

## **Views of gender equality and feminism do not substantially differ in Korean teenagers**

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According to an OECD report, South Korea's gender inequality index has continuously improved over the past 10 years. Despite the progress the country has achieved, its gender pay gap remains one of the largest in the world, and women are still facing a glass ceiling within the workplace.<sup>1</sup> This has led to the sudden rise of Korean feminism,<sup>2</sup> with 64% of women in their 20s supporting progressive political parties that embrace a more feminist identity.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the anti-feminism movement organized by the younger generation of South Korean men has received worldwide attention with news outlets such as the NY Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, and NHK reporting on the country's backlash against feminism. A book titled, “이대남 [Men in 20s]” by Cheon Gwan-yul and Jeong Han-wool also capitalized on anti-feminist backlash, with 59% of men in their 20s opposing the rise of the feminist movement. In turn, the conservative party has garnered the critical votes of young male voters.<sup>4</sup>

A 2019 CNN article took a deep look into the dark side of the gender equality movement.<sup>5</sup> According to the article, the initiatives the feminist movement pushed for were achieved through portraying Korean men in a discriminatory fashion. While many young men

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/country/korea/thematic-focus/gender-equality-korea-has-come-a-long-way-but-there-is-more-work-to-do-8bb81613/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/05/south-korea-gender-wars/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=47108>

<sup>4</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/23/young-south-korean-men-hate-liberals-feminists/> <sup>5</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/21/asia/korea-angry-young-men-intl-hnk/index.html>

agreed that the older generation of Korean women suffered discrimination due to their gender, the radicalization of the feminist movement and portrayal of young men as misogynistic was met with strong opposition.

This view was also substantiated by a poll in 2018 that asked approximately 1,000 individuals about their opinions on feminism. In the survey, 76% of men in their 20s and 66% of men in their 30s responded that they opposed feminism. Additionally, in another 2018 poll with over 3,000 male respondents, 72% of the respondents viewed the Korean mandatory military service as discriminatory, and 65% stated that women should serve in the military along with their male counterparts for purposes of equality.<sup>6</sup>

Opinions of younger Korean men reflecting anti-feminism are becoming more solidified. A Korea Times survey in 2021 saw 79% of men in their 20s respond they felt they were being severely discriminated against compared to females, a percentage that was twice as large when compared to male respondents in their 50s and 60s.<sup>7</sup>

The main reason that many younger Korean men felt discriminated against was because of the agenda for which the feminist movement advocated. While they acknowledge that pervasive patriarchal values and culture marginalized women decades ago, they do not understand why the younger generation of men must receive the backlash for a world they had no part in creating, especially considering they have not received any benefits or privileges from the system that older Korean men created.<sup>8</sup>

This growing social dissatisfaction is furthered with the adoption of government policies favoring females.<sup>9</sup> Such policies are perceived to be disadvantageous to many young Korean men, who postponed career entry until completing undertaking mandatory military

<sup>6</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/21/asia/korea-angry-young-men-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021061321020001086>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.koreaherald.com/common/newsprint.php?ud=20210506000791>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.womentimes.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=56024>

service, with only males serving roughly two years. As Korean society is transforming, there is little chance that young Korean males will receive any of the privileges that old Korean males have enjoyed.

The sudden rise of radical ideas based on the South Korea of previous generations pushed the idea that men in their 20s were being subject to reverse discrimination. They think they pay an unfair price for what they had no part in creating. Accordingly, they try to find ways to reflect their interests and receive fair treatment.

In order to find a solution, many young Korean men have turned to voting. According to an article from Foreign Policy, 73% of men in their 20s voted for the right-wing People Power Party (PPP) candidate in the 2021 Seoul Mayor election. This support for the conservatives was even higher than that of the traditional support group of the party: 70% of voters over the age of 60 voted for PPP.<sup>10</sup>

Yoon Suk-Yeol, PPP's presidential candidate in 2022, pushed for dismantling the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. His campaign pledge to do so contributed to the increased support of Mr. Yoon among younger Korean men, as the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family was seen as an institution that advanced the women's rights agenda.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the formation of a stronger political identity centered around opposition towards feminism, Korean men in their 20s are considered a segment of politics that holds influence within the conservative party. Conflicts and hatred between them and Korean women in their 20s receive strong attention in Korean society.

An interesting question is what the next generation of Koreans, in particular teenagers,

<sup>10</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/23/young-south-korean-men-hate-liberals-feminists/> <sup>11</sup>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/11/south-korea-gender-equality-anti-feminist-president-yoon-suk-yeol>

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think about gender equality. Do Korean male teenagers hold similar opinions about feminism as Korean men in their 20s? How do they differ from those of Korean female teenagers?

Overall, tension between the sexes over gender equality remains increasingly divided, with the division among those in their 40s-50s being less pronounced than for those in their 30s, and with it being greatest among those in their 20s. If this generational trend persists, will we see even more disparity in gender conflicts among Korean teenagers?

In order to examine Korean teenagers' perspectives on gender equality and feminism, an online survey was administered for Korean secondary school students. The data was gathered by a professional survey company from August 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, through which participants provided blinded responses, which ensures the anonymity of responses. One hundred sixty secondary school students (80 males and 80 females), aged 14 to 19 in South Korea, took part in the survey. The majority of participants were high school students (74%), with a little over a quarter (26%) of the participants at the middle school level. Moreover, among the participants, 20% were from Seoul, 21% from Kyung-gi Province, 34% from five major metropolitan cities, and 25% from other areas. Participants used a 5-point Likert scale - ranging from "1" strongly agree to "5" strongly disagree - to express their opinions. An overwhelming majority of Korean teens (94% males, 95% females) agree that women should have equal rights with men. In turn, 35% of male teenagers (versus 25% of female teenagers) say women and men are indeed equal in Korea. The survey also finds that men (35%) and women (49%) disagree about the current state of gender equality in Korea. While only 1% of

males and 10% of females somewhat agree with the statement that “I am a feminist,” most Korean teenagers think that they are not feminists. However, the degree to which male teens do not identify themselves as a feminist (89%) was higher than for females (69%).

About half of male teens (53%) agree misogyny against women is a societal problem, 5

compared with 60% female teens. Interestingly, over three-quarters of male teens (76%) agree that misandry is a societal problem, compared with 49% of women in their teens. Male teenagers were less likely than female teenagers (9% vs. 21%) to say that many social disadvantages exist for females, especially in school. However, male teenagers were more likely than female teenagers (33% vs. 15%) to agree that many social disadvantages exist for males, especially in school.

Gender differences are muted when it comes to teenagers’ views about relationships between partners. Both male (86%) and female (85%) teenagers report that men and women should pay equal contributions for their share of a first date. Similarly, male teenagers (81%) are nearly as likely as female teenagers (85%) to say that both the bride and groom are equally responsible for paying for wedding expenses. Additionally, 75% of male teenagers and 90% of female teenagers say that wives and husbands should have equal household responsibilities. The survey also found that both male and female teenagers (70% vs. 86%) agree that both husbands and wives should hold equal financial responsibilities, as well as equally sharing child care responsibilities (66% vs. 86%).

As for conscription, about one in two males (54%) say both men and women should be subject to mandatory military service; women (30%) are less likely to agree. However, men (70%) and women (70%) offer similar views on preferential treatments in employment for individuals who have previously served in the military.

For the following statements, however, some interesting disparities were observed.

*Women in Korea are especially at a disadvantage.* Only 4% of male teenagers agree with this statement compared with 21% of female teenagers. A majority of male teenagers (83%) are also more likely to disagree that women in Korea are especially at a disadvantage (compared with 53% of female teenagers).

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*There continues to be a wide difference in views of how likely women are to face the barriers of a glass ceiling in the workplace.* About half of female teenagers (53%) say they agree that women are likely to face such workplace barriers. By comparison, just 11% of men say so. Female teenagers (15%) are considerably less likely than their male counterparts (46%) to say the glass ceiling does not exist in the workplace.

*Men should contribute more to dating expenses.* A vast majority of men (78%) and 87% of women say they disagree with the statement. Similarly, about 81% of men and 85% of women do not agree that future husbands should pay more for marriage expenses.

*Women should perform more household duties after marriage.* In their attitudes about the changing gender roles of men and women in marriage, Korean female teenagers were more likely to disagree (95%) than male teenagers (68%) to this statement. Similarly, female teenagers (91%) are much more likely than male teenagers (71%) to say that women should assume more responsibility for childcare than men. Also, while more than half of male teenagers (58%) disagree with the notion that men should have more financial responsibility, 76% of female teenagers disagree.

*Only men should do mandatory military service.* The present survey found that 68% of men and 50% of women said they disagree with the statement. For many male teenagers, it is very

clear that men agree on receiving bonus points for completing the military service. Yet this does not hold true for everyone, with 35% not being agreeable to completing the public service.

Predictably, men and women have different perspectives on gender equality and feminism, but these differences are not evident on all issues but on a relatively narrow set of

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issues. For example, while the majority of young men (65%) in their 20s in the 2018 poll favored compulsory military service for women, the latest poll of male teenagers shows only 30% support military conscription for women. These findings largely deflect patterns from previous generations on gender equality and feminism.