

The effect of economic development and globalization on the role of feminism

[Economics](#), [Globalization](#)



As a sheltered teenager living in Seoul, I had not experienced such discrimination and inequality of the sexes—furthermore, I was not aware of the inequality of the sexes that, in fact, was existent all around me. One of the perks of being an international student is being able to indulge in two cultures at the same time. At school I considered myself an American, yet as I crossed the boundaries of my school, I was a Korean. There are stark differences in the culture of the two countries — some of which can be considered quite sexist to one and normal to the other. I was both intrigued and appalled by the certain actions, behaviors, and roles that seemed to be a crucial and definite part of the Korean culture; however, from the perspective of an outsider, there were qualities to this culture that seemed wholly inappropriate and outrageous at times. Despite being a very small country, South Korea’s culture is thriving globally.

Overtime, the culture of South Korea has become a widespread phenomenon ranging from the music to food industry. Many people are familiar with the Korean culture in terms of K-Pop, K-Drama, and Korean food — yet there is a whole history and tradition to Korean culture that exists outside of the entertainment and food industry. Such history and deep rooted tradition is one of the most important qualities to Korea that makes it unique amongst many other countries. Furthermore, South Korea has been looked down upon for many generations as it was colonized by several countries before it gained its independence. Nonetheless, in the course of a few decades, South Korea rose to the top as one of the most innovative, technologic, and economically stable countries in the world. In regards to my interests of both South Korea and feminism I was propelled to answer the question: how has

economic development and globalization of South Korea influenced the role of feminism?

South Korea is recognized as a conservative country—therefore public support for feminism is a rarity. It caught me by surprise that even some women are against feminism or are not familiar with this philosophy. This increased my curiosity in exploring feminism within South Korea and I took upon this opportunity to research more about the details and statistics regarding this subject matter. Global issues such as sexual harassment, sex trafficking, and discrimination will be explored. By examining many different factors that have contributed to economic development and globalization, the objective of this paper is to analyze the changing views regarding women and feminism. Upon the discussion of feminism with a classmate, I became aware of the different perspectives regarding the same ideology. I was fired up in the spur moment and argued strongly for my own viewpoint; however, after reflecting upon what my classmate had said, I recognized his stance despite my differing opinion. Feminism is a political ideology that encompasses various definitions in regards to various views on what it stands for. To some, it is regarded as a movement that advocates for the equality of both males and females — while to others, it is a movement that fights for women’s rights to be equal to those of males. Though these two definitions may seem the same, there are crooks and crannies within both that can lead one to hold different understandings and attitudes towards ‘feminism.’ As the meaning of the word continues to shift in what it stands for, society’s outlook on this ideology and movement also continues to shift.

Thus, it is important to understand the history of the feminist movement to recognize what propelled these changes in people's views.

Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker are able to divide the history of feminism into three waves that range from the early nineteenth century to our present time. The first wave consists of several female figures in the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century who advocated for sociocultural and political equality. One of the first radical individuals who stirred discussion and shifted views was British writer Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797); she published a controversial yet empowering text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that was regarded as a sort of “feminist declaration of independence” corresponding to Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791). Of the many admirable women, Florence Nightingale was an important representative who founded modern nursing as a significant role within the military. The first wave highlights the rights of women's suffrage as women in both Britain and the United States stood up as leaders to campaign for the freedom to vote — some of the notable women include Emily Davison, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The second wave marks the time period between the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. This wave was sparked as a result of French Existentialist Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)'s book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*). By questioning the nature of women's oppression and discrimination she tackled ideas that were not talked about during that time. While women's suffrage continued to be of concern, this wave was mainly involved in the issue of ending discrimination. The third wave developed in the early 1990s

as feminists began to question the definition of feminism. Disagreement on the idea of feminism emerged with some contending the belief that there are indeed differences between the sexes while others believed that there are no differences and instead the problem is rooted in social conditioning. Due to the constantly shifting opinions, there are now a variety of different branches of feminists who, although are in a sense advocating for the same general idea, are very distinct in terms of motive, attitude, and ideology. A few of the different branches include: Radical Feminism, Separatist Feminism, Sex-Positive Feminism, Anarchist Feminism, Black Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Liberal Feminism, French Feminism, and the list continues.

In order to answer the question, it's crucial to understand the historical context of South Korea in terms of economics and culture. As a result of Korea's geographical characteristics, Korea had struggled for independence in the midst of other countries attempting to colonize the land. However in 1910 Japan had successfully seized control over Korea. For 35 years (1910-1945), Korea had been under Japanese occupation — in this period, Koreans were forced to comply by Japanese customs and conform to Japanese culture. Korea was losing a sense of their own culture and identity to which many women sought it necessary to form secret nationalist groups in order to maintain their culture and traditions. Forming nationalist groups of only women was also an independence movement of its own to gain equality with men. This brought about a sort of “ feminist nationalism” which was “ a kind of feminism that made use of nationalism as a means to raise women's consciousness.” Despite efforts from women to gain equality through

feminist nationalism, men viewed feminism as Western Propaganda. Men, who had always believed women should be housewives and remain home where they can take care of children, were not comfortable with women exercising their rights actively. In correspondence with their Confucian values, many Korean men believed this to be disregarding family responsibilities. As a result, there was a disagreement between men and women regarding how women were to behave.

On the other hand of the spectrum, women were benefitting from the industrialization of Korean economy. As South Korea began to modernize, the production method transitioned from “labor-intensive” to “expert-oriented.” During this period, Korea’s economy thrived as a result of cheap labor — utilizing those of unskilled workers, young workers, and women workers. As seen in the table below, South Korea’s employed women increased since the year of 1963 to 1990. Within many of these industries, there were “female manufacturing industries” where women were the majority as they outnumbered the male workers. Some of these industries included electronics, clothing, rubber and plastics, pottery, and etc. This demonstrates the importance of women in the rise of the South Korean economy. However, in spite of the great contributions, women were not rewarded or acknowledged for their efforts in the growth of the country. The wage gap between women and men was one of the highest. According to the data collected by the International Labor Office in 1988, South Korea’s women’s wages when compared to the average men’s wages was a staggering 51 percent. This meant women earned nearly half the amount of

money men earned for the same, if not more, effort and time dedicated in working. By comparing the percentages of the wage gap over time, data revealed that the percentage of women's wage to men's wage consistently decreased to 61, 57, 53, and 51 as the years of employment increased. It was hypothesized that "the wage gap is likely to widen as work experience is accumulated." Furthermore, in the 1980s, among the data of 15 countries that the International Labor Office was able to provide, South Korea ranked as the only country where the women worked longer hours than men. Women worked for 9.7 hours per day which was longer than the legal 8 hour working day. Although times have changed and some aspects of this discrepancy have become resolved, the backwardness of industrialization and globalization and its regards to women is still greatly present in our time.

Feminism is not the common topic of conversation nor a common idea that is of concern in the daily lives within Korea. Yet, the subtle nature of feminism is existent, whether or not Korean women are able to put a label on what they are advocating for. It is an accumulation of multiple factors ranging from Korea's colonization by Japan, Korea's belief of Buddhism and Confucianism, and the role of women throughout it all — almost everything has contributed to the growth of South Korea's economy and the globalization that it experiences today. It is true that women have increasingly become more involved — however, there are uncommon ideas (about feminism) and hidden actions that should be uncovered and openly discussed. Whether it be easily noticeable on the outside or concealed from

the public eye, it's important to acknowledge all factors that impact the role of feminism within South Korea. This includes misogyny, sexual harassment, plastic surgery, and the unquestioned views and actions that may seem the norm—such as women being submissive to their husbands.