

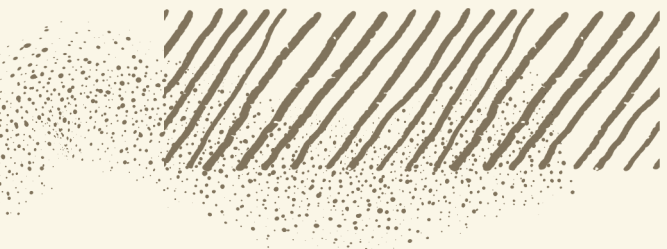


Feminist Refusal:


4B and The Rejection of Scripted Womanhood in South Korea

by Mia Hutchins

This article investigates the South Korean 4B movement as a form of institutional feminist refusal that challenges Korea's patriarchal system. By exploring the history of South Korean women through Confucianism, Japanese colonialism and the 1997 IMF crisis, we can see the origins of South Korean gender inequality. This article then uses John Stuart Mill's theory of institutionalised subjection to expose how female expectations are socially constructed rather than freely chosen. Next, the article analyses the 4B movement and its future impact locally and globally. Ultimately, the essay concludes that 4B is powerful but a context-specific form of resistance.



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Introduction

The 4B movement is a form of feminism that exposes how South Korea's gender order is maintained through the naturalisation of womanhood. Using Mill's theory of institutionalised subjection, this essay argues that 4B effectively challenges these coercive gender norms within Korea but remains globally unsustainable.

Economic development is widely expected to reduce gender inequality. Modernisation theorists argue that as economies grow, labour markets expand, education levels rise and traditional family values erode.¹ South Korea stands in contrast to this assumption. South Korea is one of the most developed economies globally, yet it is home to persistent gender inequality. This essay argues that the movement is best understood as a form of institutional resistance shaped by a specific historical and political context and will assess its success. To develop this argument, the essay will start by tracing the historical construction of gender inequality in South Korea, emphasising that the patriarchy we see today has been reshaped through Confucianism, colonialism and financial crisis. Next, the article introduces John Stuart Mill's 'The Subjection of Women' (1869) as a theoretical framework. Thirdly, the article examines the movement itself and explores how it relates to the patriarchal structures Mill identifies. Finally, the essay will consider the global reach of 4B and why its logic resists direct translation to other contexts, such as the USA.

History of South Korean women

South Korean women's struggles are deeply rooted in the country's history. This has shaped its social and political foundations. Korean society was structured by Confucianism, which matured during the Choson Dynasty (1392 – 1910), taking over Buddhism to become the main political ideology.² Under Confucianism, women were placed at a disadvantage and were always seen as subordinate to men. The eldest male was the most respected person in the family, and occupied public, intellectual and political spheres, whereas women were confined to domestic life. These gender norms were not only cultural expectations but were also written into the state law.

However, Confucianism is not the sole reason for

gender tensions in South Korea. Under Japanese rule (1910-1945), Korea experienced systematic repression and increased sexual violence. The colonial policies reinforced male dominance and subjected women to domestic roles, creating 'comfort women'. These 'comfort women' were essentially sex slaves for Japanese soldiers before and during the Pacific War.³ They were assigned numbers and placed into recreation camps and were as young as twelve years old. After Japan's surrender in 1945, they tried to erase evidence of their criminal acts committed against Asian women. This was done by slaughtering Korean soldiers and the 'comfort women'. Korea split into North Korea and South Korea. In the South, women's rights were deprioritised in favour of rebuilding the nation.

The 1997 IMF financial crisis represented another critical moment in the reconfiguration of Korean gender norms. The crisis created setbacks for the equality of working women in Korea, as the economy was bailed out.⁴ Women were the first to be laid off during the mass unemployment due to bankruptcy, pushing them out of stable work and reinforcing the male breadwinner model. As a result, women became forced to work in low-income, non-permanent jobs. This disproportionately disadvantaged women, especially single mothers, as they lacked savings and access to stable jobs. The repercussions of this are still seen today, as women are still pushed out of formal employment, creating one of the worst gender pay gaps in the world.

In a contemporary context, gender inequality has been reinforced rather than dismantled. President Yoon Suk Yeol relied heavily on anti-feminist rhetoric during his 2022 campaign, framing feminism as the destructive force responsible for the country's weak demographic.⁵ High-profile officials using language like this places women in South Korea at risk of being further marginalised by society as it legitimises sexist attitudes. The president also planned to remove the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family under his regime, illustrating how gender issues in South Korea were weaponised to gain votes. These discriminatory policies have consequences and are being manifested in everyday life for women in South Korea. Under sexist leadership, more and more men are becoming comfortable with normalising sexism

without any consequence. The implications of these sexist cultural rules in South Korea mute female voices and allow domestic violence to become more common. The consequences of a sexist leader manifest in society as increased misogynistic activity and violence. It is impossible to understand the resistance of South Korean women without recognising the historical and political backdrop. The emergence of the 4B movement was not sudden but rather was inherited by women over the course of years of gender oppression. Gender inequality in South Korea is a system shaped by the Confucian legacy and is reinforced by modern political rhetoric. Many Western societies have gradually become more distant from religious gender norms, but Confucian values continue to contribute to everyday social relations in Korea. The willingness of political figures such as Yoon Suk Yeol to use anti-feminist regimes highlights how these historical norms remain a powerful political tool, undermining the seriousness of discrimination in ways that differ from Western patriarchies. The unique collaboration of Confucian tradition and modern politics creates a form of gender oppression that is distinct to South Korea. Women in South Korea have banded together in this movement to reject the 'natural' sexual roles of women.



Normative Femininity in South Korea

Patriarchy in South Korea operates through explicit discrimination and the institutionalisation of normative femininity. This refers to the socially constructed behaviours and traits that society expects women to embody. It is shaped by expectations of heterosexuality and domestic responsibility. In South Korea, marriage is framed as the natural progression of a woman's life, and motherhood her biological destiny. The labour market is a huge factor that reproduces normative femininity. It reinforces the idea of a male breadwinner model and positions women as

secondary earners whose careers bend around domestic responsibility. This places women's natural position in the home. These gender expectations remain embedded in policy, culture and everyday life. Understanding this system is key for interpreting the 4B movement. It illuminates how 4B is not a rejection of men, but instead a rejection of the institutionalised expectations of women. The movement openly challenges mechanisms that reproduce normative femininity and exposes how deeply patriarchal institutions shape women's choices.

Using Mill as a Theory

John Stuart Mill's 1869 Essay 'The Subjection of Women' provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the emergence of the 4B movement. Mill argues that the subordination of women is harboured by social institutions and is not natural. The expectation that women should marry, bear children and be domesticated reflects the institutionalised subjection Mill criticises. Mill claims that women's consent under patriarchy is shaped by coercive norms. This helps explain why many women in the 4B movement view childbirth and marriage as obligatory conventions instead of a free choice. We can see Mill's argument clearly in the context of South Korea. Mill insists that the patriarchy survives because social institutions have trained women from childhood to see domesticity as their purposeful role in life. Despite modernisation occurring in South Korea, these gender assumptions remain embedded in their society. South Korea's labour market continues to operate around a male-breadwinner model. This model reinforces limitations of women's economic autonomy, tying them to domestic roles.⁶ These institutional pressures not only restrict women's choices but also make it a normal expectation for women to be domesticated. Using Mill's theory, we can see that the 4B movement does not act as a rejection of men but rather it rejects the patriarchal structure that continues to constrain women's lives. The movement echoes Mill's idea that true gender equality requires dismantling the systems that bind women to patriarchal service. Despite this, there are limitations to using Mill's ideas as a theoretical lens for 4B. Although Mill wrote in the context of Victorian Britain, not contemporary Korea, his analysis still offers a valuable way to understand how patriarchy naturalises women's subordination.

The movement

The 4B movement is a movement inspired by ideas in radical feminism that supports the female rejection of dating (biyeonae), sex (bisekseu), marriage (bihon) and childbirth (bichulsan). In a society where a woman's main role is mainly domestic, this collective refusal of heteronormativity functions as a powerful political statement. The movement began online in 2017 and gained attention after it reported on high-profile violent incidents against women. Digital platforms like Megalia have allowed women to connect with others who have experienced the same sexism throughout their lives in South Korea without being under state surveillance. In South Korea, there is a highly monitored digital environment and so being able to speak freely with the safety of anonymity is important for women. In 2022, government retaliation against women and journalists who reported gender-based discrimination and harassment online scored 3/5 for violation of user rights.⁷ Online posts also often offer alternative imaginaries of potential womanhood that reject beauty standards, domestic expectations and labour. The rise of this movement has not caused protests or legal campaigns but instead relies solely on peaceful activism brought by the female community.

Future/global impact and criticism

The rise of 4B has provoked backlash in Korea. Men have started to form their own groups that advocate male rights and oppose 4B and feminism. The group called New Men's Solidarity has gained significant attention because of its violence targeted at women's rights activists, with reports of members chasing feminists and spraying them with water guns.⁸ The movement has also started to grow abroad, specifically in the USA, after President Trump's re-election. Many young American women have come together online to join 4B after the speculation of a loss of many of their rights.⁹ Despite this, many women in the USA have found it difficult to fully immerse themselves in the movement, finding it non-inclusive. The movement was born as a rejection of the natural script of womanhood in South Korea, and is highly specific to Korean society. South Korean culture and American culture contrast in their attitudes to gender and sex. The whole social context that gave rise to the movement in the two countries are completely different.¹⁰ The USA

has a much more diverse population, with larger proportions of marginalised groups. This means that intersectionality has been a key focal point in American feminist movements. Many South Korean women who are part of 4B movement have chosen 4B over other feminist groups as they believe that other groups have lost focus by allying with other minority groups, such as transgender and queer women. In contrast, the movement growth in the USA is not strictly for supporting cis women only. This limits the global applicability of the 4B movement. To grow as a worldwide movement, South Korea will need to adapt its views on homosexuality and transgender rights.



We can see the contrast between 4B and the American Boy Sober movement. Boy Sober is a social media-driven movement where women are committing to not dating, focusing on self-growth and healing. This movement is individualistic and therapeutic, whereas 4B is collective, strict and political. The main difference between the two movements is that Boy Sober criticises men, but 4B directly attacks institutions and political sexism. The institutions present in South Korea create conditions for communitarian feminism where rejection of expectations of womanhood becomes a collective refusal of the sexist system itself. Going back to Mill's ideas that women's choices are shaped by social institutions helps explain why 4B is so successful in South Korea. In contrast, by looking at Micahale Ferguson's (2009) Essay 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics,' we can explore how Boy Sober is more suitable in the neoliberal American world where the focus is about self-optimisation. Ferguson argues that personal decisions are seen as inherently empowering by "choice feminists". This highlights how a direct translation of 4B from South Korea to a country like the USA is not applicable, as the context and history of sexism in each place differ vastly.

Conclusion

To conclude, the 4B movement has acted as a major support system for South Korean women. In a society where they have historically been marginalised and discriminated against, the movement provides women with a powerful community of feminists. 4B provides emotional refuge and also allows women to reimagine a life without sexist institutions which have oppressed them for a long time. Bounded by the limitations of South Korea, it can be said that the movement has been a success. However, on a global scale, the movement has been less effective as it is too fixed in South Korean culture. As the essay has shown, 4B is more than just a lifestyle choice: it is an attack on patriarchal systems which have been in place since the rise of Confucianism. This makes the movement far less transferable to other countries. I compared 4B to Boy Sober in the USA to show this. Using Mill's argument that true gender equality must come from dismantling sexist structures existing in society, we can see how 4B is non-transferable. The movement will remain a strictly South Korean phenomenon. It cannot be successfully translated to other countries until South Korea ends its own stigma about the nature of women and removes their deeply rooted patriarchy.

Footnotes

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