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Gender Conflict in South Korean Society and Gender Injustice in the Korean Church

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Abstract

This study investigates gender injustice in South Korea by comparing the development of gender conflict in wider society with gendered power structures in the Korean Protestant church. Over the past decade, feminist activism has re-emerged in response to growing misogyny and gender-based violence, while anti-feminist backlash—especially among young men—has further polarized public discourse. These tensions reflect deeper structural and cultural inequalities that continue to shape Korean gender politics.

In contrast to society's visible gender conflicts, the Korean church maintains gender injustice through institutional silence and exclusion. Although women comprise the majority of congregants, their representation in leadership, especially in denominational general assemblies, remains minimal. From a sociology of religion perspective, this paper analyzes how the church's patriarchal systems not only resist gender equality but also reproduce injustice at structural and symbolic levels. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's theory—particularly the concepts of misrecognition, maldistribution, and misrepresentation—the study reveals that both secular and religious institutions contribute to the persistence of gender injustice. By situating the Korean church within broader patterns of societal inequality, this research highlights the urgent need for theological, political, and cultural transformation to achieve gender justice.

Keywords

Gender Justice, Feminism Reboot, Anti-Feminism, Korean Church, Nancy Fraser

1. Gender Injustice in Korean Society

"There is no longer structural gender discrimination. Discrimination is personal." On February 7, 2022, former presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol made this statement as a slogan while pledging to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. This implied that gender inequality had disappeared from Korean society, and that everyone competes based on merit, making policies and systems for women discriminatory against men.¹ Reflecting this claim, South Korea ranked 15th out of 191 countries in the 2022 *Gender Inequality Index* (GII) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The GI measures gender inequality levels based on indicators such as health (maternal mortality ratio, adolescent birth rate), empowerment (percentage of female parliamentarians, education level), and labor (labor force participation rate). This index focuses more on infrastructure for quality of life than on gender

1 In addition to the pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, the previous Yoon Seok-Yeol administration reduced women's policies by replacing 'gender equality' with 'equality between men and women' and gender-based 'violence against women' with specific sexual crimes. And women returned to being the main agents of family care amid the changing population structure of low birth rates and aging population. Yoon-jeong Yeon, "Yoon's government without 'women'!" *The Labor Today*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.labortoday.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=226608>

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gaps, often yielding higher scores for developed countries. South Korea ranked among the best in indicators like adolescent birth rate (1.4) and maternal mortality ratio.²

However, according to the 2023 *Global Gender Gap Report* by the World Economic Forum, South Korea ranked 105th in the *Gender Gap Index* (GGI), falling six places from the previous year. Apart from the health sector (ranked 46th), South Korea ranked low in politics (88th), education (104th), and economy (114th). Why such stark differences between the two indices? GGI assesses gender equality through gender gaps in areas such as survival and health (sex ratio at birth, life expectancy), education (literacy rate), economy (labor force participation), and politics (representation in parliament). While GII focuses on levels, inputs, and capabilities, GGI emphasizes gaps, outputs, and equality. Generally, the two indices correlate. However, in South Korea, gender gaps in economic and political participation are particularly severe compared to other socioeconomically similar countries.³ This discrepancy shows that while South Korea supports women's capacity building, it hesitates to grant them positions reflecting those capacities. The lack of support for women in various sectors indicates a regression in women's status and social perception compared to the past. This is not just a matter of equality but a regression in gender politics.⁴

Nancy Fraser argues that multidimensional gender inequality and injustice are closely related to a society's economic-political structure and cultural values. Cultural devaluation of women's labor, coupled with misogynistic norms, perpetuates women's economic vulnerability. Fraser identifies three intertwined forms of injustice: cultural disrespect, misdistribution, and misrepresentation. She explains that gender justice is possible only when women achieve participatory parity by overcoming these injustices.⁵ From Fraser's perspective, the gender injustice in South Korea is apparent. In 2023, female wage workers numbered 9.978 million, comprising 45.7% of all wage earners—the highest figure since 1963. Yet, the gender wage gap in South Korea was 31.2%, the highest among OECD countries. Despite the increase in women's economic activity, women's wages are still about 70% of men's wages. The following comments were posted to this article:⁶

2 Ju-hyeon Lim, "Is South Korea really a 'gender-equal backward country'?", *KBS news*, July 17, 2022, <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/pc/view/view.do?ncd=5511120>

3 Junyi Park, "Korea's gender inequality index is high, but its gender gap index is low... 'Gender bias' is in decline," *ASIA Economy*, November 13, 2023, <https://view.asiae.co.kr/article/2023111310371486579>

4 Roggeband and Krizsan define policy backsliding as the phenomenon of a government's policy commitment declining or breaking its previous gender equality policy promises, and discuss it in three dimensions. First, there is the discursive delegitimization of gender policies by leaders or high-ranking officials, which openly declares opposition to gender equality. Second, there is policy decay, which brings about the disappearance of existing policies through policy reframing, replacement of frames, or opposition. Third, there is the gradual, rather than direct, policy backsliding, which occurs through poor implementation, such as budget cuts, delays in implementation, and broken promises. Lastly, there is the decline of mechanisms for inclusion and accountability through the absence or abolition of governance. Roggeband, C. and A. Krizan. "Reversing Gender Policy Progress: Patterns of Backsliding in Central and Eastern European New Democracies," *European Journal of Gender and Politics*, no. 3(2018): 367–85. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510818x15311219732356>. Reprinted from Kyeong-hee Kim, "Gender Politics of Regression Surrounding the Abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family," *Economy and Society*, no. 141 (2024): 27.

5 Nancy Fraser, *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates her Critics*, ed. Kevin Olson (Verso, 2008), 32–41.

6 Hyun-jung Park, "'World's No. 1' Gender Wage Gap, Only Words to Resolve," *Hankyoreh*, June 2, 2025, <https://n.news>.

“Men and women are paid equally for the same jobs. This is a misleading average!

“Men earn more because they work in 3D (dirty, dangerous, difficult) jobs that women avoid.”

“Women take more maternity leave, so it only appears they earn less. In reality, wages are the same.”

These opinions reflect deep-rooted gender-role perceptions and anger among some men about changing gender equality structures. Such assumptions normalize women’s lower wages and reduce wage disparities to differences in individual capabilities rather than structural inequality. This is precisely why Fraser began to debate ‘recognition or redistribution’: the cultural discrimination and neglect inflicted on women cannot be separated from the issue of economic inequality.⁷

This study aims to describe, from a sociology of religion perspective, how South Korean politics not only denies the existence of gender injustice but also actively incites gender conflict. Furthermore, it critically examines how the Korean church perpetuates gender oppression and discrimination through a premodern patriarchal worldview rather than challenging injustice. The research begins by analyzing the patterns of gender conflict that have emerged in Korean society over the past decade. First, it investigates the emergence and limitations of the Feminism Reboot, which arose in resistance to misogyny and gender-based violence. Second, it explores the rise of anti-feminist discourse and resistance among young men. Against the backdrop of these social tensions, the study then turns to how the Korean church has regressed in its gender consciousness, reinforcing structural injustice. Drawing on Nancy Fraser’s theory—particularly the concepts of misrecognition, maldistribution, and misrepresentation—the study reveals that both secular and religious institutions contribute to the persistence of gender injustice. By situating the Korean church within broader patterns of societal inequality, this research highlights the urgent need for theological, political, and cultural transformation to achieve gender justice.

2. Feminism Reboot

2.1. The feminist movement in Korean society over the past decade

In 2015, misogynistic expressions such as *Doenjang Girl*, *Kim Yeo-sa*, and *Mom-chung*⁸ began to circulate widely online, igniting a new kind of gender conflict. In response to misogyny and ridicule proliferating in male-dominated online communities like *Ilbe*, *Fmkorea*, and *Dcinside*,

naver.com/article/comment/028/0002749038

7 When both spouses work, men often choose “greedy jobs” offering high pay and career advancement, while women tend to select flexible work, sacrificing either career or pay. Despite starting equally, time inevitably leads to wage and career gaps. Without a re-examination of rigid gender roles and structural changes, women continue to face exclusion and inequality in wages, promotions, and representation. These structures devalue women’s labor and limit their political voice. Of course, women are not a homogenous group; identity varies by class, occupation, education, region, and age. Yet the modes of gender injustice remain largely similar. Women in Korean society continue to face discrimination.

8 ‘*Doenjang Girl*’ refers to a woman who is extravagant, ‘*Ms. Kim*’ refers to a woman who should be doing housework but drives and participates in social activities, and ‘*Mom-chung*’ refers to a woman who raises children. These are terms used online to mock and despise women.

young women organized feminist platforms such as *Megalia* and *WOMAD*. Through strategic mirroring using terms like *Kimchi-nam* and *Han-nam-chung*, they exposed and challenged the violence and inequality women faced. Despite media criticism, these online spaces intensified mutual hatred and mockery. Against this backdrop, the May 17, 2016, murder near Gangnam Station became a catalyst for the feminist resurgence.

One online women's community criticized police for attributing the case to a schizophrenic's random crime, arguing instead that it was a gender-targeted act. This framing as a misogynistic crime resonated deeply with many women, who saw themselves as potential victims. Emotional solidarity with the victim emerged, and more than 20,000 Post-it notes filled Exit 10 of Gangnam Station, transforming it into a site of mourning and resistance. This incident marked a turning point, shifting feminist movements from online activism to a broader public movement.⁹

Later that year, in September, the *Black Protest* emerged, opposing anti-abortion laws and resisting government birthrate policies. The government has consistently failed to recognize that issues of reproduction and intimacy are deeply intertwined with broader socioeconomic structures. Instead, it has often framed women's decisions to remain single or child-free as selfish choices, encouraged highly educated women to "marry down," and even went so far as to quantify and publish the number of women of childbearing age by region in what became known as the "Korea Birth Map." This incident starkly revealed a bureaucratic, male-centered perspective that reduces women to mere reproductive tools in an attempt to resolve the low birthrate crisis. Rather than addressing the structural incompatibility between work and childcare, the government has shifted the blame onto women, prompting widespread resistance. Women pushed back against policies and social narratives that sought to impose the burden of demographic decline on their bodies and choices.¹⁰

In 2018, the #MeToo movement spread rapidly through social media, followed by the #WithYou campaign in solidarity with survivors. Across academia, politics, business, the arts, and sports, cases revealed systemic sexual violence, often perpetrated by individuals in positions of power. Victims, empowered by digital platforms, broke their silence and found solidarity. These movements exposed the entrenched culture of sexual exploitation and hierarchical organizational norms in Korean society.

That same year, large-scale protests took place at Hyehwa Station and Gwanghwamun against biased investigations into illegal hidden camera recordings targeting women. Tens of thousands of women protested, holding signs reading, "My life is not your porn," "We are each other's courage," and "Unfair courage changes the world." These incidents were not isolated acts of deviance but evidence of a society where violence and discrimination had been normalized. These movements, collectively referred to as the Feminism Reboot, demonstrated feminism's potential to expand its influence by connecting those who resist gender-based violence and

9 Mi-young Kim, "Everywhere was 'Gangnam Station'... 1 year since the misogynistic murder case," *Hankyoreh*, May 17, 2017, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/795047.html

10 Soo-jung Kim, "'South Korea Birth Map', What's the Problem?," *Nocut News*, December 30, 2016, <https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/4709870>

oppression.¹¹

2.2. Characteristics and Limits of the Feminism Reboot

Compared to earlier feminist generations, the Feminism Reboot era has distinct characteristics. First, as the arena of misogyny and gender conflict was primarily online, the generation responding to it were digital natives. They created new feminist discourses online with minimal cost and risk. Strategic mirroring allowed women to resist cultural norms and assert themselves as capable agents. The digital space also allowed for swift interaction and adaptation.

Second, their identity was shaped by their role as consumers. They navigated feminist practices while simultaneously engaging with and critiquing the objectification of women in pop culture. Feminism Reboot participants both challenged and enjoyed the benefits of popular culture, embodying a duality of resistance and participation. This reflects feminism's engagement with neoliberal consumer culture.¹²

Third, the digital and pop-cultural feminism that emerged from incidents like the Gangnam murder and political protests transitioned into physical, offline political actions. Women publicly mourned victims, exposed sexual abuse by the powerful, and resisted state narratives that reduced them to reproductive tools. This marks a shift from 1990s feminism, which focused on supporting victims through counseling centers and influencing state policy through gender mainstreaming.¹³ The current feminism places lived experience at the center of discourse and activism, expanding the scope of feminist struggles in Korea.

However, the unique aspects of Feminism Reboot also highlight its limitations. While acknowledging the structural roots of misogyny, many did not demand systemic transformation. Instead, resistance was often expressed through individualized consumer actions or protests within gender-exclusive spaces. Feminist practices were framed as fighting against sexism and violence while maintaining one's role as a student, worker, or consumer.¹⁴

The Feminism Reboot centered around misogyny showed the 'politics of resistance' created by women in the dead end of structural transition and Korean society over the past 30 years. This reflected the precarious and unstable living conditions of the society in which the young generation, the agents of resistance, live. Therefore, their critical awareness and resistance to the system or policy of the tilted playing field have been significantly weakened. Rather than being interested in the unjust structure of neoliberalism, they sometimes focus on self-development to construct and promote their own desires, aspirations, and actions as subjects of neoliberalism.

11 Sang-ji Hong, "Why did 60,000 women shout 'Sisters Fighting' at Hyeheha Station?," *JoongAng Ilbo*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/22782494>

12 In this regard, Son Hee-jung says that the biggest characteristic of 'now, here' feminists is their "consumer identity." This is because they exercise their influence as consumers to purchase feminist books and cultural products and actively intervene in the market. They are "citizens' with a voice" and "consumer subjects who engage in subversive cultural practices," and they also display "neoliberal femininity" that does not hide their desire to succeed and achieve through self-development. Hee-jung, Son, *Feminism Reboot*, (Seoul: Namu Pencil, 2017), 83.

13 Hye-ryeong Kim, "Gender Justice and the Korean Church as a Regressive Space," *Theological Thought*, Vol. 196 (2022): 217.

14 Bo-myeong Kim, "The Resurgence of Feminism, Its Paths and Characteristics," *Economy and Society*, No. 118 (2018): 101.

In this process, they perceive themselves as human capital that survives competition and as beings that plan reproduction through capital, science, and technology. Therefore, gender injustice is reduced to a level that can be overcome through individual effort, and individual happiness and a sense of accomplishment become important purposes.¹⁵ Korean women have been fighting against misogyny in the square in a completely different way for the past 10 years. However, apart from the struggle, women's endless competition to gain recognition of their status in capitalist society is, as Fraser points out, subordinate to institutionalized patterns. Temporary recognition does not lead to full-fledged equality of participation. In this regard, the Feminism Reboot is insufficient to reform sexist systems/structures or persuade cultural awareness to overcome gender injustice.

Another limitation is that feminism, which resists and stands in solidarity with violence and hatred, has created contradictions in that it fails to stand in solidarity with minorities such as sexual minorities, immigrants, and the disabled and excludes them. They rejected feminism for all because they thought that intersectional identities that consider all kinds of inequalities together could not solve the problems women face, and instead advocated "radicality of movement" and "radicality of exclusion" rather than "radicality of solidarity."¹⁶ Although not covered in this paper, after the martial law on December 3, 2024, young women held idol cheering sticks in the square and chanted for the impeachment of President Yoon Seok-yeol. They, who had raised their voices in the square for the past 10 years, gathered again for the restoration of Korean democracy. The popularization of feminism in loose solidarity created another historical experience of confronting violent politics in the square.

The fact that the popularization of feminism is meaningless is that the basis of solidarity is based on biological women. Therefore, the Feminism Reboot leaves open the task of how to create a terrain of oppositional and alternative movements with women who cannot speak out together in the streets and square, "feminized beings" in this society.

3. Anti-Feminism and the Divided Perceptions of Young Men

If online misogyny triggered the Feminism Reboot, the rise of feminist discourse and activism led to the consolidation of anti-feminism, particularly among young conservative men. While the terms "backlash" and "anti-feminism" are often used interchangeably to describe reactions against feminism, this paper uses "anti-feminism" to highlight its political alignment with conservative forces. Digital subcultures and the intense misogyny of a small number of men have emerged as political variables that determine mainstream politics, along with conservative parties that have put forward major pledges such as the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, strengthening the punishment of false accusations of sexual violence, and compensation for military service.

¹⁵ Neoliberal feminism is thought to be progressive beyond gender inequality, but it is also a variation of post-feminism that regresses women's liberation and the realization of equality. Hyun-Jae Lee, "Gender Justice and Breaking the Glass Ceiling in the Neoliberal Era," *Gender and Culture*, December (2019): 50.

¹⁶ Hye-ryeong Kim, "Gender Justice and the Korean Church as a Regressive Space," 221.

The problem is that anti-feminism is at the center of the conflict of the youth generation, but it cannot be an identity that represents young men based on meritocracy and fairness. Rather, it has become a core issue of social conflict as it has become a political frame that promotes gender division by reducing problems such as inequality between classes and generations, political and economic polarization, and the crisis of social reproduction to conflict within the youth generation. In addition, it has been used as a defense mechanism for Christian fundamentalism and another terrain for the conservative right-wing, in line with women's groups, family associations, or anti-homosexuality movements in the conservative Protestant camp.¹⁷

The roots of anti-feminist discourse go back to the 1990s, especially with the abolition of the patriarchal family registry system (*hojuje*) and the military service bonus point system. Feminism was framed as threatening the foundation of the family and national security, especially within the context of the anti-communist and conservative discourse. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, instability in the labor market further shaped anti-feminist sentiments among men, who saw the loss of military bonus points as a blow to their survival in an unfair job market. Military service, once a badge of masculine honor, became perceived by young men as institutionalized gender discrimination.¹⁸

Anti-feminism hardened through the political conservatization of young men accustomed to neoliberal concepts of meritocracy and fairness. In the past, distinctions between conservatives and progressives focused on reunification, security, and welfare. Today, the most visible divide is gender and gender equality. Young men in their 20s regard gender-sensitive policies, support for women's organizations, and gender equality policies as reverse discrimination that threatens market fairness.

These men argue that current gender discrimination either does not exist or is a relic of the past. Success and failure in education, employment, and competition are seen as products of individual effort and ability. Anti-feminism distinguishes between feminists and non-feminist women, constructing a male victim narrative that resists gender equality policies.¹⁹ Women seeking equal status are viewed as recipients of unfair benefits, while men see themselves as deprived of their rightful share. In this climate, Lee Jun-seok, then leader of the conservative party, skillfully captured anti-feminist sentiment, asserting that differences should not become privileges, and used this rhetoric as political capital.²⁰

Of course, not all young men supported this trend. Many voiced opposition to anti-feminism

17 Bo-myeong Kim, "Discourse and Practice of Conservative Anti-Feminism in Korean Society," *Korean Women's Studies*, no 40 (2024): 189.

18 Hye-ryeong Kim, "Gender Justice and the Korean Church as a Regressive Space," 215.

19 Chansook Hong, *Gender Politics*, (Sechang, 2025), 155-77. The author, in analyzing the gender conflict in Korean society, does not view the obsession with fairness among young men as simply a product of neoliberalism. She believes that the changes in class structure through Korea's rapid industrialization and the transition to a crisis society have given rise to the Korean-style individualism centered on fairness. This is different from that of young women, and she sees it as a crisis and anxiety among men in this era.

20 Bo-myeong Kim, "Discourse and Practice of Conservative Anti-Feminism in Korean Society," 190.

and the idea that men in their 20s were politically conservative. They warned against using reverse discrimination narratives to represent all youth and emphasized that conservatism among young men could shift depending on their interests. Critics also accused politicians like Jun-seok Lee of deepening generational and gender divides.

There were continued voices of self-reflection that anti-feminism is violence against feminism and it is dangerous to grant narrative and representation to groups that claim discrimination through violence. They also condemned the politics of anti-feminism from the perspective that gender conflict is originally formed on the basis of complex logic and diverse structures of perception that cannot be defined by a single frame. Rather, young men have shown a prominent phenomenon of rejecting traditional patriarchy and trying to escape the burden of being the sole breadwinner at home. It is noteworthy that the discussions and practices in recognizing and making gender conflict an issue have been diversified.²¹ In addition, although both the Feminism Reboot and anti-feminism had their own driving force, these discourses and movements were all variations of the popular culture and sentiments of neoliberalism.

The crisis of male identity in South Korea—shaped by political polarization, economic precarity, and the rise of feminism—has led to the emergence of young men in their twenties as a distinct social group. Their narratives, often framed around competition for increasingly scarce resources, reveal that they, too, are, in some ways, victims and survivors of the injustices and inequalities produced by patriarchal capitalism. This perspective recalls Nancy Fraser’s assertion that social justice cannot be neatly separated into either socioeconomic or cultural dimensions; rather, these domains are deeply entangled.²² In this light, the structures of inequality and the culture of exclusion do not only harm women—they also erode the identity and dignity of men.

4. Gender Injustice in the Korean Church

If gender conflict in contemporary Korean society has become a battleground of survival shaped by mutual hostility, then in the Korean church, it has functioned as a mechanism for reinforcing and preserving existing power structures through the production of gender-based hatred. As women’s presence in the public sphere has expanded and their social status has improved, the backlash against gender equality has intensified in tandem with these rapid transformations in both structure and consciousness. However, the dynamics of gender inequality within the Korean church diverge significantly from those in broader society. Rather than manifesting as overt gender conflict, the church reveals a more deeply entrenched pattern of gender injustice rooted in structural oppression and unequal power relations. Dr. Hye-Ryung Kim has emphasized that the stagnation of reforms for gender-equal leadership in the Korean church should not be confused with the regressive backlash seen among young men in secular society. She argues that the church remains trapped in a “pre-modern condition” in which

21 Ji-won Um, “I am *Idaenam*,” *Hankyoreh* 21, February 12, 2022, https://h21.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics_general/51580.html

22 Nancy Fraser, *Adding Insult to Injury*, 178-79.

women's rights have neither been structurally nor perceptually improved. Regarding gender issues, the dominant view within the church is not that of a liberal, merit-based humanism but rather a pre-modern anthropology premised on rigid gender separation.²³ Therefore, the church's refusal to acknowledge or politically engage with demands for gender equality is not merely a passive form of backlash—it constitutes the continued operation of primary, structural oppression. Nancy Fraser's multidimensional theory of justice, encompassing the socioeconomic, cultural, and political, provides a useful framework for analyzing the church's gender injustice. In this light, this study examines the gendered power order of the Korean church by analyzing the decisions of denominational general assemblies and the gender consciousness of Protestant congregants.

4.1. Gender Injustice in Denominational General Assemblies

Every September, each Protestant denomination holds a regular general meeting. The general meeting is the highest decision-making body of the church that evaluates the operations of the denominations and reviews the direction of activities and current issues for the year. In recent years, the main slogans of each general meeting have been "recovery, innovation, healing, and revival." This shows the situation in which the church has lost external social trust, failed to communicate with society, and has become internally powerful through capital and power. It also contains the church's will to reform due to the church's authoritarian and unethical attitude that has led to a decline in church membership. However, apart from the church's slogan, if we look at the members of the General Assembly and the agenda of the meeting, we can see the inequality of capital and power and gender injustice within the church.

In 2023, the mandatory quota for female delegates was a significant issue in denominations that permit women pastors and elders. For the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK), out of 1,500 total delegates, only 41 (2.73%) were women, despite this being the highest number to date. However, a proposal for a mandatory 10% female delegate quota was not even discussed as an agenda item. In the case of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK), female representation was relatively higher, with 68 women among 612 total delegates (11.11%). Consequently, a motion to expand the female delegate ratio to 15% was rejected. Among the delegates, the argument was made that this proposal constituted reverse discrimination against men. Annually, despite progressive policies related to women being brought up at the general Assembly, the overall atmosphere remains conservative. In other denominations, such as PCK (Hapdong), Koshin, and Hapshin, their general assemblies were comprised entirely of 100% middle-aged to elderly male clergy, with not a single female delegate.

Furthermore, one general Assembly allocated a mere ₩500,000 for the budgets of both the 'Gender Equality Committee' and the 'Sexual Violence Response Committee.' While financial limitations may exist, such a meager allocation for gender equality-related budgets serves as a clear indicator of that denomination's gender sensitivity and its perception of women.²⁴

²³ Hye-ryeong Kim, "Gender Justice and the Korean Church as a Regressive Space," 225.

²⁴ Taebin Um, "Major denominational assemblies: Discussion results on women and sexual violence agenda?,"

In 2019, the average age of Assembly members was 62.5 for pastors and 65 for elders. Some denominations proposed extending the retirement age for pastors from 70 to 75. A few passed these proposals, while others rejected them but left room for exceptions. The General Assembly of Presbyterian Churches in Korea (GAPCK) rejected the extension of the retirement age but decided that pastors could continue their ministry until the age of 75 if there was an agreement within the church.²⁵ The increasing age of clergy and congregants highlights the exclusion of youth and women. With men over 60 occupying the center of church authority, male-dominated church governance remains deeply entrenched.

Hundreds of proposals are submitted at each Assembly, but the key issue remains: whose perspectives and voices shape the church's future? The male-dominated structure of assemblies determines gender perspectives in church policies. In 2023, the GAPCK briefly allowed women to preach, only to reverse the decision. A manual titled "Guidelines for Preventing and Responding to Sexual Ethics in the Church" revealed an alarming lack of awareness about sexual violence, downplaying its seriousness and obscuring its definition. Even progressive denominations like the PROK showed gender injustice in church labor structures: many churches failed to provide standard social insurance for clergy, and paid parental leave was rarely discussed. Maternity leave was often treated as an issue only relevant to female clergy.²⁶

Overall, the Korean church continues to operate within a patriarchal power structure centered on male pastors. Despite theological affirmations that women are made in God's image, the church upholds a hierarchy—God, Church, Men, then Women. This order is reinforced through sermons and education. According to Nancy Fraser's framework, the church's gender perception fails even to recognize or distribute economic value to women's labor, nor does it provide representation. In short, it is a gender regression.

4.2. Gender Injustice in the Korean Church from Nancy Fraser's Perspective

The general Assembly, founded on the gospel of the Kingdom of God, determines a denomination's Christian values and policy directions. It also decides major annual policies in solidarity with its constituent churches and in relation to society. The Assembly protects the rights of clergy, determines the direction and areas of missionary work, allocates budgets for relief and welfare with society, takes political action on specific issues, and concretely addresses the faith and life of Protestants. Therefore, the entire process observed in the general Assembly—from "the composition of the meeting's members, the content and order of agenda items, and the process by which opinions are presented and decisions are made to the budget execution and distribution of meeting results"—forms the basis of the individual church's political, cultural, and religious perceptions. The entire process of the general Assembly shapes the political, economic, and cultural understanding of its affiliated churches.

News&Joy, October 12, 2023, <https://www.newsjoy.or.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=305774>

25 Chang-il Jang, "Why the 'regular offering' pastor's retirement extension is uncomfortable," *Kookmin Ilbo*, May 15, 2024, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=1715668027>

26 "Women Speak Out", <2023 General Assembly Gender Equality Monitoring> Presentation Materials, June 9, 2024, <https://bully.kr/HHaWkXo>

Nancy Fraser argued that “equality in political representation will inevitably lead to equality in economic relations.”²⁷ Yet, despite women constituting 50–60% of the church population in South Korea, female representatives in General Assemblies consistently hover between 0–10%. This stark underrepresentation reveals the deep structural barriers that prevent women from participating in church politics. Therefore, ensuring political representation for women—or those feminized and excluded—is an urgent matter in Korean Protestantism. The General Assembly has previously rejected proposals to increase the number of female representatives, claiming it could lead to reverse discrimination. However, the church has long erased the presence of women in ecclesial politics and stripped them of rightful positions. The failure to recognize women’s status reflects not only a lack of political representation but also a failure of just economic redistribution—what Fraser defines as gender injustice.

While some denominations have introduced gender quotas for female representatives in their constitutions, they often justify the low participation of women by claiming there are no eligible women or that women are unwilling to attend the Assembly. However, this is not due to a lack of women leaders, but to the absence or inadequacy of political systems that enable their participation. More fundamentally, this reflects a pervasive “cultural misrecognition” that makes it difficult to accept women as leaders. This issue is not limited to the perspectives of male pastors—it extends to internalized patriarchal attitudes among women themselves. Cultural misrecognition, unjust distribution, and political misrepresentation operate in subtle, invisible ways.²⁸ While Fraser identifies these as forms of gender injustice, the Korean church remains unaware of the mechanisms of injustice at play within itself.

Each year, after the General Assemblies conclude, reports monitoring and evaluating their proceedings are published. Yet, participation in this process is limited to a small number of female pastors and feminist theologians, and the reporting is carried out by a handful of progressive Christian media outlets. Most Christian news organizations and churches share only the major outcomes of the Assemblies. Issues related to gender are often ignored or deliberately omitted out of fear of stirring unnecessary controversy.²⁹

As mentioned earlier, while outside the church, the struggle to overcome gender injustice continues; inside the church, any related discussion is often made to seem sacrilegious in an effort to conceal gender injustice. As gender conflict in Korean society reaches an extreme, with individuals raising their voices in both online and offline public squares, the Korean church removes the public square to avoid even hinting at gender conflict. While women in society have participated as agents in public spheres even when their survival was threatened over the past

²⁷ Nancy Fraser, *Adding Insult to Injury*, 122–28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40–42.

²⁹ Ho-suk Kang, “A Practical Theological Study on the Church Order and Church Politics in the View of Gender Justice,” *Theology and Society* 35, no. 2 (2021): 180. She believes that in the current church ministry and church politics, ‘reigning’ rather than ‘serving’ produces office power and gender injustice, and that this is because the gender justice perspective related to ‘gender equity,’ ‘recognition of women’s subjectivity,’ and women’s ‘equal representation rights’ is missing.

decade, the church, witnessing the fierce debates between feminism and anti-feminism over the last ten years, has replaced women in the public square with an audience in the stands, and replaced agents with spectators.

Nancy Fraser's notion of deconstructive politics draws attention to the ways in which cultural and socioeconomic injustices intertwine to maintain identity-based precarity. She argues that in the face of such injustices, we must recognize differences while strategically supporting a politics of redistribution.³⁰ To move beyond gender injustice—and the structurally regressive oppression of women—the Korean church must adopt a more strategic and transformative approach. This involves dismantling deeply embedded cultural attitudes toward gender roles and exclusion, and actively constructing a space—a *square*—within the church where diverse voices can be heard. Between the false binary of divisiveness and irreverence, the church must courageously make room for dialogue, dignity, and justice.

5. Conclusion

The Feminism Reboot was born against the backdrop of the changing gender landscape amid institutional democratization and economic autonomy that has occurred in Korean society, and the resulting instability in the lives of the younger generation. In particular, the marginalization of female labor in the labor market since the 1990s, the gender wage gap, and the entry of women into the labor market without redistribution of reproductive labor have increased the burden on women. The normalization of hatred and violence, and the instability of employment and employment have changed the realm of intimacy, such as love and family. In a situation where housework and care were transferred to women, women had to pay the cost of structural changes in Korean society solely through their own efforts and achievements. For them, feminism was a struggle for their own survival, beyond political causes or cultural resistance. Therefore, the resurgence of feminism in Korean society began with the limitations of women's vulnerable living conditions. This situation is no different for young men who identify themselves as male victims and resist feminism. They are responding to the excessive gender equality with backlash, while at the same time rejecting or using the patriarchal authority order, thereby causing self-division. In the midst of the precarious and unstable gender politics, the COVID pandemic has revealed unequal and unjust structures in all areas, and has raised fundamental questions about human life. And it has raised anew the value of care for life and living. Gender conflict is being transformed and reformed to create a new structure that can respond politically while questioning the conditions of vulnerable and unstable life and the source of human life.

In South Korean society, the failure of institutional politics has led to the emergence of “square democracy” — the reclaiming of public spaces by citizens. Similarly, as misogyny, gender-based violence, and political hatred toward women intensified, women gathered both online and offline in the square. These spaces have become, in Nancy Fraser's terms, arenas of resistance

³⁰ Nancy Fraser, *Adding Insult to Injury*, 122-28.

against misrecognition, maldistribution, and misrepresentation — structural injustices that sustain gender inequality. The square, then, is not merely a site of protest but a symbolic space where women assert their dignity, affirm their rights, and reclaim agency.

However, the Korean church starkly contrasts with this democratic impulse. It remains a deeply hierarchical and authoritarian institution where even the discourse of feminism is repressed, let alone feminist action. Through the lens of Fraser's theory of recognition, the church's structural silencing of women constitutes a grave form of injustice. While society has witnessed women asserting their voices in the public square, the church has systematically closed off its own square — a space where resistance, recognition, and solidarity could otherwise flourish.

In addition, the church does not understand the gender struggle occurring in society or even grasp its causes, and still continues the structure of sexual injustice and inequality. In addition, it is using anti-homosexuality and anti-feminism to protect its authority and expand the terrain of conservative Protestantism, failing to communicate with society and excluding the weak. Our task is how to create a space where other voices can come out in an unjust situation where the Bible and the church are still trapped in the framework of traditional thinking and cannot be liberated. Protestants must minimize their divisions in the two worlds of society and the church, and create a place where all people can restore just relationships. We need the wisdom to criticize the gender injustice structure of the church and create a place of listening to each other and a place of the gospel so that we can untangle the numerous threads entangled in hatred and exclusion one by one. Just as Nancy Fraser approached gender inequality from the perspective of justice, we need to remember that human dignity is a matter of justice and the core of the gospel.

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