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**The Name is Miss Representation:
Female Invisibility and Its Roots in Poland and South Korea**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a cross-cultural examination of gender inequality in Poland and South Korea. Gender inequality has been part of the academic discourse for a long time; previous research, however, tends to focus either on specific countries or regions with shared connections. Drawing from an array of sources, including credible studies, news and journal articles, this research offers a broader, holistic approach, examining the roots of gender inequality and limitations to the emergence of equality by examining two seemingly different cases. This research proposes that gender inequality in these two countries, which on the surface may seem to share few commonalities, derives from and is upheld by similar ideologies and practices. In both countries the patriarchal system breaches women's rights, and low female political representation contributes to general invisibility and a lack of voice regarding gender issues, as in the glaring case of abortion. Misrepresentation and invisibility are the effects that arise from ideologically constructed systems of patriarchy built upon Christianity (in Poland), and Confucianism (in South Korea). Although both ideologies recognize women as crucial parts of the society and contributors to its growth, both strip them of recognition. The workings of the system reveal themselves in double standards women are required to meet, gender stereotyping and continued discrimination.

I. Introduction

Ziauddin Yousafzai, Malala Yousafzai's father, said at the 2013 Social Good Summit that "in most parts of the world, when a girl is born, her wings are clipped. She is not able to fly."¹ He is very much correct. The issue of the gender inequality has been an undeniable problem for centuries. Most societies and cultures have been built on a patriarchal system with specific gender roles imposed on all participants. However, within the past six hundred years, from the moment we entered the period of modernity, we have managed to make progress in a variety of areas and fields. Yet inequality between men and women remains. Even in a so-call post-modern era, the problem plagues us. To date, not a single country in the world provides equal pay, equal participation in the workforce, or equal representation in government. Elizabeth Broderick, who served as Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner, puts it best: "gender equality is the unfinished business of the 21st century."²

In 2018, news got out that a Japanese medical school had been manipulating female students' exam scores to exclude them for participation.³ In Australia, "fewer big ... companies are run by women than by men named Peter."⁴ In 2018, in an Irish rape case,

¹ Malala Yousafzai is a Pakistani activist who in 2009 became a target for Taliban forces and got shot in an attempted murder. She is the youngest Nobel Prize laureate; "Gender Inequality Quotes," *Pinterest*, accessed February 6, 2019. <https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/252342385344645632/?lp=true>

² Alex Lee, "12 Inspiring Quotes About Feminism That'll Pump You Up," *BuzzFeed News*, September 2, 2015. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexlee/12-powerful-quotes-about-gender-equality>

³ Justin McCurry, "Tokyo Medical School Admits Changing Results to Exclude Women," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/08/tokyo-medical-school-admits-changing-results-to-exclude-women>

⁴ Elizabeth Broderick, "Creating a More Gender Equal World: Reflecting on 8 Years as the Sex Discrimination Commissioner," *Australian Human Rights Commission*, September 2, 2015, www.humanrights.gov.au/news/speeches/creating-more-gender-equal-world-reflecting-8-years-sex-discrimination-commissioner

court heard that a victim was to blame, because the victim's underwear provoked the rapist⁵—a too familiar tale titled *she was asking for it*.

This research seeks to address this issue through a multi-pronged, comparative approach that examines three distinct yet interconnected areas. First, my analysis examines the lack of representation and invisibility of women in areas such as politics and government, and in decision-making processes regarding issues such as abortion and workforce participation. The intent is to present the social problems that patriarchy creates. It is to prove that although each country and culture comes as its own case and may appear unique to the outsiders, gender inequality does not choose or play favorites—it creates the same damage across *all* societies.

Second, the analysis looks into how religious and philosophical ideology perpetuates gender inequality across culture. Along with Christianity, which is a dominant religion and basis for Catholic ideology in Poland and Confucianism that lies at the base of Korean philosophy all the ideas incorporated in these ideologies serve to create a predominantly patriarchal culture. With the concept of certain ideas being “foreign” and therefore threatening national identity, as well as having Christianity and Confucianism serving as old country-building traditional ideas, these big three stand as the first guards against implementation of equality.

Lastly, this study discusses the role of gender stereotypes in the context of prevailing inequality in each country. Gender stereotypes extend their branches into concepts such

⁵ Sasha Ingber, “#ThisIsNotConsent: Protests in Ireland After Thong Underwear Cited in Rape Trial,” *NPR*, November 16, 2018, www.npr.org/2018/11/16/668636051/-thisisnotconsent-protests-in-ireland-after-thong-underwear-cited-in-rape-trial

as gender exploitation (the most prominent example being the existence of wage gap across all countries in the world) that links directly to misrepresentation of women in politics, which is one reason for, and an example of, the existence of the glass ceiling and glass elevator⁶ (a phenomena that points to quicker promotion of men when they work in female-dominated environment). Toxic masculinity and toxic gender relations are another consequence of this cycle.

The significance of this research lies in the fact that gender inequality remains an unsolved issue which occupies a constant space in the system, regardless of a country's level of development. Is a country truly developed if we take into consideration only its economy? Human rights and gender issues remain part of the complex web that tie our societies to their ancient histories—histories that although many can recognize as poisonous, no one can escape. More importantly, reaching gender equality is not only about empowering women. Methodological implementation of gender policies that aims at equality can counterbalance the ruling ideologies and role that gender stereotypes play in daily lives and politics that contribute to sustaining social hierarchy, in which patriarchal system remains a synonym for *social power*.

II. The Name is Miss Representation

Misrepresentation, sexism and misogyny remain prevailing concerns and issues of the twenty first century. At the same time, an argument that we have reached *enough* of equality seems to have been gaining popularity; in 2017, Polish Member of the European Parliament, proved

⁶ Sasha Borissenko, "Men Get Top Jobs in Traditionally Female Fields Because of Course They Do," *Broadly*, May 2017, https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/gyxvpq/men-get-top-jobs-in-traditionally-female-fields-because-of-course-they-do

otherwise, when he said that women “must earn less than men, because they are smaller, weaker and less intelligent.”⁷

There is still no country in the world with equal pay, and as of 2017, there were only two countries in the world where women’s political representation reached over 50% (Rwanda—61.3%; Bolivia—53.1%)⁸; according to UN Women’s “Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation” report “globally, there are 38 states in which women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses.” As it has been further noted, “only 22.8 per cent of all national parliamentarians were women as of June 2016.” Moreover, “as of June 2017, 46 [houses] were composed of 30 per cent or more of women, including 19 countries in Europe.”⁹ In Poland, the 2015 the number of women in parliament reached 27% and has been thus far considered the highest in the history of the Third Republic.¹⁰ In South Korea, similarly, the 20th National Assembly’s number of women is reported to have been the highest ever, with 17% representation.¹¹ Statistically speaking, the 17% appears to be an incredible figure, considering that the highest percentage before 1999 was 5.5% in 1973.¹² Yet these statistics remain strikingly concerning, as they remain proof that even when a few women shatter the glass ceilings and make it to the highest offices, the great

⁷ Helena Horton, “‘Sexist’ Polish MEP Suspended and Fined for Saying Women Should be Paid Less ‘Because They are Smaller, Weaker and Less Intelligent,’” *Telegraph*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/14/sexist-polish-mep-suspended-fined-saying-women-should-paid-less/>

⁸ “Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation,” *UN Women*, updated July 2017, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Rekordowa Liczba Kobiet w Sejmie—Kobiety w Parlamencie 2015—Podsumowanie Wyników Wyborów,” *Instytut Spraw Publicznych*, April 11, 2015, <https://www.isp.org.pl/pl/aktualnosci/rekordowa-liczba-kobiet-w-sejmie-kobiety-w-parlamencie-2015-podsumowanie-wynikow-wyborow>

¹¹ Claire Lee, “Women’s Presence in Politics Still Limited in South Korea,” *Korea Herald*, June 21, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160621000907>.

¹² Kyung-Ae Park, “Political Representation and South Korean Women,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (May 1999), pp. 432-448. DOI: 10.2307/2659403

majority remains invisible. We measure our development in terms of GDP and technological advancement, but what about the human numbers?

Misrepresentation is tightly connected to discrimination—a discrimination that extends far beyond seats in parliament. After all, having that seat means having a voice in matters regarding all aspects of life—from healthcare, to education, to budget, and to the formation of laws. Without female voices from within, women on the outside are subject to discrimination on levels that may be hard to notice. The best example is the ongoing debate about abortion. After all, this is one of the aspects of life that can never be fully relatable to or understood by men; without female representation, however, women are always at the mercy of patriarchal ideology concerning this and other issues.

Both Poland and South Korea retain extremely tough bans on abortion, at times going as far as to breaching women’s constitutional rights to happiness and health. In the two countries abortion is legal only under three circumstances. In Poland, these consist of cases when the woman’s life is endangered; the fetus is terminally defective; and pregnancy is a result of rape or incest.¹³ In South Korea, a pregnancy can be terminated when any of the parents suffers from a contagious disease; any of the parents has a “eugenical or hereditary mental or physical disorder;” pregnancy is a result of rape or incest.¹⁴ Neither of the countries recognize the social and financial situation of the woman, or the responsibilities of the man—the law remains blind regarding fathers.

¹³ Katarzyna Łodygowska, “Przepisy Dotyczące Aborcji w Polsce,” *MatkaPrawnik*, February 18, 2018, <http://matkaprawnik.pl/przepisy-dotyczace-aborcji-w-polsce/>

¹⁴ Bora Chung, “EXTRA! South Korea Brings Back Abortion Ban and Forces Women to Populate the Country,” *Safe2Choose*, December 3, 2018, <https://safe2choose.org/abortion-in-south-korea-forces-women-to-populate-the-country/>

Moreover, even in legal cases, neither country makes it easy for women to undergo abortion. In 2014, Dorota, at that time a 46-year-old citizen of Poland, “fulfilled” all the requirements to terminate pregnancy—delivering the baby meant she would lose her sight. “If you give birth,” her doctor said, “you’ll go blind;”¹⁵ nevertheless, she was denied her right. When she went to the hospital to set the date for the procedure, she heard that a second opinion was needed. Upon going to get the second opinion, all she was told was that “[she] will go blind, anyway, so what is the difference?”¹⁶ Her right to abortion was declined; her health, happiness and right to make decisions were compromised.

Even though the letter of law allows for abortion in very specific cases, theory stands far from practice. Polish law determines that in cases of rape or incest, abortion may be performed only until the 12th week, and in other cases until the 24th week—to determine whether the conditions allow the abortion within such a period of time is nearly impossible. In South Korea, in cases of rape, women need to first prove that the act was, in fact, a rape, before qualifying for a possible permission to undergo the surgery. Policies of both countries have constructed the issues and policies in such a way that regardless of the circumstance abortion is nearly impossible.¹⁷

Among the many ideological reasons that drive discussions on abortion, there is one cultural and political factor—declining population. Both countries have had to deal with

¹⁵ Olga Bierut, “Sprawa Alicji Tysiąc Niewiele Zmieniła. Polki Wciąż Wolą Usuwać Ciążę Nielegalnie,” *TVN24*, July 23, 2014, <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/sprawa-alicji-tysiac-niewiele-zmieni-la-polki-wciaz-wola-usuwac-ciaze-nielegalnie,449980.html>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ As of April 11, 2019, South Korea made a historical decision to rule ban on abortion unconstitutional; “South Korea to Legalize Abortion in Landmark Ruling,” *Korea Times*, April 12, 2019, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/04/718_267060.html

the issue of an aging society for years, and the fact that there is a decreasing number of children being born is a striking problem. However, both cultures (with a special emphasis on South Korea) make it beyond hard for women to have children and be successful in a workplace (especially in private sector/corporations). In simple terms, women are disposable; their employment is a waste of time and resources, because they will leave the workforce when they have children. There is no room for speculation of “if” they have offspring. It is taken at a face value that a women’s responsibility is to give birth. Therefore, in a lot of cases men get hired over women, even if their experience level is the same, or even if a woman may be more qualified; her upward mobility is limited due to her imposed role she feels forced to play.

As CNN reported in February 2019, “a series of firms have been caught using sexist recruitment targets to keep [women out of the] way.” Sophie Jeong, the author of the article, interviewed a 23-year-old female job seeker, who recalled being told by the employer: “women aren’t fit to work in sales . . . You’re a woman, why would you pursue a job in this industry?” Further, she explained “that during a group interview with a different South Korean company, she was asked about her plans for marriage and children, while two male applicants were only asked questions about the job.”¹⁸

The problem of invisibility and misrepresentation, therefore, is due to woman’s lack of autonomy, which men are granted as one of their birthrights—rights passed onto them by real and imagined ideologies, which lay at the core of patriarchy. Misrepresentation,

¹⁸ Sophie Jeong, “South Korea’s Glass Ceiling: The Women Struggling to Get Hired by Companies that Only Want Men,” *CNN*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/31/asia/south-korea-hiring-discrimination-intl/index.html>

invisibility and exclusion are, therefore, just at the surface of a problem with roots deeply tangled in ideology—a certain way of thinking and acting that one acquires from their parents and grandparents. These ideas and lessons oftentimes bring forward toxicity and oppression of one gender over the other.

III. Imagined Ideologies, Foreign Ideas and the Heart of Nationalism

The fact that we operate in a world that still expects women to fulfill their housewife duties, while graciously agreeing to letting them work, and yet, not rewarding them rightly, going as far as to underpay them for their double work, and expects them not to raise their voice, seems archaic. It remains a set narrative—that a woman's body is first and foremost for childbearing, taking from her all the autonomy and independence that men enjoy daily, with little predetermined expectations regarding their bodies.

What perpetuates such a way of thinking is the set of beliefs we were raised to follow. These beliefs are nothing but constructs of invented cultural and religious ideologies and traditions. In Poland, cultural practices and customs are tightly connected to Catholic traditions, which date back to the establishment of the country. The Republic of Korea, on the other hand, is a traditionally Confucian country, with a thousand years old history and practice. Two different systems, one connecting factor—patriarchy.

Historically speaking, Poland and South Korea do not fall far from each other. Both countries were absorbed by greater powers and disappeared from the maps of the world (Poland from 1795-1918, and during World War II; Korea 1910-1945); both experienced partition (in 1795 Poland was divided into three parts—Prussian, Russian and Austro-Hungarian (partition ended in 1918); in 1948 Korea was divided into the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea). In times of hardship, people

turned back to their fathers' traditions, cultures and religion to uphold the spark of their independence as people, when their political one did not exist. And while the world continued to turn and countries continued to develop and move forward, people of Poland and Korea had little left except for old traditions and the social order of their ancestors.

For the Poles, a sense of identity and structure came from the Catholic traditions that had been cultivated for centuries before. The strong role religion played (and still plays until this day) in the Polish culture influenced the existence of ideology that derived from certain beliefs. The way in which holy texts, such as Bible, portrayed their male and female characters, therefore, impacted (among other things) gender roles in Polish society. For instance, the way Virgin Mary is portrayed by the church, affected the figure of *Matka Polka*¹⁹—the caregiver, protector and teacher, responsible for the right and patriotic upbringing. There is something almost mythical and divine about this role and image; nevertheless, the role of *Matka Polka* is as important as it is invisible—“like Mary, *Matka Polka* suffers and grieves, but remains ever loyal in her commitment to family and nation, no matter what the personal cost.”²⁰ She remains hidden in the domestic sphere, leaving the country and issues connected to it—protection, management and administration—to men.

Similarly, the Confucian-based figure of *Hyeonmoyangcheo* (현모양처), meaning “a wise mother and a good wife,”²¹ conveys the same message as the Polish example—of a woman

¹⁹ Alexandra Gerber, “The Letter Versus the Spirit: Barriers to Meaningful Implementation of Gender Equality Policy in Poland,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 33 (2010): 33, DOI: 10.1016/j.wsif.2009...11.007.

²⁰ Gerber, “The Letter,” 33.

²¹ Soojin Kim, “Vacillating images of Shin Saimdang: The Invention of a Historical Heroine in Colonial Korea,” *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 274-290, DOI: 10.1080/14649373/2014/911440.

who provides teachings, care and protection to the domestic sphere, without getting recognition beyond that. The real-life inspiration for *Hyeonmoyangcheo* was Shin Saimdang, the “first woman of virtue . . . devoted to the role and responsibilities of women,” the mother of one of Korea’s most famous Confucian scholars, Yi Yi.²² And yet, although it is the woman to whom the domestic sphere belongs, and who is responsible for the righteous upbringing of children, it is the man who is considered to be the head of the family.

The latest Human Rights Watch report from February 6, 2019 on women’s rights in Poland, “The Breath of the Government on my Back: Attacks on Women’s Rights in Poland,” notes that “the government and the Catholic Church in Poland have been outspoken in censoring the concepts of ‘gender’ and ‘genderism’ and labeling promotion of equality as ‘gender ideology,’ which they demonize as driving hypersexuality, homosexuality, feminism, transgenderism, and an assault on traditional ideas of marriage and family.”²³ Both portrayals convey a certain ideology, which oppresses women, restricting them to roles they have no say in.

In fact, Confucian traditions have even been implemented legally into Korean society. *Huju* (호주) was a legal system implemented in South Korea after the Korean War, which put men as the head of the family (and therefore on the higher position than women). This system established that women were to take submissive roles in the family life and was not abolished until the year 2008 when it was recognized that it was not compatible with the 2005 constitution.²⁴ This system was one of the direct causes of patriarchy, as it sustained gender

²² Ibid.

²³ “The Government’s Breath on My Back: Attacks on Women’s Rights in Poland,” *Human Rights Watch*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/06/breath-government-my-back/attacks-womens-rights-poland>

²⁴ Chi-hyong Cho, “[Law Talk] Abolishing the Hoju System,” *The Korea Herald*, updated April 6, 2010, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20050323000033>

inequality, praised old people and other traditions of Confucianism. One such tradition is *Jesa* (제사)—a ceremony held during an anniversary of an ancestor’s death. Only members connected with the dead take part in *Jesa*, therefore, excluding the wives from their husband and in-laws’ celebrations. However, the burden of preparing the whole ceremony, falls upon women—they must spend hours cooking, catering and serving their husband’s family, only to be excluded from the actual celebrations, as they are not related by blood.²⁵

Beyond religious and cultural traditions, the historical tragedies faced by these countries have engrained gender roles. In 2010, while examining the limitations of successful implementation of gender policies in Poland, Alexandra Gerber proposed that one of reasons for a continuous failure lies in the socialistic past of the country. As she points out, due to deeply embedded historical scars, one of the main obstacles to successful implementation of gender equal policies, even (or especially) ones imposed by the European Union, is the post-war communist and socialist system that the country was under for nearly half a century. The feminization of the workforce under the socialist structure came as contradictory to the deeply patriarchal, Catholic family-oriented system of the earlier centuries. She explained that “the pre-socialist gender order status quo . . . becomes an important ‘line of defense’ . . . and a bulwark against the ‘(re)feminization’ of Poland.”²⁶ Gerber’s insightful work provides a deeper layer of understanding how gender and gender policies become part of the discourse about our identity. Gender inequality is embedded in who and *how* we should be—it becomes the handbook definition of good citizens. Therefore, any outside influence that does not follow the

²⁵ Jane Son, interview with the author, March 6, 2019.

²⁶ Gerber, “the Letter,” 33.

political agenda (social power and control) and aims at changing or shifting the way things are going to be is considered a threatening one, because it is “foreign”—“even when such . . . discourses [about gender inequality] are produced within Poland by Poles, they are often treated as ‘foreign’ and viewed skeptically,” she explains, further saying that “conceptualization of foreignness [which] is reinforced by the institutional terrain, is itself something foreign.”²⁷

Even among the sea of hidden figures, when a woman crashes through the glass ceiling, the system twists her role and reshapes it into something that is needed—a tool of nationalism, gender stereotyping and power. In striking similarity to Shin Saimdang, who fulfilled her duty to the country and became part of the collective memory and a unifying symbol of society building, is Polish scientist Maria Skłodowska-Curie. Skłodowska-Curie remains until today among the highest pedestal of Polish scientists, and yet, as Izabela Wagner notices “she is a Polish scientist, not a woman scientist, and her image is used as a powerful tool for the construction of the Polish collective memory.”²⁸ Yet, by not acknowledging her as a woman scientist, and instead a figure to drive a national agenda, we undermine her power as a woman. We are instead stuck with images such as *Hyeonmoyangcheo* or *Matka Polka* that serve as devices to fuel a dangerous idea: that women can be an integral part of society by being just mothers, as if being a mother was a woman’s only role along with responsibility to bring up her children in the spirit of nationalism and patriotism, and fulfill her duty to society.

²⁷ Gerber, “the Letter,” 33.

²⁸ Izabela Wagner, “Being Polish Scientists and Women—Between Glorious Past and Difficult Present: The ‘Reverse Dynamic of Equality Construction,’” *European Educational Research Journal* 16, no. 2-3 (2017): 142-159, DOI: 10.1177/1474904116688023.

Therefore, we can conclude that one of the many obstacles to successful implementation of gender policies are the strong ties to cultural traditions and the spirit of nationalism that resists acceptance of anything that comes from the *outside* and that may disturb the old social order. It is nationalism worn by citizens with the face of fear—the embrace of ideology and belief systems that are comfortable. It is the fear of change and the potential loss of a system that makes sexism comfortable. It is hard to determine to what degree, and whether at all, this might be a conscious thought pattern.

Realistically speaking, it appears hardly possible for such deeply embedded belief to be intentional. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that as misrepresentation and invisibility are results of ideologies and belief systems, and these ideas disguise and manifest themselves in gender profiling and exploitation. One central way to uphold the ideological division and superiority of one side over the other is through the continuous replication and reproduction of acquired behaviors, which present themselves in the form of double standards, gender stereotyping and discrimination. These significant factors prevent the equal representation of women.

IV. Double Standards, Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination

There is an ongoing battle between sexes, which women seem destined to lose as they attempt to resist and fight against pre-established ideological standards. Ideologies influence and shape human perception of the world, creating a closed circle of repetitive behaviors, standards and opinions. As a woman discovers the way the system works and learns to navigate it, it does not take long for her to realize the little space given for interpretation or discovery of herself. On the contrary, we fall into the trap of repeating

the preexisting patterns—some of which further perpetuate double standards, gender stereotypes and discrimination. In the end, everything we were raised to believe about ourselves and our relations with ourselves and the other gender is not some grand plan made by the gods and nature. It is a story created by us—by the system that was established by men, of men, for men.

The main plot of this story revolves around an endless cycle—of hypocritical standards, generalizations and unfair judgement—where women are often under more societal pressure. One of the examples is beauty—women are judged based on their looks, not their brains, which is a harmful practice that affects female self-image and self-worth. There are cases when women are being employed just to window dress the office—“When I go to meetings for client audits, my colleagues push me to wear more make-up because [our clients] these older men will be more willing to speak with a ‘pretty face’,” says a young financial consultant from Seoul.²⁹ South Korea is at the extreme end of the spectrum—the grand example of “a culturally monolithic and highly patriarchal society.”³⁰ Nevertheless, beauty remains worldwide “an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.”³¹ As Michael Hurt, a visual sociologist and professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul put it “[woman’s] body is [her] number one asset in this world, in a way that it’s not for men,” and he continues, saying that “for men, the social expectation is: don’t be fat, have a nice

²⁹ Crystal Tai, “K-beauty: the Ugly Face of South Korea’s Obsession with Women Looking Forever Flawless,” *South China Morning Post*, 2017, www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-luxury/article/2125286/k-beauty-ugly-face-south-koreas-obsession-women-looking

³⁰ Tai, “K-beauty.”

³¹ *Ibid.*

haircut, dress OK . . . if all you had to do to succeed as a woman is dress OK, not be too fat, look all right, you'd have a lot fewer problems.”³²

In 2018, an article was posted online by netizen Zbyszek Chęciński titled “What Can Help a Woman in Finding a Partner? 6 Pieces of Advice from a Man,” which seemed to have taken a very (one would hope) outdated and yet very common take on the idea that women are desperate for relationships. The author, a man, proposed six ways that women should change and how they should behave to find themselves a partner. Not only is the idea humiliating, but also offending to women, as it perpetuates the narrative that all they want and need in life is a man. The article starts off pointing to a certain need for women to uphold the imagined standard of beauty—“she needs something to sit on and something to breathe with,” taking a quote from an saying. And while he assures that maintaining such standard is not what it all is about, the first “advice” that he points to is to “take care of yourself.” Other suggestions for women relate to “cleaning up your social media accounts,” “smil[ing] more,” “let[ting] him get to know you,” and the most outrageous two—“will she be a good housewife?” and “ask God for help,” because “in the lives of all of us . . . the instructor is God.” Because apparently, although it is not necessary to be “Miss Universe,” it is very necessary to comply with beauty standards and expectations—the key is to “live by the words of Saint Benedict: ‘Ora et labora’ (pray and work).”³³

³² Ibid.

³³ Zbyszek Chęciński, “Co Może Pomóc Kobiecie w Znalezieniu Partnera? 6 Rad od Mężczyzny,” *Deon*, May 5, 2018, <https://www.deon.pl/inteligentne-zycie/ona-i-on/art,728,co-moze-pomoc-kobiecie-w-znalezieniu-partnera-6-rad-od-mezczyzny.html>

Historically, reaching the heights of perfection was woman's main job, and finding the perfect husband was considered her greatest achievement. For that, women had to be beautiful and present themselves as the perfect housewives and future mothers. However, they were never expected to be well-read, educated or *have a voice*. Women were a product consumed by the needs of those around them. One would hope that it would be different nowadays, and yet, a woman who speaks her mind is considered rude; a woman whose priority is to have a career over family is considered cold and selfish; a woman in her twenties who is not married is considered a leftover. In Poland, single women in their twenties have been referred to as *stare panny* (old ladies), a derogatory term that marks a woman in front of the whole society, as if suggesting there is something wrong with her. At the same time, the equivalent for men—*kawaler*—does not bear with it such negative connotations.

These rigid roles and social pressures lead directly to issues of one's self-perception—young girls grow up basing the idea of who and how they should be in relation to the other gender, which imposes on girls the idea that regardless of how uncomfortable they might feel, there is nothing they could or should do about it. A woman's *self* becomes intertwined with social expectations and social image of what a woman is—the submissive element in the spinning wheel of a cultural and familial system.

Not only do Poland and South Korea perpetuate the double standards regarding appearance, but the issues cut deeper into various areas: the workforce, leadership, household expectations and wage discrimination. In Poland, after democratization of the system and fall of socialism “subsequent conservative government tried to promote

family models with stay-at-home mothers to push women out from the ranks of the workforce” as one of the ways to deal with the issue of redundancies and “downsizing enterprises.”³⁴ Women were once again pushed to the back, turned into followers of men who were building a new Poland. As Wagner points out, “these dynamics were reinforced by the Catholic backlash (being a good mother and care-taker).” She further writes that “even if statistics show that Polish female academics and scientists have the access to leadership positions, it is due to the absence of males rather than to increasing gender inequality.”³⁵ This proves that although there is change happening, it is happening for all the wrong reasons.

On the other hand, in 2016, the Korean Women’s Institute of Development’s (KWID) published study which provides a demographic overview of daily life sectors of South Korean—with their main focus on capturing women participation in the social life, conveying everything from birth rates to political, educational and household activity.³⁶ This includes information about degree holders, women’s status in the education sector, level of economic activity, women working for the government, the gender gap and the gender inequality index. While the KWID’s report focuses on women’s participation in different aspects of daily life in the country, many studies and statistics reflect the activities of men. Men are shown to have very little participation regarding household affairs. For instance, as the KWID’s statistics indicate, while married females spend on average 1 hour 43 minutes cooking, serving and cleaning, their spouses spend only 12 minutes performing the same chores. Another great distinction presents itself in “care of

³⁴ Wagner, “Being Polish Scientists.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jae-Seon Joo, “Statistical Handbook Women in Korea 2016,” *Korean Women’s Development Institute*, 2017.

household members,” as women are noted to be spending 49 minutes compared to men’s 15. The most equally distributed time appears to be on home management and paying bills with women and men spending equally 1 second.³⁷

Even more interesting is that according to statistics, within a span of recent years (2005-2016), women comprised the majority of enrollees at universities (59.3% in 2016) in South Korea. Nevertheless, numbers for “Women’s Status in Education Sector” show that between 1985 and 2016 number of female principals in high schools rose only 5.9 percentage points (from 4.0 to 9.9), while the overall number of female teachers for that sector rose from 25.1% to 57.8%. The highest percentage—34.5%—of principal positions held by women as of 2016 is in elementary sector. It could be suggested that the slow growth in number would be related to a possible lower number of females seeking a degree in education in 1985, but, statistics show that the female students comprised 56.8% of all degree seeking students that year.³⁸

This greatly shows and explains the phenomenon of *glass elevator*—when a man gets promoted easier and quicker than women in fields either dominated by females or considered to be female professions (such as nursing). Similarly, in 2015 in Poland it was reported that out of 670 thousand teachers, 82% were women³⁹. And yet, as the educational system in Poland is currently in crisis⁴⁰ and debates and talk take place in media, there are hardly any women taking the floor. On Sunday, April 14th, in one of the

³⁷ Jae-Seon Joo, “Statistical Handbook Women in Korea 2016,” Table 10.

³⁸ “Statistical Handbook: Women in Korea 2006,” *Korean Women’s Development Institute*, 2006, <http://eng.kwdi.re.kr/periodicals/womenView.do?p=2&idx=101619>

³⁹ “Ponad 82 proc. Nauczycieli to Kobiety, w Środę jest ich Święto,” *Onet Biznes*, October 13, 2015, <http://biznes.onet.pl/praca/ponad-82-proc-nauczycieli-to-kobiety-w-srode-jest-ich-swieto/0fjg3v>

⁴⁰ In April 2019 teachers in Poland went on strike. Schools have been closed and there is an issue with students who are supposed to be taking their exams (middle school students write their final exams in April in Poland). Teachers want a raise to their earnings, the government does not want to talk, and there is a general disruption to the daily lives of everyone.

leading media outlets in Poland, TVN24, a debate took place, in which the only participants were men. Even with a predominantly female majority within the educational system, women remain excluded from participation in talks about their lives, situations and futures. How is that not a clear example of discrimination?

Lastly, the pressure that women face is undeniable, especially in fields that are considered (or have been considered for a long time) male ones, “partly because [women] are still held to a higher, and more unrealistic standard.”⁴¹ It is still common to hear rhetoric of “it is really a pity that you are a woman, since you are a gifted scientist. You will meet a man and you will marry him and have children and you will be lost for science.”⁴² Helen Sullivan, in her article “Old Stereotypes Hold Women Back from Pursuing Careers in Politics” quotes Lauren J. Hall and Ngaire Donaghue who wrote that “women must overcome stereotype-based expectations that lead them to be considered less competent than men and work to overcome assumptions that they will not be ‘tough enough’ for the hard decisions and personal attacks of political leadership”. As the author points out, “one reason that gender myths persist is that analysis and opinion over female politicians’ hair, bodies, and clothing still remains ‘fair game’ . . . by focusing criticism (and compliments) on a woman’s appearance rather than her record, to be ‘qualified’ means to have both experience with wardrobe and hair to match.”⁴³

But women are not shadows, they are not followers, they are not child-bearing incubators. They are self-standing leaders whose *rights are human rights*. What needs to

⁴¹ Sullivan, “Old Stereotypes.”

⁴² Wagner, “Being Polish Scientists,” 146.

⁴³ Sullivan, “Old Stereotypes.”

be recognized is that gender inequality influences and shapes all of our lives of us all, not only women. We all suffer from gender profiling and gender stereotyping. It may represent itself differently in each place, but it affects us all. The way we grow up being taught what we can and cannot do, depending on our gender, is a contributing factor that shapes aspects of us, including our beliefs and interests. Beyond any geopolitical sphere and crossing over cultures and continents, gender equality impacts and harms us—and we are all affected.

V. CONCLUSION

Gender inequality has been a part of the academic and cultural discourse for a long time. Yet, after decades it seems impossible to fix the broken system. Women remain underrepresented in politics and leadership; disposable in the workforce; burdened by the pressure to be perfect mothers, perfect employees, perfect teachers, cooks and cleaners, all the while looking perfectly, dressing perfectly and listening perfectly. Women remain exposed to sexism and misogyny, discrimination and harassment, having their health and happiness compromised in name of ideology that puts the fate of the unborn above the living. Why? Because this broken system works for those in power, leaving those without it still without a voice loud enough to break through the glass ceiling.

Although we tend to believe that we are moving forward, facts tend to show otherwise. Both Poland and South Korea are among the ranks of the first world countries and members of the OECD;⁴⁴ however, while Poland's and South Korea's wage gaps stand on two opposite spectrums⁴⁵ (which may indicate a better situation for female

⁴⁴ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

⁴⁵ South Korea has the biggest wage gap among the OECD countries (36%)

workers in the European country), when it comes to daily realities, Wagner notes that “in today’s Poland, we are observing a process opposite to the one which occurred in the first part of the 20th century; instead of gender equality improvement, there is now a growing discrimination.”⁴⁶ In today’s South Korea, women are being degraded and humiliated, as they fall victims to the spy cameras pornography. As reported by CNN, “in 2017, more than 6,400 cases of illegal filming were reported to the police, compared to around 2,400 in 2012.” It is being further reported that “last year (2018), tens of thousands of women took to the streets of Seoul . . . to protest against the practice and demand action, under the slogan ‘My Life is Not Your Porn.’”⁴⁷

As Gerber points out, history and traditions are linked to the meaning and sense of belonging within a nation, and hold a strong grip on progress and development. On a decision-making level, women remain highly underrepresented, while certain debates keep expanding into realm of men, rendering significant issues such as abortion beyond the control or voice of the very women who experience it. Church and state are tightly interconnected, whether visibly or beneath the surface, and both old philosophical thoughts and religious decrees rule our consciousness, becoming an excuse for the fear of change.

We need to recognize that this debate is always going to be a rather pessimistic one. However, as Malala Yousafzai once said we should “raise up [our] voice—not so [we]

⁴⁶ She focuses on the situation of women in science; however, it is not to be assumed that women in other professions have it much easier; Wagner, “Being Polish Scientists,” 143.

⁴⁷ Sophie Jeong, “Hundreds of Motel Guests Were Secretly Filmed and Live-Streamed,” *CNN*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/20/asia/south-korea-hotel-spy-cam-intl/index.html>

can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”⁴⁸ Maybe we have finally come to the point where it is high time to recognize that being radical in our actions and opinion is the only way to make a difference—recognizing that we live in societies ruled by invented traditions and gender stereotypes, which may no longer be applicable to the developed and modern state we paint our world to be, is enough to make a change. To realize that “gender equality goes to the heart of who we are and how we live,” and “what we have before us are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems.”⁴⁹ Let’s be radical in recognizing each other as equally necessary parts of communities we have spent so many decades building. Let’s be radical in making sure that when a girl is born her wings are not clipped. Let’s be radical in making our voice heard for those who do not have them.

⁴⁸ “Top 12 Most Inspiring Malala Yousafzai Quotes,” *Goalcast*, March 7, 2017, <https://www.goalcast.com/2017/03/07/top-12-most-inspiring-malala-yousafzai-quotes/>

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Broderick, “Creating a More Gender Equal World.”

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