

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Gender Issues and
Feminism in
Economically Advanced
South Korea*

REPORT

Speaker :
Hawon Jung

24 April 2024

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Speaker: Ms. Hawon Jung, Journalist and Author of *Flowers of Fire: The Inside Story of South Korea's Feminist Movement and What It Means for Women's Rights Worldwide*.

Chair: Prof. Sandip Kumar Mishra, Professor, Korean Studies, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies; and, Distinguished Fellow, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- In his opening remarks, Prof. Sandip Kumar Mishra, drew attention to the need for greater attention to the global narrative on South Korea, which is often limited to its economic success and democratisation. He highlighted contemporary material expressions in a technologically advanced society, noting the struggle to balance traditional social values with global shifts such as increased gender sensitivity.
- Ms. Hawon Jung concurred with the Chair as to how the rest of the world is largely unaware of gender inequality issues, and rise of feminism within South Korean society. She noted that despite Korean women being better educated than their counterparts in various other countries, their continued absence from leadership positions is deeply disheartening. She mentioned the existence of a “glass ceiling” which hinders women from reaching decision-making roles. This, in tandem with a highly prevalent wage gap, makes it harder for women with families to balance their work without suffering from negative effects on their mental health.
- The speaker discussed the conservative family structure in South Korea which binds women to traditional roles, leaving no room for individual identity. Apart from the high costs of child-rearing faced by women, the speaker emphasised the bare minimum contribution of men in household chores and childcare duties. Ms. Jung specifically noted that even in households where women are the primary earners, stay-at-home husbands devote less time to domestic work and childcare. Furthermore, rampant discrimination against mothers in the workplace further adds to their distress. The speaker examined such socio-cultural factors in order to demonstrate

how they affect the future of the nation, especially in the context of South Korea's dangerously low fertility rates.

- Ms. Jung expressed concern about gender-based violence, noting that women are victims in 80% of violent crimes, mostly at the hands of their partners. She also highlighted the fact that many crimes go unreported, and without consequences, especially crimes such as “spycam porn” or “molka”. The rampant tech-based harassment and sexual abuse is a matter of grave concern, considering the pressure on women with regard to their appearances, which pushes them to undergo cosmetic procedures.
- Ms Jung also referred to the #MeToo Movement which brought positive legal changes with stricter consequences, giving women a sense of being heard. The speaker argued that voices emerging from this movement encouraged discussions on the impact of victim-shaming and blaming, while also encouraging women to resist the burdensome demands of prevailing beauty standards. It also led to the decriminalisation of abortion, which finally gave women more agency over their own bodies. Ms. Jung then discussed the anti-feminist protests fuelled by the recent presidential campaign, making gender equality a taboo. These protests were driven by the idea that feminist ideas would imply female supremacy, and declining birth rates would worsen.
- During the interactive session, questions were raised on defamation laws affecting the #MeToo Movement, and the perceptions and narratives around victims who come forward with their experiences. . . In response to a question, Ms. Jung stressed upon the debilitating impact of strict beauty standards on the body image and mental health of young girls. The speaker concluded that although women's experiences vary due to cultural differences and generational divides, most women ultimately want the next generation to have better opportunities and conditions than they did.

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