Feminism in South Korea: How Civil Society, Domestic Institutions, and International Law Advance Women's Rights

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Gender inequality and women's rights are a problematized issue in South Korea as the country that ranks 102 on the Global Gender Gap report. Feminism has become synonymous with radical misandry, discrediting the nature of the women's rights movement. Despite previous scholarship on women's rights, not many focus on the case study of South Korea or its determinants. This paper seeks to ask what determines and advances women's rights in 21st century South Korea? Through content analysis, primary source analysis, and scholarly evidence, I find that the media spreads awareness and sets the political agenda on gender inequality, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family advocate for policies to advance women's rights, and international law and human rights organizations promote closing the gender gap. This three-level analysis are determinants of women's rights in South Korea today.

K-pop singer Naeun, from popular girl group APink, was caught in a storm of backlash from dedicated fans back in 2018 for posting a photo of her to Instagram.[1] The culprit? Her phone case in the photo that said, "Girls can do anything." A seemingly harmless phone case that has typical messaging seen in marketing today caused an uproar for allegedly promoting feminist ideals. Naeun then deleted the post, and her agency rejected the feminist undertones by stating that the case was a gift from French fashion label, Zadig & Voltaire, whom she recently completed a photo shoot with. This is not an isolated incident; female celebrities often receive backlash for representing anything remotely feminist. In South Korea, feminism – that is the belief in gender equality across sociopolitical and economic spheres – has a deeply negative connotation. The ideology has become synonymous with radical misandry where women are reluctant to call themselves feminists, and men feel victimized by it, leading to a rise in anti-feminist sentiment across the country.

The Republic of Korea is a free democracy with one of the world's most advanced and largest economies, yet it ranked 102 out of 156 countries in terms of gender parity and equality

[1] Tamar Herman, "Female K-Pop Stars Face Criticism for Seemingly Feminist Behavior," *Billboard* (blog), March 26, 2018, https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/female-k-pop-stars-face-criticism-feminist-behavior-8257777/.

on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report in 2021.[2] Such a low rating for a country of this political and economic caliber combined with tense political discourse around gender equality begs the question: what determines and advances women's rights in 21st century South Korea? This paper conducts a case study on the Republic of Korea to propose the determinants of women's rights domestically using scholarly evidence, qualitative analytic work on primary sources, and a content analysis of newspaper articles. I use three arguments that simultaneously work together to advance women's rights in the country: one, civil society through the media provide coverage on women's rights and set the political agenda; two, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family as a domestic institution proposes, advocates, and reforms policies towards women's rights; and three, international law and human rights organizations put pressure on Korea by monitoring and promoting women's rights. This represents a three-level analysis where progress is made possible by utilizing civil society, domestic institutions, and human rights.

What follows is a background on women's rights throughout Korea's history and why the issue is so controversial today. Then, the literature review overviews the scholarly work done on women's rights. After that, the theory, methodology, and analysis section explain how the three levels work to advance women's rights in Korea. I propose a new framework that combines previous work across domestic and international determinants of women's rights, opting for a simultaneous three level analysis that focuses solely on the unique case of South Korea. This framework can also be helpful when analyzing other social movements within Korea as they would be utilizing the same system to advance their rights of choice.

[2] "Global Gender Gap Report 2021," World Economic Forum, March 30, 2021, 241, https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/.

Background

Korea has a long history of Neo-Confucian tradition under the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) that reorganized society under hierarchal economic stratification and strict gender roles limiting women's freedom.[3] It was not until the late 19th century with the introduction of Christianity that the first missionary women's schools were established, giving women the opportunity to receive an education – although it was mostly used to teach feminine virtues and domestic housework.[4] Then, under Japanese colonialism (1910-1945), women began to take the role of patriotic wives and mothers who were to participate in nation-building by birthing and rearing sons that would serve the national liberation effort.[5] Gradually, restrictive gender norms gave way to modernization and industrialization over the 20th century, allowing women the chance to pursue an education, a job, and free (unarranged) love.

Furthermore, the mid to late 20th century saw South Korea grow from the ashes of the Korean War and widespread poverty into a rapidly industrialized nation leading in heavy industry and electronic exports. The authoritarian leadership brought social unrest that culminated in the democratic *minjung* movement and gave way to the country's first free presidential election in 1987.[6] The birth of a civil society following democratization allowed for new political space to advocate for more rights. After this, the modern women's movement that began in the 1970s grew in scope and activism. The main issues facing the movement then and today include tackling sexual violence, discriminatory employment, patriarchal family systems,

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[3] Bruce Cumings, "The Virtues," in *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), https://www.overdrive.com/media/2307686/koreas-place-in-the-sun.
[4] Sonya M. Kim, "Women, Gender, and Social Change in Colonial Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (London: Routledge, 2016), 143.
[5] Kim, 142.
[6] Bruce Cumings, "The Virtues, II: The Democratic Movement, 1960 - Present," in *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), https://www.overdrive.com/media/2307686/koreas-place-in-the-sun.

and sexist cultural norms. These issues are grounded in Korea's history and norms leftover from the Joseon dynasty, Japanese colonialism, and authoritarian governments where even the family register system allowed only male head of households and patrilineal inheritance up until it was abolished in 2005.[7]

In recent years, feminism and women's rights have become controversial among young Korean men. While older generations may be likened to the role of a "patriarch," younger Korean men may see themselves as victims of feminism who are being discriminated by policies largely meant to close the gender gap, argues S. Nathan Park on Foreign Policy.[8] "I have never called for women to be put at a disadvantage," said leader of the conservative ruling People Power Party, Lee Jun-Seok, in a 2021 televised debate.[9] "All I said was that these benefits are excessive, they amount to reverse discrimination, and should be amended, now that times have changed."[10] Some young Korean men are disgruntled by the harsh competition to get into top colleges and corporations in an economy with high youth unemployment and high home prices.[11] They scapegoat feminism as the cause for giving unfair advantages to women through government programs, incentivizing women in the workforce, and compulsory conscription that puts men two years behind women their age in pursuing opportunity.[12] Cheon Gwan-yul and Jeong Han-wool argue that these men believe in a meritocracy through "decontextualized fairness" where they fail to see the distinction behind internal determinants, like motivation, and

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[7] Kyungja Jung, *Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Women's Movement against Sexual Violence* (London: Routledge, 2013), 81, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315887289.
[8] S. Nathan Park, "Why So Many Young Men in South Korea Hate Feminism," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed June 27, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/23/young-south-korean-men-hate-liberals-feminists/.
[9] Anthony Kuhn, "As South Koreans Go to the Polls, a Backlash against Feminism Has Become Political," *NPR*, March 8, 2022, sec. Asia, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085111819/as-south-koreans-go-to-the-polls-a-backlash-against-feminism-has-become-politica.
[10] Kuhn.
[11] Kuhn.
[12] Jake Kwon CNN, "Why South Korea's Young Men Are Angry," CNN, accessed June 28, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/21/asia/korea-angry-young-men-intl-hnk/index.html.

external determinants, like socioeconomic class and structural discrimination.[13] Thus, many do not see a need for feminism where 58.6% of Korean men in their 20s said they strongly oppose it.[14]

What furthers the negative connotation that feminism receives in South Korea is the existence of misandrist websites like Megalia and Womad that aim to combat misogyny with an online forum for women to express similar derogatory comments toward men.[15] Womad explicitly does not classify its members as feminist, however.[16] Nonetheless, these websites provide fuel for anti-feminist men to justify their beliefs that feminism is inherently misandrist, jeopardizing the legitimacy of women's movements for gender equality. As a result, many Korean women, despite being supporters of women's rights, will rarely ever call themselves feminists because they fear being associated with misandry. "I don't want to be called a feminist here in Korea. Maybe I'd say I'm a feminist if I wasn't in Korea, but there's a certain stereotype and stigma that comes with the title here," said Sira Park in Seoul.[17] Feminism is thus highly controversial in Korea today, leading to a rising tide of anti-feminist sentiment and politicians capitalizing on it with promises to abolish the country's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, which current President Yoon Suk-yeol did during his campaign.[18] The nation's political atmosphere is polarizing, discouraging the advocacy of women's rights and increasing the salience of this research paper at this time.

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[13] Park, "Why So Many Young Men in South Korea Hate Feminism."
[14] Park.
[15] Spencer Hines and Jay Song, "How Feminism Became a Dirty Word in South Korea," The Diplomat, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-feminism-became-a-dirty-word-in-south-korea/.
[16] Hines and Song.
[17] Sunny Lee, "Why Korean Women Are Hesitant To Label Themselves Feminists," *Vice* (blog), February 17, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en/article/v74zd3/korean-women-feminists.
[18] Hyonhee Shin, "South Korea President-Elect's Pledge to Shutter Gender Ministry Stirs Debate | Reuters," Reuters, March 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skorea-president-elects-pledge-shutter-gender-ministry-stirs-debate-2022-03-18/.

Literature on Women's Rights

The research on women's rights and what advances their progress toward gender equality is split among various perspectives divided among these five main schools of thought: sociocultural factors, economics, domestic institutions and policy, international institutions and policy, regional case studies, or multiple of these at the same time. Surveying this literature aids the discussion of South Korea as a regional case study in relation to avenues of change available to advance women's rights.

Social and cultural factors is one important theme that arises from the literature on women's rights as it affects everything from values, traditions, norms, and religious beliefs widely held in a population to demographics like class, race, education levels, and urban versus rural differences. Uddin (2017), for example, examines how Islamic beliefs and subsequent Islamic law, or *sharia*, is commonly seen in conflict with women's rights, but Uddin argues that other expansive interpretations could offer a vehicle for advancing women's rights.[19] Other authors like Fredman (2018) argue for a substantive approach to achieving educational parity that includes initiatives like facilitating participation and addressing stigma as a means for achieving gender equality.[20] These articles provide in depth analysis to specific sociocultural factors that can obstruct the progression of women's rights, but they fail to be grounded in the unique circumstances that different societies have when they take a generalized approach to examining an issue. Therefore, my paper is focusing on South Korean society and culture to understand the cultural nuances that relate to women's rights.

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[19] Asma T. Uddin, "Women's Rights in Islamic Law: The Immutable and the Mutable," Islam and Human Rights (Atlantic Council, 2017), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03717.8.

[20] Sandra Fredman, "Women and Education: The Right to Substantive Equality," in *Human Rights and Equality in Education*, 1st ed., Comparative Perspectives on the Right to Education for Minorities and Disadvantaged Groups (Bristol University Press, 2018), 99–110, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2867w4.11.

Economic issues are often another barrier to the advancement of women's rights by making the financial autonomy and independence of women difficult. These issues can range from property rights and female leadership positions to the wage gap and workforce participation after pregnancy. Fernandez (2013) looks at the former and models how economic development in countries led to the progression of women's rights by increasing their property rights.[21] Additionally, Sabharwal examines women's struggle to attain high level job positions, commonly known as the glass ceiling, and how they tend to be promoted when companies are at the highest risk of failure, setting them up for failure, also known as the glass cliff.[22] The literature on economic issues, including these two articles, tends to focus most on data from Western industrialized nations with less research done on how economic policies may affect non-Western and/or non-industrialized nations. My paper will thus address this gap with the focus on South Korea as an East Asian country that has recently rapidly industrialized.

When looking at avenues of change for women's rights, literature divides between domestic and international institutions and policies. Domestic institutions and policies include women's rights legislation and government departments or ministries that focus on gender. Castaño (2019) analyzes how the institutionalization of women's movements affects the symbolic and substantive realities of women's rights legislation using the example of Bolivia.[23] On the other hand, within international institutions and policies, there are treaties, summits, conferences, and international bodies like the United Nations. One predominant lens in the field is the focus on human rights through international law: across four papers, Powell (2005), Arat

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[21] Raquel Fernández, "Women's Rights and Development," *Journal of Economic Growth* 19, no. 1 (2014): 37–80.
[22] Meghna Sabharwal, "From Glass Ceiling to Glass Cliff: Women in Senior Executive Service," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART* 25, no. 2 (2015): 399–426.
[23] Pablo Castaño, "Women's Movements Institutionalization and Impact on Policy. The Case of the Bolivian Movement of Domestic Workers," *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 12, no. 1 (July 1, 2019): 168–96, https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v12i1p168.

(2015), Cornwall and Molyneux (2006), and Cook (1994) all address the rise of international human rights law and the rights-based approach to redress gender injustices, questioning and challenging its advantages and disadvantages in different regions of the world.[24] By narrowing in on international law, their scope is limited from addressing the unique sociopolitical context that exists in each country, which is detrimental to a situational study of women's rights in the specific country that my paper will conduct.

In regional case studies, scholars addressed women's rights with respect to a country or region. Fincher (2013) does this by looking at the status of women's rights in China.[25] Other scholars take an even narrower approach by examining one of the other main schools of thought, like a sociocultural factor, with respect to a certain place (as opposed to examining all women's rights there). For example, Tajali (2015) situates their research in Turkey and Iran's struggle with female political representation, explaining how Turkish women advocate for it with human rights discourses while Iranian women work within religious justifications to appeal to elites.[26] This article uses two countries and political representation to address women's rights, showing how different groups of women adapt to their sociopolitical circumstances, but the cultural context is too different from the context of South Korea, a Confucian Christian-Buddhist nation. On the other hand, Jung (2014) exemplifies how Korean feminists successfully addressed several

[24] Marie Powell, "A Rights-Based Approach to Gender Equality and Women's Rights," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement* 26, no. sup1 (January 2005): 605–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2005.9669101; Zehra F. Kabasakal Arat, "Feminisms, Women's Rights, and the UN: Would Achieving Gender Equality Empower Women?," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 4 (November 2015): 674–89, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000386; Andrea Cornwall and Maxine Molyneux, "The Politics of Rights: Dilemmas for Feminist Praxis: An Introduction," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 7 (2006): 1175–91; Rebecca J. Cook, "Women's International Human Rights Law: The Way Forward," in *Human Rights of Women*, ed. Rebecca J. Cook, National and International Perspectives (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 3–36, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhxkd.5.

[25] Leta Hong Fincher, "Women's Rights at Risk," *Dissent* 60, no. 2 (2013): 36–40, https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2013.0040.

[26] Mona Tajali, "Islamic Women's Groups and the Quest for Political Representation in Turkey and Iran," *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (2015): 563–81.

sexual violence issues in her book, *Practicing Feminism in South Korea*: *The Women's Movement against Sexual Violence.*[27] This literature, however, has a narrow scope on the women's movement by focusing specifically on sexual violence and the relationship between grassroots organizations and the law.

Continuing with this, much of the literature on South Korea focuses on state institutionalization and adoption of policies advocated by their grassroots women's movements. Suh and Park (2014), use the example of the Korea Women's Hot Line to show how the organization was able to inform women about the human rights they had against gender violence in the 1970s, popularize the notion that gender violence is a manifestation of state violence under 1980s authoritarianism, and apply the gender frame to push for women's rights policies at the legislative level in 1990s post-democratization.[28] The article represents how Korean women's movements were able to succeed in implementing laws for women's issues through this process. However, it is limited to the example of the hot line during a turbulent time in Korean history when it was undergoing the *minjung* movement, which may not be fully applicable in today's world.

Furthermore, Suh, Oh, and Choi (2011) discuss how the movement was institutionalized in Korean politics through the cooperation of women's organizations and the top-down changes made at the government level with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and prominent female legislators.[29] Similarly, a pivotal piece of scholarship that goes more in depth on this is

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[27] Jung, *Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Women's Movement against Sexual Violence*.
[28] Doowon Suh and Inn Hea Park, "Framing Dynamics of South Korean Women's Movements, 1970s–90s: Global Influences, State Responses, and Interorganizational Networks," *Journal of Korean Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 327–56, https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2014.0016.
[29] Chan S. Suh, Eun Sil Oh, and Yoon S. Choi, "The Institutionalization of the Women's Movement and Gender Legislation," in *South Korean Social Movements: From Democracy to Civil Society* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 151–70, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=692974.

The Korean Women's Movement and the State by Seung-kyung Kim. The book demonstrates how key feminist legislation was passed in the progressive 2000s by analyzing the relationship between the umbrella organization, Korean Women's Association United, and the MOGEF.[30] These literatures provide excellent research for the process between grassroots mobilization to law, but they are also limited to that relationship without consideration to international factors (globalization) and technology as an amplifier and challenge to women's issues in recent years. I will go more in depth with the Korean women's rights literature in my analysis section as I will be using part of this literature to support my three-level argument.

This paper will address the gaps found in the literature by considering not just one avenue of change (civil society, legislation, or international law), but how all three work together to advance women's rights in modern day South Korea. Additionally, the use of content analysis to break down the discussion of women's issues in newspapers will inform my argument of the salience and priority of certain issues over others.

Theory

Previous scholarship provides the groundwork for understanding how rights arise from civil society, domestic institutions, and human rights organizations. Specifically, mobilization theories help advance my argument because activism from the women's movement of Korea lead to the advancement of women's rights at the social and institutional level. I ground my thesis on resource mobilization theory to support this.

Resource mobilization theory was founded in 1977 by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald's paper, *Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory*, setting out to establish a

[30] Seung-kyung Kim and Kyounghee Kim, *The Korean Women's Movement and the State: Bargaining for Change* (London: Routledge, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315818740.

new way of thinking about social movements' growth and decline.[31] This novel theory proposed that a social movement's success is based on their ability to manage and effectively utilize resources for mobilization. Bob Edwards, along with McCarthy, then expanded on this in *Resources and Social Movement Mobilization,* stating that, "The concept of resources is indispensable in any analysis of power and conflict relations," where they differentiated among moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material resources as key to the theory.[32] In my paper, I prioritize external or large-scale moral and social-organizational resources as a strategic method of progressing women's rights in South Korea rather than the internal specifics of the movement more commonly noted in cultural, human, and material resources.

Moral resources are those that legitimize and provide public support for a movement; they also tend to be come from an external source that gives it to the movement.[33] This can include awards, celebrity endorsement, or celebrity expression of solidarity with a movement. I use moral resources to support the first part of my thesis where the media helps legitimize, set the agenda, and garner support for a movement by giving it coverage to the mass public. Additionally, social-organizational resources are the infrastructures, networks, and organizations that aid the movement's growth, including recruitment of volunteers or collaborating with other organizations and sharing resources.[34] This is where the second and third part of my thesis come in. Domestic institutions through the government can be one network that the movement can accrue allies to pass favorable policies to the movement. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family is one example of this: it is the government ministry specifically aligned with the mission

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[31] John D. McCarthy and Zald N. Mayer, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1212–41.
[32] Bob Edwards and John D. McCarthy, "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 125–28, https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch6.
[33] Edwards and McCarthy, 125.
[34] Edwards and McCarthy, 127.

of gender equality. Recruiting allied politicians across branches of government that would vote or advocate for women's rights is another example. Lastly, international law, including human rights organizations that promote it, are allied organizations that can grow the women's rights movement in a country and pressure domestic governments to pass favorable policies. Thus, social-organizational resources can provide the institutional framework for gender equality within the women's movement. I base my thesis on these two categories of resources from resource mobilization theory to establish how the media, domestic institutions, and international law are determinants of women's rights in South Korea.

Methodology

I propose a framework for understanding how women's rights progress in South Korea through English-sourced material. For the content analysis, I examined 40 articles from Korean newspapers that mention women's rights to survey what the media are saying about it and how that can pressure government officials to tackle it. I sourced articles from four major digital English-language South Korean newspapers or versions of digital Korean newspapers in English: *The Korea Times, The Korea Herald, Korea JoongAng Daily,* and *The Chosun Ilbo*. I selected articles I could find within the last year in order to focus on the 2022 presidential election where feminism and women's rights were a prominent talking point among candidates and received a lot of media coverage. I also focused on this year because I have limited exposure to sampling techniques and content analysis. I was learning the tools to conduct content analysis as I was researching for the paper, so extending the number of articles to previous years would have not been feasible given the time limitations. Furthermore, I followed a simple random sampling technique on which I will elaborate further below.

I found these articles by searching for those that mentioned “women,” “women’s rights,” “women’s movement,” “gender,” “sex,” and/or “feminism” in the newspaper’s search bar. Additionally, I checked that these articles were domestic news in relation to South Korea rather than an international issue, and that they were sufficiently relevant to the subject of women’s rights in order to use them. For *The Korea Times* and *The Korea Herald*, there were about 40 articles each while *Korea JoongAng Daily* and *The Chosun Ilbo* had about 15 articles each. I wanted to collect an equal number of articles from each paper to represent the Korean (digital English-language) media more accurately without over-representing one paper, so I randomized and collected ten articles from each one. Once I gathered these articles, I used the content analysis form attached in *Appendix A* to analyze them according to various categories that relate to women’s rights and the media’s role is relaying this message. From this data, I created line and bar graphs that displayed the frequency of articles and the most prominent themes within women’s rights that the articles talked about, shown in *Figure 1* and *2*.

As for the qualitative analysis, I sourced scholarly work on women’s rights in South Korea written in English by Korean authors. I used the data they presented on women’s rights to support my own three arguments about the progression of women’s rights in South Korea. Additionally, I used primary sources put out by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in their website, in the form of reports, to analyze how CEDAW has pressured Korea to implement women’s rights policies in the country. These three methods, content analysis, scholarly evidence, and primary source analysis, helped me come up with my three arguments that civil society, domestic institutions, and international law all play a stake in pushing forward women’s rights in South Korea.

Analysis

In this section, I will focus on analyzing the media data, primary sources, and scholarly evidence to further that civil society through the media, domestic institutions and the government, and international law and human rights are part of mobilization efforts that help advance women's rights in South Korea. I found that the media and news act as communication channels to both the masses and politicians, informing public opinion and setting the political agenda for salient issues. At the same time, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family as a domestic institution in government proposes and advocates for policies in favor of women's rights. And lastly, human rights organizations upholding international law are promoting, advocating, and monitoring women's rights in Korea.

Media coverage on women's rights in South Korea functions to inform the people and set the political agenda on gender inequalities. This is grounded on two premises: first, that there is coverage of the issue, and second, coverage leads to change. Hilgartner and Bosk's public arenas model provides support for the first premise.[35] Media attention, especially favorable attention, is a scarce moral resource for a movement or issue to attain. Media constructs social problems by giving it attention, and the scope of the problem is "measured by the amount of attention devoted to it in these arenas."[36] Furthermore, the media has a "carrying capacity" for the number of social problems it can provide coverage for during a certain period, which is too limited to account for all the potential problems it can construct.[37] Thus, social problems must compete to gain media coverage.[38] Hilgartner and Bosk's public arenas model establishes that media coverage is finite

[35] Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk, "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 1 (July 1988): 53–78, https://doi.org/10.1086/228951.
[36] Hilgartner and Bosk, 70.
[37] Hilgartner and Bosk, 70.
[38] Hilgartner and Bosk, 70.

and competitive, thus consistent and ample coverage of a social problem demonstrates that the media found it worthy enough to promote on its channels against all other issues.

To show that there is media attention on Korean women's rights, I introduce my content analysis where I analyzed 40 digital English-language Korean newspapers from January to early August of 2022. *Figure 1* shows the frequency of articles written regarding feminism or women's rights during 2022, cutting off at early August when this paper finished collecting data. The graph shows consistent coverage within my relatively small sample size of 40 articles across four papers throughout the eight-month period. There is a notable spike in articles in March, aligning with the South Korean presidential elections that were held on March 9th, 2022. Additionally, *Figure 2* shows the frequency of articles written regarding an issue related to feminism. The graph reveals what were the most salient feminist topics during this period.

Figure 1

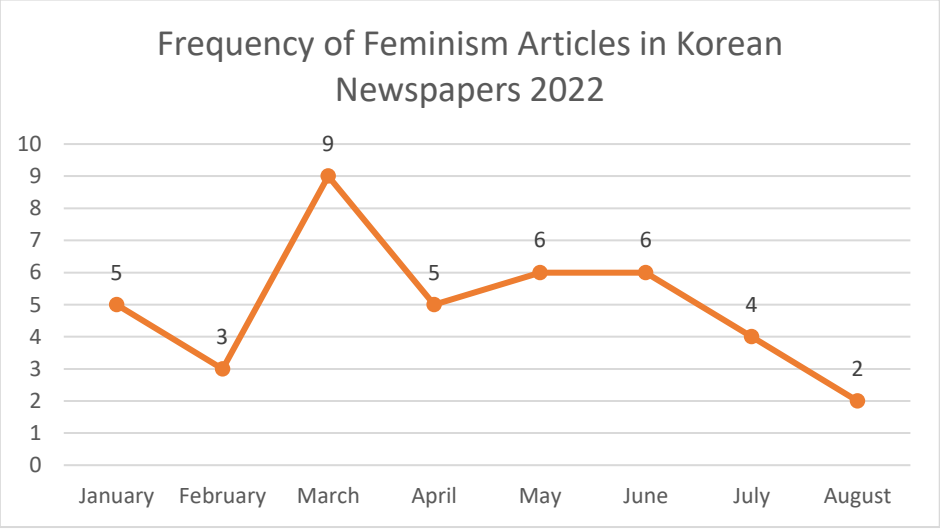

Figure 2

These two graphs not only show that there is coverage on women's rights in Korea during 2022, but that there is consistent and ample coverage of it through multiple articles published a month and a variety of issues represented. Particularly, gender equality and gender conflict as it related to the 2022 election were the most salient issues. Newspapers covered gender issues more during March as the "gender war" became a prominent talking point during the presidential election where the liberal Democratic Party's Lee Jae-myung and the conservative People Power Party's Yoon Suk-yeol aligned themselves accordingly with or against feminist ideals. As such, this illustrates how journalists chose to cover women's rights, with their limited carrying capacity, over many others because they deemed the issue news-worthy and important. This is the first premise on the availability of coverage.

While my content analysis is recent and cannot demonstrate the effects of 2022 media coverage on future changes in women's rights, scholarship reveals that media does lead to progress on a social issue. Research shows that the media sets the political agenda and policy process, and it can influence public opinion, debate, and understanding of a social problem

through its coverage.[39] When an issue is talked about in the news, people became more aware, and the issue can gain new supporters and traction. Politicians may also pay more attention to the issue, and legislation may be drafted to deal with the problem. Through my research, employment gaps, family responsibilities, sexual violence, and general gender discrimination and inequality are all issues that are pertinent to South Korean society. For example, in a *Korea JoongAng Daily* national column article, Jin-ho Jeong reports on Korea's gender employment gaps, citing studies and quoting economic professors about the differential state of Korean women in the work force.[40] Articles like these bring gender disparities to the forefront of public awareness and spark a dialogue about these problems.

During the presidential election campaigns, coverage showed how politicians pay attention to these issues as seen by how much they talked and capitalized on gender tensions with promises to act if they were elected. While the then-candidate Yoon Suk-yeol promised to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family because it is unnecessary today, Lee Jae-myung doubled down on becoming a feminist president and promised expanded policies to close the gender gap across different sectors of society.[41] This reveals how tuned in politicians are to media coverage and public sentiment that they make gender issues part of their campaign and legislative agenda, paving the way for institutional change. Thus, the news and media, as part of civil society, are instruments in informing the public and setting the political agenda on women's rights.

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[39] Kenneth T. Andrews and Neal Caren, "Making the News: Movement Organizations, Media Attention, and the Public Agenda," *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 6 (December 2010): 842, https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122410386689.

[40] Jin-ho Jeong, "Maternity Leave Worsens Korea's Already Wide Gender Wage Gap," Korea JoongAng Daily, n.d., https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/06/16/business/economy/Korea-wages-gender-wage-gap/20220616195652266.html.

[41] Yoonjung Seo and Julia Hollingsworth CNN, "How Feminism Became a Hot Topic in South Korea's Presidential Election," CNN, n.d., https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/08/asia/south-korea-election-young-people-intl-hnk-dst/index.html.

The second level of analysis involves the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family as a domestic institution where they propose and advocate for policies that benefit women and close the gender gap as a social-organizational resource. The MOGEF was formed in 2001 as the Ministry of Gender Equality after two major women's organizations, United Korean Women's Association and Korean National Council of Women, and their 64 affiliated subgroups came together to push for a ministry dedicated to women's rights.[42] It was then expanded to include childcare policies as the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2005.[43]

The success of the MOGEF lies in the creation of an institutional space for women's rights that were previously handled under various ministries and committees. First, women's rights activists were hired to the MOGEF, including the first minister Han Myung-sook, one of Korea's most prominent women's rights activists, ensuring the expertise necessary regarding gender inequality was represented in the government.[44] Additionally, women's organizations were able to directly influence decision-making in the government through these formal privileged networks, maintaining communication between grassroots direct action and the legislative process. Second, the ministry has its own independent Gender Equality Committee in the National Assembly that allows ministry officials to participate in committee meetings and provide their expertise for the gender-relevant bill on hand when other ministries are not always afforded this opportunity.[45] Through this committee channel, the ministry can draft, propose, and recommend bills pertaining to women's rights to the National Assembly. They can also persuade legislators to vote in favor of their bill.

[42] Suh, Oh, and Choi, "The Institutionalization of the Women's Movement and Gender Legislation," 156.
[43] Suh, Oh, and Choi, 156.
[44] Suh, Oh, and Choi, 159.
[45] Suh, Oh, and Choi, 161.

Between 1998 and 2008, proposed gender-relevant bills increased tenfold as a result of the creation of MOGEF.[46] Within these bills are the landmark laws passed that made substantial progress on gender equality: *Abolition of Patriarchal Family Register System Act, Anti-Prostitution Act,* and *Special Act against Sexual Violence*.[47] This shows just how much more effective the creation of a ministry aided the progression of women's rights in Korea by having an insider in the government to advocate for the movement's ideals. The MOGEF is thus the most significant social-organizational resource available at the government level for the women's movement. It provides the infrastructure and networks necessary for grassroots activists to promote their agenda within the government by institutionalizing the movement. The ministry has been a pivotal institution that has proved its ability to advocate on behalf of women's rights, even if its future is unknown under the new president.

The third level of analysis includes international law that human rights organizations uphold, providing pressure on the Korean government by monitoring and promoting women's rights. Rubenstein argues that international human rights organizations are useful in the promotion of rights because they can collaborate with local organizations to achieve a human rights standard, they can advocate for resources from donors when promoting rights, and most importantly, they can monitor compliance in states to fulfill human rights obligations.[48] They act as watchdogs, similar to the media, checking for human rights compliance, pressuring states if they find something wrong. One method of pressuring is naming and shaming where they publicize and expose human rights violations, building up a media storm to get public opinion on

[46] Suh, Oh, and Choi, 161.
[47] Suh, Oh, and Choi, 159.
[48] Leonard S Rubenstein, "How International Human Rights Organizations Can Advance Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: A Response to Kenneth Roth," *Human Rights Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2004): 845–65, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2004.0056.

their side and force the actor to comply.[49] These methods can be used to expose gender injustices and promote gender equality as a human right.

Human rights organizations advance gender equality in Korea under two premises: first, that pressure from these organizations is successful in changing a state's behavior, and second, that this pressure is beneficial in promoting women's rights. The world's human rights movement began in the 1990s with the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights and the 1995 International Conference on Women.[50] The former conference stressed the importance of national human rights institutions to monitor and promote human rights in their own country.[51] This led to the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission in 2001 after the Korean government caved in to international pressure from Amnesty International criticizing their draft human rights law for being too weak.[52] It is one example of pressure from international organizations successfully pressuring a state to comply with human rights.

The NHRC was thus established as a large independent government body with over 200 staff members and no interference from other government bodies.[53] They deal with human rights violations and discrimination complaints, including that of gender.[54] This demonstrates the level of importance and trust given to the NHRC to be so independent rather than allowing other government branches to diminish its power. Furthermore, their correctional recommendations are accepted roughly 95% of the time for human rights violations, including one of their recommendations on a law about a person's right to refuse mandatory military service that was

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[49] Rubenstein, 847.
[50] Jeong-Woo Koo, "Origins of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea," in *South Korean Social Movements: From Democracy to Civil Society* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 81, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=692974.
[51] Koo, 83.
[52] Koo, 83.
[53] Koo, 80.
[54] Koo, 81.

publicized by the media, and the National Assembly responded by changing the draft.[55] Only 5% of their recommendations are not accepted, which is an extremely low number for human rights organizations that are typically powerless without the ability to enforce their policies. Despite only being able to make recommendations, they are still followed an overwhelming majority of the time, revealing the high level of respect they have in Korean society. They also have a strong ability to influence public opinion by utilizing the media as the National Assembly fixed the draft. All of this backs the first premise that pressure from the NHRC and other organizations are successful in changing a state's behavior.

The second premise is that this pressure is beneficial in promoting women's rights, which the case of CEDAW exemplifies this through MOGEF periodic reports on its compliance. CEDAW is the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations in 1979.[56] It is the most significant human rights treaty for women that obligates states to eliminate gender discrimination, ensure women's advancement, and allow CEDAW to inspect states' efforts to implement the treaty.[57] The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family has published eight periodic reports and a follow-up to demonstrate its compliance with CEDAW as a state party to the convention.[58] The third periodic report, published in 1995, states in its first paragraph:

> The Republic of Korea, being a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, herewith submits its third report for the

[55] Koo, 80.
[56] "OHCHR | Introduction to the Committee," OHCHR, n.d., https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw/introduction-committee.
[57] "OHCHR | Introduction to the Committee."
[58] Ministry of Gender Equality & Family Republic of Korea, "National Report > Laws & Data > Ministry of Gender Equality and Family," Ministry of Gender Equality & Family Republic of Korea, accessed August 16, 2022, http://www.mogef.go.kr/eng/lw/eng_lw_f001.do.

> consideration of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in accordance with Article 18 of the said convention.[59]

This is one example of the reports that demonstrate South Korea's compliance with the treaty by submitting this report to CEDAW for scrutiny, showing how human rights organizations monitor and promote human rights inside states. The paper continues, "Since the submission of its second report in 1989, the Government of the Republic of Korea has introduced far-reaching measures for the advancement of women with the central objective of realizing an egalitarian society…"[60] The quote explicitly mentions how Korea is taking steps to close the gender gap in 1995. Lastly, the paper states:

> The Government established the Ministry of Political Affairs (II) (for women) in 1988 and empowered it with full authority to coordinate all government and non-government activities aimed at advancing the status of women and to propose measures.[61]

This excerpt here is one measure that Korea took in 1988 towards CEDAW recommendations for gender equality. The Ministry of Political Affairs (II), as mentioned in the excerpt, is a precursor to the Ministry of Gender Equality established in 2001. They both served to equalize the playing field for women and propose policies in favor of it. Since this paper is a couple decades old, we can see that there has been substantial progress on women's rights since the paper was published, especially considering the NHCR, MOGEF, and its landmark legislation passed. This shows that pressure and monitoring from human rights organizations and international law has contributed to the advancement of women's rights in South Korea.

Thus, the media spreads public awareness on gender inequality and sets the government's legislative agenda, MOGEF works to pass policies on gender equality, and international law and

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[59] "Third Periodic Reports of States Parties: Republic of Korea," in *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* (United Nations, 1995), http://www.mogef.go.kr/eng/lw/eng_lw_f001.do.
[60] "Third Periodic Reports of States Parties: Republic of Korea."
[61] "Third Periodic Reports of States Parties: Republic of Korea."

human rights organizations promote gender equality by monitoring the state of society in Korea. The evidence I found supported this thesis. However, I did find my initial hypothesis that international institutions were solely responsible for promoting gender equality at the global level were better explained by domestic organizations and movement that took initiative to adopt international law on human rights: the NHCR of Korea and Korea's compliance on CEDAW. Additionally, I also adjusted my initial expectation that grassroots movement was responsible for civil society's advocacy and awareness of gender inequality, but due to limitations on my knowledge of Korean, I could not find the evidence to justify it. Therefore, I focused on civil society through the media to explain awareness and agenda-setting. Overall, one of the main problems that seem to be impeding the progress of gender equality in Korea is the polarizing nature of the issue posing two sets of groups against each other: one that believes gender inequality exists, and one that thinks it is an issue of the past. By bridging tensions and increasing understanding of gender inequality, society, and thus the government, may become more compassionate toward solving the gender gap. Therefore, increased educational programs in school up until the older generation that teach about the differences in gendered treatment may advance women's rights and gender equality in South Korea.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how the newspapers as the media, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family as a domestic institution, and human rights organizations, as upholders of international law, provide a three-level system to progress women's rights in South Korea. The news informs the people and sets the political agenda for the government; the Ministry targets gender disparities by proposing and advocating for rectifying policies; and human rights

organizations monitor and promote women's rights as human rights in Korea. Through the simultaneous effort of all three-levels, the gender gap can continue to close in the country.

However, there are several limitations with this research. The most important one is the lack of Korean-language proficiency I had as a researcher situated in the U.S. studying a South Korean issue. I am not fluent in the language, so I missed out on opportunities to read scholarship and news published in Korean, which would have been greatly beneficial to understand the domestic context of women's rights targeted at Koreans rather than what an internationally oriented English-language publication may produce. This also prevented me from adequately studying the role of grassroots women's rights organizations in the political process because the information I found on them was largely in Korean except for some mentions of them in English scholarship. My original hypothesis included civil society not just through media but through grassroots organizations, but due to this limitation, I was unable to study and include it in this paper. I recognize the absence of grassroots organizations as a limitation in my thesis when talking about civil society. In the future, I hope to do more encompassing research with the capability of reading Korean and studying grassroots women's organizations, which would greatly improve the strength of my argument.

Furthermore, my content analysis was limited in scope. As a college student conducting content analysis for the first time with little training, this was more an exercise in content analysis than a full-fledged experiment. I also had about two weeks to manually collect, sort, and input the data, which limited the amount of data that I could analyze within that period. I was limited to using only English-language Korean newspaper websites, which only allowed me to search through recent articles rather than go back in time significantly. As a result, this took a toll on my ability to analyze the cause and effect of media coverage and progression of women's

rights, which led me to only use what previous scholarship has concluded about the media's effect on social movements and problems.

Nonetheless, this paper provides a first glimpse into the systems that function in South Korean society to progress women's rights and close the gender gap. These systems are also applicable to other social movements in the country, such as a labor movement or environmental movement, since they use the same structures: media, domestic institutions, and international law. Additionally, it is possible that other countries with similar developmental trajectories or socio-political settings can see progress with this approach in their own nations with some adaptation. There is much room for further research and expansion on the future of women's rights in South Korea and how to continue the movement toward greater gender equality.

Appendix

Appendix A

Content Analysis Form for Newspaper Articles

Newspaper: _____
Date: _____
Title: _____
URL: _____

Newspaper Description: _____

Section in Paper:

_____1. National/Politics
_____2. Business
_____3. Opinion

Newspaper Ideology:

_____1. Left-center; mostly factual
_____2. Right-center; mostly factual
_____3. Left-center; mixed reporting
_____4. Right-center; mixed reporting

Editorial: Yes / No

Issue/Topic: _____

Mode:

_____1. Critical of society
_____2. Critical of government
_____3. Critical of business
_____4. Positive of women's rights

Article Description: _____

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