

Meet the Incels and Anti-Feminists of Asia



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Kim Woo-Seok, a 31-year-old chef in Seoul, grew up questioning the way society treats women. He felt sorry for his stay-at-home mother. He considered himself a feminist. But over the past few years, his opinions have shifted. When he came across women activists online, he was shocked to see some of them were making demeaning comments about men, including making fun of small penises. “I felt like my masculinity was under attack,” says Mr. Kim. He believes that, since the 2010s, Korean society has become more discriminatory against men than women. Although he has a girlfriend, many of those who share his beliefs in the region do not.

In advanced countries the gap between the sexes has widened, with young men tending to be more conservative and young women tending to be more liberal. The trend is particularly striking in East Asia. Men are not adapting well to a society where women are better educated, compete with them for jobs and do not want to have babies with them. According to one survey in 2021, 79% of South Korean men in their 20s believe they are victims of “reverse discrimination”. In neighbouring Japan, a survey the same year found that 43% of men aged 18 to 30 “hate feminism”.

At first glance, this may not seem that unusual. Much of East Asia has tended to be rather patriarchal. Japan and South Korea are the worst performers in The Economist’s glass-ceiling index, a measure of how women-friendly the working environment is in 29 well-off countries. In the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries, South Korea has the biggest gender pay gap. Women earn 31% less than men. In Japan that gap is 21%. In a survey in 2023 by IPSOS, a pollster, 72% of South Koreans agreed that “a man who stays home to look after his children is less of a man,” the highest rate in the 30 countries surveyed.

Even so, women’s lives in much of the region have improved. East Asia’s “son preference” is fading, with boys and girls alike expected to do well in school. The college enrolment rate for girls is now higher than that of boys in South Korea, China and Taiwan. In Japan it is still higher for boys, but only by three percentage points. Women are increasingly entering the workforce: in Japan the employment rate for women aged 25-39 surpassed 80% for the first time in 2022. In South Korea 74% of women aged 25-29 are employed.

This success is the first cause of the backlash. Young men are “surrounded by women who do better in school or excel in work”, says Lee Hyun-jae of the University of Seoul. Many men feel that “gender equality has already been achieved,” says Ms. Lee. In a world they believe is already egalitarian, many young men feel that extra policies to uplift women are unfair. Most do not wish to confine women to the home. But they are frustrated all the same.

Another factor is that East Asian men are living in less optimistic economic times than their fathers. Japan witnessed the burst of its “bubble economy”, an end to decades of remarkable growth, in 1991. South Korea was hit hard by an economic crisis in 1997. Young people born since then have lived in an era marked by slow growth. The full-time “salarymen” work model has eroded, with more precarious or part-time jobs on the rise. Last year in Japan, inflation hit a four-decade high (of around 3%, so still low by current rich-world standards). Real wages have fallen for the past two years. In South Korea the share of young men not in education, employment or training (NEET) has surged from 8% in 2000 to 21%. By contrast the share of female NEETs has fallen from 44% to 21% over the same period.

Meanwhile, the dating market is becoming more brutal. Fewer people are getting married: more than 60% of Japanese women in their late twenties are unmarried, double the rate in the mid-1980s. In Japan the age at which men lose their virginity has always been high. It has remained so: in 2022, 42% of men in their 20s said they had never had sex, while 17% of those in their 30s were virgins, too. A government report from 2022 found that 40% of men had never been on a date.

Marriage trends are similar in South Korea and Taiwan, while childbirth outside of wedlock remains rare. This means that the countries are ageing, and not enough babies are being born to support the population. South Korea’s fertility rate is the lowest in the world, at 0.72. Taiwan’s is 0.87, while Japan’s is 1.2. In South Korea some women have sworn off heterosexual relationships altogether. In 2019 a fringe “4b” movement emerged there. It involves women abstaining not just from marriage and childbirth, but also dating and sex with men. They believe a life with a man is a life without freedom. “I’m not even fighting the patriarchy—I’ve decided to walk out of it,” says Kim Jina, a 4b practitioner.

Another factor is that anger towards women is being stoked online. Mr. Kim, the chef, follows Bae In-gyu, an influencer on YouTube who leads “New Men on Solidarity”, a men’s-rights group. Mr. Bae claims that “feminism is a mental illness.” In South Korea, a popular online slur among men is kimchinyeo or “kimchi bitch”, a term that implies young

Korean women are materialistic, controlling and willing to live parasitically off men. In Japan tsui-femi, which is short for “Twitter feminists”, has become a derogatory term.

Similar to incels (or involuntary celibates) in the West, a group of Japanese men known as jakusha-dansei or “weak men” have emerged. “When it comes to dating, women overwhelmingly have decision-making power,” says Horike Takeshi, a 25-year-old Japanese man who has never had a girlfriend. He identifies as a “weak man” because of his low income and lack of sex appeal to women.

South Korea’s politicians are pandering to these young angry male voters. Yoon Suk Yeol, the current president, campaigned two years ago on a pledge to abolish the gender-equality ministry. He claimed feminism is hurting “healthy relationships between men and women”. The country’s gruelling, 18-month mandatory military service is a particular flashpoint. Unlike their fathers who served in the military without question, young Korean men are increasingly disenchanted. According to a survey in 2021 by Hankook Research, a market research outfit, 62% of Korean men aged 18-29, the prime age for conscription, feel military service is a “waste of time”.

Neighbouring Taiwan faces similar challenges. Its men must also serve in the military, though for a much shorter stint. But an organised anti-feminist movement is notably absent there, says Huang Chang-ling of the National Taiwan University. Young Taiwanese men’s frustration, unlike South Koreans’, “hasn’t become strong enough for any politician to want to exploit”, says Ms. Huang. Similarly, in Japan, where there is no mandatory military service, politicians have not yet decided to stoke up the incel vote.

The rise in anti-feminist sentiment bodes badly for the region’s birth rates. In South Korea, a government survey showed that over 60% of Korean men in their late 20s believe getting married and having children is “necessary” in their lives. Only 34% of women in the same age group agreed. But can East Asian men and women find common ground? A survey by a dating app last year found that, among divorced singles, 37% of Korean women said that a “patriarchal” man would be their least

favourite date. A similar share of men said they didn't want to date feminists.