The Rise of the 4B Movement: Reimagining Futures Through Radical Resistance

Ash Schepens

Abstract

Following the 2024 U.S presidential election, the 4B movement—a South Korean feminist movement which is characterized by women's refusal to participate in dating, marriage, childbirth, and sex with men—has experienced increased popularity in the West. Naturally, this inspires questions about the 4B movement, its origins, and its objectives. Asking these questions is necessary to avoid an oversimplification and/or Western co-optation of the movement. Through examining the historical contexts of Korean feminism, alongside modern socioeconomic conditions and online activism, this paper argues that the 4B movement can be conceptualized as a distinct radical feminist movement that responds to multiple intersecting power structures. By analyzing how the state, capitalism, and patriarchy work in concert to control women's bodies and futures, the 4B movement's counter-participation presents itself as political resistance aimed at reclaiming women's autonomy and envisioning new feminist futures outside of patriarchal constraints.

For the past decade or so, Western politics have become increasingly fraught with culture war-inspired rhetoric and rampant mainstreaming of fringe, extremist ideologies. The modern ideological battle has led to certain freedoms and rights, previously espoused as inalienable, safely cemented and protected by law—such as the right of final authority over decisions concerning one's body—to become points of discursive interest to be revisited and contested in the public sphere, especially online. With the rise of alpha-male podcasters berserk over falling birth rates, Christian nationalists invoking past gendered hierarchies, and politicians vying for bodily control enshrined in law, there have been growing concerns regarding the infringement of various women's rights. Resultingly, there has been an increase of Western attention given to various women's movements, including South Korea's contemporary women's movement, the 4B Movement, that may have never broken containment otherwise. After exposure to glimpses of the movement, the intellectually curious—those who are serious about political resistance, or those who are interested to explore where the growing Western gender divide might lead—may be drawn to try to understand the cultural and historical contexts of the movement which are always inevitably left out of social media posts with character and time limits. What exactly is the 4B movement? How did it emerge and what are its primary goals or motivations? To answer these questions, this paper explores Korean feminism in modern and historical contexts, illuminating the complex matrix of powers to which the 4B movement finds itself in response. In responding to the way in which women's bodies and lives are controlled through the state, the beauty industry, capitalism, temporality, and misogynistic attitudes on the individual and societal level, the 4B movement carves out a place for itself as its own distinct, radical feminist

Vol. 9(1) | DOI: https://doi.org/10.31542/a2gf2013
MacEwan University Student eJournal | © 2025 under CC BY-NC | ISSN 2369-5617

movement whereby activists refuse to participate in the broader patriarchy—including, but not limited to, Korea's "reproductive futurism"[1]—as a political act.

What is the 4B Movement? Preliminary Understandings

The 4B Movement, also known as the "4 Nos" is a South Korean[2] women's movement that follows four tenants: no marriage (*bihon*), no childbirth (*bichulsan*), no sex (*bisekseu*), and no dating (*biyeonae*) with men. The name itself encompasses the counter-participatory spirit of the movement—which is most prevalent among young, online-based feminists—as "B" is itself a homophone of the Korean '*bi,*' meaning 'not.'[3] Ultimately, the movement operates through young women's refusal to participate in the expected gendered activities which, then, entails the broader project of the reconstitution of one's life "outside the confines of traditional gender roles."[4] Thus, the 4B feminists implicitly pose the question: what does a woman's[5] future look like outside of patriarchal participation?

The Birth of the 4B Movement: Contemporary Origins and Historical Contexts

Contemporary Origins: Megalia, Gangnam Station, Escape the Corset

To understand the 4B movement in its entirety, one must look towards its contemporary political origins, as well as some broader historical contexts of Korean women's movements and the overall treatment of women. Given the fluid, online nature of the 4B movement, it is difficult to pinpoint a precise starting point from which the movement ensued. That said, there are a few modern political junctures that one can point to in terms of the 4B movements' emergence.

One important antecedent would be the emergence of Megalia, an online feminist group, in 2015. The group arose online by confronting the ways in which misogyny was perpetrated by "male-dominated internet communities."[6] Their discourse also criticized the culture of misogyny present in broader Korean society. This cyber-misogyny itself has its own context worth disclosing: throughout the 2010s, gendered tensions began to arise, mostly as a response to economic conditions. Still feeling the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, and the prior IMF crisis in 1997, many young Korean people were dealing with rising costs and increased competition in academia and the job market. During this time, the number of Korean women enrolled in higher education began surpassing those of men. Moreover, women were seen as competitors in the job market. Resultingly, some Korean men went to the internet with their frustrations.[7] There has been an ongoing 'gender war' that serves as a vital precursor for the 4B movement. Miseong Woo, in analyzing gendered violence in South Korean thrillers, argues that depictions of

[1] Jieun Lee and Euisol Jeong, "The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future with/in a Non-Reproductive Future in Korea," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 637, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1929097.
[2] *Korean*, hereafter.
[3] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 633.
[4] Ming Gao, "'A woman is not a baby-making machine': a brief history of South Korea's 4B movement – and why it's making waves in America," *The Conversation*, November 10, 2024, https://theconversation.com/a-woman-is-not-a-baby-making-machine-a-brief-history-of-south-koreas-4b-movement-and-why-its-making-waves-in-america-243355.
[5] It must be said here: for the sake of brevity, the term 'women' is referring to young, feminist, Korean women throughout this essay. It is not meant to speak to the experiences of all women globally.
[6] Jeong, Euisol, and Jieun Lee, "We Take the Red Pill, We Confront the DickTrix: Online Feminist Activism and the Augmentation of Gendered Realities in South Korea," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 706, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447354.
[7] Anna Sussman, "A World Without Men," *Pulitzer Center*, March 8, 2023, https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/world-without-men.

violence, which are most primarily against women—as well as the "monstrous feminine image of female aggressors"[8]—are symbolic media responses which reflect growing male anxieties throughout Korea as gender dynamics continue to change, moving from the traditional "Confucian notion of social relations."[9]

The 'gender war' also manifests online. Some Korean men would engage in various acts of online misogyny, through cyberbullying, trolling, circulating revenge porn, and developing their own neologisms, such as *kimchinyeo*, which is used to stereotype the "selfish, self-obsessed, and vain" Korean women.[10] Here, women were blamed for men's economic insecurity. The misogynistic online discourse served as an avenue to "prop up hegemonic masculinity"[11] by attempting to scapegoat and subordinate women. Megalia's response was to invoke mirror tactics: they swapped the genders, stole men's language and came up with their own neologisms, and began their own internet 'trolling' tirade with the goal of "irritat[ing] young Korean men,"[12] while also sharing their gendered experiences. It is argued that the mirroring "rendered visible what had previously been invisible."[13] By adopting and gender-swapping the men's language, Megalia activists highlight the misogyny behind the online rhetoric which, in turn, continues to illuminate the instances of misogyny Korean women face outside of the web. Consequently, Megalians participate in feminist activism online and offline.[14]

Another vital event is the Gangnam station murder case and the activism that followed. In 2016, a 23-year-old woman was stabbed and killed in a public restroom in a relatively busy, populated area of Seoul. The incident was originally treated as a random killing, though it was later made clear that Kim Seong-min, the perpetrator, was purposely carrying out a gendered attack as he felt he had been consistently ignored by women.[15] The crime was never charged as a hate crime. Online and offline activism ensued, with the most notable tactic being the plastering of sticky notes all over Gangnam station. Messages on the sticky notes would depict Korean women's own experiences of gendered violence and other oppressive forces. Aside from the images proliferating online, the sticky-note tributes were also originally brought on by a Twitter post.[16] The combination of the online/offline tactics serve as "alternative media"[17] which ultimately seeks to problematize existing hegemonic frameworks by providing counterhegemonic alternatives. By telling their own stories, the "personalization of politics" ensues, which is a common feature of digital activism.[18]

Finally, one should also consider the "Escape the Corset" movement (ECM), yet another feminist movement which originated online amongst young Korean women. ECM originated in

[8] Miseong Woo, "4: Gendered Violence, Crisis of Masculinity, and Regressive Transgression in Postmillennial South Korean Crime Thrillers," In *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, eds. Jesook Song and Michelle Cho (University of Michigan Press, 2024), 108, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12297089.9.
[9] Woo, "Gendered Violence," 108.
[10] Jeong and Lee, "We Take the Red Pill," 710.
[11] Jeong and Lee, "We Take the Red Pill," 708.
[12] Jeong and Lee, "We Take the Red Pill," 706.
[13] Jeong and Lee, "We Take the Red Pill," 712.
[14] Jeong and Lee, "We Take the Red Pill," 706.
[15] Jinsook Kim, "Sticky Activism: The Gangnam Station Murder Case and New Feminist Practices against Misogyny and Femicide," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021): 37–38, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2021.0044.
[16] Kim, "Sticky Activism," 38.
[17] Kim, "Sticky Activism," 43.
[18] Kim, "Sticky Activism," 47.

2016 as an attempt for young Korean women to liberate themselves from “psychological, physical, sexual, and social repressions,” which are represented by the metaphor of the corset.[19] By employing the imagery of a corset, the movement highlights their target: the limiting, patriarchal structures that act upon women’s minds and bodies. Beauty standards and the beauty industry are seen as primary targets. Activists seek to challenge the constricting beauty standards within South Korea by rebelling against them through acts like not wearing makeup and shaving their heads. These standards are deeply ingrained in the society, acting as the “ultimate value…allowed for and imposed upon women,”[20] and can affect a woman's social and economic life. It is important to note that the ECM varies from other, similar Western movements regarding women’s embodiment, as ECM hopes to altogether reject aesthetic norms, while other movements aim to expand beauty standards.[21]

Cyber-feminism: Consciousness-Raising through the Personal and Everyday

The 4B movement is closely related to these other modern, online movements in terms of its strategies, goals, and motivators. It is itself birthed out of the varied discourses that are engaged by Megalia, ECM, and Gangnam Station activists, including discourses about economics—especially economic struggles and their relation to ‘gender wars’ and the ‘crisis of masculinity,’—online/offline misogyny and gendered violence, and oppressive beauty standards. Further, as a primarily online movement, it has operated through bringing attention to shared lived experiences of patriarchal powers in Korean women’s everyday lives. Activism that takes place in online spheres (i.e., cyber-activism) can serve as a powerful consciousness raising tool. Cyber-activism offers a platform for conversations between women about their gendered experiences that occur directly online in male-dominated internet spaces, while these conversations also work to transvalue women’s offline experiences. Euisol Jong describes online spaces as an area where “gendered aspects of reality are augmented,”[22] thus altering the way users interact with, make sense of, and apply significance to their everyday experiences that take place offline. These online discourses can specifically make visible the disparities between lived experiences of women and dominant cultural rhetoric that argues gender equality has been achieved.[23] Another author states that the ECM primarily served “as a catalyst for young women to critically examine unquestioned matters.”[24] Similar sentiments arise once again when analyzing the activism following the Gangnam murder. The digital sphere provides a democratized and decentralized network of communication where activism functions voluntarily, without a formal organization.[25] As well, it often operates through the sharing of personal stories which are then perceived as collective since they illuminate that many experiences of misogyny are shared among large numbers of Korean women and operate under a matrix of different power structures, as opposed to being heavily isolated and rare occurrences. In sharing

[19] Ji-Yeong Yun, “Escaping the Corset: Rage as a Force of Resistance and Creation in the Korean Feminist Movement,” *Hypatia* 37, no. 2 (2022): 260, https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2022.15.
[20] Yun, “Escaping the Corset,” 261.
[21] Gowoon Jung et al., “‘I Feel Free and Comfortable’: The Escape the Corset Movement in South Korea and the Question of Women’s Agency,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 107 (2024): 5, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102973.
[22] Jeong and Lee, “We Take the Red Pill,” 707.
[23] Kim, “Sticky Activism,” 55.
[24] Jung et al., “I Feel Free,” 7.
[25] Kim, “Sticky Activism,” 45.

experiences, women also partake in the "mutual sharing of emotions and affects"[26] that allows them to build relationships. Resultingly, a collective feminist identity arises and inspires further collective action, whether in the form of sustaining existing movements, or establishing new ones like the 4B movement through further mobilization both online and offline.

Historical Contexts: Feminism vs Familism

Though the 4B movement's beginnings most directly relate to other contemporary, online, Korean feminist movements, it is also worth divulging the earlier history of women's movements in Korea. The strong, gendered segregation in South Korea is often attributed to the Confucian tradition. This has contributed to a "unique culture and solidarity"[27] between Korean women. Mobilization of women has occurred at numerous points in Korea's history: Heisook Kim discusses the history of feminism in Korea, arguing that during the Japanese occupation, nationalism was a means through which women's consciousness could be raised. There were numerous women's independence movements during this time in which women, through nationalism, were "awakened […] to the logic that they could do something meaningful for themselves."[28] The independence movements offered a pathway towards gendered equality. Following 1945, however, feminism and nationalism came to be at odds as nationalists were increasingly attempting to instill the social system with patriarchal norms. Women were understood mostly as mothers, who, through childbirth, would perpetuate the family[29] and, consequently – perhaps even indirectly – would also perpetuate the Korean state. Though Korean women cannot be generalized, it is true that a historical memory exists in which women's rights have been in conflict with nationalist and/or statist formal and informal institutions that bolster traditional family values.

This sentiment is echoed again by Doowon Suh, who argues that much of feminist activism in Korea has come about in response to patriarchal Confucian culture, social discrimination, and gendered violence. In their article, they follow the trajectory of the gender frame that the Korea's Women Hot Line constructed when waging political struggles throughout the 1970s to 1990s. Because of the work of varied women's groups, the Special Act on Sexual Violence was eventually passed in 1994, alongside some other formal legislation that addressed violence against women.[30] However, for some activists, the legislation was perceived as unsatisfactory due to its limited scope in addressing sexual violence. Namely, some felt it failed to truly answer to feminist political frames as it "implicitly still conceived of ways to preserve the integrity of families,"[31] and failed to conceptualize violence against women as an effect of a "broader patriarchal system of discrimination and misogyny."[32] Ultimately, feminist ideologies came in further conflict with ideals of "familism" in the passing of the Act on the Prevention of

[26] Kim, "Sticky Activism," 51.
[27] Heisook Kim, "Feminist Philosophy in Korea: Subjectivity of Korean Women," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 2 (2009): 247, https://doi.org/10.1086/590977.
[28] Kim, "Feminist Philosophy in Korea," 248.
[29] Kim, "Feminist Philosophy in Korea," 248–9.
[30] It is important to note that violence against women was understood as a form of state violence stemming mainly from political authoritarianism, not solely instances of individualized violence against women.
[31] 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): 344, https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2014.0016.
[32] Kim, "Sticky Activism," 57.

Domestic Violence.[33] Once more, the family unit and its maintenance and perpetuation seemed to be privileged over individual rights, as individuals were still defined in relation to their families. The emphasis on family was, for many activists, a symbol of a broader patriarchal ideology. Moreover, the legislation of certain gendered policies had the inadvertent effect of "empowering the role of the state,"[34] both in terms of promoting familism, and in influencing women's movements. Over 50 years later, the same feminist concerns that were waged following Korea's independence—that is, concerns about the state's emphasis on the family—continued to appear in feminist discourses and political struggles.

The 4B movement, as well as other modern online movements that inspired it, emerged within a specific historical context. Over the past century, Korean women have waged numerous political struggles in order to try to dismantle the gendered segregation that pervades Korean society. The conflict seems to have been largely reinvigorated in the past decade or so. Again, one cannot treat all instances of Korean women's activism as a monolith; a common denominator appears in the confrontation of the ways in which both state and individuals are complicit in patriarchy through bolstering and institutionalizing traditional family roles—where women are understood most primarily as mothers and reproductive agents.

"Feminist Reboot:" Bridging the Gap Between Past and Present

Another distinction that delineates modern Korean feminist movements as unique rests on the conceptualization of women as consumer subjects. Following the IMF crisis of 1997, Korea increasingly accepted capitalist, neoliberal values, which retained a gendered aspect. Hee-jeong Sohn sets forth the notion that the primary response to the crisis consisted of conceptualizing the economic crisis as, instead, "the fantasy of a 'crisis of masculinity,'" and responded economically by "reorganizing the male-centered labor market."[35] The author argues that economic and social changes in the 1970s and 1980's led to the promotion of women's socioeconomic participation and the pursuit of women's self-improvement, which also appealed to feminists of the time, given women were acquiring broader public roles. Eventually, this led to legislation of equal employment for the sexes, further enshrining new gender roles. All of this took place at a time where Korea felt they had to integrate with global neoliberalization. What came to be established was a distinct society whereby women's public participation was encouraged while gender discrimination was still operative in public.[36]

Though Korean women in the late 1980s and 1990's were met with growing autonomy—especially within the public, economic sphere—this newfound agency ensured within "a context of patriarchal capitalism" that simultaneously pushed for women's economic participation while pushing them back in the private domain by appealing to "ideologies of motherhood and reproduction."[37] Consequently, the system reclaimed control over women's agency as women were expected to abide by traditional gender norms while remaining "a

[33] Suh and Park, "Framing Dynamics," 344.
[34] Suh and Park, "Framing Dynamics," 345.
[35] Hee-jeong Sohn, "1: Feminism Reboot: Neoliberalism, Korean Movies, Misogyny, and Beyond," In *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, eds. Jesook Song and Michelle Cho (University of Michigan Press, 2024), 31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12297089.6.
[36] Sohn, "Feminism Reboot," 32.
[37] Sohn, "Feminism Reboot," 33.

flexible and adaptable workforce," so that their public participation would only go so far.[38] Pop-culture, specifically cinema, reproduced the image of the ideal and modern Korean woman: someone who reconciled professionalism and motherhood. Motherhood was depicted as "the ultimate virtue of women," though Sohn argues that the idea of compatibility of the two domains was socially fabricated to benefit the state.[39]

However, following the IMF economic crisis, Korea had to maintain and optimize a flexible labor force, moving even more towards Western-originating neoliberal frameworks. The crisis resulted in growing unemployment, and with it, a population of men who were facing grievances in the face of weakening patriarchal power. Society then centered their efforts on "consoling the anxiety of men" by reverting to archetypes of men as economic providers and women as strong mothers. Once again, women's reproduction role was prioritized, especially in the face of low birth rates.[40] Further, women were increasingly excluded from certain economic spheres and opportunities, becoming merely supplemental laborers. Finally, it is argued that certain media depicted and fostered neoliberal ideals. Despite women's growing exclusion from the work force, films like *Sunny* generated the image of women rejecting the patriarchal role of 'mother,' while focusing on their own self-improvement, especially via consumerism. However, the author describes these images as a postfeminist fantasy, stemming from a patriarchal industry that was used to help Korean women "endure the era of neoliberalization" through providing false hopes.[41] Of course, the promotion of the idea of women's femininity and liberation being founded through a women's economic agency was not enough to save them from their own economic precarity following Korea's rapid economic transformation, nor did it prevent increasing systemic gender inequalities and misogynistic social attitudes.[42] The 2000s then increasingly saw women carving for themselves a space in the online realm, eventually culminating in a move away from "overtly commercially driven, female-oriented" online spaces for other online communities in the 2010s.[43] Online movements that disseminated amongst Korean women post-2015 are then best understood as their own distinct iteration of feminism, which is responding to a history of economic and gendered conflicts. I also argue that they can be seen as reacting against the increasing proliferation of neoliberal, feminist ideals in South Korea in the late 80s through to the 2010s, which is especially true of the 4B movement, as these movements are recognizing and responding to a number of complex, interrelated, and oppressive systems of power.

The 4B movement may, at first glance, appear as another variation of neoliberal feminism which depicts women as individual subjects who—despite facing inequality—can actualize themselves. However, neoliberal movements oft deny the intersecting power structures that come to inform and configure women's lives. The 4B movement is of a different ilk. It operates through resistance to and counter-participation within a complex matrix of systemic forces. It is not merely about individual choice, or economic and material rights but, instead, follows other feminist evolutions by "question[ing] the sites and mechanisms of

[38] Sohn, "Feminism Reboot," 33.
[39] Sohn, "Feminism Reboot," 33–34.
[40] Sohn, "Feminism Reboot," 35.
[41] Sohn, "Feminism Reboot," 36–40.
[42] Gao, "A woman is not a baby-making machine."
[43] Sohn, "Feminism Reboot," 41.

power."[44] Rather than treating feminism as an individual project, the 4B movement and other online Korean feminist movements repeatedly engage in a "discursive struggle" that consistently reassesses and redefines the "relationship between women and freedom"[45] by locating and responding to various identified power structures to understand the complex subjectivities that Korean women face in their everyday lives. 4B activists' counter-participation is not merely a matter of liberation through individual choice, but a stark act of political resistance to multiple patriarchal forces.

Making Sense of 4B: How the State, Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Temporality Intersect

With all of that said, our question asks how to make sense of all of this. How do different power structures intersect in terms of Korean women's subjectivities? It has already been illustrated that gendered violence and harmful misogynistic rhetoric pervade Korean women's lives, both online and offline, as a result of complicated gender history within society. Moreover, the ECM as well as the argument posed by Jesook Song—that modern Korean feminist movements are unique based on their understanding of women's positions in capitalism as consumer subjects—highlight how economic systems and beauty standards work in concert as oppressive powers. Finally, historical contexts emphasize that much of Korean feminist framing throughout history has scrutinized the state's perpetuation of patriarchal norms through the centering of the family unit, even when trying to treat gender inequalities. To draw some final connections, we will explore the concept of bio-power, as well as general intersecting points of the nation-state, capitalism, the beauty industry, and their subjectification of women's bodies. In their intersections, the power structures acting upon Korean women also come to affect their own temporality and understanding of their futures. What comes to be illustrated, then, is that the 4B movement positions itself as a reaction to an entanglement of numerous different powers.

Foucault's Bio-Power: State Control & Monitoring of Bodies

The promotion of family values has historically been taken as a patriarchal symbol for many Korean feminists given its roots in Confucian, gendered traditions. Part of these concerns are rooted in the understanding that the state's consistent defining of women primarily in terms of their reproductive ability impedes on Korean women's agency as individual, fully realized subjects through their objectification as reproductive resources for the state.

These ideas speak to Foucault's theory of biopolitics and biopower, which ultimately argues that in modern societies, political powers act upon the individual and species' body in order to "administe[r] life."[46] It is the power that operates over the species' body with which we are concerned, as it is here where we locate the regulatory controls or "biopolitics of the population,"[47] where power operates through controlling, monitoring, and optimizing the biological processes of a population, like birthrates. Though biopolitics operates on many levels, our primary concern is the way sex becomes "the theme of political operations [and] economic

[44] Özlem Aslan and Zeynep Gambetti, "Provincializing Fraser's History: Feminism and Neoliberalism Revisited," *History of the Present* 1, no. 1 (2011): 138, https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.1.1.0130.
[45] Aslan and Gambetti, "Provincializing Fraser's History," 137.
[46] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (Vintage Books, 1990), 139.
[47] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 139.

interventions"[48] whereby procreation comes to be a point of power intervention that acts upon the body. Indeed, Foucault argues that one of the ways 'sex' has been defined historically was as "that which by itself constitutes a woman's body, ordering it wholly in terms of the functions of reproduction"[49] so that state powers can take part in the management of life. I will mention briefly that Foucault's biopolitics, which "center[s] on the body as a machine," where the individual body is disciplined and used for its power,[50] is also operative as women's bodies are controlled through the workforce though this power treats both sexes as its object.

Policies in Korea have often tried to "manage reproduction, care labor, and welfare"[51] through promoting and incentivizing marriage, especially during moments of economic crisis in order to raise low birth-rates. Moreover, social assistance is usually directed at women who "hav[e] a clear reproductive role."[52] The state has historically tried to promote traditional family values both ideologically and materially by utilizing specific economic interventions which, as aforementioned, has often served as a point of contention between feminists and the Korean state itself. These contentions came to a head in 2016 with the government's release of National Birth-Maps, one of which mapped the number of reproductive women by district and age, color-coding them in different shades of pink. The website was shut down shortly after release, but many women saw this as a clear indicator that the state viewed women as both agents who are responsible for lowering birth-rates, and as reproductive agents of the state that need to be managed.[53] This served as a hallmark event in the emergence of the 4B movement, delivering the message to activists that it was not only instances of individualized misogyny that they must position themselves against, but also a patriarchal state that views women mostly in terms of their bodies' biological functions: as "means to perpetuate a patriarchal pedigree."[54] Further, state interventions operate by "pathologizing and punishing desireless subjects,"[55] especially in terms of exclusion from certain economic policies, given population growth and economic growth are heavily intertwined. Jesook Song also poses a vital question, which speaks to the 4B movements' intrinsic framing: "whose future is guaranteed by the liberal, capitalist state?"[56]

Korean Beauty: Interactions Between the State, Capitalism, and Beauty

The Escape the Corset movement, which resists strict societal beauty standards, is inherently linked to the expansion of the South Korean beauty industry in contemporary years. The country has its own reputation as a "beauty-obsessed nation."[57] As such, what has come to be established are "visual economies."[58] Images of Korea as a beauty capital are, in part, "projects

[48] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 146.
[49] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 153.
[50] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 139.
[51] Eunjung Kim, "6: Against Confinement: Degeneration, Mental Disability, and the Conditions of Nonviolence in The Vegetarian," In *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, eds. Jesook Song and Michelle Cho (University of Michigan Press, 2024), 143, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12297089.12.
[52] Kim, "Against Confinement," 143.
[53] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 633; Kim, "Against Confinement," 143–4.
[54] Kim, "Feminist Philosophy in Korea," 250.
[55] Kim, "Against Confinement," 149.
[56] Kim, "Against Confinement," 149.
[57] Jung et al., "I Feel Free," 1.
[58] Sharon H. Lee, "Beauty Between Empires: Global Feminism, Plastic Surgery, and the Trouble with Self-Esteem," *Frontiers (Boulder)* 37, no. 1 (2016): 2, https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2016.a618381.

of pop culture and plastic surgery" that are taken on by the state for economic pursuits.[59] The continuously growing K-Pop industry relies heavily on visual aspects, so that idols' appearances are under direct management and also come to be "commodified alongside their music and dance."[60] Moreover, Womenlink (a Korean feminist non-profit organization) argues that the large amount of plastic surgery within Korea is not a reflection of voluntary choices that reflect individuals' low self-esteem, but a problematic phenomenon of lookism that occurs within a specific cultural and socioeconomic context.[61] It is no surprise that capitalism, by presenting the illusion of personal choice, can easily be used as a lens through which to shift blame onto the female consumers themselves, as opposed to acknowledging the conditions that lead women to these choices.

In their framing of the issue, Womenlink sees lookism as a women's issue, as it affects women's job and marriage opportunities. Another article points out that Korean, working women are expected to participate in "dress-up labor" in order to adhere to certain appearance standards.[62] These standards affect women asymmetrically, existing within and contributing to a hegemonic gender order through "feminized embodiment."[63] Moreover, the self-management of one's body through upholding appearance is seen as a "prerequisite for citizenship."[64] Neoliberal ideals come to be internalized, especially following the 1990s, when, in actuality, the work put into being 'beautiful' resembles a type of 'forced labor' imposed by the beauty industry, capitalism, and other societal structures that uphold strict beauty expectations for women. Individuals come to be controlled through their own freedom, which one feminist scholar highlights as another technique of biopower, where the body is self-managed to symbolize one's position.[65] Rejecting these powers can be particularly hard when women, as consumers, are continuously promised happiness and well-being by the beauty industry. Not only is participating in beauty practices necessary for one's career, and painted as an avenue of self-realization, but it also affects a woman's attractiveness as a wife. As a result, ECM activists see the movement as a way to distance themselves from "the objectification of women as mere dolls for men"[66] and counter male perspectives that influence the beauty standards. Forces of patriarchy, capitalism, and nationhood come to intersect to constrain women's choices in terms of their body, despite self-management being "narrated as liberatory."[67] Finally, the state itself is a complicit actor. Lookism acts as another method of control upon women's bodies, while simultaneously producing a beauty standard "deemed particularly Korean"[68] of which the state is aware, and off which the state profits, through the promotion of the Korean beauty industry.

Women In Time: Temporal Relations Underlying the 4B Movement

[59] Lee, "Beauty Between Empires," 2.
[60] Lee, "Beauty Between Empires," 5.
[61] Lee, "Beauty Between Empires," 12–13.
[62] Jung et al., "I Feel Free," 3.
[63] Jung et al., "I Feel Free," 2.
[64] Jung et al., "I Feel Free," 3.
[65] Lee, "Beauty Between Empires," 15.
[66] Jung et al., "I Feel Free," 2.
[67] Lee, "Beauty Between Empires," 16.
[68] Lee, "Beauty Between Empires," 18.

The 4B movement exists within a particular context and history of socioeconomic sex segregation. Consequently, the movement itself responds not only to individual misogynistic men, but also patriarchal control of women via the nation-state, capitalism, and general expectations of women. Ultimately, all these forces also intersect in a unique way that alters women's own temporality and understandings of their futures. Not only their bodies come to be controlled, but also their time.

Most immediately, women have their time directly controlled through the aforementioned 'dress-up labor." Though we have discussed the ECM as responding to beauty standards and capitalism, the 4B and ECM movement are closely related,[69] and 4B activists do recognize that capitalism (and the beauty industry) work to exploit their labor, as well as their consumption by "parasiti[zing] on their desire."[70] Upholding beauty practices involves the investment of time and energy. Moreover, it also costs a considerable amount of money.[71] Consequently, it affects women's ability to plan for the future, especially due to the capitalist promises of immediate happiness and overall self-improvement realized through purchasing.

One author describes women's temporal experience as a "passive present."[72] The concept comes from Simone de Beauvoir, who argues that certain events[73] in a woman's life act as temporal ruptures which "annex a woman into the universe of men."[74] Simultaneously, women are drawn back into the present, while also conceiving of their future in a limited way, as the prospect of marriage transforms time into a closed structure. The foreclosing of the future alters a women's being-in-the-world, while the achievement of this future (i.e., marriage) does not re-open women's time. Instead, she is "incorporated into [the husband's] time."[75]

Once more, concealed powers come to rule over women's actions. This distinct, gendered temporality acts as another force of women's subordination. Indeed, Foucault also argues that time acts as a disciplining, controlling force upon bodies and their individual actions, both presently and in the future.[76] In this case, the intangible force of time works to close women's futures, and with it, their world so that women remain in their subordinated positions. In their own way, 4B activists recognize that envisioning new futures is itself a feminist pursuit. Numerous 4B feminists have acknowledged that their future only existed in a limited way, viewing themselves as expiring after a certain age, while also conceptualizing marriage as a "kind of barrier" where her own time ends.[77] The present, then, becomes a temporary state, but even within this state one's attention is, to some degree, directed towards finding marriage. The present is not only temporary, but an in-between state in which a woman's 'potential' is not yet realized, such that her decisions come to be made "in relation to this marital future."[78] By

[69] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 633.
[70] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 640.
[71] Jung et al., "I Feel Free," 5.
[72] Megan M. Burke, "Gender as Lived Time: Reading 'The Second Sex' for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality," *Hypatia* 33, no. 1 (2018): 112, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45153676.
[73] These events include girlhood, heterosexual initiation, and marriage: Burke, "Gender as Lived Time," 118.
[74] Burke, "Gender as Lived Time," 118.
[75] Burke, "Gender as Lived Time," 118.
[76] Jürgen Portschy, "Times of Power, Knowledge and Critique in the Work of Foucault," *Time & Society* 29, no. 2 (2020): 403, https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X20911786.
[77] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 638.
[78] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 638.

refusing marriage, a woman's "time-space" is reconfigured.[79] Suddenly, a new, open future awaits her.

Consequently, economics becomes important, not in terms of liberating oneself through self-management, but as a necessary consideration if a woman hopes to "maintain one's *bihon* life in the long term."[80] That is, women must now, in conceptualizing these new futures, be concerned with her own economic security, as single life is no longer viewed as temporary. As such, the 4B feminists also reassess their own consumption habits, being aware of their own economic vulnerability and how this precarity often operates to pull women back into "the patriarchal institution of marriage"[81] while consumerism also asks them to turn a blind eye to their futures in favor of immediate consumption, once more highlighting how patriarchy and capitalism work in tandem to subjugate women, especially by altering their temporal existence. As a result, it appears that 4B feminists are, perhaps, asking the most radical and most ignored question of all: what do women's futures look like once they escape the passive present by renouncing their ties to men? At once, a woman's body, economic power, and time are reclaimed and come under her own agency.

Concluding Thoughts: Feminist Justice as Living Autonomously

Taking all that has been said together, what comes to be illuminated is that the 4B movement, existing in a complex, historical tradition, employs counter-participation not merely as a neo-feminist project; instead, the 4B movement uses counter-participation as a radical feminist tactic which is meant to free women from the overlapping constraints imposed by the state, capitalism and general patriarchal society. In doing so, the 4B activists wage their own distinct question: how are women's futures constructed outside of oppressive patriarchal structures? In reclaiming their bodies and economic power, the 4B feminists also make claim to a new understanding of their own temporality. Resultingly, the 4B activists implicitly deliver their idea of women's justice, being the ability for women to live autonomously, in the sense that their lives are not defined at all in terms of their relationships or ties to men. It becomes very clear that the 4B movement is not merely its own iteration of neoliberal feminism, but a feminist movement that has its own distinct character. To truly understand the motivations and goals of 4B activists, one must recognize just how many power structures are being resisted through abstaining from dating, sex, marriage, and reproduction with men. In refusing, the 4B women are not simply practicing their own personal choice as a means for feminist liberation, but are, instead, directly reconstituting their lives as separate from patriarchy by refusing to take part in Korea's future-making, as well as their rejecting other systems of patriarchy that implicitly limit, discipline, monitor, and place control on women's bodies and futures.

[79] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 638.
[80] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 638.
[81] Lee and Jeong, "The 4B Movement," 639.

Bibliography

Aslan, Özlem, and Zeynep Gambetti. “Provincializing Fraser’s History: Feminism and Neoliberalism Revisited.” *History of the Present* 1, no. 1 (2011): 130–47. https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.1.1.0130.

Burke, Megan M. “Gender as Lived Time: Reading ‘The Second Sex’ for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality.” *Hypatia* 33, no. 1 (2018): 111–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45153676.

Cho, Michelle, and Jesook Song, eds. *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*. University of Michigan Press, 2024. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12297089.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Vintage Books, 1990.

Gao, Ming. “‘A woman is not a baby-making machine’: a brief history of South Korea’s 4B movement – and why it’s making waves in America.” *The Conversation*, Academic Journalism Society, updated November 10, 2024. https://theconversation.com/a-woman-is-not-a-baby-making-machine-a-brief-history-of-south-koreas-4b-movement-and-why-its-making-waves-in-america-243355.

Jeong, Euisol, and Jieun Lee. “We Take the Red Pill, We Confront the DickTrix: Online Feminist Activism and the Augmentation of Gendered Realities in South Korea.” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 705–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447354.

Jung, Gowoon, Yaquan Liang, and Hyunsook Lee. “‘I Feel Free and Comfortable’: The Escape the Corset Movement in South Korea and the Question of Women’s Agency.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 107 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102973.

Kim, Eunjung. “6: Against Confinement: Degeneration, Mental Disability, and the Conditions of Nonviolence in The Vegetarian.” In *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, eds. Jesook Song and Michelle Cho, University of Michigan Press, 2024, 140–69. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12297089.12.

Kim, Heisook. “Feminist Philosophy in Korea: Subjectivity of Korean Women.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 2 (2009): 247–51. https://doi.org/10.1086/590977.

Kim, Jinsook. “Sticky Activism: The Gangnam Station Murder Case and New Feminist Practices against Misogyny and Femicide.” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021): 37–60. https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2021.0044.

Lee, Jieun, and Euisol Jeong. “The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future with/in a Non-Reproductive Future in Korea.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 633–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1929097.

Lee, Sharon Heijin. “Beauty Between Empires: Global Feminism, Plastic Surgery, and the Trouble with Self-Esteem.” *Frontiers (Boulder)* 37, no. 1 (2016): 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2016.a618381.

Portschy, Jürgen. “Times of Power, Knowledge and Critique in the Work of Foucault.” *Time & Society* 29, no. 2 (2020): 392–419. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X20911786.

Sohn, Hee-jeong. “1: Feminism Reboot: Neoliberalism, Korean Movies, Misogyny, and Beyond.” In *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, eds. Jesook Song and Michelle Cho, University of Michigan Press, 2024, 29–45. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12297089.6.

Suh, Doowon, 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.

Sussman, Anna. “A World Without Men.” Pulitzer Center, March 8, 2023. https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/world-without-men.

Woo, Miseong. “4: Gendered Violence, Crisis of Masculinity, and Regressive Transgression in Postmillennial South Korean Crime Thrillers.” In *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, eds. Jesook Song and Michelle Cho, University of Michigan Press, 2024, 93–112. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12297089.9.

Yun, Ji-Yeong. “Escaping the Corset: Rage as a Force of Resistance and Creation in the Korean Feminist Movement.” *Hypatia* 37, no. 2 (2022): 257–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2022.15.