South Korean women rise up: An interview with Nayoung Kim

Meghan Murphy interviews South Korean feminist activist and attorney, Nayoung Kim.

Meghan Murphy   June 12, 2018
Nayoung Kim is a feminist activist and attorney from South Korea. Her activist journey began in the South Korean women’s movement. She went to the University of Michigan Law School to learn about feminist legal practice and theory from Catharine A. MacKinnon. Nayoung is involved with Prostitution Research & Education, Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution, and Af3irm, a transnational feminist organization. Her online feminist project is Korea Women’s Liberation. She is currently translating Andrea Dworkin’s Woman Hating into Korean.

Meghan Murphy interviewed her about the South Korean women’s movement and her journey in feminist activism this week over email.

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MEGHAN MURPHY: Tell me a little bit about your background. How did you come to be involved in the women’s movement?

NAYOUNG KIM: I am an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. I first confronted this fact in 2009, when a particularly gruesome rape of an eight-year-old girl outraged the nation. The media gave the survivor an alias that is the same as my name: Nayoung. The constant airing of what the rapist did to her triggered my own deeply buried memories. I sunk into suicidal depression and dropped my university studies for more than a year. I was not able to get good help during this time because I did not know where to look or whom to trust. At that time, I wasn’t yet politicized — I hadn’t encountered feminism as either practice or theory. There also was not much coverage of the feminist movement in South Korean society.

What saved me was the fact that I have always been a huge reader. Not feeling comfortable anywhere else, I spent much of my time in libraries. I browsed the stacks, starting from 000 of the Dewey Decimal system, until finally I came across feminist books on violence. When I read Andrea Dworkin’s work for the first time, my life changed forever. Her writing taught me the politics of sexual abuse. It made clear to me that sexual abuse is the heart of male
dominance. I learned that I was not alone in my experience, that others like me had fought back, and that the system of male dominance must be destroyed in order for every woman to live with dignity.

With this knowledge, I no longer wanted to die. Instead of cowering in shame and despair, I began to respect myself and other women.

Nine years ago, I made a vow to myself that I would live this life as a feminist fighting male violence. I have been at it ever since. I cut my activist teeth volunteering with Korea Women’s Hotline, the oldest and largest feminist organization fighting men’s violence against women in South Korea. This nationwide NGO has more than 10,000 members, and has been at the forefront of feminist struggle since 1983. I connected with these women as a student and fell madly in love with their furious and unapologetic dedication to advancing women’s rights. There was no other group of people I admired more in the world.

Asserting myself as a feminist became a source of intense hope, joy, and honour. Since then, I have sought out and worked with feminists wherever I am, focusing on the issue of male violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, prostitution, pornography, sexual harassment, and femicide.

**MM:** How are women treated in South Korea? How does sexism manifest itself?

**NK:** In every sector of South Korean society, women are assigned second-class citizenship and deprived of equal opportunity. South Korea has the highest gender pay gap among OECD countries, with women earning 63 per cent of what men earn in 2017. Only 56.2 per cent of women are employed. Women are grossly underrepresented in positions of power, holding only 17 per cent of seats in the National Assembly and 10.5 per cent of management positions in the private sector.
In South Korea, women are treated as sex objects, reproductive vessels, servants, and prey for men. Men subject women to sexual harassment and rape everywhere — at home, at school, at work, at the market, in religious communities, in political parties, in progressive activist circles, and out on the street. Prostitution flourishes. In 2016, a study of 1,050 men revealed that 50.7 per cent had paid a woman for sex. This is a conservative estimate. K-Pop is a hotbed for sexual objectification. South Korean men’s sexual objectification of women cuts across national borders. Given free rein to sexually abuse women at home, men also travel overseas to prey on women in poorer countries.

Abortion is illegal and the government regards women as reproductive vessels who exist to supply the nation with a new generation of subjects. Concerned by the country’s low birth rate, in 2016 the Ministry of the Interior decided to create and publish a national “birth map” showing the number of women aged between 15 and 45 and where they were located. Government officials thought pointing men towards women and girls of childbearing age would address the low birth rate in the country.

At home, women are expected to act as servants for male family members. In their family of origin, daughters receive less material and emotional support than sons. In many families, girls are assigned the task of cooking for and cleaning up after their brothers, regardless of birth order or ability. Countless women from working class families have had to give up their own education and begin work at an early age to pay for their brothers’ education.

Women are under immense pressure to marry men. However, in a culture prioritizing the patriarchal family over the individual, heterosexual marriage functions more as a system that keeps women in indentured servitude to her husband and his family than as a partnership between two equal individuals. Many South Korean men use the mail order bride industry to lure young women from poorer countries into abusive situations — this is called “multicultural marriage.” Considering this, resisting marriage is an important
struggle for feminists in South Korea.

Men’s violence against women is extremely destructive in South Korea. From the moment of conception, females are targeted for annihilation.

I was born in 1990. In my generation, millions of female fetuses were aborted because people didn’t want daughters. Females that were born, against all odds, are targeted by men. Each year, more than 100 women die at the hands of their male partners. Thousands experience rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. Women are murdered just because they are women.

On May 17, 2016, a 23-year-old woman was stabbed to death with a 32.5cm kitchen knife in a public unisex restroom in Gangnam, an affluent district of Seoul. The man who killed her had been hiding in the bathroom, waiting for his opportunity to kill a woman, because he claimed to have felt ignored and belittled by women.

**MM:** What impact does South Korea’s prostitution legislation have on women and on the sex trade?

**NK:** South Korean prostitution law draws a problematic distinction between “voluntary” and “coerced” prostitution, criminalizing the former but not the latter. This framework is based on a liberal notion of individual choice, instead of on a structural analysis of the inequality and violence inherent to the sex trade.

The current law was created in 2004 after 19 prostituted women died in a series of brothel fires. Their pimps had locked them up to prevent them from escaping. The passage of the law was celebrated as a feminist accomplishment because it decriminalized at least some prostituted women, recognized them as victims, and provided them with resources to exit the sex trade. However, this legislation does not do enough for women. It continues to punish prostituted women who cannot prove that their prostitution was “coerced” as opposed to “voluntary.” It also doesn’t actually challenge the
existence of the sex trade because, though sex buyers and pimps are criminalized, that law is not enforced. South Korean feminists who understand the violent and exploitative nature of the sex trade advocate for the Nordic model, which decriminalizes all prostituted people and criminalizes the buyers and pimps.

**MM:** How does prostitution factor into South Korea’s history and things like colonialism and imperialism?

**NK:** Prostitution is the world’s oldest oppression. Historically, prostitution has been about men offering women as sex slaves to other men in exchange for material or political gain. In addition to intragroup prostitution, in which Korean women are prostituted to Korean men, an important aspect of prostitution in South Korean history has to do with the recurring colonial pattern of Korean men prostituting Korean women to stronger foreign men.

One example is the *kongnyeo* — or “tribute women” — from pre-modern times. For centuries, Korean rulers sent thousands of teenaged girls to Chinese rulers to express their subordination, dependence, and loyalty as rulers of a weaker group. In return, Korean rulers received approval, protection, and resources from Chinese rulers. Another example is the prostitution that happened in American military camp towns. After the Korean War, the United States stationed its troops in South Korea. For decades after, approximately one million women and girls were prostituted in U.S. military camp towns. During this time, the South Korean government essentially adopted the role of pimp. It periodically forced prostituted women to undergo abusive medical procedures — some of which led to death — and lectured the women about serving American men well. Government officials told women that they were good patriots for bringing in American dollars for their country.

**MM:** Is pornography a big issue in South Korea? Is there a porn industry there?
NK: Pornography is a huge issue in South Korea. Most men use pornography. What complicates this subject is that South Korean law prohibits the production and distribution of obscene materials. But this doesn’t mean that an industry that sells images and videos of prostituted women and girls (i.e. pornography), does not exist. It just doesn’t enjoy the same exalted, legitimate status as it does in some other countries.

Also, in this day and age, men can always access pornography produced overseas — in the US and Japan, for example. They can also freely access what has come to be called “Korean Porn.” These are illegally produced and distributed images and videos of women, some of whom are prostituted and many of whom are not. Often, the women in these materials are not aware either that they are being filmed or that the material is going to be distributed.

The first variety — in which the woman being filmed does not know that she is being filmed — has been called “spy cam pornography,” “illegal filming,” or molka (“secret camera”). These films often capture women having sex with their male partners, or prostituted women being sexually used by male sex buyers. Sometimes, these men are the ones who secretly film the encounter. At other times, men plant cameras in places like motel rooms or in other people’s homes in order to obtain material they can sell or otherwise use. Molka is not limited to sex. Men secretly film women in restrooms, in changing rooms, in school, at work, on public transportation, on the street, etc. While this behavior is punishable as a sex crime, it is rarely punished.

The second variety is when the woman being filmed knows that she is being filmed but does not know that the film will be distributed. South Korean feminists have given such “Korean Porn” a new name: digital sexual violence. Countless women have been subjected to this. Many have committed suicide. Men find it this form of pornography even more entertaining when they learn that the film hurt a woman so much so that she ended her own life.

Digital sexual violence was at the heart of the most recent women’s rights
march in South Korea, the largest one in the nation’s history, with 30,000 women participating. A popular feminist tactic among today’s young women is “mirroring” the misogyny coming from men, or, as I would put it, giving men a taste of their own medicine. Most actions are clever linguistic twists and insults, but one woman took the concept of “mirroring” further and electronically distributed an image she had taken of a male nude model. The fact that the police did not hesitate to investigate and arrest her sparked rage in women across the nation, as the same crime has never invoked such a prompt response when the victim is a woman.

**MM:** Can you tell me a bit about the history of the women’s movement in South Korea? Was there a movement similar to that in the UK and North America? Have there been “waves,” as they are referred to in the West?

**NK:** Resistance to women’s oppression — i.e. feminism — exists whenever and wherever women’s oppression exists. South Korea is a male dominated society that operates based on women’s oppression, so there have been women resisting male dominance in South Korea throughout its history. Sadly, many have been forgotten and erased. I rely on the information that is currently available to me to trace the history of the women’s movement in South Korea.

South Korean women have been resisting male dominance in an organized way since the 1970s. The bulk of these early organizers belonged to left wing labour, student, anti-imperialist, and pro-democracy movements, where they experienced misogyny and sex discrimination from their movement brothers. Progressive women’s rights organizations began to emerge in the 1980s. [Korea Women’s Hotline](https://www.kwh.org) is the oldest among this cohort. Other notable groups that were founded during this period include: [Korean Women Workers Association](https://www.kwsa.org), [Korean Women Link](https://www.kwl.org), and [Alternative Culture Press](https://www.acp.org). When the pro-democracy movement succeeded in establishing a democracy in 1987, many progressive women’s groups joined forces to form an umbrella organization, [Korean Women’s Association United](https://www.kwaunited.org). In 1990,
The Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan was founded and ensured a safe space for survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery to break the silence about their experiences in the Second World War. In 1991, the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center was founded to specifically address sexual violence. These organizations have paved the way through legal reform, public awareness campaigns, political lobbying, direct service, and knowledge production. A brief window opened in the 1990s to nurture a new generation of young feminists, until South Korea’s national bankruptcy in 1997 and the subsequent zeitgeist of neoliberalism paralyzed the realm of collective social action.

I have the utmost love and respect for this cadre of professional feminist organizers. I think their work planted the seeds for the revolution that is happening in South Korea right now. Nonetheless, South Korea did not see a mass women’s movement similar to that in the UK and North America until very recently.

What I mean by this is that, in previous years, feminism had mostly been shared among a select group of activist and academic women. Nowadays, feminism is finally sweeping every corner of the nation and reaching ordinary women. I think this is possible largely due to the speed, anonymity, and expansiveness of the Internet. It allows women to share their rage with one another, to discover important feminist knowledge through consciousness-raising, and to organize in multitudes. Each year, hundreds of new activist projects are popping up and thousands of women are joining the women’s movement. These are mostly young women in their teens and 20s, but there are also women over 80 calling feminist organizations. The current feminist revolution gives me hope for a real change in South Korea.

**MM:** Statistics show that rates of sexual violence in Korea have shot up in the past few years, and more women in Korea are murdered than men. Why do you think this might be?

**NK:** I think it is in part due to increased reporting and visibility. Men have
been raping women forever, but women have been too afraid to report. Maybe women are reporting more because the women’s movement is growing stronger and they feel less isolated. Men have also been murdering women forever, but few people cared enough about women to see their deaths as specifically misogynistic. Every year, Korea Women’s Hotline calculates the number of women who were murdered by their male intimate partners, but they have to rely on media reports, because there is no government record of who murdered women under what circumstances and for what stated reason. They started doing this only a few years ago. The visibility of misogynistic murders (i.e. femicides) has increased drastically since then.

Another factor is that I think misogyny is becoming more aggressive and lethal across the globe — not just in South Korea. As more women are developing a feminist consciousness and working together to effect change, male dominance is striking back. Men are using violence to maintain their power and control over women.

I mentioned that sexual abuse is the heart of male dominance — we can see this in that the sexual objectification of women is at an all-time high in South Korean society, with pornography and prostitution propelling the engine of patriarchy. It has saturated every aspect of mainstream culture. This is apparent when one compares media like pop music, TV, and movies from a couple of decades ago with what is being broadcast today. Sexual objectification dehumanizes women, and as the sexual objectification of women intensifies, men are attacking women in greater numbers. This cannot be a mere coincidence, in my opinion.

**MM:** How does the situation of domestic violence in South Korea compare to other parts of the world?

**NK:** The situation of domestic violence in South Korea is both similar and different as compared to other parts of the world. It is similar in that it happens in the context of sex inequality, that it is about exerting power and control over another person, and that it goes mostly ignored by society.
I’ve noticed that whenever I talk about domestic violence, people attribute it to a foreign country. For example, when I’m in the US, and I talk about how many women experience domestic violence, Americans ask me, “Is it really so bad in South Korea?” I’ll respond, saying, “I’m talking about what I’ve observed while volunteering at the local domestic violence shelter, right here in the United States.” The same thing happens when I am in South Korea and talk to people about domestic violence — people ask if domestic violence is really so bad in the US! Domestic violence happens everywhere, but so few of us seem to know how bad it is.

The phenomenon of domestic violence is similar across the world, but systemic and cultural responses to domestic violence are wildly different depending on where you are. For example, in many parts of the world, there is a policy mandating arrest for perpetrators of domestic violence. But in South Korea, these arrests are discretionary, reflecting the view that domestic violence is just a private matter, not to be interfered with by the government. Numerous women talk about the police responding to their calls for help, only to leave them at the scene with the assailant. In the South Korean law on domestic violence, there is even a provision stating that the purpose of this law is to “protect the family,” which effectively discourages punishing the perpetrator. Culturally, victim-blaming and a negative view of divorce are stronger in South Korea than in many parts of the world. Divorced women face severe discrimination, stigma, and lack of opportunities, and the situation is worse for divorced women with children. There are also very few spaces where women can find good feminist support. Hopefully the new women’s movement will change this reality.

**MM:** Has there been a backlash to women’s activism? How have men responded to feminism/feminist action? Is there a Men’s Rights Movement in South Korea, for example?

**NK:** There have been many backlashes to women’s activism, so many that I’m losing count. Men threatened to throw acid at women during the most
recent protest against digital sexual violence. One man brought a knife to a memorial event for the woman stabbed to death in Gangnam. Men took pictures of women protesters and put them online for other men to make rape and death threats against. Companies fired female employees for posting about feminism on their personal social media accounts. Male fans turned against a female entertainer for reading a feminist book. Hiring committees have asked female applicants what they thought of the #MeToo movement, the message being, “We don’t want you here unless you promise to keep your mouth shut about sexual harassment.” The list goes on. I would say that Korean men have not responded well to feminism at all. I am tempted to say that the status quo itself is a gigantic Men’s Rights Movement. But yes, there is a separate Men’s Rights Movement, or something like it, that is more directly misogynistic and violent — it is mostly online and reaches millions of men as well as young boys.

**MM:** How can Western feminists support the women’s movement in South Korea?

**NK:** My favorite pastime is researching feminist activism of past and present, in every part of the world. Reading global women’s history has made me realize how many women from different cultures and backgrounds have inspired each other. This fight against male dominance — especially men’s violence against women — truly is a global struggle. So I want to ask you to attack male dominance wherever you are, and in whatever way you can. Every bit helps. Document what you have done, why and how, and what ideas you have about how we can destroy male dominance. Share this feminist knowledge as widely as possible, scream and roar if you can, so that every woman can use it in her own fight.

How can Western feminists support the women’s movement in South Korea? We are attacking male dominance head on. We are screaming at the top of our lungs. Hear us roar. Help us spread the word about what we are doing, take your own shots at it, too, and keep in touch!
Meghan Murphy

Founder & Editor

Meghan Murphy is a freelance writer and journalist. She has been podcasting and writing about feminism since 2010 and has published work in numerous national and international publications, including New Statesman, Vice, Al Jazeera, The Globe and Mail, I-D, Truthdig, and more. Meghan completed a Masters degree in the department of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University in 2012 and lives in Vancouver, B.C. with her dog.

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