

No dating, no sex, no marriage, no kids: South Korea's growing feminist movement

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SEOUL – Bonnie Lee doesn't care about finding a boyfriend or a fairy-tale wedding, and will decide her own happily-ever-after: "I'm a straight woman who is no longer interested in having relationships with men."

She is not alone.

A growing number of South Korean women are banding together to reject rigid patriarchal norms and vowing never to wed, have children or even date and have sex.

"I've always felt that as a woman there are more disadvantages than advantages to being married," said Lee, a 40-something professional who lives with her dog near Seoul.

Now she has gone even further, embracing the nation's radical feminist movement called 4B, from the "four nos": no dating, no sex, no marriage and no child-rearing.

Marriage rates are plummeting in South Korea, where wives are often expected to work, raise children and care for aging in-laws with little state or community help.

"In the marriage market, your previous life and work experience don't matter," explained Lee, who has two master's degrees.

"For some ridiculous reason, being highly educated also becomes a minus point. What matters the most as a potential wife is whether or not you are capable of caring for your husband and in-laws," she added.

She has witnessed well-educated friends hitting barriers at work and experiencing problems at home after having children.

Such difficulties are the subject of a recent hit film, "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982."

Based on a controversial feminist novel, it centers on a married South Korean woman who has quit her job and struggles to raise her child with limited support.

Female viewers rated the film an average 9.5 out of 10 stars on the South's top search engine. Men gave it 2.8.

A growing number of women are turning their backs on the traditional expectations of South Korea's male-dominated society, where working wives spend four times longer on domestic chores than their husbands.

A decade ago, almost 47 percent of single and never-married Korean women said they thought marriage was necessary. Last year, that fell to 22.4 percent. The number of couples getting hitched slumped to 257,600 — down from 434,900 in 1996.

4B members say the movement has at least 4,000 followers.

A separate feminist YouTube channel that features messages of boycotting marriage and child-rearing has more than 100,000 subscribers.

Lee has also adopted some tenets of Escape the Corset, a movement against South Korea's strict beauty standards. Some adherents have shared viral videos of themselves smashing up their make-up collections.

The groups are emerging against a backdrop of anger over South Korea's spy-cam porn epidemic, whose victims are mostly women, and cases of sexual misconduct uncovered in the global #MeToo movement.

The final straw for Lee came last year when a progressive male politician who used to proclaim himself a feminist was convicted and imprisoned for raping a female aide.

Lee said: "I realized this society is a system that I cannot accept as a woman, and from then any encounter with men — be it marriage or dating — became meaningless to me."

Yoon Ji-hye, a 24-year-old YouTuber, feels South Korean women are often expected to be "passive, childlike and bubbly," as well as attractive, to be desirable.

She has fully embraced Escape the Corset, cropping her hair short and going bare-faced, shunning the country's booming beauty industry.

"I used to spend hours mastering make-up techniques watching YouTube videos, and spent about \$200 on beauty products every month," recalled Yoon, who lives with her parents.

Her ex "preferred" her with long hair and did not support her feminist inclinations, she says.

Now also a 4B member, she does not miss dating or sex: "There are other options and ways to please yourself."

Yoon is convinced most South Korean men in their 20s and 30s have watched spy-cam videos or revenge porn — footage released by male exes — one reason she no longer wants to engage with any of them.

4B and Escape the Corset are the most radical forms of feminism the South has ever seen, according to Shin Gi-wook, a sociologist at Stanford University.

“The four categories — marriage, motherhood, dating and sex — often put women in subordinate position to men ... and what is represented in ‘corset’ is also similar — that women need to look certain ways to please men,” he said.

The effects risk reinforcing the country’s looming demographic disaster.

South Korea’s total fertility rate — the number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime — dropped to 0.98 in 2018, far below the 2.1 needed to keep a population stable.

The government predicts the South’s 55 million population will drop to 39 million by 2067, when half the nation will be age 62 or older.

Authorities have been trying to promote marriage by offering newlyweds housing benefits and low-interest mortgages.

But for Lee, the future is female.

She insisted, “My dream is to build housing only for women who plan to never marry.”