

# South Korea: Transphobic hate is not an opinion but a crime that endangers the lives of transgender people

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**In South Korea, there was a focus on hate and discrimination against transgender people in 2020 and 2021, when the Covid-19 backlash targeted LGBTIQ people.**

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Byun Hui-su, the first known transgender soldier in South Korea, wanted a transfer to the military's female corps after undergoing surgery. But she was dismissed in January 2020 on the grounds that she was unfit for service. And in February 2020, a trans woman who was accepted to Sookmyung Women's University in Seoul withdrew from the school because of online harassment and concerns for her future safety. She was scared of their transphobic behaviors and attitudes that did not want to allow her smallest hopes.

Then in February 2021, two well-known trans women committed suicide one after another [1]. One of them was Byun Hui-su. She filed a lawsuit against the military in August 2020 seeking reinstatement, but she died before the case was resolved. Another suicide. Kim Ki-hong, the 38-year-old co-head of Jeju Queer Culture Festival [2], was found dead at her home three days before Byun Hui-su's suicide.

In recent years, transphobic remarks have been made mainly on the internet using feminist language in South Korea. Consequently, the remarks were used politically to mask conservative interests with feminist language and also used to divide the LGBTQ community from the left [3]. Some oppressive or discriminatory remarks led people to jump to the conclusion that trans women are potential culprits. Having a prejudice against trans women is very easy for people born and raised in South Korean society where gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained.

## **First research in which large number of Korean transgender people participate**

The National Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea released “Survey of hate and discrimination against transgender people” in February 2021, when the suicides of two trans women

were reported. This is the first research report mainly on transphobia conducted by a South Korean national agency. [4]

A total of 591 transgender people over the age of 19 living in the country participated in the survey. The breakdown of 591 is 189 trans women (32.0%), 111 trans men (18.8%), and 291 non-binary people (49.2%). The survey covered a wide range of topics including family life, daily life, school/education, employment/workplace, public facilities, treatment at state institutions, medical care, hate and discrimination, and health. Based on the above results, the report concludes that hate and discrimination against transgender people are prevalent in South Korean society.

As a fundamental measure, the report advocates the enactment of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law in which gender identity is specified without omission. South Korea's constitution prohibits discrimination, as do international human rights treaties that the country has ratified. The bill to enact the anti-discrimination law has been submitted to parliament since 2007, but has not yet been enacted. Since the democratization of 1988, South Korea has made great strides in protecting human rights. But LGBTIQ people and the socially vulnerable are still abandoned in the society.

## History so far

Even after the democratization of 1988, transgender people were embarrassed by their own existence. Transgender people had difficulty getting relevant information about who they were (often unintentionally confused with homosexuality in the society) and what to do. Similar situations were also seen in other East Asian countries such as Japan.

After 1995, the availability of broadband allowed rapid growth of LGBTIQ communities. And the internet also played a role in connecting LGBTIQ people living in big cities with those living in small rural towns. After the inauguration of President Kim Dae-jung, the first Pride Parade was started in 2000 to respect the human rights of LGBTIQ people. [5]

Since the early 2000s, there have also been some transgender people in the public eye. One of them is Harisu, a South Korean singer, model, and actress. Inspired by the emergence of Harisu and her subsequent rise, Lady debuted in 2005 with four members. It was the country's first all-transgender group.

In 2006, the first Supreme Court ruling was made allowing transgender people to legally change their gender. On the other hand, the growth of visible transphobia became a key theme for the South Korea's transgender communities. And since the middle of the 2000s, conservative Protestants and some right-wing politicians have fueled prejudice against transgender people.

In 2007, some groups led by conservative Protestants strongly opposed the South Korea's Ministry of Justice (MOJ) Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Law. In the end, seven clauses including "sexual orientation" were deleted. The incident highlighted the emergence of conservative Protestant groups as huge anti-LGBTIQ far-right force [6]. Meanwhile, "centre-left" neoliberal politicians had given their silent approval to discrimination.

## Hate and discrimination focused on transgender people in 2020 and 2021

In 2020, South Korea experienced a sharp increase in online discrimination cases against LGBTIQ people. They were unfairly accused of spreading Covid-19 by online threads. Queer culture festivals and other events were regularly targeted or threatened and harassed online or by physical violence.

In February 2021, when two trans women committed suicide one after another, the backlash to transgender student sparked sharp exchanges and teenage transgender students faced discriminations both on and off campus.

Ms. A, a trans woman who had no choice but to give up admission to Sookmyung Women's University, wrote the following in the article "Abandoned admission to Sookmyung Women's University". [7]

*No one has authority over my life. However, going to a University and even my dreams are suspected and unfairly investigated. My life is constantly ignored and "opposed" in the daily lives of others. I was even deprived of the right to live a normal life.*

In Ms. A's case, some anti-trans feminist groups emerged as subjects of "suspicion and investigation." The backlash provoked by the anti-trans feminist groups had exacerbated the already high levels of hostility transgender people (especially trans women) in South Korea already faced. Some anti-trans feminist groups emerged to make the mundane transphobic claims that had been made by conventional conservative groups. These two very different groups - anti-trans feminists and conservatives- have ended up working together much more closely than either would like. [8]

And the anti-trans feminists consequently played a role in defending right-wing policies with conservative interests masked with feminist language and dividing the LGBTQ community from the left. To elicit an answer to the question "Where did some feminists in the country go wrong?", we need to understand a brief overview of the recent history of the women's movement in South Korea.

### **Emergence of some anti-trans feminist groups in South Korea**

For many years, feminism was not widespread amongst Korean women. Then feminism was generalized among women by the murder of a woman which occurred near Gangnam Station in Seoul in May 2016. As a result of this incident, Korean women began to speak out one after another, and it became a big social movement. From 2015, a year before that, there were signs of a growing awareness of feminism. Misogyny was spreading online due to fake news that the first infected person by MERS was a woman in her twenties who returned from overseas.

In the same year, radical feminists launched an internet community site called "Megalia". In Megalia, the words that men despised women were also applied to men as a counterattack against misogyny. However, some excessive mirroring not only insulted men excessively but also ridiculed unrelated sexual minorities, which became a social problem in the country.

Megalia was closed in 2017. However, people who used Megalia had developed a feminism peculiar to South Korea in various ways, such as the opening and operating of a radical feminism site called "Womad". [9]

In 2018, some of them created a publishing company "Yalda Books" which published only "radical feminist" books and introduced Sheila Jeffreys' books to South Korea. [10] And in 2019, the company also invited Sheila Jeffreys to speak at an event. They played a role in introducing the claims of anti-trans "radical feminism" which is a minority position in other countries. They criticized the sexual minority movement that raised gender issues by naming it "transgenderism" and argued that biological women's rights must be prioritized. Their "radical feminism" was theorized in the anti-trans "position". And it spread rapidly in the country as the "position" of women for "suspicion and investigation" against trans women.

Some of them formed a movement against a trans woman's admission to Sookmyung Women's University on the grounds of "women's safety" and eventually forced her to give up her admission. At the same time, the above-mentioned suicides of the trans women were reported.

### **Misunderstanding of "radical feminism"**

Anti-trans "radical feminism" has an underlying liberal feminist point of view in many cases. [11] Anti-trans feminists do not represent feminists as a whole, let alone women in general. In South Korea, mainstream women's groups such as the Korean Women's Associations United (KWAU), feminist scholars, and activists supported Ms. A's enrollment.

Catharine A. MacKinnon, who led the anti-pornography movement and seemed to be an icon of radical feminism, made affirmative comments about trans women [12] And in recent years, Gloria Steinem, a leader of second-wave feminism in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, changed her view of being critical of transgender people. [13]

It should also be noted that alongside the claims of anti-trans feminists are rapprochement with some traditional religious conservative layers of the society. They perceive the cause of women's oppression as patriarchal oppression. And setting excessive stipulations to explain the phenomenon centering on "women's safety" and conventional women's appearances, they regard only biological women as the subject of their struggle and misidentify trans women as dangerous.

The fundamental problem with obsession with biologically defining the category woman is that it enables a politics that is potentially reactionary. And the offensive ideology of biological sex essentialism scapegoating inflames a bigotry. Those biological claims are based on the logic reducing the Simone de Beauvoir statement "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" to biological features, many of which correspond to physiological.

Trans woman's "danger" is exaggerated and irrational fears grow as the ideas that trans women threaten women's safety and use violence in women's spaces spread widely on the internet. These remarks are not new, but are based only on conventional transphobia that is deeply rooted in Korean society. They are deliberately distorting the root cause of women's oppression.

### **Feminism, which incites hatred and discrimination, cannot be accepted as a social movement**

Feminism is a women's liberation struggle for those who have been excluded from the male-centered society formed by capitalism and patriarchy. It is also the practical struggle against the central category demanded by the male-centered ideology of the rulers for liberation of the oppressed and excluded such as gender minorities, disabled people, and migrant workers. And the history of feminist movements has been a process of expanding the category of women to a social one and of including those oppressed by patriarchy into the category.

However, anti-trans feminists regard only biological women as "real women" and intentionally narrow the female category. And they exclude those who did not fit into their narrow "real women" category. For exclusion, anti-feminist groups that were neither state nor capital emerged as subjects of "suspicion and investigation." Then ludicrous and groundless transphobic rumors were spread with feminist language. [14]

Transphobic hate and xenophobic hate have something in common. Historically, groundless rumors

against oppressed groups were also a harbinger of death for them. [15] Transphobic hate is not an opinion but a crime. Meanwhile, they see women's rights and the rights of trans women as competing and clashing.

But transgender rights are not mutually exclusive with women's rights. The idea of getting women's rights first is a capitalist interpretation.

The transphobic hate carried out under the pretext of "freedom of opinion" and exclusion of trans women for the purpose of expanding women's rights are based on the most capitalistic and neoliberal perspective. Trans rights cannot be guaranteed by reactionary politics under capitalism. We cannot accept feminism which incites hatred and discrimination by the destructive logic of capitalism as a social movement.

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## Footnotes

[1] The suicides of trans women we know about will be the tip of the iceberg as some people in the trans community do not want to be recorded as transgender. (See Angela Lavoipierre, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 21 November 2019, "Why is it so hard to work out how many transgender people have been murdered in Australia?") In December this year, the Trevor Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to LGBTQ+ youth suicide prevention, released state-level survey data from nearly 34,000 queer and trans youth ages 13 to 24. The survey says that more than 50% of trans and non-binary youth in US considered suicide this year. (See Sam Levin, 16 décembre 2022, *The Guardian* :

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/dec/16/us-trans-non-binary-youth-suicide-mental-health>

Available on ESSF (article 65069), [More than 50% of trans and non-binary youth in US considered suicide this year, survey says.](#))

[2] Jeju Queer Culture Festival was first held on Jeju Island in 2017. It was then held for three years until 2019, before the Covid-19 Crisis.

[3] FFRENCH Méabh, 20 October 2022, Rupture:

<https://rupture.ie/articles/transphobia-is-the-feminism-of-fools>

Available on ESSF (article 64843), [Transphobia is the feminism of fools.](#)

[4] The investigation was authorized to a survey team of Sookmyung Women's University in which transgender student faced discriminations both on and off campus.

[5] The name of "Pride Parade" was later changed to "The Queer Culture Festival". In 2022, the 22<sup>nd</sup> festival was held.

[6] Protestant, especially evangelicals, wield outsize political power in South Korea. About one third of the South Korean population identifies themselves as Christian with about 19% being Protestant.

[7] 권기담 (Kwon Ji-dam), The Hankyoreh, 8 February 2020, "트랜스젠더 학생들 (Transgender students who had been admitted to Sookmyung Women's University eventually gave up admission)"

[8] FFRENCH Méabh, 20 October 2022, Rupture:  
<https://rupture.ie/articles/transphobia-is-the-feminism-of-fools>  
Available on ESSF (article 64843), [Transphobia is the feminism of fools](https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article64843).

[9] Karen Yamanaka, 19 May 2022, ESSF (article 62499), [Women's Movement in South Korea: How to Break the Structural Oppression](https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article62499):  
<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article62499>

[10] Sheila Jeffreys is a founder member of the Women's Human Rights Campaign (WHRC) which is described as an anti-trans feminist group.

[11] Karen Yamanaka, 19 May 2022, ESSF (article 62499), [Women's Movement in South Korea: How to Break the Structural Oppression](https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article62499):  
<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article62499>.

Liberal feminism has been the mainstream in South Korea and has taken the initiative. But institutional reforms promoted by Korean liberal women's movements have not changed the lives of women.

[12] TCP, TransAdvocate, 27 November 2015, "Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: An Interview With Catharine A. MacKinnon".

[13] In the Channel 4 News program "Gloria Steinem on feminism and transgender rights" aired in 2015, Gloria Steinem commented about a trans woman "We need to change society to suit the individual, not the individual to suit society."

[14] Their claims of threats to women's safety from trans women etc. are baseless fear mongering. Some anti-trans feminist groups use illegal filming, rape, and other sexual crimes as evidence to incite fear. But most of these crimes have nothing to do with trans women. On the other hand, fake news translated without verifying the contents of overseas anti-transgender sites are also used to inspire a feeling of fear. Even if some of them are true, crimes committed by individuals should not be replaced with transgender issues as a whole.

[15] Karen Yamanaka, 26 March 2022, ESSF (article 61710), [Racism under Covid-19 in Japan](https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article61710):  
<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article61710>. In the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, about 6,000 Koreans were killed in Japan by the groundless rumor "Koreans and Communists poisoned the well" deliberately spread by then Japan's state power.