Gender-Based Crimes in South Korea: Threats to Women's Safety In The Implementation of Cedaw

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Abstract

Gender inequality in South Korea remains a persistent issue, marked by increasing gender-based violence in both physical and digital spaces. Rising cases of femicide, sexual violence, and digital exploitation, such as the discovery of a deepfake chatroom involving more than 220,000 male members, have heightened women's sense of insecurity in everyday life. This study aims to examine gender-based violence as a threat to women's human security in South Korea and to evaluate the state's implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) through a feminist analytical framework. Using a descriptive qualitative method based on secondary data, the research applies Feminist Security Theory (FST) to shift the concept of security beyond state-centric and military perspectives toward individual well-being and freedom from fear. The findings indicate that despite South Korea's formal ratification of CEDAW, entrenched patriarchal norms, institutional bias, and weak legal enforcement continue to undermine women's security. Gender-based violence is frequently normalized or inadequately addressed, revealing a significant gap between international commitments and domestic practice. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the emergence of the 4B Movement, Bihon, Bichulsan, Biyeonae, and Biseokseu, represents a collective response to state failure in ensuring women's safety. The movement reflects women's loss of trust in legal and social institutions and highlights how women reclaim agency through resistance. This study concludes that effective implementation of CEDAW requires structural transformation of social, cultural, and institutional frameworks that perpetuate gendered insecurity.

Keywords: CEDAW, Gender Equality, 4B Movement, Femicide, and Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTIONS

Every day, women live in fear. In South Korea, gender-based crimes are endless. Recently, in 2024, South Korea faced an epidemic of digital sexual crimes, with hundreds of women and children becoming targets of the spread of fake indecent images. The group sharing these fake images reportedly has 220,000 members. There has been a significant increase in the number of reported cases from 2021 to 2024, with approximately 116 reports in 2021 and 297 reports in 2024 (Barr, 2024).

In addition to digital sexual crimes, which have recently been widely discussed, women in South Korea also face violence in relationships. The increasing rate of violence in relationships in South Korea has led to an alarming number of deaths in

recent years. However, this has not been accompanied by strict laws to address violence, resulting in perpetrators often escaping punishment or receiving only light sentences. In a recent case, a medical student in his twenties killed a woman from the roof of a tall building in broad daylight because she demanded to end their relationship (Saefudin et al., 2024). Another case involved a man who entered his ex-girlfriend's house and strangled her to death. Then in March 2024, a man stabbed his ex-girlfriend to death after their relationship ended (Park, 2024). These cases reflect how frightening life is for women in South Korea, who are constantly haunted by the threat of death that could befall them at any time.

The number of cases of violence in relationships in South Korea has reached alarming levels. According to The National Police Agency Report, there has been a significant increase in reports of violence in relationships (dating). In 2020, there were around 49,000 reports of dating violence received by the national police, then this number rose rapidly in 2023 to 77,000, and 19,000 reports throughout 2024 (Park, 2024). In 2023 alone, approximately 57.9% of reports were cases of domestic violence, 45.5% were cases of sexual violence, 10.5% were cases of stalking, 10.1% were cases of dating violence, and the rest were other forms of sexual crimes (Hot-Line, 2023). These figures show that women live in an unsafe environment. These fears will only intensify if there is no firm protection for women in South Korea.

In contrast to the number of sexual crimes committed against women, the penalties imposed on perpetrators are disproportionate. According to reports, out of 14,000 suspects of dating violence, only about 310 people or 2.22% were arrested for these crimes. According to the Korean Women's Hotline, about 138 women were killed by their husbands or boyfriends, and 311 women survived attempted murders in 2023. Looking at this data, it can be said that South Korean women face the risk of being killed by their husbands or male partners every 19 hours. With such a high number but without adequate protection and efforts to eliminate gender-based crimes, South Korean women live in fear of becoming victims of sexual crimes every day.

Speaking of clear law enforcement, South Korea ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on December 27, 1984, 3 and adapted it into national law on January 26, 1985 (Chang et al., 2005). This is a sign that the South Korean government is seriously committed to gender equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. CEDAW establishes universal and equitable principles between men and women (Manjoo & Beninger, 2024). The convention also establishes equal rights for women regardless of their marital status in all areas, including politics, economics, society, and culture (Song, 2018). However, the implementation of this convention does not seem to be

going as it should. Patriarchal practices and culture are so deeply rooted in South Korea that it is difficult for South Korean women to obtain justice and equality. Nowadays, they even feel increasingly threatened by femicide.

Despite its commitment to eliminating all forms of discrimination against women through the ratification of CEDAW, South Korea seems to have encountered many obstacles, as the CEDAW committee has issued at least three warnings along with an evaluation of the lack of implementation of CEDAW in South Korea. There are several issues that have been strongly criticized by the CEDAW committee regarding the South Korean government's lack of implementation of CEDAW. The first is significant gender inequality, which includes significant wage gaps. secondly, gender-based violence, which remains a major concern with no significant reduction in its prevalence, and thirdly, reproductive rights and abortion, where in 2019 South Korea temporarily lifted its ban on abortion, and the CEDAW committee urged South Korea to ensure women's access to safe and legal reproductive health services (CEDAW, 2022).

Despite all efforts to provide equal access for women in South Korea, it appears that the South Korean government is still unable to guarantee a decent and safe life for women. The poor implementation of CEDAW, laws that do not favor women, and ineffective sanctions against perpetrators of sexual crimes have led women in South Korea to voice their protests through the 4B movement. This movement first emerged in late 2010, with a movement that sought to voice the following demands: no marriage (*bihon*), no childbirth (*bichulsan*), no dating (*biyonae*), and no sexual relations with men (*bisekseu*) (Coates, 2024). This movement is a form of protest against patriarchal and misogynistic societal pressures, where women are pressured to take on traditional roles under conditions that are often unfair and discriminatory. This movement has become widely known globally as a feminist movement that criticizes patriarchal and misogynistic culture (Zoonen, 2010).

Despite South Korea's formal commitment to eliminating discrimination against women through CEDAW ratification, gender-based crimes remain pervasive. Patriarchal and misogynistic norms, weak state protection, and the limited effectiveness of CEDAW implementation continue to hinder meaningful progress. Rising femicide cases and the emergence of the 4B Movement reflect women's persistent fear and insecurity. Although the government has introduced legal reforms, established the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, and launched public awareness campaigns, these efforts remain constrained by entrenched patriarchal culture and institutional bias. As a result, a clear gap persists between formal commitments and actual protection. This paper critically examines South Korea's

implementation of CEDAW and analyzes the structural barriers to reducing gender-based violence through a feminist security perspective (J. Kim, 2017).

The government's commitment, which is considered insufficient in addressing gender-based crimes, has led women in South Korea to voice their concerns through protests. 4B is a movement that stands as a form of disappointment and criticism of the government and the patriarchal culture that is deeply rooted in South Korea. This movement exists to criticize and voice protests against all forms of discrimination and the fear and pressure felt by South Korean women, which are not accompanied by protection and firm sanctions from the government against perpetrators. This raises the question of what makes efforts to eliminate gender-based crimes in South Korea so difficult, even though these crimes have reached alarming levels and become a serious security issue.

Therefore, the question arises: "Why has gender-based crime in South Korea become a human security issue despite the country's commitment to eliminating gender-based crime and implementing CEDAW?"

Existing studies on gender inequality and gender-based violence in South Korea have predominantly focused on legal frameworks, policy reforms, and statistical trends, highlighting gaps between legislation and enforcement. A growing body of literature also examines digital sexual crimes, online misogyny, and femicide through sociological, criminological, or media studies perspectives. Meanwhile, research on South Korea's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) generally evaluates compliance in terms of legal alignment and institutional mechanisms. Studies on the 4B Movement tend to interpret it as a cultural, generational, or ideological phenomenon emerging from online feminist spaces, often detached from broader discussions of security and state responsibility.

However, these approaches rarely conceptualize gender-based violence as a human security threat or critically assess state failure through Feminist Security Theory (FST). The existing literature largely overlooks how patriarchal structures embedded in legal, social, and institutional systems undermine the effective implementation of CEDAW and contribute to women's everyday insecurity. This study addresses this gap by applying FST to reframe gender-based violence in South Korea as a security issue rather than solely a social or legal problem. Furthermore, it introduces a novel interpretation of the 4B Movement as a feminist security response and a form of collective self-protection, thereby linking state failure in safeguarding women's rights to the emergence of resistance and agency among women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Raday (2012) examines CEDAW's impact on democratic citizenship by emphasizing substantive equality as a means to challenge patriarchal legal, cultural, and economic structures, yet notes a persistent gap between formal legal commitments and social practice due to entrenched patriarchy and neoliberal exploitation. However, her analysis remains largely normative and legal-institutional, positioning women primarily as legal subjects rather than as security subjects facing everyday insecurity. Similarly, Seo (2020) situates gender inequality in South Korea within the country's political economy and Confucian-influenced patriarchal norms, highlighting enduring institutional sexism despite modernization and legal reform. While offering a strong structural account, Seo does not engage with CEDAW or adopt a feminist security perspective, resulting in gender-based violence being treated as a social issue rather than conceptualized as a threat to women's security.

Kim (2018) examines the rise of gender-based violence in South Korea, particularly sexual violence and stalking, by focusing on legal frameworks and law enforcement responses, revealing weak enforcement and persistent victim-blaming attitudes within criminal justice institutions. While providing valuable empirical insights, the study adopts a policy-oriented and criminological approach that treats the state as a neutral actor, thereby overlooking the masculinized nature of state institutions and their role in reproducing structural violence against women (Mee, 2010). Meanwhile, Lee (2007) analyzes the development of women's movements in South Korea through a social movement and resource mobilization perspective, emphasizing organizational strategies and political opportunities in response to authoritarianism and social change. However, this work predates contemporary forms of gender-based violence, such as digital sexual crimes, and does not frame feminist resistance as a response to security failures. Consequently, women are positioned primarily as political actors rather than as subjects of human insecurity, leaving the connection between state failure, gender-based violence, and women's security largely unexplored.

Existing research on gender-based violence in South Korea has predominantly employed legal, sociological, and policy-oriented frameworks that focus on institutional performance, legislative gaps, or social norms. While these approaches offer important empirical insights, they often conceptualize the state as a neutral actor and treat gender-based violence as a social or criminal issue rather than a security concern. Consequently, limited attention has been given to examining how the masculinized nature of the state and entrenched patriarchal structures shape security policies and systematically marginalize women's experiences. This theoretical gap

underscores the need for a feminist security perspective that reframes gender-based violence as a form of human insecurity and critically interrogates the role of the state in reproducing structural violence against women.

This paper will use Feminist Security Theory (FST) to analyze how the South Korean government's role and efforts are considered inefficient in reducing gender-based crime rates. FST is not a theory explicitly proposed by a single researcher, but rather part of the development of studies from Feminist in International Relations and security studies. FST itself emerged as a result of criticism of international relations studies, which were considered to prioritize principles of masculinity. This theory stems from criticism of the international relations order, which often promotes sexist and patriarchal thinking and disregards the role of women in the state (Kantola, 2007).

The roots of FTS thinking stem from criticism of the traditional understanding of the state as a masculine entity. This is because the state in the realist understanding of international relations is referred to as a sovereign power, military force, and aggressive. These descriptions lead to a masculine construction, where matters related to military power and defense are always associated with men. War and the military in the concept of the state in realist theory always emphasize masculine concepts and affirm the role of men, who are considered rational and aggressive, while women are likened to emotional dependence and vulnerable groups in war (Kantola, 2007).

In Blanchard's writing, quoting Tickner, he states that in traditional IR theory, issues related to women's experiences are often ignored in favor of masculine characteristics such as military strength and state authority (Rosenberg & Tickner, 1993). Tickner seeks to broaden the study of security through a feminist lens by highlighting non-military issues such as social injustice, gender-based limitations, individual insecurity, and patriarchal culture, which often sideline women's interests and experiences in traditional security issues. What needs to be underlined in Tickner's thinking on feminist and security concepts is her criticism of masculine and patriarchal culture and her efforts to promote an understanding of non-military security and how individual insecurity plays a role in viewing insecurity from the perspective of women as a community that are affected by patriarchal culture (J. Kim, 2017).

Tickner highlights the importance of expanding the concept of security. She argues that threats experienced by women as individuals, such as domestic violence, sexual violence, structural violence, and any gender-based crimes, must be examined at the same level and given the same importance as military security issues (Tickner et al., 2004). In Blanchard's writing, he focuses on how FST developed and began to explore gender as a factor influencing insecurity in the global world (Blanchard, 2003).

Blanchard also attempts to present and deepen studies from a feminist perspective in international relations that can provide insight into critical thinking.

By applying FST, this paper fills a theoretical gap in the existing literature by reframing gender-based violence in South Korea as a security issue rather than merely a social or legal problem. This approach enables a critical examination of how patriarchal state structures hinder effective CEDAW implementation and contribute to persistent insecurity for women. Furthermore, the use of FST allows this study to interpret feminist movements not only as social or cultural resistance but as responses to structural insecurity and state failure. In doing so, this paper offers a more comprehensive and gender-sensitive analysis of security, governance, and women's lived experiences in South Korea.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design that allows researchers to identify in depth how gender-based crimes in South Korea have emerged as a threat to women's security in the context of CEDAW implementation. This approach was chosen because it is 5 relevant for examining social constructions, power relations, and women's experiences that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative methods (Bryman, 2012). The analytical framework of the study is based on Feminist Security Theory, which highlights how the state as a masculine entity, shapes security structures that do not fully incorporate women's needs and experiences. The theory operationalization chart illustrates the relationship between the state, the construction of masculinity, patriarchal culture, structural violence, women as subjects of security, and the role of the government in implementing CEDAW.

The object of this research is the dynamics of gender-based violence and the South Korean government's responses, while the analytical subjects include the state, security institutions, and women as the primary affected group. Data were collected through purposive sampling of relevant secondary sources, including reports from the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), criminal and police statistics, government policies on gender and security, South Korea's periodic reports to the CEDAW Committee, academic literature, and media coverage of femicide, stalking, and digital violence, particularly deepfake crimes. All data were gathered through documentation and literature analysis.

To ensure conceptual clarity, this study operationally defines gender-based violence as acts of violence against women rooted in gender, including sexual violence, stalking, and digital abuse that threaten women's physical and psychological security. Patriarchal culture refers to male-dominated values that shape state policies and law enforcement practices, while structural violence denotes systemic state failures, such

as gender-biased regulations or passive institutional responses. The role of the government and CEDAW implementation is examined through the alignment of domestic regulations, programs, and enforcement practices with international obligations. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis by coding and organizing materials based on the core variables of Feminist Security Theory (FST), with patterns compared inductively against theoretical propositions to assess how patriarchal structures and weak state responses contribute to persistent gender-based violence and undermine women's security.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The State and Patriarchal Culture: The History of Masculinity that Shaped Patriarchal Culture

Patriarchal culture was formed for different historical reasons in each country. From an international relations perspective, patriarchal culture was formed from a process of gender hierarchy that has been deeply rooted since the era of traditional international relations theory. Traditional feminist theory emerged to criticize the world order, which is mostly dominated by elite, white, male practitioners, which is a form of patriarchy that assumes that women are not suitable for strategic positions in politics (Runyan & Peterson, 1991). Thus, the concept of gender in the traditional international relations order emphasizes masculinity, thereby marginalizing the roles and experiences of women. This gave rise to a patriarchal culture, as women were considered incapable of holding or carrying out tasks related to the state.

In South Korea, patriarchal culture is rooted in Confucianism. Confucianism itself is a way of life that was spread by Confucians in the 6th to 5th centuries BC and has been followed by the Chinese for more than two millennia. Although it has undergone many changes, the teachings of Confucianism remain at the core of Chinese learning, values, and social codes, which have spread to other countries, particularly South Korea, Japan, and China. Confucianism has become deeply rooted in life, so much so that it is difficult to eradicate because it is embedded in the patterns of government, society, education, and family in East Asia (Tu Weiming, 2024) .

Confucianism also teaches about a social hierarchy that prioritizes men over women through principles such as "men are high, and women are low." This teaching then limits the role of women in society and the family, which then, from generation to generation, makes women a second class and pushes their role towards the domestic sphere (Jane, 2014b). South Korea is a country that has embraced Confucianism since the Koryo Dynasty and reached its peak during the Joseon Dynasty. During the Joseon Dynasty, Confucianism became the state ideology that governed all aspects of life,

including governance, education, and social life. Confucianism teaches social hierarchy through the "Three Obediences" (Kardina & Yurisa, 2021), namely: one, daughters must obey their fathers; two, wives must submit to their husbands; three, widows must depend on their sons. This shows that the roots of patriarchy in South Korea stem from historical teachings that have become ingrained in the culture 9 regarding the domestic roles of women and the subordination of men, so that in its development, women's roles have always been pushed towards domestic roles (Jane, 2014a).

Although it has been centuries, Confucianism has historically remained the foundation that supports the patriarchal system and reinforces gender stereotypes that discriminate against women. In an article written by Kardina and Yursina, their research shows that Confucian values, now more commonly referred to as the patriarchal system, have supported the emergence of gender-based violence. This system in South Korea often normalizes violence against women as a means of maintaining social hierarchy and placing women in their proper place in Confucian teachings (Kardina & Yurisa, 2021). Overall, it can be concluded that Confucianism plays a major role as the historical foundation that shapes the patriarchal culture and social structure in South Korea, which is deeply rooted to this day.

Feminist Security Theory views hierarchy, construction, and government as playing an important role in shaping patriarchal culture. Through the previous explanation, it can be concluded that it is true that patriarchal culture in South Korea is historically rooted in Confucian teachings. However, this is then exacerbated by how the government adopts these values in governance and seems to "perpetuate patriarchy." One example is the family shift system, whereby after marriage, women are required to become part of their husband's family and lose their original family identity (Hoju system) (Yune, 2006). This results in women being seen only as objects for continuing the family line, and their experiences are often ignored.

Structural Violence and Individual Insecurities in South Korea

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to forms of violence that are rooted in gender inequality and disproportionately target women. According to the UNHCR, gender-based violence is any harmful act directed against an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender. Similarly, the CEDAW Committee defines gender-based violence as violence that is directed at a person based on their sex or gender, encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm. GBV is therefore understood not merely as individual acts of abuse, but as manifestations of structural discrimination and power imbalances within society. (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 1996). When these forms of violence and crime

occur systematically and persist over time, with an increasing number of victims, it is unsurprising that they become a matter of serious concern and evolve into an issue of human security.

According to the UNDP, there are seven types of human insecurity based on their causes (UNDP, 1994). Two of these are individual insecurity, where this insecurity stems from an individual's feeling of being threatened by an unfavorable environment or any form of threat that causes the individual to feel unsafe (Kuhlmann, 2021). The other is Community Insecurity, which refers to situations where communities feel unsafe due to the threat of violence or systemic discrimination, which is often based on gender, religion, race, ethnicity, or other social status (Martin & Owen, 2014). In the context of gender-based violence, the female community, in this paper focusing on women in South Korea, experiences feelings of insecurity because every day women in South Korea must live in fear of becoming victims of sexual crimes or other types of crimes targeted at them because they are women.

According to statistical data from the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), cases of sexual violence in South Korea continue to increase year after year. Based on The National Police Agency Report, there has been a significant increase in reports of violence in relationships (dating). In 2020, there were approximately 49,000 reports of dating violence received by the national police, then this number rose rapidly in 2023 to 77,000, and 19,000 reports throughout 2024 (Park, 2024). In 2023 alone, 57.9% of reports were cases of domestic violence, 45.5% were cases of sexual violence, 10.5% were cases of stalking, 10.1% were cases of dating violence, and the rest were other forms of sexual crimes (Hot-Line, 2023). These figures indicate that women are living in an unsafe environment. Such fears are likely to intensify in the absence of firm and effective protections for women in South Korea.

Despite the high prevalence of sexual and gender-based crimes against women in South Korea, sanctions against perpetrators remain disproportionately lenient. Of approximately 14,000 suspects in dating-violence cases, only about 310 individuals (2.22 percent) were formally arrested. Data from the Korean Women's Hotline show that in 2023, 138 women were killed by their husbands or boyfriends, while 311 survived attempted femicide, indicating that a woman in South Korea faces the risk of being killed by her male partner every 19 hours. These figures demonstrate that inadequate legal protection and weak enforcement have left women living in constant fear of becoming victims of gender-based violence. (J. Kim, 2018).

In addition to violence within intimate relationships, women in South Korea also face the growing threat of digital gender-based crimes. Between late August and early September, widespread fear emerged among women following the discovery of

a deepfake pornography chatroom on Telegram, consisting of approximately 220,000 male members, with 99 percent of the victims being women and six out of ten of them minors. According to a 2021 report by the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), among victims of online sexual crimes, 70–80 percent were children and young people (Jane, 2014a), with the highest proportion occurring among those in their late teens and early twenties (KWDI, 2022).

KWDI also reported that women constitute the largest proportion of victims of severe and brutal criminal acts.
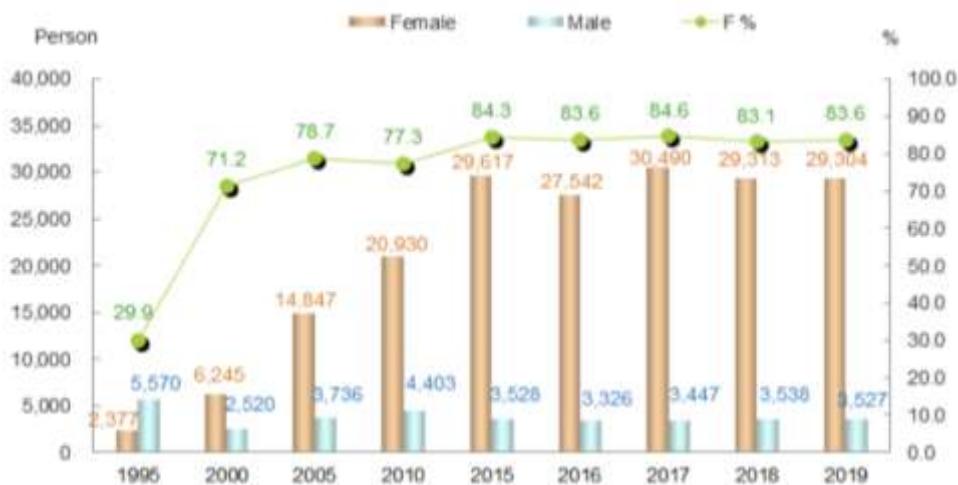
Source: KWDI – Women in Korea: Female rate of brutal Crime Victims

The data above illustrate that women are the most frequent victims of severe and brutal crimes, with the rates in South Korea being particularly alarming. It is therefore unsurprising that it is often stated that every 19 hours, a woman in South Korea faces the threat of being killed in an intimate-partner violence case. This reflects the substantial prevalence of both sexual crimes and other forms of criminal violence targeted at women. According to ANTARA News, a sexual offense occurred every 25 minutes in South Korea during the first seven months of 2013, with reported rape cases reaching 12,234 between January and July of that year (Ade P Marboen, 2013). Given these figures and the estimated frequency of such cases, these incidents can no longer be regarded merely as issues of discrimination; they constitute clear threats to human security. Women in South Korea are compelled to live under constant fear on a daily basis, underscoring the severity of the situation. It is therefore imperative that this issue be recognized as a critical and urgent matter, requiring heightened attention and responsive action from the government
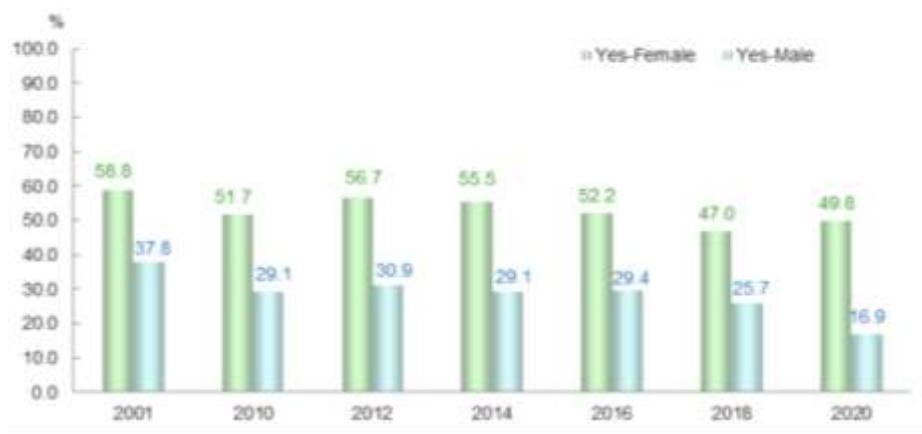
Source: KWDI – Women in Korea: Fear of Walking at Night

The data show that women in South Korea experience heightened fear when walking alone at night, reflecting the prevalence of crimes targeting women and a persistent climate of insecurity. This fear is reinforced by societal stereotypes that blame women for sexual violence and by patriarchal norms rooted in Confucian traditions, which frame women's independence as a deviation from ideals of obedience. From a Feminist Security Theory (FST) perspective, gender-based violence is not merely a gender equality issue but a human security concern, as women's everyday fear constitutes a form of individual insecurity. Therefore, the state bears a critical responsibility to adopt more effective measures to ensure women's safety and enable them to live their daily lives without fear.

Implementation of CEDAW and Government Commitment to Gender Equality Efforts

South Korea ratified CEDAW in 1984; however, its implementation has been significantly hindered by the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture that continues to shape social norms and state institutions. In addition to this cultural barrier, weak support from the legal system and bureaucracy, low public awareness of gender equality, and the high prevalence of misogyny further exacerbate the problem (M. Kim, 2024). This demonstrates that legal reforms alone are insufficient to eliminate gender-based violence. Meaningful progress requires comprehensive cultural transformation as well as heightened societal awareness of the rights and dignity of every individual.

Broadly speaking, South Korea has declared its commitment to eliminating gender-based violence and discrimination against women. This commitment is reflected in the country's ratification of CEDAW and its subsequent incorporation into domestic law on 26 January 1985. CEDAW has influenced the development of several

laws aimed at combating discrimination against women, including the Framework Act on Gender Equality, enacted in 2014 (Raday, 2012). This act serves as a legal framework for promoting gender equality and includes measures to protect women's rights in the workplace, political sphere, and broader society. However, South Korea continues to face limitations in fully implementing CEDAW. A comprehensive anti-discrimination law has yet to be enacted, despite repeated recommendations and criticisms issued by the CEDAW Committee (Advocate for Human Rights, 2023).

South Korea has undergone at least eight periodic evaluations by the CEDAW Committee due to its inconsistent commitment to eliminating discrimination against women. Several of the Committee's observations highlight persistent shortcomings and serve as evidence of the country's limited progress in implementing CEDAW and advancing gender equality. One notable concern raised in the Committee's seventh periodic report pertains to the significant gender disparities that remain, including the low participation of women in decision-making positions and the inadequate protection provided to victims of violence (Republic of Korea, 2010). Nevertheless, the seventh periodic report also acknowledges several efforts and significant steps taken by the South Korean government to comply with CEDAW. However, the core issues of concern remain largely unchanged, as the absence of clear and comprehensive legal protection for victims of violence continues to be a major unresolved problem and a central focus requiring sustained attention (Parekh, 2024).

In the most recent periodic report, the eighth review published in 2018, the CEDAW Committee reiterated many of its previous recommendations and concerns. These repeated criticisms primarily relate to South Korea's continued lack of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law, a gap that contributes to the persistently high rates of gender-based violence in the country (Advocate for Human Rights, 2023). This situation persists because perpetrators often do not receive sufficiently deterrent penalties, while victims are discouraged from reporting due to prevailing social norms and narratives that blame them rather than the offenders. As explained earlier in the discussion on gender-based violence statistics, one of the main reasons victims hesitate to report is the perception that doing so is futile, given that only a small percentage of cases are pursued while the majority are overlooked. The CEDAW Committee has likewise expressed concern over the high prevalence of gender-based violence in South Korea, whether domestic, digital, or sexual and the inadequate sanctions imposed on perpetrators (Ada Tchoukou, 2023).

Feminist Security Theory (FST) views this situation as a responsibility that must be borne by the state. The government plays a fundamental role in deconstructing the deeply rooted social constructions within its society. In South Korea, gender-based

crimes and misogyny cannot be separated from the historical legacy of Confucian values that have long positioned women in a subordinate role. Therefore, the state holds a crucial responsibility to create policies, institutions, and social environments that ensure the safety of women.

From the perspective of FST, security is not limited to national security or external threats, but also encompasses the security of individuals. Gender-based violence in South Korea is not merely a matter of discrimination; it has developed into an issue of human security. Many women live in constant fear of becoming victims of hatred and violence. Thus, providing safe spaces that allow women to live and carry out their daily activities is an essential obligation of the state. The government must ensure that all citizens, including women, receive adequate protection and a sense of security as part of its fundamental mandate to uphold human security.

Critiques of the South Korean Government: The 4B Movement and the Rising Threat of Femicide

Although the South Korean government has expressed its commitment to gender equality through the ratification of CEDAW, its efforts remain far from successful. Gender-based crimes targeting women continue to occur at an alarming rate. The government's inconsistent actions, combined with cultural and legal structures that appear to perpetuate patriarchal norms, have fueled growing dissatisfaction among South Korean women. In response, many women have voiced their resistance to patriarchal expectations that restrict their autonomy. This sentiment has crystallized into the 4B Movement, which stands for *Bihon* (rejecting heterosexual marriage), *Bichulsan* (rejecting childbirth), *Biyeonae* (rejecting dating), and *Bisekseu* (rejecting heterosexual sexual relationships).

The 4B Movement is understood as a radical feminist movement that emerged in South Korea between 2017 and 2019. It arose in response to deeply rooted gender inequalities, widespread gender-based violence, and strong social pressures faced by women in the country. The movement is grounded in the lived experiences of South Korean women under a patriarchal system and developed as a form of protest against systemic violence and discrimination directed at women (AFPRelaxnews, 2024). In addition to the various threats of violence faced by women in South Korea, they also continue to experience a significant gender wage gap. In 2024, South Korea recorded the highest gender pay disparity among OECD countries, with women earning only 68.8% of men's wages (Richard Milner, 2024). Women are also expected to take on double roles, working while simultaneously managing household responsibilities, yet they often receive little to no institutional support in the workplace, such as adequate

maternity leave or family-friendly policies. This lack of structural support further fuels the rise of the 4B movement (Lee & Chin, 2007).

A number of data sources indicate a significant decline in birth rates as well as a decreasing desire among South Korean women to have children. Various surveys also show that women in their twenties are increasingly reluctant to date. One of the major factors behind this trend is the high incidence of violence within romantic relationships, particularly dating sexual violence, which creates a sense of insecurity for women. According to KWDI, there were 1,171 reported stalking cases in 2021, and 30% of these were committed by former partners. (J. Kim, 2022). The escalating risk of gender-based violence and stalking within intimate relationships, frequently perpetrated by male partners or former partners, has led many South Korean women to reassess the safety and desirability of heterosexual relationships. Consequently, a growing number of women are deliberately disengaging from romantic involvement with men as a strategic response to protect their personal security and autonomy.

The 4B movement emerged as a form of women's political resistance against South Korea's entrenched patriarchal culture, which continually positions women's bodies as instruments of state interests. By rejecting marriage, childbirth, dating, and heterosexual sexual relationships, the movement explicitly challenges the traditional roles that expect women to function as "baby-making machines." As noted by *The Conversation*, government policies such as the pink birth map that publicly displayed the number of women of reproductive age in each district triggered widespread anger, as they were seen as reducing women's wombs to national assets rather than acknowledging them as autonomous individuals (Gao, 2024). Slogans such as "my womb is not national property" reflect women's rejection of demographic pressures that ignore their safety and autonomy. Within the 4B Movement, withdrawing from heterosexual relationships is not merely a personal choice but a political strategy of self-protection. For many young women in South Korea, living without men represents resistance to a system that has failed to protect them from physical and digital violence while continuing to control their bodies and reproductive roles (M. Kim, 2024).

Gender-based violence in South Korea has reached an alarming level, exacerbated by the absence of a comprehensive legal framework capable of providing effective protection for victims. In a context where the state fails to guarantee even the most basic forms of security, many women have chosen to withdraw from heterosexual relationships through the 4B movement as a strategy of self-preservation (Seo & Choi, 2020). The 4B Movement represents a political response to the persistent risk of male violence in women's everyday lives, rather than merely a rejection of

marriage or heterosexual relationships. With women facing the threat of femicide nearly every 19 hours, gender-based violence in South Korea has become a condition of structural insecurity rather than a simple gender equality issue. The state's failure to effectively address this violence is closely linked to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that continue to normalize misogyny, violence, and control over women's bodies, allowing such crimes to persist with minimal accountability (Chang et al., 2005). As a result, women in South Korea continue to live under daily fear, while the state has yet to provide a systemic response capable of ensuring their safety and upholding their rights.

Beyond discrimination, sexual violence, and intimate partner abuse, women in South Korea also face the persistent threat of femicide, defined as the killing of women driven by misogyny or gender-based hatred. These acts reflect deeper structural problems rooted in patriarchal culture and entrenched gender inequality, which allow gender-based violence to escalate into lethal forms. In several cases, perpetrators have explicitly expressed hatred toward women as their motive. A notable example is the 2016 Gangnam Station murder, where the attacker stated he targeted the victim because "women always ignored him." This case became a national symbol of misogynistic violence, underscoring how normalized gender hostility continues to endanger women's lives in South Korea (Richard Milner, 2024).

Source: KBS News - 여성 상대 범죄 잇따르는데…"경찰 대응은 소극적" / KBS 2024.10.01.

The image above shows an official infographic from KBS News illustrating data on the murder of women by men in South Korea in 2023. The main Korean text reads

"일면식 없는 남성의 여성 살해," which translates to "the killing of women by men with no prior acquaintance." This highlights that many victims were murdered by perpetrators who had no previous relationship with them, indicating a rise in *random, gender-motivated violence* in public spaces. The central visual element is a large grey circle containing the figure 88명 (88 people), representing the total number of women killed by men in 2023. The infographic further states "나흘에 1명," meaning "one person every four days." Based on this, the data shows that out of the 88 women killed in 2023, at least one woman was murdered by a man every four days (Choi, 2024). The data presented is a compilation from the Korea Women's Hotline (한국여성의전화), which adds credibility and authoritative weight to the information.

Source: KBS News - 여성 상대 범죄 잇따르는데…"경찰 대응은 소극적" / KBS 2024.10.01.

Of the 88 cases of women murdered by men in 2023, as shown in the previously presented data, the image above reveals a clear and recurring pattern in the motives behind these acts of violence. Approximately 23% of the cases occurred in the context of attempted sexual violence, indicating that sexual threats against women in South Korea do not end at harassment or rape, but can escalate to the point of taking the victim's life. Another 13% of the cases were committed solely "because the victim was a woman" (여자라서), which serves as a direct indicator of femicide, gender-based killings driven by misogynistic hatred (Choi, 2024). This reveals the presence of deeply rooted and structurally embedded misogyny within gender relations.

Furthermore, approximately 9% of the cases were committed in moments of impulsive or heightened emotion (홧김에). Although this category may appear gender-neutral, the context reveals a persistent pattern in which women become targets of male emotional outbursts reflecting patriarchal norms that position women as objects for the release of men's anger. Taken together, these motives demonstrate that the killing of women in South Korea is not random, but is driven by gender-based patterns of violence that encompass sexual domination, explicit misogyny, and male attempts to exert emotional control over women. (Hot-Line, 2023).

The data illustrate that femicide in South Korea is not limited to violence within personal relationships but reflects broader patterns of public misogyny, insecurity in everyday spaces, and the state's failure to protect women. Women face a persistent threat of lethal violence, with cases occurring even without prior relationships and sometimes solely due to gender. This reality underscores that gender-based violence constitutes a public security issue rather than a private or domestic matter. Despite South Korea's formal ratification of CEDAW, state responses remain largely symbolic and normative, failing to dismantle entrenched misogynistic norms within legal, institutional, and cultural spheres. From a Feminist Security Theory perspective, the continued prevalence of femicide represents a structural failure of the state to fulfil its basic security obligations, as law enforcement and judicial institutions remain gender-biased and inattentive to women's lived experiences of insecurity. Consequently, women's security remains secondary to the preservation of patriarchal order, rendering protection uneven, conditional, and insufficient.

CONCLUSION

Feminist Security Theory (FST) provides a critical lens for uncovering the male biases that have long dominated security discourse. By centering women's experiences, FST expands the understanding of security beyond state defense and military threats to include the well-being, safety, and freedom from fear of individuals and communities. This approach creates space for women's voices, which have historically been marginalized by patriarchal social structures, and highlights how everyday insecurities are often dismissed as irrelevant by mainstream security theories. In the context of South Korea, FST helps illuminate how gender-based violence, systemic discrimination, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms often grounded in Confucian teachings continue to produce structural vulnerabilities for women, even in a state that has formally ratified CEDAW. The theory underscores that legal ratification alone cannot ensure women's security without addressing the entrenched social and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate gendered harm.

An FST-based analysis further highlights that the state's inability to provide effective legal protection has compelled South Korean women to reclaim agency through the 4B Movement: *Bihon* (refusal of heterosexual marriage), *Bichulsan* (refusal of childbirth), *Biyeonae* (refusal of dating), and *Bisekseu* (refusal of heterosexual sexual relationships). This movement represents not only a protest against the state's failure to create safe spaces but also a powerful symbol of female solidarity in resisting patriarchal structures that exploit them. Ultimately, this situation demonstrates that women are forced to protect themselves when social, legal, and cultural systems are either incapable or unwilling to provide the protections that should constitute their fundamental human rights.

Despite its several strengths, Feminist Security Theory (FST) also has limitations. Its strengths lie in its ability to reveal hidden forms of violence, expand the definition of security, and provide a framework to analyze power relations, patriarchy, and gendered experiences in everyday life. However, FST sometimes offers limited guidance on practical and comprehensive policy solutions, particularly regarding how the state can concretely reform its institutions to protect women. Additionally, FST tends to focus primarily on the experiences of heterosexual women and may insufficiently account for intersectionality, including the experiences of queer women, migrant women, or working-class women who face compounded vulnerabilities.

For future research, it is crucial to integrate Feminist Security Theory (FST) with intersectional approaches and public policy studies so that the analysis does not remain limited to structural critique but also offers operational models of protection. Subsequent studies could also explore how digital dynamics, social media, and generational shifts influence women's resistance movements in South Korea. Combining FST with policy theory or institutional studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the state can effectively fulfill its CEDAW commitments and build a security system that is genuinely responsive to women's needs.

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