korean manosphere is not to be understood as just a collective of individuals that dislike feminism; the political significance stems from its capacity to unify varied experiences into a coherent group identity. Sociopolitical and pop cultural grievances, as well as the existence of institutions such as the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, can be interpreted as expressions of a common condition: Korean men are supposedly becoming a disadvantaged, even marginalized, social group; a reversal of perceived privilege and the formation of victim ideology

¹⁴⁰ Jin-sook Kim, "Calling Out Feminists: Antifeminist Hijacking of Cancel Culture in South Korea," *Television & New Media* 26, no. 1 (2024): 88 – 103.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

resulting into a narrative of victimhood that allows individual frustrations to acquire collective political meaning.

The South Korean case thus reveals a feedback loop. Feminist activism challenges established gender hierarchies and antifeminist groups perceive this confrontation as proof of male disenfranchisement. Digital platforms enhance these emotionally charged perceptions of resentment, while political figures convert the ensuing division into electoral support. Such an approach demands neither a centralized conspiracy nor a singular ideological entity: it may arise from the interaction of societal discontent, platform design, influencer dynamics, and electoral motivations.

The role of algorithms in this process, however, requires careful consideration. Misogyny is not created by recommendation algorithms on its own, and not every incidence of antifeminist content can be traced to algorithmic design. Their analytical value lies in the conditions they establish for repeated exposure and reinforcement. When consumers interact with content that reinforces an existing grievance, recommendation algorithms may direct them to progressively comparable material. Repetition might reinforce the sense that a specific interpretation is commonly accepted, whereas engagement metrics can encourage more controversial types of communication. The end outcome is not always the development of a new ideology, but rather the consolidation and normalization of an existing interpretative framework.

Victimization discourses nonetheless play a significant role. The anti-feminist identity associated with some young Korean males has been linked to the belief that modern society is progressively antagonistic against men across several domains, including employment, personal relationships, law enforcement, and sexual crime legislation. These beliefs do not inherently align with a coherent factual account of gender disparity; rather, they offer a system through which social uncertainty may be understood. Economic instability, intensifying competition in job markets, shifting relationship expectations, decreasing marriage rates, military service, and demographic concerns can all be connected to a singular explanatory framework that attributes the deterioration of men's societal status primarily to feminism.

The result is a form of *zero-sum gender politics*. Gender equality is no longer viewed exclusively as the reduction of structural disparities between groups.

Instead, advancements for women may be perceived as setbacks for males, and policies aimed at mitigating women's disadvantages as discriminating benefits, while the ongoing structural inequities impacting women become less politically salient. The significance of this structure transcends the manosphere, as it serves as a conceptual conduit for online frustrations to permeate mainstream political dialog.

The same digital realm intersects with a more direct manifestation of gendered power: digital sexual violence. Anti-feminist rhetoric does not necessarily lead to sexual offending, but the two can intersect through broader cultures of objectification, entitlement, monitoring, and the use of women's bodies as objects of consumption. Non-consensual intimate images, organized sexual exploitation, and AI-generated sexual material are all examples of how digital platforms allow these beliefs to acquire technical expression.

The Korean context showcases the dual nature of digitalization. The same channels may promote feminist visibility, solidarity, documentation, and mobilization while also facilitating harassment, surveillance, sexual exploitation, and ideological reinforcement. The Korean manosphere is thus best understood as part of a larger socio-technical dynamic in which gender complaints, platform incentives, and technology capabilities interact. Thus, digital change is more than just an issue of communication; it is also about power: who becomes visible, whose concerns are legitimized, and how technology reproduces or exacerbates existing inequities.

3.1. The Reactionary Loop: YouTube, Algorithmic Recommendation Systems, and the Rise of I-Dae-Nam

Susan Faludi, in her 1991 *'Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women'* provides a useful starting point for understanding the reactionary character of this process. She argues that phases of feminist progress can generate conservative reactions that do not necessarily seek to restore earlier social order in an identical form; rather, they seek to reinterpret, contain, or reverse those social changes that are associated with women's emancipation. South Korea has experienced an extraordinary feminist mobilization, particularly

and mostly through digital movements. A type of advocacy that opposes patriarchal rules not only institutionally but also in everyday cultural practices. One that also provoked a concrete, strong antifeminist backlash across both digital and political realities¹⁴². This dynamic transformed into what Korean academics call a 'gender war': a conflict both ideological and cultural, and a reflection of distinct worldviews between young men and women. Gallup Korea's 2024 WIN survey produced clear differences among the interviewees in their twenties: in assessing whether gender equality had been achieved, the net score among men in their 20s was +59 in workplaces and +21 in politics, compared with -19 and -75 among women of the same age¹⁴³. These divergent attitudes provide a crucial framework for understanding the political significance that gender has gained among younger voters. An ideological gap that reflects in political displays through behaviors during events such as political elections, particularly in South Korea. For the 2022 presidential election, 58% of women in their 20s voted for progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung, contrasted by 58.7% of men in the same age group supporting conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol – 33.8% were the women that cast the same vote¹⁴⁴. Political analysts read this polarization as indicating that gender, more than class or region, has become the core of political identification among younger generations.

Digital communities enable young individuals to confront divergent narratives of the same social reality: one may view feminist policies as essential rectifications of systemic injustice, whilst the opposing viewpoint may perceive same policies as manifestations of bias against men. Digital platforms provide the framework that enables these interpretations to evolve into shared identities. These distinctions are significant as they point out that the modern 'gender war' extends beyond disagreements over specific policy measures for addressing objective disparities. It also extends to fundamentally divergent interpretations of the social reality around gender inequality. For some young men, the advancement of women's rights and the prominence of feminist discourse may

¹⁴² Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).

¹⁴³ Gallup Korea, "Sŏngp'yŏngdŭng (Gender Equality) kwanryŏn insik—WIN tagukka chosa" [Perception of gender equality—WIN multi-country survey], March 14, 2024. The survey was conducted January 24–30, 2024, among 1,029 South Koreans aged 19–79.

¹⁴⁴ Chang-hwan Lee, "I-Yun, sedaebŏl ssollim sok 'Idaenyŏ' nŭn ljaemyŏng·'Idaenam' ūn Yun Sŏgyŏl" [Lee and Yoon Show Generational Polarization: 'Young Women' for Lee Jae-myung, 'Young Men' for Yoon Suk Yeol], *Newsis*, March 9, 2022.

be perceived as proof that gender parity has been attained, or even exceeded. For young women, in contrast, the persistence of discrimination and gender-based violence may indicate that equality stays unfulfilled. One side may interpret feminist policy as necessary correction to structural inequality, while the other may interpret the same policy as evidence of discrimination against men. The two groups might thus assess the same society and reach fundamentally divergent conclusions on the persistence of gender inequity. Then, the resulting conflict is not limited to policies-related disagreements, but it concerns the differing perceptions of whether gender inequality is still a structural issue, whether equality has already been reached, and whether actions to address disparities serve as justice or just reverse discrimination.

This 'gender war' shows the fragility of progress when institutional reform does not go in hand with cultural change. Following Faludi, this type of backlash is not a mere regression following feminist advancement, but also a reaction to adaptation; patriarchy does not self-reproduce and self-sustain through unchanged institutions, rather it adapts its languages to new media and political strategies in order to reassert its dominance. Comprehending this dynamic is fundamental for interpreting South Korean feminism today: not as a linear battle toward equality, but as a continuous dialogue between empowerment and resistance in a quickly digitalized democracy. In this sense the Korean case is not to be understood as a reproduction of Western experiences, but as an adaptive form of patriarchal resistance. The Korean case should not be perceived only as a transient setback after the progress of feminism. It expresses a responsive adjustment wherein traditional gender hierarchies are redefined by modern technology and political discourse; claims regarding male victimhood, fairness, reverse discrimination, and the supposed completion of gender equality allow antifeminist actors to oppose feminist demands without necessarily presenting themselves as defenders of patriarchy, but rather as defenders of fairness, individual merit, or men's rights.

The feminist 'reboot' of the mid-2010s, with movements like Megalia, Womad, and other forms of feminist activism, emerged within such an environment, and it made misogyny and gender inequality increasingly mainstream within public discourses; and that made it a 'everybody problem', whether of pro or anti association. This concurrently offered antifeminist actors a distinctly recognizable

political adversary, starting a phenomenon in which gender progressively emerged as a struggle between two opposing collective identities. It was the emergence of a 'gender war': not merely disagreement in terms of policies, but a conflict between competing interpretations of gender, fairness, discrimination, and social power.

In South Korea, such cultures emerged from a specific fusion of local Internet cultures, anonymous discussion boards, political fractioning, and platform-based influencer networks. Spaces like Ilbe and DCinside became significant environments for the circulation of misogynistic narratives prior to the rise of the more modern YouTube-centric Korean antifeminist ecosystem. Research on Korean digital platforms shows how such spaces have constructed a portrayal of women and feminists as antagonistic social categories, while simultaneously presenting Korean men as victims of a steadily changing social order¹⁴⁵. Antipathy to feminism is well represented in a SisaIN survey aimed at identifying why men in their 20s had such exceptionally low approval ratings for liberal government: 78.9% of interviewees strongly agreed that feminism is fundamentally female supremacy, while 44.5% strongly disagreed to claims about feminism being a movement seeking equal status between genders¹⁴⁶, supporting the general observations that see male hostility towards feminist movements accompanied by strong and aggressive externalizations, stipulating not only feminism as a female egotism but also recognizing themselves as 'victims' of female powers. Many young men were found to believe current South Korean society – but not exclusively - to be unfavorable towards them in various ways, from dating and marriage to employment and law enforcement – particularly sexual offenses – and therefore they pointed that as the emergence of male minority identity¹⁴⁷.

The decentralized structure of these spaces nevertheless allows forms of informal leadership to emerge, and the translation of animosity into shared identity acquires significant traction when integrated within the framework of modern digital platform. Anonymous forums originally served as primary venues for the establishment of antifeminist discourses, whereas platforms like YouTube,

¹⁴⁵ Wool-jung Han, "A New Variation of Modern Prejudice: Young Korean Men's Anti-Feminism and Male-Victim Ideology," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1–15.

¹⁴⁶ SisaIN, "Isiptaenamja, küdüün nuguin'ga" [Men in Their Twenties: Who Are They?], *SisaIN*, April 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

live streaming services, and short-form films transformed the dynamics of their dissemination.

Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), incel groups, and Red Pill spaces differ in their objectives, practices, and degrees of hostility toward women. What connects many of them is instead a shared discursive vocabulary through which gender relations can be framed in antagonistic and hierarchical terms. Feminism is frequently represented as the institutionalization of female privilege, while men's social difficulties are interpreted as consequences of women's emancipation¹⁴⁸. What arises is therefore less a cohesive ideology than a collective interpretative framework that allows for the comprehension of various personal experiences as expressions of the same perceived gender inequity.

The translation of animosity into shared identity acquires further traction through contemporary digital platforms; if anonymous forums originally served as venues for the establishment of antifeminist discourses, YouTube, livestreaming services, and short-form videos transformed their dissemination process. Thus, antifeminist rhetoric can now be customized, commercialized, and perpetually replicated by prominent figures whose credibility is established through their presence.

Figures such as Andrew and Tristan Tate, Myron Gaines, Justin Waller, Sneako, and Harrison Sullivan have emerged as major actors within this ecosystem, establishing themselves as leaders, mentors, or truth-teller offering guidance and insights on success, identity, and gender dynamics on a worldwide scale. Distinguishable not only through their messages but also the mechanisms through which their authority and masculinity is constructed and sustained – amplified and enhanced by algorithmic systems that privilege engagement, emotional intensity, reactive stimuli, and controversy, thereby reshaping the conditions under which leadership emerges and is acknowledged. In such context visibility progressively substitutes legitimacy, and influence becomes disconnected from conventional indicators of expertise or accountability¹⁴⁹. At the Korean level the comparison with Andrew Tate is useful precisely because the

¹⁴⁸ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁴⁹ Bogdan Costache et al., "Algorithmic Masculinity and the Commodification of Authority: Leadership, Influence, and Digital Power in the Contemporary Manosphere," *International Journal of Education, Leadership, Artificial Intelligence, Computing, Business, Life Sciences, and Society* 6 (2026): 45-68.

Korean manifestation is both similar and different. Whereas Tate represents a transnational form of influencer masculinity associated with wealth, sexual dominance, entrepreneurial aspirations, and antifeminist rhetoric, the Korean discourse operates within a different institutional and cultural context, infused with discourses that go from military service issues, *gongjeong*, and the specific history of Korean digital feminism. Aligned mechanisms have been employed by domestic antifeminist personalities and organizations particularly through the YouTube platform; the 2022 presidential elections demonstrated how digital grievance can be transformed into electoral capital, particularly through organizations that mobilized perceptions of discrimination through influencer-driven political communication¹⁵⁰. Political sympathy not only resulted in a wider publicization of misandry-focused discourses, but it also had physically concrete results in mainstream politics, like the election of an antifeminist Lee Jun-seok as the leader of the People Power Party in 2021. Strong in his antifeminist beliefs, Lee pledged the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality if elected; a position that had become central in the discourse surrounding gender politics during electoral rallies. In a significantly evident paradox, the country top ranking among the OECD countries with a gender wage gap of more than 30% now has a significant political leadership that advocates men's rights rather than women's.

The technical architectures of digital means are fundamental in their design systems catering to personalized recommendations for continuous engagement, through emotionally engaging communication – outrage, moral indignation, mockery, identity-based hostility. This does not mean that algorithms mechanically create misogyny, nor that every user exposed to antifeminist content becomes radicalized. Rather engagement-oriented systems can create conditions in which emotionally charged material receives repeated visibility - an echo-chamber-like effect.

The process can be represented as a reactionary loop: individual grievance becomes online recognition; recognition becomes collective male identity; collective identity encourages attribution of grievance to feminism; emotionally intensified content generates greater engagement; engagement produces visibility; repeated visibility reinforces the original interpretation. In this sense,

¹⁵⁰ Young-im Lee, "Blaming Feminists, Claiming Pain: Anti-Feminist Discourse and Electoral Mobilization by New Men's Solidarity in South Korea," *Women's Studies International Forum* 112 (2025).

platform infrastructures can inadvertently reward the communicative style most capable of producing conflict; the system does not require a central actor deliberately directing toward misogyny.

On a wider spectrum, political mobilization gives this process additional significance, as NMS demonstrated during the 2022 election - notwithstanding that it rests upon a gender grievance that had already acquired collective identity and a recognizable digital vocabulary and footprint, becoming a political capital. YouTube-based antifeminist organization NMS strategically framed male grievances to mobilize young men, portraying feminism as a hegemonic ideology supported by elites in political parties, media, and civil society, while representing themselves as defenders of 'true' gender equality, justice, and democracy¹⁵¹.

This mechanism further clarifies the persistence of gender conflict: political campaigns possess an identifiable endpoint, but digital attention economies lack a natural termination; emerging disputes might perpetually rekindle the same hostilities. An advertisement, a celebrity's remark, a romantic controversy, a feminist initiative, or a governmental policy can all be contextualized within a pre-existing interpretive lens, rendering each dispute an occasion to reinforce the notion that men are experiencing a decline in status and that feminism is culpable.

The algorithmic landscape therefore not only facilitates the dissemination of antifeminist notions but also ensures their enduring presence by perpetually introducing new entities onto which the identical interpretative framework might be applied. This does not make the digital environment the sole cause of gender polarization, but it does create an infrastructure through which grievances, identities, and ideological interpretations can continuously reinforce one another.

The impact intensifies when the target of such animosity shifts from a feminist discourse or political entity to a specific woman's physical form, sexual identity, or personal existence. The same digital frameworks that convert discontent into shared identity may enable mechanisms of monitoring, degradation, and sexual abuse, especially when sexist portrayals of women are accepted within the groups users engage with.

¹⁵¹ Young-im Lee, "Blaming Feminists, Claiming Pain: Anti-Feminist Discourse and Electoral Mobilization by New Men's Solidarity in South Korea," *Women's Studies International Forum* 112 (2025).

3.2. From Digital Grievance to Political Capital: The Weaponization of Gender Conflict

The relationship between misogynistic digital culture and sexual violence is not one of simple causation. It would be analytically insufficient to argue that participation in antifeminist communities inevitably produces sexual offenders. The more significant relationship concerns the increasing objectification of women's bodies through surveillance, consumption, humiliation, and circulation.

South Korea's experience with *molka* provides an important starting point. Women have been secretly filmed in bathrooms, changing rooms, homes, and other spaces where privacy is expected, with recordings subsequently being distributed as sexual material. *Molka* is significant not simply in the availability of recording technology but also in the social practice that accompanies it: the transformation of a woman's body and private life into content that can be anonymously observed, exchanged, and consumed¹⁵².

The March 2019 Burning Sun scandal demonstrates the intersection of sexual exploitation, digital communication, celebrity culture, and social networks; what began around the Seoul nightclub Burning Sun investigation grew into a broader scandal involving charges of sexual violence, illicit filming, and the circulation of non-consensual sexual material through private chatrooms. Simultaneous investigation into celebrity chatrooms revealed an exchange of illegally filmed sexual material, demonstrating how digital communication could facilitate the normalization and distribution of sexual violations among groups of men¹⁵³.

Burning Sun is analytically important because it demonstrates how digital sexual violence does not require a single centralized structure: sexual exploitation can become ingrained within existing social networks, celebrity cultures, and male peer groups. The audience is therefore an important component of the ecosystem: digital sexual violence is sustained not only by those who create material but also by those who request, receive, circulate, and legitimize it.

¹⁵² Chamee Yang, "The Techno-Optics of Safety: Surveillance and Women's Ambivalent Experiences in South Korea's 'Smart Safe City,'" *Social Studies of Science* 55, no. 1 (2025): 47–68; Sora Kim, "Tijit'öl sŏngp'öllyŏk ūi pyŏnhwa yangsang kwa 'ūmran sŏng' (obscenity) ūl kŭnkŏro han kyuje ūi han'gye" [Changes in Digital Sexual Violence and the Limitations of Regulation Based on "Obscenity"], *Asia Women's Studies* 57, no. 1 (2018): 163–199.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

The 2018 Nth Room case represented a further development in the organization and scalability of digital sexual exploitation. Between 2018 and 2020, perpetrators used Telegram to create secret chatrooms in which women and girls looking for jobs online were lured in and then coerced through threats, blackmail, and exploitation into producing sexually explicit material. Victims' personal informations were used to further stalk, harass, blackmail and physically abuse with the final purpose of extorting violent materials to sell. Initial investigations identified 103 victims, of which 26 were minors, but a total 1,154 victims were confirmed at the end of the formal government investigation in December 2020, with a total of 60.7% in their 20s or younger.

Research on the case identifies it as a major example of the manner in which encrypted messaging, anonymity, cryptocurrency, and networked communication can facilitate large-scale sexual exploitation¹⁵⁴.

The sexual violence and violation experienced by the victims went viral domestically and in international media, leading to sparks of public outrage not only at perpetrators but also at certain political figures' dismissive and victim-blaming reactions - some excused viewers' participation as personal enjoyment and teens as merely fooling around on their computers¹⁵⁵. The significance of Nth Room lies precisely in its transformation of sexual violence into a networked and scalable practice. The perpetrator no longer required to be physically present with the victim, and the audience no longer needed any direct relationship with her; visual content could be produced under coercion, uploaded, copied, redistributed, sold, and consumed by large numbers of participants. Digital infrastructure consequently separated the production, distribution, and consumption of sexual violence across a wider network.

This further blurs the distinction between perpetrator and spectator. The scale of participation surrounding the Nth Room case demonstrated that digital sexual exploitation may involve extensive networks of consumers in addition to the individuals directly responsible for coercion and production¹⁵⁶. The case

¹⁵⁴ Woo-chan Jun, "A Study on the Analysis of and Educational Solution for Digital Sex Crimes in Korea", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 3 (2023).

¹⁵⁵ Anna Schwartz, "Cloud Backlash: Digital Sex Crimes and Anti-Feminism in South Korea," *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 46, no.1 (2025): 56-71.

¹⁵⁶ Yoon-jeong Jeon, "'N-Bönbang' sakön üro pon tijit'öl sömbömjae kyuje hyönhwang gwa kaesön kwaje," [Institutionalization of Digital Sex Exploitation Materials Regulation - Focusing on the 'Telegram n Chatting Room' Issue], *Ewha Yösong gwa Pyönggho* [Ewha Journal of Gender and Law] 13, no. 3 (2021): 1-29.

consequently forced South Korean law and public discourse to confront not only those who created the material but also those who paid for, accessed, possessed, and distributed it.

The case further exposed the limitations of legal frameworks designed around more conventional forms of sexual violence. Encrypted and overseas-based platforms create jurisdictional difficulties, while the speed and reproducibility of digital material make its removal considerably more complicated than removing a single physical object. Even after legislative responses to the Nth Room case, digital sexual violence has continued to present substantial enforcement challenges.

These developments reveal a broader transformation. Technology does not simply provide a new location in which sexual violence occurs; it changes its scale and persistence. A recording that might previously have been confined to a small number of people can now be replicated indefinitely. An image can be moved across platforms and jurisdictions. Anonymity can reduce the perceived social consequences for perpetrators and consumers, while victims may face the possibility that material remains accessible long after the original violation.

Generative artificial intelligence further exacerbates the overall situation by altering the relationship between sexual violence and authentic imagery. Previous iterations of digital sexual violence generally required the existence of an actual image or recording. AI-generated sexual imagery can manufacture the appearance of sexual activity from an ordinary image, meaning that a victim does not need to have produced any sexual material whatsoever.

Deepfake scandals demonstrate the scale of this transformation. Telegram groups and channels were reportedly organized around schools, universities, and other institutions, with AI-generated sexual images of female students, teachers, and acquaintances being produced and circulated¹⁵⁷. Research on the 2024 South Korean deepfake crisis has shown the creation of networks targeting women throughout educational institutions, emphasizing how generative AI spread digital sexual abuse beyond the unlawful distribution of actual photos.

The 2024 Seoul National University deepfake case saw the distribution between 2021 and April 2024 of nearly 2,000 AI-generated pornographic images

¹⁵⁷ Yenn Lee, "The Digital Misogyny Pipeline: Deepfake-Based Sexual Violence in South Korean Schools and Universities," *Gender and Education* 38, no.6 (2026): 699–715.

of women who attended the same alma mater as the two male perpetrators - that were later handed a 10 and 4-year prison sentence¹⁵⁸.

Recent research describes this development as part of a “digital misogyny pipeline,” in which established forms of online misogyny intersect with generative technologies to produce new forms of sexual violence¹⁵⁹. While in 2023 high school teacher Kim came to know being the target of deepfake exploitation by students on Twitter through a student’s warning; photos of her were taken during class and post-edited through AI to be shared on social networks. Police told her that identification would only be possible if the X user informations were directly disclosed to her from the platform, thus fearing social repercussions through official channels, helped by a colleague – also a victim of secret filming in the past -, launched their own investigation that led to the identification of the student¹⁶⁰.

The technological difference is fundamental. A perpetrator no longer necessarily requires access to the victim, a hidden camera, or an authentic sexual recording. An ordinary image can become raw material for sexualized manipulation and the potential pool of victims consequently expands, while the practical barriers to production decrease.

AI intensifies several characteristics already present in earlier forms of digital sexual violence: scalability, reproducibility, anonymity, personalization, and persistence. Victims can be targeted because of their appearance, identity, school, workplace, political activity, or simply because an ordinary photograph of them is available online.

The technology nevertheless does not operate in an ideological vacuum. When AI-generated sexual imagery is produced within online spaces that already commodify women's appearance as objects of consumption, that technological capability can reinforce existing patterns of misogynistic objectification. The issue is therefore not simply ‘AI pornography.’ It is the interplay between generative technology and a cultural environment in which women's digital images can be appropriated without consent.

The progression from *molka* to Nth Room and then to AI-generated sexual

¹⁵⁸ Agence France-Presse, “South Korea court jails man for 10 years over deepfake porn,” *Courthouse News Service*, 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Yenn Lee, “The Digital Misogyny Pipeline: Deepfake-Based Sexual Violence in South Korean Schools and Universities,” *Gender and Education* 38, no.6 (2026): 699–715.

¹⁶⁰ Yoon-jung Seo and Mike Valerio, “Deepfake porn is destroying real lives in South Korea”, *CNN World*, 2025.

imagery illustrates an important transformation in the technological conditions of misogyny. Each stage increases the ability to record, reproduce, distribute, manipulate, and preserve representations of women's bodies. The underlying social logic is not necessarily new, but the technological capacity through which it can be enacted has expanded dramatically.

This produces a second loop: misogynistic representation normalizes objectification; objectification facilitates surveillance and sexual exploitation; networked circulation expands the audience; technological innovation increases the capacity for manipulation; and increased capacity creates new opportunities for abuse.

The distinction between discourse and material harm therefore becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Digital misogyny does not inherently produce digital sexual crimes, but it might foster an environment in which the violation of women's privacy and sexual autonomy is more readily justified; where women are repeatedly represented as deceptive, sexually available, manipulative, or deserving of humiliation, violations of their digital autonomy can be interpreted not as violence but as punishment, entertainment, or retaliation.

The Korean experience illustrates that technology advancements may amplify pre-existing gendered practices rather than simply creating entirely new ones. Patriarchal practices have adapted to the digital realms: surveillance becomes hidden-camera recording; sexual exploitation becomes networked distribution; humiliation becomes viral circulation; and fabricated sexual imagery is enabled by generative AI.

The resulting problem is not simply that misogyny has moved online. Digitalization has changed the capacity, speed, scale, permanence, and accessibility of misogynistic harm.

3.3. Victims of “Reverse Discrimination”? The Zero-Sum Construction of Gender Equality

The persistence of these narratives cannot be solely attributed to technology alone. Although digital platforms might enhance grievances, they do not determine the significance attached to them. For digital animosity to attain

permanence, it must be understood within a framework that gives it legitimacy. In contemporary South Korea, a prevailing framework has been the perception that men themselves have become victims of gender equality.

The disagreement therefore concerns more than policy; it is about the interpretation of social reality itself. One group can interpret feminist policies as necessary corrections to structural inequality, while the other can understand the same policies as evidence that women have acquired institutional advantages. And in such social scenario digital communities are the suppliers of environments through which these interpretations can become collective identities, allowing individual perceptions to acquire a broader social and ideological meaning.

The language of *gongjeong*, or fairness, is particularly important because it allows antifeminist arguments to be articulated without openly defending patriarchal hierarchy. Rather than contending that women should have fewer rights, antifeminist actors may argue that all individuals deserve equal treatment. Rather than opposing equality, they may argue that feminism has actually produced inequality against men; rather than focusing on male privilege, they may present themselves as defending individual merit against group-based preferential treatment¹⁶¹. In this sense, opposition to feminist efforts might be expressed in terms of justice rather than an outright defence of established gender hierarchy. This rhetorical metamorphosis alters the political subject matter. The antifeminist young man may not necessarily see himself as opposed to women's equality, but rather as a person who has been denied fairness because of his gender. Thus, feminism is seen as the institution responsible for alleged injustice.

According to research, young Korean antifeminists have a significant inclination to conceive themselves as victims of female power. Within this worldview, men no longer appear as the socially dominant group par excellence, but rather as a minority whose concerns are ignored by feminist institutions and programs¹⁶².

The language of 'misandry' consequently acquires significance beyond its literal definition of hostility toward men; within antifeminist discourse, the concept

¹⁶¹ Bo-myung Kim, "Chongŏ kaltŭng kwa p'anp'eminizŭm ūi möppŏp" ["'Gender Conflicts' and Antifeminism in Contemporary South Korea"], *Cross-Cultural Studies* 56 (2019): 1–25.

¹⁶² Wool-jung Han, "A New Variation of Modern Prejudice: Young Korean Men's Anti-Feminism and Male-Victim Ideology," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1–15.

can become an all-encompassing explanation for individual experiences of rejection, disagreement, policy dissatisfaction, or criticism. A collection of heterogeneous grievances can thereby transform into evidence of a systemic anti-male order.

This is where the concept of zero-sum gender equality becomes particularly useful. Within a zero-sum framework, social progress for women is understood as a corresponding loss for men: if women receive some sort of institutional support men are assumed to have lost an opportunity. If feminist perspectives gain exposure male perspectives are assumed to have been silenced; if women report sexual violence, reforms concerning sexual offences may be interpreted by some men as threats to due process or as evidence that men are presumed guilty without question. Gender equality thus ceases to represent a shared social objective, becoming a competition over a finite amount of social power.

The political consequences of this framework became particularly visible during the 2022 presidential election, which did not create the gender conflict but demonstrated that gender grievances had become politically recognizable and electorally consequential: young men disproportionately supported conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol while young women were considerably more leaning toward Lee Jae-myung.

NMS illustrates this conversion particularly clearly through a YouTube communication that framed young men as victims of an established feminist order and presented the organization as defending fairness and male interests, demonstrating how an identity constructed through online grievance can acquire institutional relevance¹⁶³. Political mobilization should nevertheless be understood as a consequence of a broader process rather than as its starting point: online grievance had already become a collective identity before it became electorally useful.

This distinction is of relevance because electoral politics can change rapidly while the underlying interpretive framework can remain embedded within digital communities – and hence, society. A political candidate can gain or lose support on a daily oscillation-base, but the belief that feminism symbolizes female privilege can continue to circulate via YouTube, online forums, short-form video,

¹⁶³ Young-im Lee, “Blaming Feminists, Claiming Pain: Anti-Feminist Discourse and Electoral Mobilization by New Men’s Solidarity in South Korea,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 112 (2025).

and private messaging networks.

The zero-sum construction of gender equality also helps explain why objective improvements in women's status do not necessarily bring about greater acceptance of feminism among young men. Feminist advancement may become evidence of male disadvantage: the greater the visibility of women's rights, the more visible feminist institutions become; and the more visible those institutions become, the easier they can be represented as sources of male discrimination.

This produces an important paradox. South Korea has historically recorded one of the largest gender wage gaps among OECD countries, yet antifeminist discourse can easily construct Korean men as the principal victims of contemporary gender relations. The gap itself is often justified by some young men as deriving from women's lack of effort or competence, and the disparity is therefore considered fair¹⁶⁴. The coexistence of these narratives illustrates that perceptions of fairness cannot be understood solely through aggregate indicators of inequality; they are mediated through identity, social comparison, political communication, and digital communities. A society might exhibit measurable structural inequalities, while individuals interpret actions designed to correct such gaps as unjust benefits given to another group. The essential question is not whether inequality can be quantitatively demonstrated, but how existing inequalities and efforts to fix them are perceived in light of opposing ideas of merit, fairness, and group interests. When gender relations are viewed within a zero-sum framework, existing disadvantages for women can become evidence of merit rather than evidence of structural inequality, while attempts to fix it can be recast as discrimination against men. The paradox is therefore not that perceptions of inequality differ from statistical reality, but that statistical inequality can itself be reinterpreted as fair.

The issue acquires particular significance when individual experiences are perceived as emblematic of an entire gender. A man experiencing rejection from a woman may interpret that experience as personal disappointment; however, when the same experience is repeatedly discussed within a community in which women are described as collectively entitled, manipulative, or hostile toward men, that individual disappointment can become evidence of a broader theory about

¹⁶⁴ Wool-jung Han, "A New Variation of Modern Prejudice: Young Korean Men's Anti-Feminism and Male-Victim Ideology," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1–15.

women.

The same mechanism operates in conversations across various contexts, such as employment: an individual who fails to secure a job may attribute that outcome to economic competition, their own qualifications, timing, or the choices of organizational decision-makers. Within an antifeminist interpretive framework, that same outcome can easily become evidence that women - or feminism - have seized institutional power at the expense of men.

The distinction between experience and explanation is therefore fundamental. The experiences themselves may be genuine, but what requires careful analysis is the interpretive mechanism through which these experiences are attributed to feminism and generalized into a theory of gender relations.

Because they provide individuals with opportunities to meet others who interpret their experiences in similar ways, digital communities play an essential role in ideological consolidation. The ensuing realization can reveal itself as psychologically powerful: an individual who previously understood his difficulties as personal may find a collective explanation in which his experience becomes evidence of a broader injustice.

Polarization within the group can reinforce this process, becoming part of a shared narrative of male victimhood. Studies on Korean antifeminism have highlighted the importance of online communities and peer interaction in producing homogeneous and antagonistic attitudes; the Internet has always been able to function as a large peer group for younger generations, allowing certain interpretations learned from online peers to become normalized through repetition and social reinforcement¹⁶⁵.

This process should not be regarded as a phenomenon exclusive to antifeminist communities. Polarization is a common feature of group interaction; therefore exclusive identities can also emerge within online feminist communities. The issue concerns the ideological content that is then amplified: in the Korean case, online male communities have created an environment in which antagonism toward feminism can become increasingly central to collective identity. The resulting ideological loop can be understood as follows: perceived disadvantage is attributed to feminism; this attribution leads to the identification

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

of men as victims; collective recognition confirms the initial interpretation; repeated confirmation reinforces the belief in reverse discrimination, and hostility toward feminist claims becomes increasingly justified and accepted as self-defence.

This helps explain the relationship between male grievance and misogyny without confusing the two concepts: not every person who believes that men experience particular disadvantages is necessarily misogynistic, nor does acknowledging the real difficulties experienced by men imply a rejection of feminism. The problem arises when men's grievances are interpreted through a framework that treats women collectively as the cause of male disadvantage, feminism as a form of female supremacy, and equality as a redistribution of privileges from men to women.

At that point, gender equality stops being a shared social objective and becomes a conflict between collective identities. Resistance to feminist demands can be framed as resistance to oppression; criticism directed at women can be interpreted as a response to discrimination; and hostility can acquire the language of fairness, in an endless reactionary loop in which claims of victimhood and claims of discrimination continually reinforce one another.

The implications extend beyond political discourse: the same interpretive framework can influence the perception of women's bodies, their sexuality, and their digital identities. Hostility toward women can be understood as a reaction to injustice when feminism is portrayed as an unfair attack on men. And when digital communities consistently endorse this interpretation, misogynistic language can be normalized as mere political disagreement, while more extreme forms of humiliation and abuse can become easier to justify.

The Korean case therefore demonstrates how material grievance, ideological interpretation, digital amplification, and technological capacity interact. But grievances alone are not sufficient to explain the phenomenon; they acquire greater significance when organized into a collective identity, amplified through platforms, legitimized by influencers, and interpreted through a zero-sum understanding of gender equality.

Patriarchal backlash, therefore, does not need to reproduce older forms of patriarchal power to remain effective. It can operate through languages of fairness, individual merit, male victimhood, and technological freedom; it can

circulate through anonymous forums and hyper-personalized influencer accounts, and political relevance through elections; and it can have concrete consequences resulting from the use of technologies that enable surveillance, sexual exploitation, and AI-generated abuse.

The contemporary Korean 'gender war' is therefore best understood not as a mere conflict between men and women, nor as an evenly balanced disagreement between two equivalent ideological positions, but as a process through which experiences of insecurity and disadvantage are interpreted through conflicting accounts of gender, transformed into collective identities, amplified by digital infrastructures, and, in their most extreme manifestations, connected to acts of digital violence. The significance of the Korean case lies precisely in this interaction: misogyny is not simply reproduced online, but adapted to the communicative, economic, and technological conditions of the digital age.

4. South Korea as a Comparative Case: From Regulatory Lag to Preventive Governance

South Korea is a particularly revealing case for examining the relationship between technological change, gendered conflict, and digital regulation. Its relevance lies in neither the claims that fact that digital sexual violence originated there nor in the assumption that the country has started developing a comprehensive solution to the problem. Rather, South Korea represents a particularly conspicuous example of a recurring dynamics in which technological innovation alters the conditions under which gendered harm is generated, distributed, and re-produced faster than institutions can recognize and regulate such changes. The progression from *molka* and non-consensual image distribution to the organized exploitation of women via encrypted platforms, and, more recently, AI-generated sexual imagery, illustrates the limitations in existing regulatory frameworks when confronted with forms of abuse and violence that exceeded the already established categories and mechanism of institutional response.

Hence, digital sexual violence cannot be understood as a problem of individual

criminality alone, as its effects are mediated by infrastructures of recording, storage, reproduction, distribution, and increasingly automated generation. A sexually exploitative image may continue to circulate longer after its original production, reproduced across multiple platforms, or transformed into new forms of digitally modified abusive material. The problem is therefore simultaneously criminal, technological, institutional and transnational. The state may criminalize the initial act, but criminalization alone cannot stop or prevent further distribution once the material has fully entered network environments.

South Korean institutions have progressively responded through specialized victim-support structures, content-removal mechanisms, legislative reforms, and investigative powers¹⁶⁶. The chronology of these developments is quite significant. Governmental attempts at formulating comprehensive measures specifically addressing digital sexual crimes came exclusively after accumulated criticism, feminist mobilization, and political pressure¹⁶⁷. This is significant exactly because the State did not anticipate the transformation of sexual violence through digital technology; it was popular mobilization and social pressure that strongly pushed for legal and institutional recognition - of a phenomenon that had already become deeply embedded in the webs of everyday digital society.

This temporal disparity can be understood as a form of regulatory lag: the interval between the emergence and diffusion of a technologically enabled practice and the development of legal and institutional mechanism addressing its consequences. Technological innovation can be adopted and adapted instantly; hence, it does not await the regulatory recognition process of public acknowledgment of harm, political mobilization, institutional investigation, legislative deliberation, and subsequent administrative implementations. The difference between these temporalities is a structural challenge for regulation. Once a specific type of digital abuse becomes visible enough to spur legislative intervention, the technological environment in which it emerged may have already changed.

The inadequacy of initial institutional response – and, in this sense, it refers to

¹⁶⁶ Heather Barr, “‘My Life Is Not Your Porn’: Digital Sex Crimes in South Korea.” *Human Rights Watch* (2021).

¹⁶⁷ Yun-soo Kim and Joon-seup Chung, “Tijit’öl sömbömjae üi ippöp gwa kaesönan” [The Legislation and Revision Plan of ‘Digital Sex Offences’], *Tongbuk-A Pöp Yöng’u* [Northeast Asian Law Research] 11, no. 3 (2018): 383–410.

all government agencies – was not merely the consequence of technological novelty; it was rather connected to the broader socio-institutional context in which sexual violence was understood and disseminated.

The problem, therefore, was not only technological novelty but also a delay in recognition. Before institutions can regulate a new technological practice, they must first determine what kind of harm it poses. Digital sexual violence has challenged established understandings of privacy, sexuality, evidence, victimization, and criminal conduct. Practices that might have been initially interpreted as voyeurism, unauthorized recordings, isolated instances of misconduct, or private disputes have increasingly revealed themselves as forms of sexual violence with collective, persistent, and technologically reproducible consequences¹⁶⁸. The regulatory challenge thus concerned not only the punitive approach but also how the very subject matter of regulation should be conceptualized. Korean legal scholarship has repeatedly identified insufficient preparation, lenient punishment deficiencies in enforcement, and wider cultural attitudes as limiting factors to the effectiveness of responses¹⁶⁹.

The hardship cannot therefore be reduced to simple technological lag, as it was as well one of recognition: institutions were slow to conceptualize digitally mediated violations as serious forms of sexual violence rather than private matters, voyeuristic misconduct, or isolated offences committed by deviated individuals. Institutional hesitation should also be understood within the persistence of broader patriarchal structures, as institutional categories are not developed separately from their social context. The institutions in charge of defining, investigating, prosecuting, and punishing such crimes operate within a society in which gender hierarchies have historically shaped understandings of sexuality, privacy, credibility, and violence. This does not imply that individual officials or institutions consciously acted with misogynistic intent. Rather, institutional assumptions can operate structurally, influencing the level of regard to certain issues and their seriousness compared to others, how victims are perceived, what evidentiary forms are considered appropriate, and how urgently

¹⁶⁸ Ji-sun Kim, Min-ji Kim, and Se-eun Hong, 'Tijit'öl sömbömjae üi pyönhwa punsök mipt N-bönbang pangjipöp sihaeng ihu chöngch'aek ch'ujin gwa hyokwasöng p'yöngka [*Analysis of the Changes in Digital Sex Crimes and Evaluation of Policy Implementation and Effectiveness after the Nth Room Prevention Law*], Research Series 23-A-06 (Seoul: Han'guk Hyöngsa·Sajöng Yöng'guwön [Korean Institute of Criminology and Justice], 2023).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

certain forms of violence predominantly experienced by women are addressed. Korean criminal-justice research has thus identified barriers that limit the effectiveness of responses to digital sexual violence in institutional preparation, enforcement, and punishment, as well as broader social attitudes¹⁷⁰.

The institutional history of sexual violence therefore reveals an important paradox: the state was simultaneously expected to protect women from technologically mediated sexual violence while its own institutions and legal frameworks were still negotiating the extent to which such violence should be understood as a serious form of violence. The significance of newly introduced digital technologies is dependent on whether institutions are prepared to recognize them as extensions of sexual violence rather than isolated acts of criminal misconduct.

The scale and the extremely high reproduction of *molka* further accentuated such institutional limitations, making it increasingly difficult to overlook or bury as a minor felony. In 2018, the Seoul Metropolitan Government announced that it would inspect all 20,554 public toilets in the city on a daily basis, increasing the number of personnel assigned to the task from approximately 50-to-80.000¹⁷¹. The scale of the mobilization demonstrated institutional recognition of both *molka* and the extent to which such unauthorized filming had already penetrated ordinary public life. At the same time, those were results of the limitations of a regulatory strategy based primarily on detection after technology had already become widely spread and accessible. The government responded by strengthening its ability to detect hidden recording devices, by which time the technology was already widespread and the practice deeply entrenched in society. As a result, while these detection efforts made it possible to identify individual cases of abuse, they failed to counter the broader infrastructure through which the recordings were stored, reproduced, and continuously distributed.

The key issue is not whether legislation becomes tighter, but whether it can address the technological and organizational conditions that enable abuse to persist. Criminal law cannot, by itself, remove encrypted networks, prevent files from being copied, nor ensure their removal in any form or copy by regulating

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Heather Barr, "My Life Is Not Your Porn': Digital Sex Crimes in South Korea." *Human Rights Watch* (2021).

platforms beyond national jurisdiction. Nor can the concrete punishment deal with the cultural conditions through which sexually exploitative material becomes normalized, consumed, and repeatedly redistributed. Regulative work may thus require operations at multiple levels simultaneously: criminal liability, platform accountability, quick content removal, protection of victims, technological detection, international cooperation and prevention.

South Korea can therefore be understood as a global laboratory, but in an ambivalent sense. It is a laboratory not because it has solved digital sexual violence, but because it has experienced successive stages of the problem with unusual intensity: covert filming, mass online distribution, organized sexual exploitation, encrypted networks, platform-mediated misogyny, and AI-generated sexual abuse. Each stage has exposed the limitations of existing legal and institutional arrangements, prompting a newer round of adaptation efforts. The importance of the Korean experience demonstrates how technological innovation does not automatically produce institutional innovation; digital infrastructures can evolve rapidly within societies whose legal, political, and cultural institutions remain firmly anchored to outdated assumptions about privacy, sexuality, evidence, and violence. When such institutions are further influenced by enduring gender hierarchies, the result can be a particularly dangerous form of regulatory delay in which harms that disproportionately affect women are recognized only after they have reached significant proportions.

The Korean case therefore raises a more extensive question that transcends national legislation: what happens when technologies capable of reproducing gendered violence emerge and develop faster than institutions are willing - or able - to acknowledge that type of violence as such? The answer provided by South Korea is neither a straightforward regulatory failure nor a successful adaptation. Rather, it is a cycle of technical innovation, normalization, victimization, public mobilization, institutional recognition, legislative intervention, and renewed technological adaptation. It is this cycle - rather than the existence of any individual law - that makes South Korea particularly valuable for understanding the future of digital sexual violence and AI governance.

The regulatory challenge then shifts from responding to established forms of harm to anticipating the conditions under which such harm may arise; the issue is no longer just about institutional capacity to respond once a technological

practice has produced identifiable victims, but whether governance can intervene at an earlier stage in those environments that allow for these practices to develop and spread.

4.1. The Legal Lag: Digital Sexual Violence and the Limits of South Korean Regulation

The development of digital sexual violence in South Korea predates the scandals that eventually brought the issue to national and international attention. The phenomenon of *molka* can be seen as a starting catalyst. By 2018, approximately 6,800 cases of illegal filming had been reported to police, yet the institutional response remained comparatively weak, with only around 1/3 of reported cases referred for trial, and fewer than 1 in 10 trials resulted in a prison sentence¹⁷². Human Rights Watch has also documented that, in 2017, only 119 of the 5,437 people arrested for online sex crimes were imprisoned, while many cases were dismissed or resulted in suspended sentences or fines¹⁷³.

The gap between the prevalence of the practice and the severity of institutional responses is significant because digital sexual violence differs from conventional forms of sexual offences in the persistence and scalability of the harm they produce. A secretly recorded image does not remain confined to the location in which the offence occurred; once uploaded it is copied, reposted, stored, distributed as pay-for good, or transferred between users, thus circulating independently of the original offender. The victim consequently loses control not only over the original material but also over its subsequent reproduction, so the technological characteristics of the offence transform privacy violations into potentially indefinite and infinite forms of exposure. The problem was no longer limited to the moment of recording but extended into an indefinite process of reproduction and circulation

This difference revealed a significant flaw in the old legal concept. Criminal law is primarily organized around recognizable acts committed by identified criminals.

¹⁷² Heather Barr, “My Life Is Not Your Porn’: Digital Sex Crimes in South Korea.” *Human Rights Watch* (2021).

¹⁷³ Ibid.

However, digital sexual assault can involve numerous actors performing different functions; the technical infrastructure may therefore distinguish between production, circulation, and consumption. A judicial system that focuses solely on the initial perpetrator risks underestimating the larger network through which the harm is perpetuated.

The 2019 Burning Sun case, that saw singer Jung Joon-young admitting to secretly filming sexual encounters with women and distributing the recordings to friends through a group chat, made this problem particularly visible. The scandal was not reducible to one nightclub or a single category of offence; rather, it exposed a broader concrete ecosystem in which sexual exploitation, celebrity culture, hidden-camera recording, online distributions, and male peer networks intersected.

Another case saw two men detained for operating hidden cameras in 30 motels across 10 cities and streaming private activities of approximately 1,600 guests, demonstrating that recording and distribution can operate through broader networks of sociotechnological participation¹⁷⁴. The significance of these cases lies less in individual circumstances than in their exposure of the limitations of treating the problem of digital sexual violence exclusively as an issue of individual criminality. Removing a camera or arresting its operator may address one offence without addressing the infrastructure through which recordings were stored and redistributed. Moreover, the low number of cases resulting in imprisonment suggest that the criminal justice system has yet to develop a response that is proportional to the social consequences of such crimes. As a result, the problem was not only that crimes were being committed, but also that the judicial system was still adjusting to a type of sexual assault with ramifications that extend beyond the time of production.

The Nth Room case represented a further, more substantial transformation - also in public understanding. The Telegram-based chatrooms' abuse illustrated how the technological architecture implemented was central to the organisation of the crime: encrypted communication, pseudonymity, closed chatrooms, payment systems, and the ability to reproduce digital material allowed sexual exploitation to be transformed into a commercialised and networked activity. The

¹⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2020: South Korea (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020).

case involved what was concretely a criminal organisation rather than an isolated offender operating without an organized network of participants and consumers, and the subsequent sentences reflect the severity of the judicial recognition. Cho Ju-bin was indicted to 42 years in prison - a sentence upheld by the Supreme Court in 2021 - together with dozens of accomplices, for organising a criminal group, blackmailing 74 victims - including 16 minors according to the appellate proceedings - and distributing sexually exploitative material through the Telegram chatroom known as *baksabang*¹⁷⁵. The court also confirmed 30 years of electronic monitoring, a forfeiture order, 10 years of disclosure of personal information, and a 10-year employment restriction concerning child-related facilities. In December 2025, the Supreme Court separately confirmed an additional 5-year sentence for sexually exploiting and raping a minor, bringing his total sentence to 47 years¹⁷⁶.

The legislature was therefore forced to address not only the perpetrators but also the techno-social environment in which the exploitation was operated. Which poses as a primary challenge within South Korean jurisprudence: legislations frequently evolve in reaction to specific crises, whereas technical frameworks remain dynamic entities that are difficult to keep pace with.

The Nth Room case also changed the political meaning of digital sexual violence in South Korea. Public outrage generated demands for stronger punishment and for a legislation capable of addressing not only the original production of abusive material but also its distribution, possession, and technological facilitation. The subsequent legislative response expanded criminal liability and investigative powers and strengthened institutional mechanisms for victim protection.

South Korea tightened its criminal regulations on illegal filming and distribution and introduced more detailed measures on digitally altered pornographic content. Article 14 of the Act for Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes addresses the production and distribution of illegally recorded footage, while Article 14-2 provides a special legal basis for sexually exploitative content produced through editing, synthesis or modification. The latter provision is

¹⁷⁵ Republic of Korea, Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes, art. 14-2

¹⁷⁶ Cheong-mo Yoo, "Supreme Court Upholds 42-Year Prison Term for Mastermind of Sex Abuse Ring," *Yonhap News Agency*, 2021.

especially significant for following deepfake regulations, as it changes the legal subject being protected: sexualized image offences no longer depended upon an authentic, concrete recording of a sexual act, as the unauthorized sexualization of an identifiable individual's likeness can in itself constitute a relevant harm.

Yet, severe punishment alone does not resolve the structural characteristics of digital sexual violence. The Nth Room demonstrated that perpetrators could exploit technologies designed for privacy and secure communication to construct criminal networks that are otherwise difficult to detect through conventional investigative techniques. It also showed that the people responsible for producing abusive material may constitute only one part of a larger ecosystem involving distributors, consumers, intermediaries, and platform infrastructures – of which socio-politically influencing ones. The problem is thus simultaneously criminal, technological, social, economic, and institutional.

This pattern has continued to develop after the Nth Room: in November 2025, Kim Nok-wan received a life sentence for operating a Telegram-based network - 'The Vigilantes' - that sexually exploited 261 people, including minors, for the realization and distribution of sexual contents between 2020 and 2025. On September 2026 the Supreme Court confirmed his life sentence, together with additional 10 years of online disclosure, 10 years of employment restrictions, and 30 years of electronic monitoring¹⁷⁷. In April 2026, an appellate court upheld the life sentence¹⁷⁸. The case is particularly revealing because the number of identified victims was more than three times that of the Nth Room-related *baksabang* case five years prior. This highlights important data to consider: even if institutions and legislatures actively moved to organize and implement direct skin-fitting measures, the bedrock of the criminal system was not deterred; rather, the organisational model had continued to evolve in its exploitation. So while legal strengthening can be concretely documented through harsher penalties, expanded investigative powers, and victim-support mechanisms, technological deterrence is a more complicated issue, due to criminal organizations' ability to

¹⁷⁷ Hyung-jin Kim, "In South Korea, deepfake porn wrecks women's lives and deepens gender conflict," *AP News*, 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Ji-sun Kim, Min-ji Kim, and Se-eun Hong, 'Tijit'öl sömbömjæe üi pyönhwa punsöök mipt N-bönbang pangjipöp sihaeng ihu chöngch'aek ch'ujin gwa hyokwasöng p'yöngka [*Analysis of the Changes in Digital Sex Crimes and Evaluation of Policy Implementation and Effectiveness after the Nth Room Prevention Law*], Research Series 23-A-06 (Seoul: Han'guk Hyöngsa·Sajöng Yöng'guwön [Korean Institute of Criminology and Justice], 2023).

technologically adapt when legal constraints become more punitive. Legal development does not eliminate the conditions that make the immediate exploitation of technology possible. Given the pace at which contemporary technologies develop and are repurposed, regulation is unlikely to eliminate this gap entirely; the challenge is instead to reduce the temporal distance between technological adaptation and institutional response.

The emergence of AI-generated sexual imagery introduced another challenging stage in this regulatory problem. In conventional digital sexual violence, the legal concern typically begins with a base image, or recording, of an actual sexual act, private situation or the body of a person. Generative AI shifts that relationship. An ordinary picture taken at school, university, work or in a social-media setting can be transformed into sexually explicit material without the subject's involvement in the production process. Technology thus alters not only the scale of circulation but the very relationship between victim and abusive material.

The 2024 major deepfake crisis demonstrated the real scale of the transition. According to the National Police Agency, during the first seven months of 2024 police recorded 297 deepfake sexual-exploitation cases, with 178 suspects identified -113 (or 73.6%) of those being teenagers. One Telegram channel was reported to have approximately 220,000 members, while investigations identified deepfake material targeting students, teachers, military personnel, and other women. The scale of the crisis demonstrated that synthetic sexual abuse was no longer an isolated technological phenomenon but had become an integrated form of digital sexual violence.

Amendments taking effect in October 2024 strengthened Article 14-2, making the non-consensual creation and dissemination of sexually explicit content generated by editing, synthesis, or processing punishable by up to 7 years in jail or a fine of up to 50 million won. The new law further criminalizes the possession, purchase, storage, or viewing of such material, punishable by up to 3 years in jail or a fine of up to 30 million won. These modifications greatly widened the range of criminal responsibility by targeting the generation of sexually explicit altered materials, rather than restricting accountability to their subsequent

dissemination.¹⁷⁹ Alongside, lawmakers amended the Sexual Violence Prevention and Victims Protection Act, granting state agencies stronger mandate authority to actively delete deepfake materials from international networks and support victim recovery. AI-generated material can now be treated as a form of sexual crime even where the depicted sexual conduct never occurred, moving beyond the assumption that sexual-image offences require an authentic image-base. The law therefore recognises that the harm is not dependent upon the factual authenticity of the image, because what is of crucial consideration is the unauthorised sexualisation and circulation of an identifiable person's likeness.

The institutional response has also incorporated victim-centred removal mechanisms. The Advocacy Center for Online Sexual Abuse victims assisted more than 10,000 victims of digital sexual crimes and handled 332,341 support cases, including hundreds of thousands of requests and interventions concerning the removal of abusive content¹⁸⁰. Of these, 300,237 concerned content deletion, while 3,826 involved referral for legal or investigative support. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family also reported that 95.4% of illegal adult websites addressed through the system were hosted on overseas servers, illustrating the transnational dimension of content removal¹⁸¹.

The scale of removal requests illustrates the peculiar temporal structure of digital sexual violence: even after an offender has been identified or convicted, the harm may continue because copies of the material remain distributed across multiple websites, search engines, social-media platforms, communities, and storage systems.

These figures reveal not only the development of concrete state capacity but also the great persistence of the underlying problem. A state may become highly sophisticated at removing illegal content, all the while remaining unable to prevent the social and technological conditions that continuously generate new material.

The deepfake crisis also showed an important distinction between conventional *molka* and AI-generated sexual abuse: whereas in *molka* cases the perpetrator generally required access to an actual sexual image or recording, in

¹⁷⁹ Republic of Korea, Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes, arts. 14, 14-2, and 14-3.

¹⁸⁰ Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Republic of Korea, "Over 10,000 Supported by ACOSAV in 2024," Press Release, 2025.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

the physical sense, generative AI can instead construct a sexually explicit representation from an ordinary image, increasing the radius of action considerably in terms of reaching and creating capacity. The technological barrier between a victim's everyday digital identity and sexual exploitation is consequently reduced. A *selka* shared on social media, or an identification picture for school websites, workplace profiles, or personal pages on website like LinkedIn, can potentially become raw material for fabricated sexual content.

And the distinction between 'real' and 'fake' offers little to no protection to the victim: the image may be synthetic, but the reputational, psychological, and social consequences are real.

The Korean regulatory experience thus demonstrates a persistent legal lag – or, a regulatory paradox. The country has progressively developed stronger criminal provisions, specialised investigative mechanisms, victim-support institutions, and systems for removing illicit material. Yet, many of these interventions followed highly publicised crises rather than anticipating the technological developments that produced them. Each major transformation in digital sexual violence has been followed by institutional adaptation: *molka* generated demands for stronger enforcement; the Burning Sun intensified public recognition of the relationship between sexual exploitation and digital circulation; the Nth Room produced major legislative reforms; and the deepfake crisis prompted further criminalisation and specialised responses to synthetic sexual imagery. The problem is fundamentally that technological innovation can move faster than the regulatory cycle.

This specification is important because describing Korea simply as a country with 'weak laws' would obscure the more complicated institutional problem. Contemporary Korean law is substantially more punitive and extensive than it was during the earlier *molka* period; what remains difficult is anticipating the next configuration of abuse before a major scandal demonstrates its consequences. Each major transformation has generated a corresponding expansion of legal and administrative capacity, followed by the emergence of harm rather than precede it. Regulation consequently operates in a recurring sequence: technological innovation creates a new opportunities for abuse; perpetrators exploit those opportunities; victims and civil-society actors expose the consequent harm; public outrage generates political pressure; legislation and enforcement mechanisms

are expanded; and technological practices subsequently adapt again. The regulatory system becomes progressively stronger and more sophisticated, but often only after the technological environment has already changed. This is the key limitation of a largely reactive model. Criminal law is necessary because digitally mediated sexual abuse involves recognizable crimes, offenders, and victims who seek legal protection. However, criminalization occurs largely when harmful activities have become sufficiently evident to be defined and prosecuted.

South Korea can therefore be understood as a laboratory not because it has solved digital sexual violence, but because the country provides unusually clear evidence of the interaction between technological innovation, gendered social conflict, criminal organisation, and regulatory adaptation. Its experience demonstrates that criminal law remains indispensable, particularly where perpetrators deliberately exploit digital infrastructures to produce and distribute sexual abuse. At the same time, criminalisation alone cannot regulate the systems through which abusive material is recommended, monetised, copied, stored, and redistributed; a societal approach aimed at analysing and understanding that specific segment of anti-feminist society that lies at the root of these crimes.

This regulatory lag thus leads directly to the issue of preventive governance. If regulation begins only after a technological practice has already produced sufficiently visible victims and sparked public pressure, institutions will continue to deal with the consequences of yesterday's harm. The comparative question that arises, therefore, is not which country has the strictest criminal law, but how different legal systems attempt to anticipate the need for intervention: shifting from punishing established crimes to regulating platforms, infrastructure, the production of synthetic content, cross-border circulation, and the conditions that enable new forms of digital sexual violence.

4.2. Exporting the Conflict: Comparative Regulatory Responses

South Korea occupies a distinctive position in the development of the contemporary legal response to digital sexual violence. It would be misleading to

describe the country as the geographical origin of non-consensual intimate-image abuse or digitally mediated sexual exploitation - both of which have emerged across multiple technological and national contexts. Yet South Korea was among the nations in which these practices became particularly prominent as a distinct and systemic form of sexual violence, and where organization, technological sophistication, and scale generated an unusually consequential legislative reaction.

In a 2024 survey of 16,693 participants across ten countries, South Korea recorded the second-highest rates of non-consensual synthetic intimate imagery (NSII) victimization; public comments condemning NSII were least common in South Korea, while references to strong punishment, criminalisation, and governmental accountability were more frequent than in other countries. U.S.-based cybersecurity firm Security Hero similarly reported in 2023 that 53% of victims depicted in 95,820 deepfake videos and more than 100 deepfake websites it analysed were South Korean nationals, indicating a disproportionately high exposure to NSII crimes¹⁸². Combined, these figures place South Korea not just as an important site of early legislative intervention, but also as a setting in which the extent and visibility of digitally mediated sexual exploitation created ongoing demand for regulatory action.

The progression from widespread *molka* to the organized exploitation exposed by the Nth Room case demonstrated that digital sexual violence could encompass far more than the unauthorized circulation of an intimate image. It could comprise coercion, blackmail, minors, encrypted communication, commercialized access, anonymous participation, and the persistent reproduction of abusive material across digital networks. The Nth Room case consequently became a critical moment for the institutional recognition of digital sexual violence as a specific regulatory problem rather than a peripheral extension of conventional sexual offences¹⁸³.

The significance of South Korea in such contextual discourse lies not simply in

¹⁸² So-hee Jung, and Hyeseon Noh, "From Grassroots Advocacy to AI Governance: Lessons from South Korea's 2024 Deepfake Sexual Abuse Crisis on Democratizing Knowledge and Policy," *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 50, no.3 (2026): 299-336.

¹⁸³ Soo-bum Lee and Min-ho Song, "Tijit'öl sŏmbŏmjae podo e taehan p'yap'an'jŏk kisul punsek: 'N-bŏnbang' sakŏn ūl chungsim ūro" [A Critical Discourse Analysis on the Report of Digital Sexual Crimes: Based on the Nth Room Case], *Eŏllon Yŏn'gu* [Journal of Communication Research] 57, no. 4 (2020): 150-195.

the severity of individual cases, but in the extent to which those cases exposed the inadequacy of legal frameworks designed for a pre-digital understanding of sexual violence. These implications extend beyond national criminal law, as digital sexual violence rarely remains confined to a single jurisdiction. A victim may be located in one country, the perpetrator in another, the platform incorporated elsewhere, and the relevant evidence dispersed across several jurisdictions. Generative AI further complicates this a definition of these boundaries: image-generation tools can be developed in one part of the world, while their outputs are circulated instantaneously across international networks.

South Korea's legislative trajectory therefore provides an important regulatory precedent. Amendments to Article 14-2 of the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes established an explicit legal basis for addressing sexually explicit material created through the manipulation or synthesis of another person's features¹⁸⁴. Crucially, this development preceded the widespread public and regulatory recognition of generative artificial intelligence as a major mechanism for producing synthetic sexual abuse.

The Korean experience also demonstrates a broader characteristic of digital sexual violence: technological innovation does not necessarily create an entirely new category of harm, but can substantially reduce the cost, expertise, and time required to produce and distribute existing forms of sexual exploitation. What once required access to a hidden camera, an existing intimate image, or specialized editing skills can now be produced from publicly available photographs and automated tools. The resulting problem is not merely that more individuals can manufacture false sexual images, but that the technological barriers for producing reputational, psychological, and sexual harm have been radically lowered.

This should not, however, be understood as an isolated national development; the international expansion of these practices demonstrates that the regulatory questions confronted by South Korea are no longer specifically confined to the Korean digital environment.

Digital sexual violence emerged in different forms across multiple jurisdictions

¹⁸⁴ Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes (South Korea), art. 14-2, as amended to criminalize the production and distribution of sexually explicit material created through the manipulation or synthesis of another person's features.

before the widespread availability of generative artificial intelligence, through non-consensual image sharing, covert recording, online sexual harassment, and sextortion. What contemporary platforms did was accelerate these harms, while generative Artificial Intelligence further intensified this transformation by lowering the technical barriers to producing sexually explicit material.

Consequently the problem can no longer be described as a national failure to criminalise non-consensual sexual imagery, but rather as a question of how states regulate the interaction between perpetrators, platforms, algorithms, AI systems, and digital infrastructures. South Korea's framework emphasizes downstream criminalization, increased penalties, strengthened investigative powers, and dedicated victim-support mechanisms. Other regulatory developments and jurisdictions demonstrate a different but complementary approach in which responsibility is increasingly moved upstream toward the systems structuring digital communication in its most wider sense.

In Australia, the eSafety Commissioner reported in 2024 a 550% year-on-year increase in explicit deepfakes since 2019¹⁸⁵, to which the country responded by treating artificially generated images as an extension of image-based abuse under the Online Safety Act. Subsequently the Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material) Act 2024 was enacted to strengthen federal criminal penalties alongside administrative removal powers, targeting both creation and sharing of explicit materials, produced or altered through means of AI technologies. Regulation thus developed through a combination of criminalisation and administrative intervention, facilitating a regulative work addressing both individual conduct and mechanisms designed to limit the spread of abusive material¹⁸⁶.

The United Kingdom has pursued a more anticipatory model combining platform regulation and intervention at the level of technological tools. UK police-commissioned research estimated that a 1,780% increase in sexual deepfakes prevalence between 2019 and 2024, with the same body of research reporting that 1 in 7 women and 1 in 9 men aged 18 to 34 had experienced threats involving the sharing of intimate images, while more than 28,000 cases of non-consensual

¹⁸⁵ eSafety Commissioner, "Addressing Deepfake Image-Based Abuse" (Australian Government, 2024).

¹⁸⁶ Australia, *Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material) Act 2024* (Cth); Australia, *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth).

disclosure had been reported between April 2015 and December 2021¹⁸⁷. These findings suggest that the regulatory challenge is not limited to technological capacity; the social normalization of such crimes concurs in creating an environment in which demand for certain material can persist alongside increasingly accessible technological means of production - nearly 1/4 of survey respondents were either neutral toward or saw nothing wrong with creating or sharing sexual deepfakes without consent¹⁸⁸.

Following the Online Safety Act 2023, the UK enacted the Crime and Policing Act 2026, which criminalizes the making, adapting, supplying, or offering tools designed specifically to generate non-consensual intimate imagery - so-called 'nudification' tools¹⁸⁹. By penalizing the creation and distribution of the software itself with up to 3 years' imprisonment, the law aims for an intervention before the generated content reaches public distribution. The British approach is consequently significant because it moves regulatory attention from the completed abusive content toward both the infrastructure that facilitates its creation and the platforms through which it is distributed.

The regulatory responses emerging in other jurisdictions can consequently be compared to the precedent established by the South Korean experience. France, for example, has moved toward explicit criminalization of sexually explicit synthetic material. Article 226-8-1 of the French Penal Code, introduced in 2024, criminalizes the distribution to a third party, or the public, without consent, of a sexually explicit montage or algorithmically generated sexual content, with aggravated penalties¹⁹⁰ where the offence is committed through an online public communication service. The importance of this approach lies in its recognition that the absence of an authentic sexual image does not eliminate the underlying harm. The law instead focuses on the non-consensual sexual representation itself, thereby adapting the logic of image-based sexual abuse regulation to the synthetic environment. France therefore provides an example of a criminal law

¹⁸⁷ Beatriz Kira, "Non-Consensual Intimate Image Sharing: Prevalence, Harms and Legal Responses in the United Kingdom," *Computer Law & Security Review* 54 (2024).

¹⁸⁸ National Police Chiefs' Council, "Police Warn of Rising Threat from Sexual Deepfakes," Press Release, 2025.

Crime and Policing Act 2026 (UK), secs. 99–100; UK Home Office, "Crime and Policing Act 2026: Overarching Factsheet," 2026.

¹⁸⁹ *Crime and Policing Act 2026* (UK), sec. 100.

¹⁹⁰ The offence is punishable by up to two years imprisonment and a €60,000 fine, with three years and penalties up to €75,000 where the conduct is carried out through an online public communication service.

that recognises the distinctive harms of digitally manipulated sexual imagery without requiring legislators to wait for the technology to become established through a major scandal.

Italy offers a complementary European case, as its recent legal development integrates criminalization of non-consensual intimate material with data-protection mechanisms, and more recently a broader criminal provision on AI manipulated content. Article 612-ter of the Italian Criminal Code integrates the criminalization of unlawful and unauthorized dissemination of sexually explicit images or videos - or, 'revenge porn'¹⁹¹. This criminal framework is integrated by Article 144-bis of the Italian Privacy Code, which allows individuals to notify the Italian Data Protection Authority, or DPA (in Italian, garante per la protezione dei dati personali) of the risk of the unauthorized circulation of sexually explicit material. The provision establishes a rapid administrative procedure through which the DPA must act within 48 hours of receiving the report – submissible also by minors over 14 years of age -, thus introducing an administrative mechanism to limit dissemination before the harm becomes more difficult to contain¹⁹².

The emergence of generative AI subsequently exposed the limits of a framework designed primarily around authentic material. To which the country responded through Law No. 132 of September 23, 2025 (132/2025), which introduced Article 612-quater of the Criminal Code¹⁹³. The provision defines criminal liability for the non-consensual dissemination – and with the intent to cause unjust harm - of images, videos, or voices that have been falsified or altered using artificial intelligence systems, misleading about their authenticity. The offence is punished by imprisonment for one to five years¹⁹⁴. Although Article 612-quater is not confined to sexual material, it is important for digital sexual violence because it recognizes that AI-generated or AI-altered representations

¹⁹¹ Italy, *Codice penale*, art. 612-ter, introduced by Legge 19 luglio 2019, n. 69, art. 10, *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, no. 173, July 25, 2019. Article 612-ter criminalizes the dissemination, without consent, of sexually explicit images or videos intended to remain private.

¹⁹² Italy, *Codice in materia di protezione dei dati personali*, art. 144-bis; Garante per la protezione dei dati personali, "Revenge Porn." Article 144-bis permits persons, including minors over fourteen, to report the risk of non-consensual dissemination of sexually explicit material to the Garante, which must decide within forty-eight hours.

¹⁹³ Italy, *Legge 23 settembre 2025, n. 132, Disposizioni e deleghe al Governo in materia di intelligenza artificiale*, art. 26, *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, no. 223, September 25, 2025.

¹⁹⁴ Italy, *Legge 23 settembre 2025, n. 132, Disposizioni e deleghe al Governo in materia di intelligenza artificiale*, art. 26, introducing *Codice penale*, art. 612-quater, *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, no. 223, September 25, 2025. Article 612-quater establishes imprisonment of one to five years for the non-consensual dissemination of AI-falsified or AI-altered images, videos, or voices capable of misleading others as to their authenticity and causing unjust harm.

can constitute a separate type of legally cognizable damage. Italy therefore exemplifies a shift away from controlling the dissemination of authentic personal material and toward acknowledging the legal implications of synthetic representations.

The Italian approach also highlights the significance of regulatory engagement outside criminal law. In 2025, the DPA acted against services capable of producing so-called 'deep nude' content - among them the ClothOff service -, on grounds relating to privacy, dignity, and personal data protection¹⁹⁵. In 2026, the Authority reiterated its warnings about the hazards of deepfakes and advocated for enhanced intervention powers against technology capable of producing deceptive representations¹⁹⁶. These actions move some of the regulatory attention away from the individual who distributes abusive content and more toward the technology services and data-processing activities that enable its creation.

Alongside criminal law and data-protection enforcement, the Italian communications regulator AGCOM serves as the country's Digital Services Coordinator under the Digital Services Act, adding another institutional layer to the national regulatory system for addressing platform responsibilities and systemic online risks¹⁹⁷.

The Italian model thus reflects an increasingly multifaceted approach: criminal law addresses individual responsibility; data-protection authorities can intervene to prevent unlawful processing and threats to personal rights; and platform regulation addresses the technological infrastructures that allow harmful content to be amplified and distributed.

At the same time, these systems are still vulnerable to the constraints described in the South Korean experience. Criminal culpability is mostly reactive, administrative action is contingent on identified legal offenses, and platform

¹⁹⁵ Garante per la protezione dei dati personali, "Provvedimento del 1° ottobre 2025," Registro dei provvedimenti no. 574, Doc. Web no. 10174164. The Garante imposed an urgent temporary limitation on the processing of Italian users' personal data by ClothOff, a generative-AI service capable of producing "deep nude" images.

¹⁹⁶ Garante per la protezione dei dati personali, "Provvedimento del 18 dicembre 2025," Registro dei provvedimenti no. 789, *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, no. 5, January 8, 2026; Garante per la protezione dei dati personali, "Deepfake: nuovo avvertimento del Garante privacy. L'Autorità chiede maggiori poteri di intervento," May 6, 2026.

¹⁹⁷ Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni (AGCOM), "Digital Services Act – DSA (DSC)." AGCOM serves as Italy's Digital Services Coordinator under the Digital Services Act and exercises national supervisory and coordination functions under the Regulation.

regulation cannot guarantee the removal of all copies of harmful information after they have reached private devices, encrypted channels, or foreign services.

At the supranational level, the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) is particularly significant. Rather than treating online harm exclusively as the consequence of individual unlawful behaviour, the DSA requires very large online platforms and search engines to assess and mitigate systemic risks arising from the design and operation of their services. Article 35 applies to Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) and expressly identifies the possibility of adapting platform design, content-moderation processes, advertising systems, and algorithmic systems, including recommender systems, as possible mitigation measures¹⁹⁸.

The regulatory object is consequently not merely the illegal post or image but also the technological environment through which content can be amplified.

Criminal law may determine that the creation or distribution of non-consensual sexual imagery is unlawful, but it does not necessarily determine whether a platform's recommendation system repeatedly exposes users to such material, whether inflammatory gender-based content receives disproportionate visibility, or whether the platform's commercial architecture creates incentives for highly engaging harmful content. The DSA attempts to address precisely this systemic layer.

Its enforcement mechanisms also reflect the economic scale of large platforms. Under Article 74, the European Commission may impose fines of up to 6% of a provider's worldwide annual turnover for specified infringements¹⁹⁹. The scale of the sanctions demonstrates that platform governance is treated not merely as a matter of private content moderation but as a form of regulated public responsibility attached to very large digital servers.

The EU's approach, still, does not replace criminal law; the DSA does not transform platforms into criminal investigators, nor does systemic-risk regulation determine the guilt of an individual who produces or distributes a non-consensual sexual image. Its contribution is instead located at another level: it attempts to reduce the likelihood that digital infrastructures systematically amplify or fail to

¹⁹⁸ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), arts. 34–35, 74, *Official Journal of the European Union* L 277 (October 27, 2022).

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

address foreseeable forms of harm.

The European Union Artificial Intelligence Act introduces a second regulatory layer: article 50 establishes transparency obligations for certain AI-generated and AI-manipulated content, with providers of systems generating synthetic audio, image, video, or text obliged to facilitate the identification of such outputs, while deployers of systems producing deepfakes must disclose that the material has been artificially generated or manipulated - transparency obligations that became applicable from August 2026²⁰⁰.

Yet transparency and criminalisation address different dimensions of the problem. A label stating that an image was AI-generated does not make non-consensual sexual images harmless; it may reduce deception and assist identification, but it cannot substitute for criminal liability, removal mechanisms, or victim protection. AI transparency may improve identification, but it cannot prevent individuals from malicious production; similarly, platform regulation can address systemic amplification but cannot replace criminal investigation or victim-centred remedies. South Korea's experience illustrates this problem particularly clearly. Despite legislative development following Nth Room case, the continued use of overseas encrypted platforms demonstrates the limits of national law when the infrastructure, perpetrators, evidence, and victims are distributed across different jurisdictions²⁰¹.

This also reflects a broader movement from regulating harmful content after its production toward regulating the conditions that make production easier. In this respect, it approaches the problem from the opposite direction to traditional criminal law: instead of asking only who created or distributed the image, the law also asks whether the technological tool itself was designed or supplied in a manner that facilitates abuse.

The comparison also reveals the limits and criticalities of each approach. Criminalization can establish clear individual responsibility, but it cannot easily prevent content from moving across borders or guarantee its complete removal once distributed. Platform regulation can influence the systems through which

²⁰⁰ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act), art. 50, *Official Journal of the European Union* (2024).

²⁰¹ Sarah Jeon, "Addressing the Use of Overseas Encrypted Platforms in Digital Sexual Violence in South Korea," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 26, no. 2 (2026): 401-435.

harmful content spreads, but it cannot replace criminal investigation or provide a complete remedy for victims. AI transparency can make synthetic content more identifiable, but a label does not prevent the creation of a sexually abusive deepfake. Removal systems can reduce ongoing circulation, but they cannot guarantee that every copy has disappeared from private devices, encrypted channels, or foreign platforms²⁰².

For this reason, the comparative evidence therefore points toward a layered regulatory model. Digital sexual violence requires a layered model combining criminal accountability, platform governance, technological transparency, rapid removal, victim support, and international cooperation. The international dimension is particularly important because electronic evidence, perpetrators, victims, and service providers frequently fall under different jurisdictions. Cross-border mechanisms such as the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime provide an additional procedural framework for cooperation concerning electronic evidence and cybercrime investigations²⁰³, while broader human-right instruments addressing violence against women and children provide a normative framework within which emerging technology-facilitated forms of abuse can be understood²⁰⁴.

The Korean case is especially useful within this comparative framework because it demonstrates what happens when regulation repeatedly encounters technological developments after they have already been incorporated into harmful practices. The progression from *molka* to encrypted Telegram exploitation and subsequently to AI-generated sexual imagery shows that the fundamental challenge is not simply technological novelty²⁰⁵. Across these different forms, a recurring structure remains visible: women's bodies and identities can be transformed into digital objects that can be captured, reproduced, exchanged, monetized, and circulated without their consent. Technology changes the mechanism, but the underlying power relation can

²⁰² See European Union, *Digital Services Act*, arts. 34–35; European Union, *Artificial Intelligence Act*, art. 50; France, *Code pénal*, art. 226-8-1; *Crime and Policing Act 2026* (UK), sec. 99.

²⁰³ Council of Europe, “Convention on Cybercrime,” describing the Budapest Convention as a framework for international cooperation and electronic evidence.

²⁰⁴ Council of Europe, *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (Istanbul Convention), May 11, 2011, arts. 3, 12, and 33–40.

²⁰⁵ Yoon-jeong Jeon, “‘N-Bönbang’ sakön üro pon tijit’öl sömbömjae kyuje hyönhwang gwa kaesön kwaje,” [Institutionalization of Digital Sex Exploitation Materials Regulation - Focusing on the ‘Telegram n Chatting Room’ Issue], *Ewha Yösong gwa Pyönggho* [Ewha Journal of Gender and Law] 13, no. 3 (2021): 1-29.

remain remarkably stable.

This is also where the gendered digital environment so far examined becomes relevant to the regulatory problem. The existence of misogynistic online cultures does not mean that every participant in the manosphere is a perpetrator of sexual violence, nor that individual digital-sex-crime cases can be causally attributed to manosphere participation without evidence. The connection is instead structural and cultural. Online environments in which women are repeatedly represented as objects of ridicule, sexual evaluation, entitlement, or antagonism can contribute to a broader cultural context in which violations of women's privacy and sexual autonomy become easier to normalize²⁰⁶. The digital sexual exploitation networks documented in South Korea should consequently be understood as criminal formations operating within a wider technological and gendered environment, rather than as direct products of one ideological community.

The significance of South Korea as a global laboratory therefore lies in the combination of conditions it makes visible. The country has experienced the rapid emergence of digital sexual violence, the political mobilization of gender conflict, the organisation of sexual exploitation through encrypted technologies, and the subsequent deployment of AI for synthetic sexual abuse. Its regulatory response has progressively become more sophisticated, but the repeated appearance of new forms of abuse demonstrates the limitations of a system that is necessarily responding to technological change after it has concretized. The comparative evidence suggests a movement toward a more preventive model of digital governance. The different jurisdictions examined above demonstrate that effective regulation increasingly requires intervention at multiple levels: individual criminal accountability, platform governance, technological transparency, rapid removal, victim support, and cross-border cooperation.

The central regulatory challenge is consequently to move from a model in which the state reacts to each new form of digital sexual violence toward one capable of anticipating how technological infrastructures can produce new forms of gendered harm. South Korea's trajectory shows the costs of arriving after the fact. The emergence of AI-generated sexual abuse does not represent the end

²⁰⁶ Elisa García-Mingo, Silvia Díaz Fernández, and Sergio Tomás-Forte, "(Re)configuring the Sexual Violence Imaginary from an Antifeminist Perspective: The Ideological Work of the Spanish Manosphere," *Política y Sociedad* 59, no.3 (2022).

of the regulatory problem but another demonstration of it: when the technological means of producing harm evolve faster than legal institutions, regulation risks becoming permanently reactive. The future of digital sexual-violence governance therefore depends not only on punishing those who commit violence, but on designing legal and technological systems capable of limiting the conditions under which such abuse can be produced, amplified, and reproduced in the first place.

Conclusion

South Korea's experience challenges one of the central assumptions of technological modernization: that technological progress inherently produces social progress alongside it. Few cases illustrate the limits of this assumption quite as clearly.

Within several decades, South Korea moved from a predominantly agrarian society to one of the world's most technologically advanced and connected economies. Yet the disappearance of older social structures did not imply the disappearance of intrinsic power relations.

For instance, gender hierarchy did not only survive modernization but it has been repeatedly reorganized through institutions, markets, and technologies of modernity; the result, therefore, has not been the replacement of patriarchy by technological progress, but rather the adaptation of gendered power to increasingly sophisticated infrastructures.

This continuity becomes visible when the history examined in this research is read against the technological transformation of South Korean society. Neo-Confucian institutions historically regulated women through family organization, inheritance, marriage, sexuality, and reproduction. Industrialization integrated them into the developmental state as workers and mothers while retaining unequal expectations about gender, family, and reproduction²⁰⁷. Ultimately,

²⁰⁷ Marian Lief Palley, "Women's Status in South Korea: Tradition and Change," *Asian Survey* 30, no. 12 (1990): 1136–53.

digitalization transformed the means through which women's bodies and identities could be observed, represented, evaluated, distributed, and controlled. The infrastructure may have changed but the unequal distribution of power persisted.

This distinction is of importance because it prevents patriarchy from being reduced to a specifically Confucian legacy. Neo-Confucianism contributed historically to the institutionalization of particular gender hierarchies, but contemporary misogyny cannot be explained as the simple survival of Confucian values. It has been reproduced and transformed through industrial capitalism, law, media, consumer culture, political discourse, and digital technologies. The persistence of gendered inequality is therefore not evidence that South Korea has remained trapped in its premodern past. Rather, it demonstrates that patriarchal relations can adapt to radically different social and technological conditions, leading to the creation of gender-based structural dynamics. What persists is not necessarily the institutional form of patriarchy itself, but the unequal distribution of power that can be reproduced through new social, economic, and technological structures. Contemporary gender conflicts, including digital sexual violence and anti-feminist backlash, must therefore be understood not as remnants of a supposedly obsolete past, but as manifestations of gendered power operating within a technologically transformed society.

This is what the concept of *digital gender* seeks to capture. Gender is not simply a social relation that exists since before the advent of technology and is now represented online. Technological infrastructures increasingly participate in the production of gender relations themselves; they determine how bodies become visible, how identities are classified, how grievances are aggregated, how communities are formed, and how particular forms of violence can be reproduced. Hence, the relevant question is not whether technology has transformed gender - it has. The more challenging question is whose power is strengthened by that transformation, whose bodies bear its costs, and who possesses the capacity to resist it.

Digital sexual violence provides perhaps the clearest answer. The progression from *molka* and hidden-camera practices to mass circulation networks such as the Nth Room, and subsequently to AI-generated sexual imagery, is not simply a chronological table of increasingly sophisticated criminal techniques. It is a history

of declining technological barriers to the sexual commodification of women's bodies. The 2018 *molka* crisis accounted for thousands of reported cases, yet imprisonment remained comparatively few and far between²⁰⁸. The Nth Room case then demonstrated what occurred when digital technologies enable sexual exploitation to become organized around encrypted communication, pseudonymity, payment systems, closed communities, and persistent reproduction. The consequent shift to generative AI made this transformation even more crucial. What has changed across the stages is not simply the medium of abuse. Each technological advancement lowered the practical cost of producing, reproducing, and distributing sexualized contents²⁰⁹. The camera has facilitated sexual surveillance; networked platforms made circulation scalable; encrypted systems made organizations more difficult to detect; and generative AI made the fabrication of sexual imagery increasingly accessible without requiring the victim's participation in any way. This last transformation is particularly significant: if earlier forms of digital sexual exploitation frequently relied upon the unauthorized recording of something that had physically occurred, generative AI introduces a novel dynamic between the victim and the image. A woman's face, body, or any ordinary image can be transformed into sexual material without her having been present at the moment of production; without her having consented to the representation, or without an authentic sexual image having existed in the first place. Technology therefore does more than facilitate the circulation of sexual violence; it expands the conditions under which a woman's body can be converted into a sexual commodity capable of producing economical profits.

The uncomfortable implication is that technological progress can increase the efficiency of harm as well as the efficiency of communication. The same infrastructures celebrated for their capacity to connect individuals, democratize expression, and facilitate innovation can reduce the economic and technical costs of sexual exploitation. Thus, digitalization did not merely provide perpetrators with new tools; it altered the economics of abuse. A representation can be produced cheaply, reproduced indefinitely, distributed across multiple networks, monetized,

²⁰⁸ Heather Barr, "My Life Is Not Your Porn': Digital Sex Crimes in South Korea." *Human Rights Watch* (2021).

²⁰⁹ So-hee Jung, and Hyeseon Noh, "From Grassroots Advocacy to AI Governance: Lessons from South Korea's 2024 Deepfake Sexual Abuse Crisis on Democratising Knowledge and Policy," *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 50, no.3 (2026): 299-336.

and modified again without requiring access to the woman's physical body.

The problem is consequently not only that women can be harmed by technology. It is that technological systems can make the commodification of women's bodies easier to reproduce in scale. The deepfake exposes this particularly clearly: the body becomes data, and data can be copied. Once the representation has been detached from the person, the technological system can continue to reproduce an image of her without requiring a physical continued presence, participation, or consent.

However, the same digital environment generated another transformation: women did not simply become more passive vulnerable victims within these infrastructures; they also exploited them to challenge the relations of power they reproduced. *Megalia* transformed misogynistic language into an object of confrontation through its practice of mirroring. The 4B movement questioned not only individual relationships on the wide spectrum but also participation in marriage, childbirth, romantic relationships, and sexual relationships²¹⁰. While the Gangnam Station protests, #MeToo, and the Hyehwa demonstrations further illustrated how digital communication could transform individual experiences into collective claims.

This is why technology cannot be understood simply as either liberating or oppressive. Digital infrastructures enabled feminist counterpublics at the same time as they enabled new forms of misogynistic organization; the same affordances that allowed women to build networks of testimony, solidarity, anonymity, and collective refusal could be appropriated by their opponents. Visibility could become surveillance. Anonymity could facilitate resistance, but also harassment. Networked communication could turn individual experiences into political demands, but it could also turn individual frustrations into collective resentment.

The Korean manosphere emerged within precisely this contradictory environment. Concerns surrounding employment, military service, relationships, and perceived discrimination, easily transformed into a broader narrative of male victimhood and reverse discrimination that constructed women as responsible for grievances concretely rooted in wider social and economic conditions.

²¹⁰ Lee, Ji-eun, and Eui-sol Jeong. "The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future with/in a Non-Reproductive Future in Korea." *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 633–644.

These grievances should not simply be dismissed as entirely fabricated: individuals can experience economic insecurity, rejection, loneliness, or uncertainty about their social position. What matters analytically, however, is the process through which such experiences acquire a gendered explanation. A rejected job application does not inherently constitute evidence of discrimination against men; economic insecurity does not inherently demonstrate that feminism has displaced men, and personal dissatisfaction does not inherently establish that women as a group are responsible for men's social position.

Digital communities can nevertheless provide frameworks through which disparate experiences are interpreted as manifestations of a common condition: the individual grievance becomes collective identity; the collective identity becomes an explanation of social change; and feminism can then be positioned as the institution responsible for a perceived loss of status, opportunity, and recognition.

The resulting conflict therefore cannot be understood simply as a disagreement over individual policies. It concerns competing interpretations of inequality itself.

The contradiction becomes sharper when these perceptions are placed alongside material conditions. South Korea continues to exhibit a substantial gender wage gap, while women remain disproportionately exposed to forms of sexual and gender-based violence increasingly exacerbating in degrees²¹¹. Yet antifeminist discourse can reinterpret gender-specific interventions as unfair advantages and structural inequalities as the outcome of individual merit. The language of *gongjeong*, or fairness, is significant precisely because it allows resistance to feminist demands to be articulated without openly defending traditional hierarchy. The claim need not be that women should have fewer rights; it can instead be that women have already received too much.

This is one of the more consequential transformations identified by this research. Patriarchal backlash does not need to reproduce the vocabulary of old patriarchy to still produce – on a bigger scale - some of its effects. It can speak through fairness, merit, individual freedom, male victimhood, and technological neutrality; it can reject the explicit language of hierarchy while reproducing a

²¹¹ OECD, "Gender Wage Gap," *OECD Data*; Human Rights Watch, *"My Life Is Not Your Porn": Digital Sex Crimes in South Korea* (New York: Human Rights Watch, June 16, 2021).

politics in which attempts to correct unequal conditions are interpreted as discrimination against those who perceive themselves as having lost something.

The distinction matters because misogyny does not require every individual participant in an antifeminist community to consciously endorse patriarchal domination. A system of inequality can reproduce itself through claims that appear, at the individual level, to concern only fairness or personal grievances. The political significance lies in the accumulation of these interpretations: when women's demands for equality are repeatedly recoded as attacks on men, structural inequality becomes increasingly difficult to recognize as inequality at all.

The consequences then extend beyond discourse. The same gendered environment in which women are represented as competitors, threats, or beneficiaries of undeserved privilege exists alongside technologies that make their bodies increasingly reproducible as sexual objects. And the connection should not be reduced to a direct causal claim that antifeminist communities produce sexual offenders. Such a claim would exceed the evidence. The more significant relationship is structural. A culture in which women's autonomy is contested, their bodies are repeatedly sexualized, and feminist demands are framed as illegitimate, creates an environment in which technologies capable of appropriating and reproducing women's identities can acquire particularly damaging social meanings.

The demographic consequences make this contradiction even more difficult to overlook. South Korea's declining marriage and fertility rates are frequently discussed as demographic or economic issues of primary importance for the future of the nation, yet the 4B movement demonstrates that reproduction is also a site of political contestation. Research on 4B participants shows that refusal of marriage and childbirth could function as an attempt to imagine a life outside established reproductive expectations²¹²; at the same time, the state has increasingly treated fertility and family formation as matters of urgent national concern. The contradiction is therefore striking: the state seeks greater participation in institutions of reproduction at precisely the moment when some women are questioning whether those institutions provide conditions under which

²¹² Lee, Ji-eun, and Eui-sol Jeong. "The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future with/in a Non-Reproductive Future in Korea." *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 633–644.

they want to participate.

The demographic crisis cannot consequently be entirely separated from the gender relations surrounding it. If marriage, childbirth, and family building are experienced within a wider structure of unequal expectations, sexual violence, economic insecurity, and antagonistic gender politics, then declining participation in those exact institutions cannot simply be understood as an individual refusal to fulfil a social role. It can - and should - also be read as evidence that the terms under which gender, intimacy, and reproduction are organized – especially for women – have now themselves become subject of strong contention.

The historical trajectory examined throughout this research consequently comes full circle. Women who were once incorporated into South Korea's developmental project through their labour and reproductive roles are now increasingly positioned within digital economies as visible, reproducible, and exploitable bodies²¹³. The form of extraction has changed, but gendered extraction has not disappeared: the industrial economy depended upon women's labour and reproductive capacity, while digital economies can derive value from visibility, attention, identities, and data. The body that once served the developmental project as labour and reproductive capacity can now also become a datafied object, capable of being recorded, copied, manipulated, monetized, redistributed, and synthetically reproduced.

Digital sexual violence represents the most extreme manifestation of this transformation because it exposes the body as information. A person's image can be detached from the person, converted into a digital object, and subjected to forms of reproduction over which she has little or no control. A deepfake does not simply falsify an image: it showcases how technological systems can separate representation from the person represented; the victim's physical body can remain entirely absent while her digital identity continues to circulate exclusively as sexual material.

This is also why the regulatory question cannot be separated from the feminist one. The issue is not merely whether states can punish perpetrators after harm occurs; it is whether legal systems can intervene in the infrastructures that make the repeated commodification of women's bodies possible.

²¹³ Seung-sook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

South Korea provides an important case in this respect. Its regulatory trajectory demonstrates successive attempts to expand the legal definition of digital sexual violence, strengthen criminal accountability, develop victim-support mechanisms, facilitate content removal, and address digitally modified sexual imagery. Australia, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy illustrate different combinations of criminalization, removal powers, data protection, and intervention at the level of technological services. At the European Union level, the Digital Services Act moves further upstream by addressing systemic risks arising from platform design, recommender systems, moderation practices, and other features of the digital environment²¹⁴. The AI Act similarly introduces obligations concerning the identification and disclosure of certain AI-generated and manipulated content²¹⁵.

These developments suggest a significant change in what counts as the object of regulation. Earlier approaches concentrated primarily on the perpetrator and the completed offence. Increasingly, regulation now also addresses the platform, the algorithm, the AI system, the reporting mechanism, and the infrastructure through which harmful material can circulate. Responsibility is consequently being displaced, at least partially, from the question of who committed an individual act toward the broader question of which technological systems make that act easier to produce, distribute, reproduce, or monetize.

This shift still remains incomplete. Platform regulation cannot guarantee that every copy of an image disappears, and AI transparency cannot prevent malicious creation. Administrative removal cannot reach every encrypted channel, and criminal law cannot easily regulate infrastructure located outside national jurisdiction. International cooperation remains slow, particularly if in relation to the speed at which digital material can cross borders²¹⁶. It is therefore and environment that continues to possess a structural advantage over institutions designed to govern it: technologies can be copied and adapted almost instantaneously, while legislation requires political recognition, deliberation, implementation, and enforcement.

The central problem is consequently not merely regulatory weakness, but it is

²¹⁴ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act), arts. 34–35.

²¹⁵ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 Laying Down Harmonised Rules on Artificial Intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act), art. 50.

²¹⁶ Sarah Jeon, "Addressing the Use of Overseas Encrypted Platforms in Digital Sexual Violence in South Korea," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 26, no. 2 (2026): 401-435.

also regulatory temporality. If the state waits until a technological practice has produced sufficiently visible victims – socially -, generated public outrage, and acquired political salience, regulation will almost inevitably address an already-established configuration of harm. In this sense, the Nth Room case did not create the need to regulate encrypted exploitation but rather exposed the consequences of regulating after encrypted exploitation had already become socially and technologically organized. The deepfake crisis did not suddenly make sexual objectification technologically possible; it demonstrated how rapidly an existing form of gendered harm could be reconstructed through a new technological architecture²¹⁷.

South Korea's experience therefore provides an important precedent for understanding legislative reaction to digital sexual violence precisely because regulation has developed through successive confrontations with changing technological forms. The significance of the Korean case is not that it represents a complete solution, nor that its regulatory response has eliminated the problem. Its importance lies in the observable process through which criminal law and institutional mechanisms have repeatedly expanded, as new forms of digital sexual violence became visible. The country consequently offers a particularly useful comparative case for examining how legal systems can move from reactive criminalization toward more anticipatory forms of governance.

Preventive governance requires a different starting point. It does not mean predicting every future technology or eliminating technological risk, as that would concretely be impossible. It means recognizing technological infrastructures as political and regulatory objects before they become established mechanisms of harm. Decisions concerning platform architecture, recommender systems, anonymity, data collection, synthetic-content generation, reporting systems, and cross-border access shape the conditions under which power can be exercised long before an individual offence becomes visible.

The importance of the South Korean example is ultimately found in this contradiction. Technological sophistication has not eliminated gender inequality. In some circumstances, it has rather given gendered power new infrastructures

²¹⁷ Yoon-jeong Jeon, "'N-Bönbang' sakön üro pon tijit'öl sömbömjae kyuje hyönhwang gwa kaesön kwaje," [Institutionalization of Digital Sex Exploitation Materials Regulation - Focusing on the 'Telegram n Chatting Room' Issue], *Ewha Yösong gwa Pyönggho* [Ewha Journal of Gender and Law] 13, no. 3 (2021): 1-29.

through which it can be intensified. At the same time, those same infrastructures have enabled unprecedented forms of feminist organization, collective refusal, testimony, and political mobilization. Technology has therefore not produced a single social outcome. It has multiplied the capacity of competing social forces.

But those forces do not necessarily possess equal resources or equal consequences. A feminist counterpublic may produce solidarity and political visibility while a synthetic sexual image can be reproduced thousands of times without the victim's consent. A digital community can give an isolated woman the means to recognize that her experience is shared by others, but the same networked environment can give an isolated grievance a language through which another person comes to understand women collectively as the source of his dissatisfaction. Digital infrastructures amplify both resistance and backlash, but the consequences of that amplification are not symmetrical.

This is the central proposition of *digital gender*. Gender is no longer produced only through families, workplaces, schools, markets, and political institutions. It is also produced through platforms, algorithms, databases, encrypted networks, recommendation systems, and generative models. These infrastructures do not merely reflect society; they help determine what becomes visible, what becomes collective, what becomes profitable, what becomes normalized, and what can be reproduced at scale.

The deeper feminist implication is therefore that technological neutrality is increasingly difficult to defend. An AI system does not invent misogyny, just as a camera did not invent sexual violence, but technologies can alter the cost, scale, permanence, and accessibility of existing forms of power. When the object being reproduced is a woman's sexualized identity, the consequences of that transformation are not socially neutral; the technological capacity to freely manufacture an image of a woman's body without her participation represents a new degree of control over female representation and bodily existence, and therefore a new site against which gendered power can be exercised.

The question is thus no longer whether technology transforms gender relations. It already does. The question is whose bodies are made more vulnerable by that transformation, whose grievances are amplified by it, who has the power to resist it, and whether law arrived before or after technological systems have made new inequalities difficult to reverse.

South Korea's experience makes these stakes unusually visible. Its history demonstrates neither that Confucianism inevitably produces misogyny nor that modernization inevitably produces emancipation. It demonstrates something more unsettling: gendered power can survive the collapse of the institutions through which it was historically organized because it can seamlessly migrate into new ones; patriarchy can be reorganized through markets, political discourse, digital communities, platforms, and artificial intelligence.

The challenge of the digital age is therefore not merely to prevent technology from causing harm. It is to prevent technological progress from becoming a more efficient infrastructure for reproducing inequalities that societies have formally declared obsolete. If the female body can be transformed into data, if data can become sexual imagery, if sexual imagery can become a commodity, and if that commodity can circulate faster than institutions can remove it, then the question of technological progress becomes inseparable from the question of whose freedom that progress actually expands.

The future of digital gender will consequently depend not only on what technologies are capable of producing, but on whether legal and social institutions are capable of deciding, before the next crisis, what they should never be allowed to normalize.

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned **Grieco Contofan Cristiana Rozina**, student ID number **881839**, enrolled at Ca' Foscari in the Master's Degree Programme in **Lingue e Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea**, author of the final paper/degree thesis "**The Gendered Infrastructure of Technology: Sexual Violence, Feminist Resistance, and Digital Conflict in South Korea**", thesis supervisor **Jong-chol An**, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under his/her own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

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That she HAS used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of his/her final paper/degree thesis, in particular:

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