# Escape the Corset: Korean Women Step Up and Step Out

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## Abstract

This manuscript details South Korea's "Escape the Corset" Movement, a feminist rebellion against societal demands of beauty and expectations of submissiveness. South Korea has a deep-rooted society of misogyny, informed by a long history of Confucianism and a patriarchal value system that has shaped values, gender roles, and societal norms. This value system contributes to the oppression of women by feeding into a male-dominated society where women are expected to be submissive and subordinate to men, and to adhere to traditional standards of self-presentation and beauty. Describing bold "Escape the Corset" statements like shaving one's hair or distributing photos of destroyed makeup, as well as "Quiet Feminism" tactics of women's book groups and discussion circles, the manuscript details how the Escape the Corset movement grew from a few feminist social media posts challenging Korean toxic beauty standards, into a powerful, globally-influential site of feminist resistance that inspires women to break free from rigid social standards.

## Introduction

In 2015, a Korean feminist group run by Megalia4 posted an image on their Facebook page, (see right) titled "Out of The Corset." This image kicked off the modern "Escape the Corset" movement in South Korea, which challenges patriarchal society and social norms, such as toxic beauty standards, that pressure women to conform. This Korean movement gained global attention with the popularity of a YouTube video published in 2018 titled '나는 예쁘지 않습니' ('I am not pretty'), showing a Korean beauty influencer, Lina Bae, sadly taking off her makeup while the screen displays actual comments she's received over social media: *'Can you even see with those squinty eyes? Your eyelids are so f*cking uneven.' 'It's a pig wearing makeup.' 'I'd kill myself if I looked like you'* (Sharp). The video ends with Bae having no makeup at all, but smiling with a message to all her followers: *'You're special just the way you are. Nobody can hurt you. I will always support you'* (Sharp). The message from her video was significant as it expressed rebellion against the societal demands of beauty, and reassured people watching that it isn't necessary to change yourself to conform to society's view. From these roots, and catalyzed by a deep-rooted society of misogyny, "Escape the Corset" has grown into a globally known Korean movement that inspires women to break free from rigid social standards.


## Review

South Korea has a deep-rooted society of misogyny. One aspect that informs Korean society is its long history of Confucianism, a patriarchal

value system that has had a significant influence in South Korea by shaping values, gender roles, and societal norms. Confucianism places men in a higher position than women and contributes to the oppression of women by feeding into a male-dominated society where women have few opportunities and are expected to be submissive and subordinate to men. In traditional Korean Confucian society, which was introduced in the late thirteenth century, and adopted as the official state ideology during the Joseon dynasty in 1392, women were not allowed to look most men in the eyes, or travel through the city without fully covering themselves head to toe (Park 2). This enduring influence of Confucianism can be seen still today in Korean magazines where women in the photos stare timidly downwards or offstage and are less likely to gaze directly at the audience, as compared to American publications (Jung and Lee 279). This demonstrates a gender role expectation in Korea that women are supposed to be submissive and passive.

The Korean beauty industry and media play a substantial role in enforcing an unrealistic skin beauty norm by creating an ideal image for what skin should look like. A common term seen in the beauty industry is "mibaek", which is a term used to describe glowing flawless skin (Park and Hong 229). This beauty norm is seen in numerous ways. First, in television, many stars are seen with "porcelain skin" that is flawless and bright. Furthermore, Park and Hong point out how most of the couples seen on television are heterosexual, traditionally good-looking couples, fulfilling their gender roles with flawless faces. The flawless and bright face in television helps create a romantic and fantasy-like feel, compared to a realistic shot that might have facial "flaws".

Today, social media plays a big role in amplifying these unrealistic beauty standards, as there are many beauty filters that are used to change one's appearance. For example, the widely used camera application, SNOW, is a beauty application that makes skin whiter and smoother, further reinforcing the idea that fair and flawless skin is ideal (Park and Hong 302).

Mibaek can also be seen in K-pop music, as idols commonly have beautiful skin and "ideal" bodies. At the end of performances, such as on music shows, K-pop has something called an "ending fairy," a close-up shot focused on one idol which gives them a chance to connect with viewers. However, most close-up shots are focused on female idols that have bright perfect skin. As ending fairies are close to idols' faces, there is pressure to have that "picture-perfect" skin to maintain an idol image (Park and Hong 305).

In these ways, K-pop and the beauty industry have contributed to toxic beauty standards, by forcing many idols and their female followers to participate in shaping their body in an extremely unhealthy way. K-pop as an industry has exploded worldwide, thanks to groups like BlackPink that have become widely recognized and paved the way for many other groups in the idol industry. Unfortunately, many female idols are forced to undergo body modifications like plastic surgery. Additionally, weight loss is heavily encouraged to the point where many idols develop eating disorders like anorexia (Venters and Rothenberg 459-463).

This exploitation of female idols demonstrates how demanding patriarchal beauty standards can be in Korean society. Many female idols are encouraged to participate in female stereotypes and stick to a very specific personality and identity to please audiences. Additionally, K-pop idols usually debut as young as fourteen or fifteen. This young age, combined with strict beauty standards, further reinforce toxic beauty standards and societal pressure for young women to conform. This damaging form of body shaming results in things like extreme diets, plastic surgery, unhealthy

weight loss, and poor mental health. The results can be deadly. For example, Sulli was a female K-pop idol who committed suicide due to mental health problems (Venters and Rothenberg 455). The extreme pressure to uphold beauty standards forced on K-pop idols to the point where suicide can occur demonstrates an urgent need for a Korean feminist resistance movement.

These standards are reflected outside of the music and media industry as well, such as in cosmetic surgery. In Korea, college and high school graduates commonly get plastic surgery to be more competitive on the job market, and employers commonly request pictures and reports on weight and height before hiring women (Business Insider). While one-third of Korean women between the ages of nineteen and thirty-nine report having undergone cosmetic surgery, 66% say they would have plastic surgery to improve their marriage prospects, and 25% of Korean mothers recommend that their daughters between twelve and sixteen years old should "go under the knife" (Business Insider).

At the extreme, Korean misogyny can result in outright violence against women. Domestic violence within intimate relationships is common, and femicide has become a growing problem in South Korea (Kim 76-78). In 2016 (Kim 76), a woman was murdered and stabbed to death by a random man in a restroom by Gangnam station in Seoul. Her killer claimed he had personal feelings of hatred against women throughout his life; however the police later stated that the murder was not due to gender-based killing but due to a mental illness. Even though the police stated that the motive was due to mental illness and not a hate crime (Ock), this case still became a key moment in driving modern feminism as many young women felt that the killing was based on gender discrimination. Following the murder, thousands of young women left sticky notes at the Gangnam subway station and occupied the location to protest the killing to demand justice (Kim 83). Even though the motive was controversial (misogyny or mental illness), this case was important because it brought attention to the growing issues of misogyny such as gender-based killing and domestic violence against women.

As a response to the various forms of toxic beauty standards and outright misogyny, Korea's "Escape the Corset" movement has taken flight. "Escape the Corset" spread widely across social media after 2015, as young women began to post and publish photos on social media that reflect the fight against societal norms. For example, women in South Korea would upload photos of destroyed makeup and beauty products as a statement of rebellion against beauty standards and the patriarchy in solidarity with "Escape the Corset". The Korean text commonly written in these photos means "Escape the Corset", with the word "corset" being used to represent societal standards that force women into a narrow box. Pictures of numerous makeup products tossed all together in a jumbled pile, and being completely destroyed, convey a way for women to contribute to dismantling toxic beauty standards (Spinnybingle). These social media posts represent women breaking free from social standards. Instead of women presenting themselves as perfect little porcelain dolls, the images show a resistive and chaotic approach to body image. The large amount of beauty products in the images further demonstrates toxic beauty standards by highlighting just how much makeup women are expected to wear. Women are expected to wear products like mascara, lip liner, eyeshadow, eyeliner, foundation, concealer, lipstick, and so much more. Simultaneously they are supposed to look "natural", or else face criticism by society for wearing too much makeup. Overall this action of resistance through counter-images is a way for women in "Escape the Corset" to express their fierce rebellion and fight against toxic beauty standards, hopefully inspiring many other women to partake in the movement and

find freedom from the patriarchy.

"Escape the Corset" rejects societal beauty standards by encouraging women to take off the "corset," which has led to a creation of new fashion styles in Korea's modern feminist movement. Some widely known styles related to "Escape the Corset" are statements such as short hair or a completely shaved head, no makeup, and going braless, which allows more women to try new styles and experiment with fashion, while also explicitly rejecting traditional standards (Shin and Lee 11). Women who participate in the movement often lean towards outfits that are more comfortable and practical, such as opting for loose-fitting clothing that doesn't highlight curves on a woman's body. Furthermore, they reject beauty standards and gender norms by avoiding clothing stereotypically meant for women such as dresses or short-skirts, rejecting decorative designs such as frills or lace, and avoiding high-heels by opting for more comfortable and gender-neutral shoes like sneakers. Other items, such as tiny feminine bags, are rejected in favor of minimalist bags that have multiple functions, have good spatial capacity, and are comfortable, such as backpacks and fanny packs. New styles emphasized by "Escape the Corset" involve rejecting fashion that pressures women to look a certain way, putting emphasis on comfortability and practicality (Shin and Lee 12). These styles have brought awareness to discriminatory aspects of women's fashion and have inspired women to experiment with new styles that better align with their daily life.

A specific brand popular among "Escape the Corset" feminists is Fuse Seoul, which is a brand known to cater to feminist ideas by paying close attention to the wants and needs of women to create clothing. They combine aspects of menswear, such as deep and spacious pockets, while also emphasizing women's comfort. For example, they make their clothing about half a size bigger than you would typically see in the same size range (Shin and Lee 8, 15). Providing wider size ranges challenges narrow beauty standards in fashion which commonly emphasize women's figure rather than comfortability. Furthermore, it allows for a more diverse range of clothing for women with larger bodies and promotes body positivity by ensuring that all women have access to clothing no matter their size.

In spreading resistive images, sharing new fashion concepts, and building nationwide communities of resistance, digital media has had a huge impact on modern Korean feminism. Instagram and YouTube have allowed women direct access to disseminating powerful images and messages across the globe, while encouraging women from diverse locations and perspectives to participate in the movement. Digital platforms have also been used to build connections and expand the scope and range of "Escape the Corset" activists through an online cafe called Uncomfortable Courage (Kim 84). Uncomfortable Courage organized two demonstrations at Hyehwa Station in 2018 as a part of a series of feminist rallies protesting sexism, misogyny, and digital sex crimes. One demonstration on June 9th had a turnout of more than 22,000 women. The protests also included a hair-shaving ceremony, a statement commonly done by feminists in "Escape the Corset" (Hankyoreh). Therefore, online cafes such as Uncomfortable Courage have immense significance in increasing the number of participants in feminist movements. Uncomfortable Courage invites its users to share their opinions and experiences and can create action through activities such as protests or social media posts.

Although digital platforms and social media have been used to advance the movement, these same technologies can exacerbate the very problems "Escape the Corset" works against, such as by facilitating cyber sexual violence. The sharing of nonconsensual sexual images and videos, including

revenge porn, images of gang rape, and even child sexual exploitation, has only grown with the expansion of digital technologies (Kim 84). In fact, there is evidence that the rise of assertive modern feminism like "Escape the Corset" has actually fueled an intense and even violent backlash against feminism in daily life, both online and offline (Jung and Moon).

Because of the level of toxic backlash and online misogyny, there is a growing movement of "quiet feminism" among young college students in South Korea, which allows many women to practice feminism in solidarity with "Escape the Corset", but without public declarations. Jung and Moon interviewed forty female college students who considered themselves feminists but are commonly afraid to express this identity publicly due to backlash. They identified a "Quiet Feminism" movement which involves creating safe spaces and self-study groups in college campuses, where women can feel supported in discussing feminist ideas like gender inequality with peers who have similar views. Much of the public focus on modern day Korean feminism highlights assertive movements like "Escape the Corset", but this quiet feminist movement is an important supplement, wherein books clubs and feminist study groups can act as safe havens for feminists, protecting women from intense emotional burnout from popular misogynistic responses such as constant, degrading online backlash (Jung and Moon).

Whether in bold "Escape the Corset" statements like shaving one's hair or distributing photos of destroyed makeup, or through "Quiet Feminism" tactics of women's book groups or discussion circles, feminism is a growing force in Korea. "Escape the Corset" is a site of resistance. Jeon Bora is a photographer with the movement who documents how South Korean women are rejecting traditional notions of femininity and beauty. She hosts exhibitions of her work open only to women, showcasing "before and after" portraits of women who have "Escaped the Corset" by taking off their makeup, cutting their hair, and changing their fashion. In one recent exhibition, a female subject left this message on her portrait, which well describes the hopes of this innovative feminist movement: "Dear sisters and friends, I wish we could become humans that exist as we are, and love and be loved as we are. You are you, I am me, we are us, without the makeup, without the corset. Just a human. I love you, always, as you are" (Kuhn).

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