

FEMALE KOREAN NURSING STUDENTS VIEWS TOWARD FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Korea is a strongly hierarchical Confucian society that within a social ideal focuses on “the greater good” rather than the individual. With the emphasis on saving face and maintaining stable social hierarchies, the study sought to understand female Korean nursing students’ perceptions of feminism. A total of 97 young women responded to the mixed-method study and the data showed that there were strongly mixed feelings toward feminism with even individuals who self-identified as being feminist critiquing the validity of “man-hating ideologies” common in modern feminism. Overall, opinion responses showed strong support for equality of the sexes but strong disapproval of “toxic femininity” which dominate 3rd and 4th Wave feminism. Understanding of nurses’ views toward feminism aids in discerning up-coming trends not only within society but also within the profession of nursing itself in Korea as well as other parts of East Asia

KEYWORDS: *Nursing, Feminism, Attitudes, Trends in Nursing, Misandry, Misogyny, Korean Studies*

Article History

Received: 25 Apr 2019 | Revised: 17 Jul 2019 | Accepted: 22 Jul 2019

INTRODUCTION

Korean society places great emphasis on the preservation of hierarchies and knowing ones place within the context of the hierarchy in question. This is evident not only in the social construction of hierarchies but also in the construction of the Korean language which uses numerous honorific or diminutive forms that are highly sensitive to the context of use, the social level of the person speaking and the social level of the person being addressed.[1]

Respect or a lack thereof is therefore intrinsically encoded in the complete grammar of Korean with conjugations playing an imperative part in communicating emotion and basic etiquette.

While it is true that women in Korea have faced hardships due to certain hierarchies [2], these same hierarchies have also in some cases ensured protection for women within their historical contexts. Korea has historically held to an extremely complex caste system not dissimilar to that of many European feudal states, however, as this system was only abolished in the late 19th century the mental vestiges of it remain.

Women in Korea are often viewed as the emotional centre of the household and men as the economic centre of the household[3]. Along with this view come the biological parameters of the sexes and their biological roles, women are capable of bearing children and are thus essential to the economic stability of the country.

In recent years there has been a change in the demographics of Korea with a substantial drop in the number of live births falling far below sustainable rates at 1.05 births per woman[4]. There is a high correlation between the fertility rates

of women and their level of education with those having more education being likely to have less children but to focus more on their childrens' health and well being[5].

Korea is a victim of its own success in many regards. The hypercompetitive schooling system has meant that students with more long term focus are able to attain higher grades. In Korea the overall scholastic ability of female students (middle to high school) have surpassed their male peers on average in reading, mathematics and science.[6]

The aging population brings further challenges to nurses who are not always sufficiently respected in society [7]. Certain elements seeking to bolster their own ideologies have been loudly pushing for feminist ideals to be implemented. The loudest voices however have consistently been from "radical feminist" groups and this toxic rhetoric has been largely ignored or criticised by both men and women in Korean society.

This study has aimed to understand the opinions of female Korean nursing students on the issues affecting their workplace as well as society in general.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used incorporated a teaching environment which will be referred to as an "intellectual zone" in direct opposition to the "safe zones"[8] common to certain universities in the western world. Students were exposed to ideas and concepts that they had a potential to find unnerving, offensive or outside of their comfort zone and no "trigger warnings" were given. It was assumed, that as university aged students, they would have the cognitive and emotional maturity to discuss subjects with which they did not necessarily agree or feel comfortable with.

Students were encouraged to state their opinion even when this opinion was different to that of their peers or professor and others students were expected to be respectful until it was their turn to speak.

Korean society follows a Confucian hierarchy in which social hierarchy dictates who is able to say what, it also dictates how and when something can be said, hence, it was important to help students become comfortable in expressing ideas that they thought might cause them to lose face in front of their peers.

The study was conducted via digital platform which could only be accessed through a direct link and a total of 100 female nursing students from the 1st year (Freshmen) and 2nd year (Sophomore) were invited to partake in the study. Of the 100 invited a total of 97 responded. Students were asked to answer a total of 9 questions to gauge their views on feminism and what it meant for Korea.

The study itself protected the privacy of the students by not recording any personal data, furthermore, the "intellectual zone behavioural conditioning" guaranteed more accurate results from the free expression of opinion.

To facilitate accuracy and freedom of expression, the study was conducted in Korean and the responses were then translated into English. The study was conducted using a mixed method approach.

Nursing students were selected as there is a tendency for nursing professionals to have higher scores in personality traits such as compassion, self-esteem and optimism. Nurses in other studies were found to be of a "proactive" inclination. [9]

Control Question

Are you female? (A female is one who has XX chromosomes, this question is directly related to sex not to pseudoscientific notions of perceived gender).

General Questions

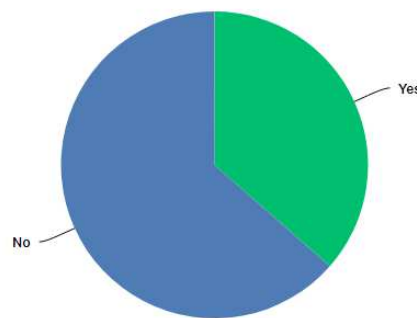
- Are you a feminist? (A simple yes/no response)
- What is your view of feminism? (Written opinion)
- Do you think Korean society is unfair toward women? (Yes/Neutral/No)
- Do you think Korean society is unfair toward men? (Yes/Neutral/No)
- What affect does Feminism have on Korean society? (Positive/ No Effect/ Negative)
- Do you view yourself as being of a submissive or dominant personality type? (Submissive / Neither –Neutral/ Dominant)
- What would you like to change about Korean society? (Written opinion)

RESULTS

A larger than expected percentage of students called themselves feminists (36.46% or 35/96) and non-feminists at 63.54% or 61/96, however the study did not take into account the particular branch of feminism that they ascribe to and responses later showed that there was a distinct difference in the understanding of much feminist ideologies of the West and a re-branding of second wave feminism in Korea. Hence, it can be said that the Korean understanding of feminism is not always on par with the Western ideology.

Are you a feminist?

Answered: 96 Skipped: 1



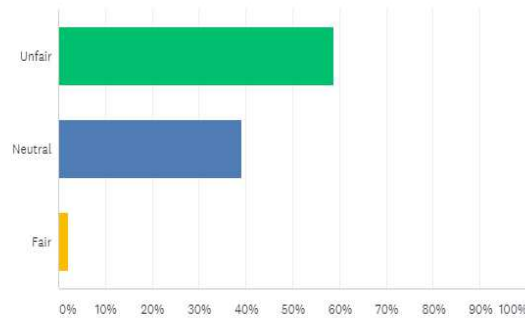
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	36.46%	35
No	63.54%	61
TOTAL		96

Figure 1

Female nursing students thought that general conditions for women in Korea were mostly unfair at 58.76%, neutral or not particularly discriminatory toward women at 39.18% and those who though it fair comprised of only 2.06%.

Conditions for women in Korean society are.....?

Answered: 97 Skipped: 0



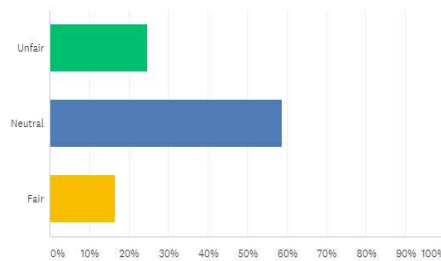
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Unfair	58.76%	57
Neutral	39.18%	38
Fair	2.06%	2
TOTAL		97

Figure 2

The same question was posed about men and students thought that general conditions for men in Korea were mostly neutral or not particularly discriminatory toward men at 58.76%, unfair at 24.74%, and those who though it fair took 16.49%.

Conditions for men in Korean society are.....?

Answered: 97 Skipped: 0



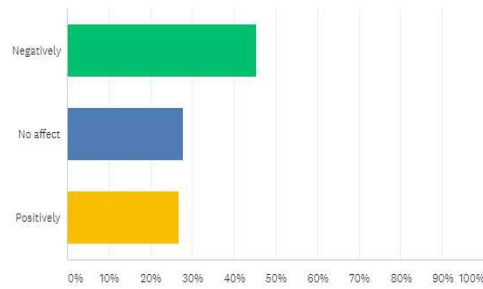
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Unfair	24.74%	24
Neutral	58.76%	57
Fair	16.49%	16
TOTAL		97

Figure 3

When asked how feminism affects Korean society there were some noteworthy findings with a majority of female nursing students (45.36%) viewing it as having a negative impact on the general society including some of those who identified as feminists. Students who thought it would have no affect (27.84%) and those who thought it would be positive (26.80%) had a minimal difference of only 1.04%.

How does feminism affect Korean society?

Answered: 97 Skipped: 0



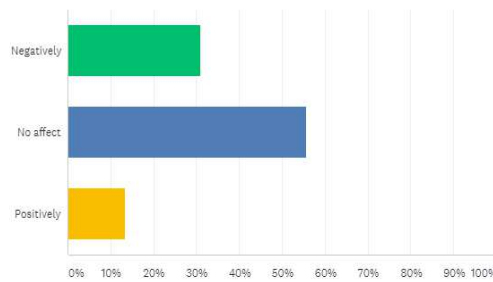
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Negatively	45.36%	44
No affect	27.84%	27
Positively	26.80%	26
TOTAL		97

Figure 4

Heavy competition for work is often a problem in the nursing field in Korea with workloads often going far beyond the contractual scope. Students were asked what their personal views are of such a heavily female dominated environment. Most were undeterred by this and stated that it did not affect them personally (55.67%). The second largest response was for the atmosphere of having mostly female nurses in the workforce being negative toward the individual (30.93%) with those viewing it positively holding only 13.40%.

Nursing is a female dominated profession. How do you feel this affects you?

Answered: 97 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Negatively	30.93%	30
No affect	55.67%	54
Positively	13.40%	13
TOTAL		97

Figure 5

Students were asked to rate how they view their own personality and to choose from the options provided. Neutral (neither submissive nor dominant) comprised the majority (72.16%) while there was not a great difference between the submissive (12.37%) and dominant (15.46%) types.

Do you view yourself as being of a submissive or dominant personality type?

Answered: 97 Skipped: 0

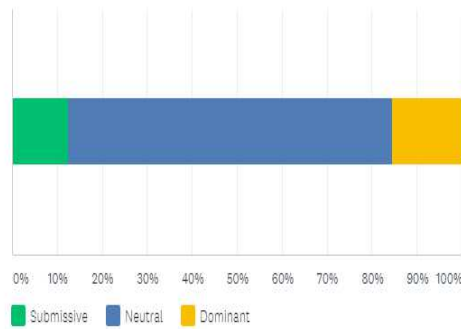


Figure 6

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Submissive	12.37% 12
Neutral	72.16% 70
Dominant	15.46% 15
TOTAL	97

Figure 7

DISCUSSIONS

The question “Are you a feminist?” was somewhat vague as there are multiple “branches” of feminism. This question was really designed to assist in the extrapolation of the personal understanding that female nurses had concerning feminism. This question was of interest because it directly ties into to the question “How does feminism affect Korean society?” with certain respondents who claim to be feminist viewing feminism as either having no effect or as having a negative effect on society (9.66%).

Hence, 25.71% (more than ¼) of those who identified as feminists did not have positive feelings toward the movement itself.

The views of how men and women are generally treated in society showed that there was a certain degree of discontent and the view that although life is not significantly better for one gender, that males do have a certain advantage.

Table 1

Treatment within Society	Female	Male
Fair	2.06%	16.49%
Neutral	39.18%	58.76%
Unfair	58.76%	24.74%

Interestingly, most students did not view society in general as fair. Certain views produced identical results, 58.76% for neutral toward men and 58.76% as unfair toward women. The results then indicate, that female nursing students do not view society as a “patriarchy” and that all men are unfairly favoured rather, that society in general has a certain degree of unfairness and that women tend to receive more of this in their opinion.

Belief in a patriarchy would have produced a higher percentage score for “fair” under the male category, however, even self-identified feminists did not necessarily view males as having a clear advantage. This can be noted from the disparity whereby 54.28% of those who identified themselves as feminists not believing males have a greater amount of fairness in society than females.

This then begs the question, “what is feminism to the individual?” and for this the opinions of students were a source of meaningful insight.

Most of the students interviewed responded that feminism meant “*the social equality of the two genders*”. A large portion however thought that this had been side-tracked by individuals within the movement. One student (personality type: neutral) said “*Originally, it was meant to foster equality between the sexes, unfortunately it has been changed into something that advocated bias against men*”. Another shared similar sentiments stating “*It started as something to liberate women but things have changed*”.

Other students (personality type: neutral) viewed feminism as something that has already served its purpose and has exceeded its expiry date, “*We have basically achieved what the original feminists wanted, which is legal equality. I think modern feminism is just harping on about women and not equality*”.

One student (personality type: aggressive) who self-identified as being feminist was fairly critical of feminism and echoed the sentiments which pertain to the larger society, “*Feminism used to mean standing up for the human rights of women, these days it basically means a sense of paranoia or to have some type of persecution complex/mania*”. She continued “*it has become an excuse for reverse discrimination*”.

There were opposing views with some of the more aggressive types of feminists posing that society is an unfair patriarchy. One of these commented that “*feminism is the removing of the historical shackles of male dominated society*”. A non-feminist student offered the view that “*feminists are generally overly sensitive*”.

Yet, another feminist student made a pertinent note that was shared with many other feminist students, “*I don’t affiliate myself with the extremists (3rd & 4th Wave feminists) but I do think that there are places in society where women need to have equality of opportunity such as certain professions and that is why I call myself a feminist, I don’t need Western definitions.*”

Interestingly, not one student mentioned equality of outcome as a desirable step for social progress and emphasis was placed only on equality of opportunity.

When asked “What would you like to change about Korean society” the results were diverse. Many students gave feelings of indifference or that society as a whole has too many factors to change.

Some stated that the legal framework and laws at present already guaranteed certain rights and also prohibited certain actions, however, that enforcement was poor or that society in general had not yet come to terms with these

concepts of special concern was the issue of hidden cameras (hidden cameras placed to take indecent photographs or video of unsuspecting victims [10]). While this is strongly outlawed in Korea and is considered a sex crime, many female students felt that the penalties for the crime were either too lax or poorly enforced to be a realistic deterrent. Many nursing students while being sympathetic to the cause of removing this social scourge (as any decent human would be) have for the majority sought to exclude themselves from the toxic femininity that has been espoused by the radical feminist core in Korea.

The area of greatest concern to female nurses however was the perception of nurses in society. While nurses are licensed as “medical practitioners” under national law, they are often treated as “mere assistants” to doctors. Students expressed concerns about their own health once they enter the nursing profession with existing research showing that 56.8% of nursing staff suffer from musculoskeletal disorders [11] due to poor work conditions or over work. Along with this came the workplace bullying that is rampant in the Korean hospitals among nurses.

Korea has a far reaching and ingrained problem of workplace bullying in the field of nursing, as the profession deals with lives, mistakes are not permitted. It falls on senior nurses to train incoming new nurses as per their dues and there are often no extra resources or benefits provided for doing so. As the senior nurses are punished for any mistakes made by new nurses, the senior nurses relentlessly bully new nurses in order to make sure they are up to par. A study conducted in by two universities in Korea showed that 94% of nurses had experienced a negative action within a six month period and that the prevalence of bullying according to operational criteria was 17.2%. [12]

Over several discussion sessions, students repeatedly came back to the issue of workplace bullying and felt that incentives to train more nurses in university was a poor solution, stating that the underlying social problem in hospitals would prevent the increase in trainees from having any effect. There was a general consensus that legislation should focus on making an environment that benefits nurses and patients and prevents unscrupulous individuals from focusing on profit.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, female Korean nursing students have the same general concerns as other women globally however show a resistance to the aggressive types of feminism which are proliferated in Western countries and due to their unique Confucian views of social responsibility are unwilling to disenfranchise or treat men unfairly, as this is seen to work against the greater good. Many women are desperate to rectify the injustices that undeniably exist in Korean society however are not willing to polarise the entire society for the sake of a textbook style utopian ideal.

Issues facing Korean society has a whole held second place to the plethora of problems plaguing the nursing profession and the majority of concern was directed toward workplace environment, workplace instability and the treatment that female nurses receive when working to care for patients. Of chief concern was the issue of bullying with many students stating it to be their greatest concern for their long term career goals.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest in this research. All research was conducted at the professor’s own expense without any support/funding from any external source.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Special thanks to all the students who participated in this study and supported the professor during data collection and without whom I would not have been able to complete this study. Also to my wife who always supports me during my research.

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