

Discord Between Transgender Women and TERFs in South Korea

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Abstract

This paper examines the discord between transgender women and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) in South Korea, focusing on the dispute between feminists and anti-feminists. This paper introduces a conflict between those two groups in that TERFs believe transgender women highlight gender stereotypes and femininity, in contrast to radical feminists looking forward to the dissolution of gender, such as the “escape the corset” movement. Furthermore, this paper illustrates the experiences of personal and legal discrimination and well-known instances to show the oppression that trans women are undergoing. Finally, among these conflicts, the paper focuses on women-only spaces, including women’s universities, which is one of the most controversial and significant problems. The study examines why females fear men’s invasion, which leads TERFs to exclude transgender women from these spaces. I reviewed journals and news articles to refer to scholars’ claims, analyze recent cases, and see public opinions for this paper.

Keywords: TERF, Feminism, Transgender, Gender

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Introduction

In South Korea, there are conflicts between transgender people and some radical feminists called TERFs. Although trans women's gender identity is female, TERFs often do not include them in the category of women and claim that trans women are against their eventual aims: the dissolution of gender and patriarchy. On the other hand, transgender people are alienated and experience discrimination against them in this situation. Thus, this paper will examine the discord between TERFs and transgender women in South Korea, specifically their claims, hardships, and the meaning of women-only spaces, to understand both groups' stances and further consider a more inclusive society.

Background

The National Center for Transgender Equality (2016) explains transgender as "a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born." However, trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) reject transgender people, prioritizing women's rights and strongly opposing misogyny (Miller & Yasharoff, 2020). A researcher analyzed that radical feminists in South Korea consider that transgender people reinforce gender roles and gender images in society (H. Lee, 2019, pp. 178-180). They tend to exclude transgender people, especially trans women, from the female boundary.

Stances of TERFs

TERFs exclude transgender people since they deny the existence of gender identity.

Maya Forstater, a tax expert and a visiting fellow at the Centre for Global Development, posted on her Twitter that people cannot change their biological sex (Bowcott, 2019). One of her statements was, "There are two sexes. Men are male. Women are female. It is impossible to change sex. These were until very recently understood as basic facts of life" (Sullivan & Snowden, 2019). As a result, in December 2019, she was "accused of using 'offensive and exclusionary' language in postings opposing government proposals to reform the Gender Recognition Act to allow people to self-identify as the opposite sex" (Bowcott, 2019) and eventually lost her job. After the judgment, J.K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series, supported Forstater and claimed that forcing "women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real" is excessive and unfair, and people also criticized her for being exclusionary to transgender people (Sullivan & Snowden, 2019).

1. Shared Experience of Misogyny

Likewise, Forstater and Rowling claimed unchangeable sexes and emphasized the protection of women's rights; TERFs in South Korea highlight severe misogyny. H. Lee (2019) states that young women's shared experiences of sexual assaults, misogyny, and hate crimes are the background of TERFs. For example, on May 17, 2016, a woman in her twenties was murdered by a 34-year-old man in a restroom near the Gangnam station (Online News Team, 2016). The case has been disputed about whether it is misogyny as a hate crime since the assailant stated during the police investigation that he committed the crime because he felt the victim had ignored him, even though he did not know her personally (Online News Team, 2016). H. Lee (2019) claims that the case triggered a lot of Korean women to be aware of feminism and define themselves as feminists. The unrest of women has increased since the

murder happened in a women's restroom, implying women cannot be safe even in female-only places. Several civic organizations gathered for the fifth anniversary of the Gangnam station murder on May 17, 2021, and they participated in the struggle to win the right to be safe from sex crimes, including digital sex crimes, dating violence, and sexual violence forced by power (News1, 2021). According to the researcher Seunghwa Jeong (2018), the 'biological female' category was initially defensively constructed rather than to exclude trans women due to anti-feminists who use transgender rights to attack feminism. Kim analyzes that trans women's femininity is regarded as exaggerated and wrong. Also, she states that radical feminists blame them, claiming that trans women cause confusion in the category of women and "re/produce" existing femininity (R-N. Kim, 2017, p. 126), contrary to radical feminism rejecting gender images.

Furthermore, there are more severe violent and abusive anti-feminism these days. An organization of feminists named "Haeil," which means tsunami in Korean, protested on August 22, 2021, against the politicization of anti-feminism (Chaigne, 2021). At the same time, an anti-feminist organization named "New Men's Solidarity" rushed into the protest, shouting assaulting words and threatening them. They surrounded Haeil with water guns and followed them, saying:

Look at all of these feminazis! That's right, run away! At least you'll get a bit of exercise! ... So you got water on you? Are you angry? God, there are so many insects here, there are so many. I'm going to kill the insects, they're insects, right? (The term 'insect' is used by some feminists to designate anti-feminists) ... I heard that there were f*****g feminists here, I'm going to murder them all. (Chaigne, 2021)

Since New Men's Solidarity also live-streamed the situation, Haeil had to cover their bodies and faces to conceal themselves and protect their personal information. A member of Haeil, Hae-in Shim, explained the reason for concealing themselves that one of the most common cybercrimes against feminists is collecting and posting all of their personal information, including photographs, online for everyone to see (Chaigne, 2021).

2. Reasons of Exclusion

H. Lee (2019) analyzes that TERFs in South Korea are based on the perception that defining femininity as part of gender identity is misogyny, and "TERFs set the ultimate goal and reason of feminism as abolishing gender" (p. 179). However, Lee also states the irony of TERFs' claim that biological sex is more legitimate than gender identity and explains that TERFs claim transgender women reinforce gender images, gender roles, and stereotypes, in contrast to the movement called 'escape the corset.' This movement aims to reject the beauty standards of South Korea and the social pressure to conform (Kuhn, 2019). Therefore, many females participate in the movement by cutting their hair short, not wearing makeup, and wearing comfortable outfits rather than tight and short clothes. Eventually, those females have become the subjects of attack and abuse from anti-feminists. In an article named "Multi-layered gender perception among young men," the author specifies that young females growing up as feminist subjects are aware of usual misogyny and sexism, while males deny the context of structural sexism and strengthen anti-feminism (Choo, 2021). The author researched 3,435 males aged 19-34 living in South Korea and classified them into four types: request of conservatism, transformation, sameness, and acceptance of gender equality as a norm.

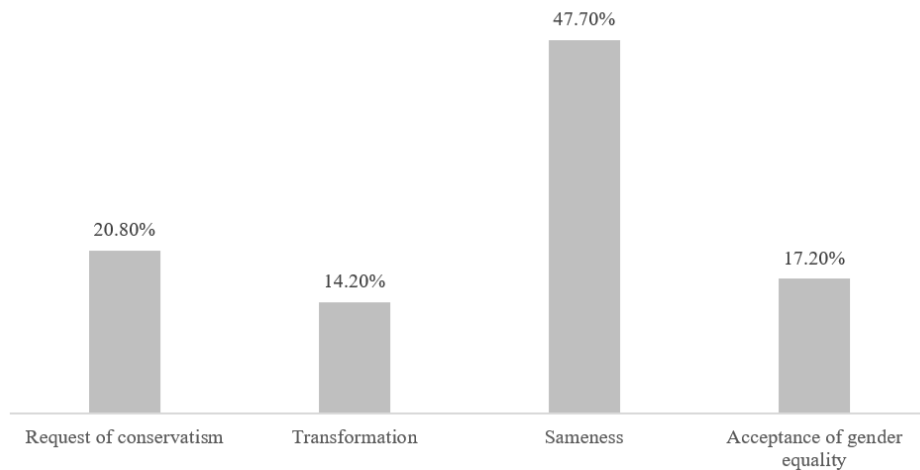


Figure 1: Four types of males in South Korea

First, 47.7% of men in the “sameness” type believe that gender relations are already equal and oppose the expansion of policies to increase the opportunities for women’s participation. The author states that this type may look similar to anti-feminism, but they agree to expand the existing policies for violence against women and career breaks. Second, 20.8% are in the “request of conservatism” type. They oppose both passive and active policies against sexism. Choo explains that people of this type mostly reject traditional gender role norms but tend to regard women as immature beings that men should protect rather than compete with women. They also believe that the extant women’s oppression is reasonable, and they resist change. Third, the “acceptance of gender equality as a norm” type has 17.2% of participants. They are friendly to expanding all policies for gender equality, including active actions for the rectification of sexism. Nevertheless, they have the highest acceptance of traditional gender role norms and are second-most defensive to the “request of conservatism” type about paternity leave and participation in housework, caring, and gender equality. Thus, the author analyzes that these people generally agree with various gender equality policies, regardless of their daily changes or attitudes toward gender role norms. Lastly, 14.2% of people are classified in the “transformation” type. They reject traditional gender role norms the most and believe that current gender relations are unfair to women. They are the friendliest to not only the policies for sexism or protecting and supporting women but also policies that promote men’s change and participation (Choo, 2021). This study shows the perceptions about feminism and females these days, and eventually, it explains the existence of attacks and abuse against feminists in South Korea.

Specifically, a female archer named An San won three gold medals at the Summer Olympics as a South Korean player in 2021. However, she had to face thousands of online comments accusing her of being a feminist because of her short haircut, and other female athletes with short haircuts experienced similar abuse (Young, 2021). Young, a journalist in the New York Times, quotes one comment on An’s Instagram: “Are you sure An San isn’t a feminist ... She meets all the requirements to be one.” She also quoted Wonjae Lee, a professor of social network analysis at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, stating, “High-profile figures are often targeted by anti-feminists in South Korea” (Young, 2021). The anti-feminists have become more aggressive toward feminism and strictly inspect females, considering feminism a harmful and dangerous thought. In this context, Hyomin Lee (2019) pointed the radical feminist community is exclusive, particularly for male feminists, sexual

minorities, including transgender people, and other women excluded from radical feminism, in order to construct and protect priority for women. In regards to TERFs excluding transgender people, Lee indicates that TERFs define gender as socially and culturally determined sex and which highlights gender stereotypes. Thus, TERFs in South Korea insist that feminism and transgender rights are incompatible since they believe many trans women pursue typical femininity and reinforce beauty standards, such as having long hair and wearing sexually appealing outfits, which is contrary to the ultimate purpose of radical feminism and the ‘escape the corset’ movement to dissolve gender and patriarchy (H. Lee, 2019).

Stances of Transgender People

According to the statement of the American Medical Association (2018), “The AMA will oppose efforts to deny an individual’s right to determine their stated sex marker or gender identity.” AMA Board Member William E. Kobler explained that “Sex and gender are more complex than previously assumed” and emphasized the importance of acknowledging that an individual’s gender identity and assigned sex from birth may not align. He also expressed concerns that the “narrow limit on the definition of sex would have public health consequences” for both transgender people and people who have intersex traits (American Medical Association, 2018).

1. Personal Discrimination

Transgender people in South Korea often face discrimination online and are even ridiculed or attacked. For example, there is a meme saying, “I am a trans cat because I feel I am a cat. If you cannot understand me, you are a trans cat phobia,” mocking trans people (H. Lee, 2019, p. 182). Lee introduces several malicious comments and Twitter postings against transgender people and states that the significant reason TERFs deny transgender people’s existence and lives is biology, specifically sex chromosomes. Following is a comment on YouTube:

The biggest dilemmas: 1) If you think you are a black person, can you be a black person? 2) If you think you are a cat, are you a cat? 3) If someone considers themselves an armless disabled person and tries to cut off their own arm, would it be an identity, not a mental illness? 4) Why do you ignore the basic scientific common sense that chromosomes determine sex? 5) What is a woman’s mind/spirit? I’ll be a TERF until someone who can clearly answer these five questions appears. (H. Lee, 2019, p. 181)

This comment explicitly shows that one of the reasons TERFs deny transgender people’s existence and lives is sex chromosomes. Namely, TERFs believe that biology is the absolute fact and common sense and emphasize the unchangeability of sex from birth. At the same time, they regard gender identity as an illusion and claim that “feeling” oneself as another gender regardless of biological sex is illogical. Moreover, TERFs argue that intersex people and transgender people are separate issues and criticize transgender people as they “cause intentional distortion as a basis for justifying their existence by bringing intersex issues that are irrelevant to them,” specifically:

Please let’s get this straight, “sseu-kka” (a derogatory term against intersectional feminists). Intersexes like XO or XXY chromosomes are diseases, not another gender. They are called Turner syndrome and Klinefelter syndrome, and those people cannot

live normally. Stop making intersex gender and saying, “How do you explain this, TERFs?!”... You always bring intersexes as the evidence of gender identity and stop using intersexes as a shield. (H. Lee, 2019, p. 197)

Likewise, TERFs emphasize intersex and transgender rights are different problems since intersex shows medical symptoms as it is a genetic and physical disorder. In contrast, transgender people claim self-determination of their gender with no ground except their “mental gender” (H. Lee, 2019). Hence, ridicule and hate expressions are prevalent online, especially stressing that gender identity is not real and claiming that the only fact is the biological sex from birth.

2. Legal & Systematic Discrimination

The National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK) researched transphobia and discrimination in South Korea in 2020 and showed the practical hardships of transgender people. In this “Transgender Hate Discrimination Survey,” 591 transgender people over 19 years old and living in South Korea participated in the survey online. The participants shared their experiences in nine areas, one of which was about gender recognition (Hong et al., 2020). Only 47 participants (8.0%) answered that they have already finished the gender recognition legally, 28 participants (4.7%) are progressing with it, and the rest, 508 participants (86.0%), have never tried it. 82 participants who have done or tried gender recognition stated five significant difficulties:

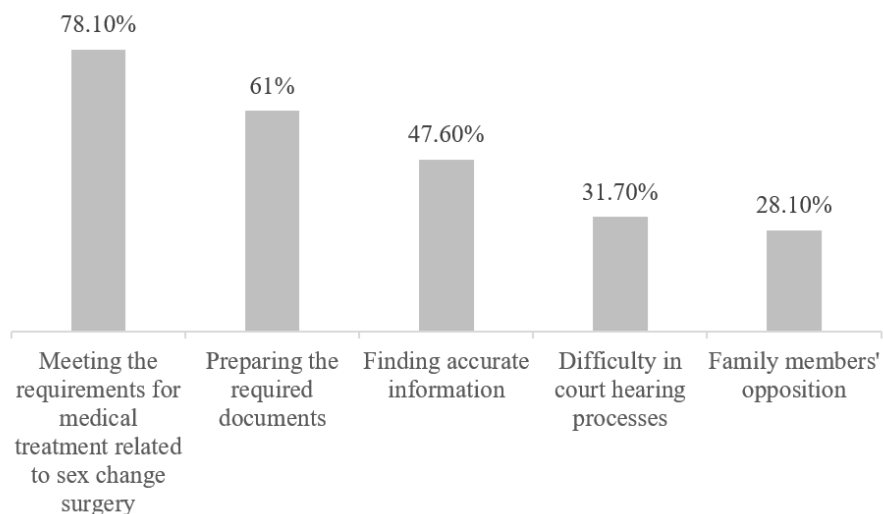


Figure 2: Hardships in gender recognition

Also, 78 participants answered that they experienced injustice during the process of gender recognition (Hong et al., 2020):

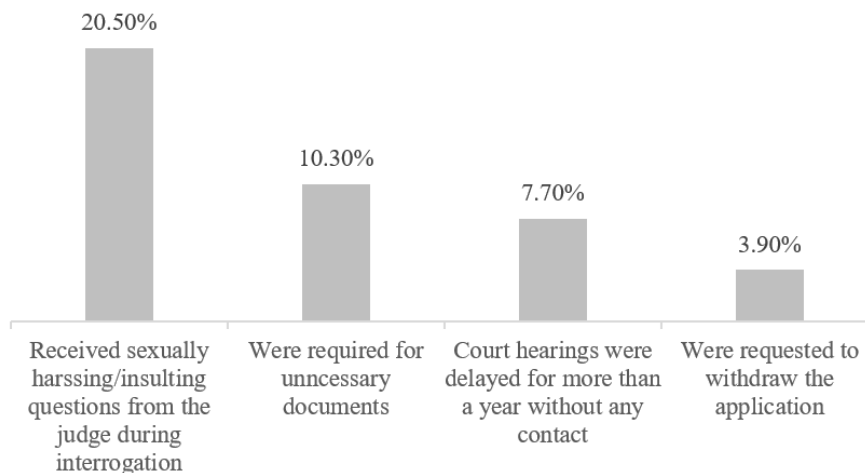


Figure 3: Injustice during the gender recognition

There are guidelines from the Supreme Court of Korea (2020) regarding gender recognition, which state required and optional documents. According to the guidelines, the courts may ask for the following (Supreme Court of Korea, 2020):

- A certificate of identification documents
- A psychiatrist’s medical certificate or written appraisal that identifies the applicant as a transgender patient
- A letter of opinion from a sex-change surgery doctor that confirms that the applicant currently has a contrary appearance (i.e., look like) to biological sex
- A medical certificate or written appraisal verifies that the applicant does not currently have a reproductive ability and is unlikely to occur or recover in the future
- The applicant’s growth environment statement and acquaintance’s warranty

The NHRCK states that South Korea does not currently have an act regarding transgender people’s gender recognition (Hong et al., 2020). Therefore, if a person wants to recognize gender, the court should allow revising the gender section on the certificate of family relations document (Hong et al., 2020). Since there is no separate act, the study states that the basis of legal gender recognition in South Korea is Article 104 (Rectification of Inadmissible Records Entered in Family Relations Register) of the Act On Registration Of Family Relations (Korea Legislation Research Institute, 2019).

In March 2021, there was a tragedy where a trans woman named Huisu Byeon took her own life at the age of 23 due to systematic discrimination. (W. Kim, 2021). She realized her gender identity during military life, and the Armed Forces Capital Hospital recommended getting surgery as she was diagnosed with severe gender dysphoria (W. Kim, 2021). Eventually, she got permission for a furlough abroad and underwent sex-change surgery (Yu, 2021). Although she wanted to continue her military service after the surgery, as her dream was to become a soldier, the Discharge Review Committee forced her to discharge from the army in January 2020, accounting for her mental and physical disorder, indicating the loss of the phallus and testicles (Yu, 2021). The army adhered to the decision, although the NHRCK exhorted the military to postpone the review for three months (W. Kim, 2021). As a result, Byeon filed a lawsuit to cancel the discharge at the Daejeon District Court on August 11, 2020, with the help of the “Joint Countermeasure Committee for the Reinstatement of Transgender Soldier Byeon Huisu.” The UN also sent a document to the Korean military that

forcing her discharge was an abuse of International Human Rights Law. The court finally set the court date, six months after Byeon's lawsuit was received, to April 15, 2021. Hyunnam Kim, the secretary-general of the Military Human Rights Center, expressed his grief about Byeon's suicide and about that she could not stand in court due to the indifference and unfairness of both the executive and judicial branches. After the story of Huisu Byeon became well-known to the public, the Minister of National Defense articulated the necessity of studies about the military service of transgender people on March 16, 2021, in the National Assembly Defense Committee (W. Kim, 2021).

Female-Only Spaces

1. Definition & Necessity

Sheila Jeffreys, a representative radical feminist of the United Kingdom, examines separatism and emphasizes the importance of women-only spaces in her book, *The Lesbian Revolution: Lesbian Feminism in the UK 1970-1990* (2018a). Separatism was applied in the early 1970s in the UK across the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). The author explains that the development of female-only spaces is the most fundamental form of separatism. According to the author, "any attempt to create women-only space is challenged and sometimes threatened by men's rights activists and men who transgender" these days (Jeffreys, 2014, as cited Jeffreys, 2018a, p. 55). The author also emphasizes the necessity of women-only spaces. Specifically, she expresses concerns that women would not be able to articulate the challenging and critical thoughts of men if men, the oppressor who "interrupt, get upset, demand women's loyalties or even threaten violence or exposure," are present (p. 59). In another book, Jeffreys (2018b) states that when claiming female-only spaces, the premise is to define 'women' as a political category formed by patriarchal oppression resulting from the experiences of living as a woman under male supremacy. She included living with a woman's body and how behavior patterns, such as menstruation or childbirth, that women will or have experienced in reality are constructed in a male-supremacist society as those experiences.

2. Korean Female-Only Spaces

There is increased interest in female-only spaces nowadays in South Korea as well, and hence, diverse women-only spaces are emerging nowadays, including parking areas, lounges, taxicabs, libraries, and fitness centers. There are, nonetheless, conflicting opinions that those spaces are reverse discrimination and, in contrast, that they are for women's safety. From the stance of advocates, the sex crime rates against women are considerably higher than for men. According to a report from the Korean National Police Agency (2021), about 92.29% of sex crimes victims were female, which is 20,041 cases out of 21,717 cases, and it states that about 40.27% of sex crimes happened in familiar places in daily lives. In this context, a news article states that women-only facilities are reasonable for women's safety and emphasizes insight into the facilities' purposes and backgrounds (Democratic Press Citizens' Union, 2019). According to an article named "Women-only Space," those spaces started to be constructed in the late 1990s when women's social achievements were visualized and became issues in Korean society (Ko, 2016). The social successes of females, such as passing national examinations, entering universities, and getting a job instead of merely keeping the house, were interpreted as men's ordeals or crises. Feminist movements and women were eventually blamed, primarily online. The author explains that women-only spaces were one of the strategies that can keep women's voices despite the hostile environments. Specifically, the female student lounge is a women-only space in several coeducational universities in the

capital area that first began to emerge between the late 1990s and early 2000s by the demands of female students. The experiences of female students about being excluded in male-dominated cultures became common problems, and the students could discuss those issues and make some networks in the lounge, which is an empowered space (Ko, 2016). Yet, there is a controversy that female-only spaces or facilities are reverse discrimination against males these days.

In 2011, a dispute was raised about the women-only library in Jecheon-si, South Korea, which opened in 1994 (S. Lee, 2021). An old lady named Hak-im Kim bought and donated the site of the Jecheon Women's Library with the whole fortune she earned by sewing, saying, "Please resolve the discrimination of educational opportunities I felt while living as a woman." However, a man in his twenties appealed to the NHRCK in 2011, claiming it discriminates against males, and the NHRCK urged the city and the library twice the following year. The city contended that the women-only library is irrelevant to sexism and followed the donator's opinion. They also explained that the donator was satisfied and proud of the library during her lifetime and that her family wanted the library to operate its initial intent. Still, NHRCK decided that it is hard to prioritize the donator's personal opinion over a public facility's purpose of operation since the national property act states that the donator's intent does not have a legal effect. Nevertheless, Jecheon-si asserted that the library did not exclude men completely, as boys under the age of 10 can use the library with a female caregiver, and other men can borrow the books with the employees' help. About 10% of borrowers are male, and the city specified that they plan to have a reading program with families, including fathers, but NHRCK did not accept those claims and judged the library as excessively limiting men's use since there are no men's restrooms in the library and men cannot use library archives. Although there is a city library near the women's library, NHRCK claimed that there are considerable differences in proximity using public transportation. Eventually, the library accepted the exhortation of NHRCK partly and allowed lending books for men since July 2021, but a library official stated that they are not considering additional actions, such as building men's restrooms (S. Lee, 2021). This specific instance shows the current dispute about women-only facilities.

3. Women's Fear of Invasion of Female-Only Spaces by Men

Female students who requested the lounge mentioned above emphasized that the lounge is not merely a convenient facility. It was an area that showed the possibility of constructing a safe place on their own, meeting other female students, and making new networks while not being intimidated by sexist cultures and threats (Ko, 2016). Ko (2016) claims that women-only spaces protect the power to voice opinions, have allies, and fight against unfair experiences together. Furthermore, Jeong (2018) states that the demand for a safe place only for women is a strategic barrier created in the reality of hidden cameras and sexual violence daily, not only widespread misogyny online. Also, the author claims that radical feminists have high sexual anxiety about men invading women's spaces after experiencing widespread sex crimes in South Korea, such as hidden camera crimes and the Gangnam station murder case. Thus, the author examines that the "biological women" category is not a barrier of radical feminism to exclude transgender women but rather a discourse constructed defensively in debates with men using transgender rights to attack feminism (Jeong, 2018).

In February 2020, a trans woman student who had sex-change surgery became qualified to enter Sookmyung Women's University. As a result, many enrolled students resisted her matriculation after noticing it through news articles (Jang, 2020). According to an article, the

enrolled students in the university protested by calling the admissions office as a group and sending protest emails to the alumni association, although the trans woman student already had the sex-change surgery in 2019 and finished the gender recognition legally (Jang, 2020). One of the students stated that women's college was created for women with fewer opportunities and mentioned that she could not understand why a person who had lived as a man until last year wanted to enter a woman's college (Jang, 2020). Moreover, more than 20 universities' radical feminism clubs made a social network account. They announced the statement opposing the student's enrollment and, further, "opposing sex change that threatens women's rights" (Sookmyung Women's University TF Team X Against Transgender Male's Admission, 2020). Another student expressed uncomfortable feelings after experiencing a series of events and mentioned the case in which a male drug offender hid in the restroom in the student union of the university and the case in which a male dressed up like a female trespassed on the toilet of the campus (Jang, 2020). Although there are no exact statistics, Lee and Kim (2020) highlight some specific cases that show the security of several women's universities has been in danger of strangers' invasion. They claim that some movements have started to exclude transgender people in women's universities since 2017 due to the threats to the safety of female students. In April 2017, a male student from a different university trespassed into Sookmyung Women's University and was arrested for sexual harassment charges. Dongduk Women's University banned unauthorized people from entering the campus in October 2018 after a male stranger committed lewd acts naked in a lecture room. Also, Ehwa Woman's University expanded the installation of security cameras and ID card readers at the entrance of the buildings in 2018 after a male office worker was charged with breaking into the campus and touching a sleeping female student's body. Consequentially, several women's universities ended up restricting outsiders' visits after hidden camera crimes or males dressed up as females trespassing into their restrooms (Lee & Kim, 2020).

Regarding the student's admission, there were, indeed, some students' strong opinions as well that the university and the students must not exclude or hate specific gender identities for mature society (Jang, 2020). In particular, the Student and Minority Human Rights Commission of Sookmyung Women's University (2020) posted a statement on their Facebook supporting the student and stating that the founding ideology of women's universities in South Korea is to provide the equal right to education to social minorities, including women. In other words, the commission defined the essential goal of women's universities as resolving discrimination and seeking equality; thus, denying a specific person's identity and discussing approval or disapproval of her admission is against the university's ideology (The Student and Minority Human Rights Commission of Sookmyung Women's University, 2020). However, the transgender student eventually renounced admission to Sookmyung Women's University (Kwon & Kang, 2020). She decided on the deadline day for paying tuition (Kwon & Kang, 2020), which is the last day for students to cancel their enrollment. Regrettably, the student watched every reaction to her news and other people's exclusion and said, "I was so scared all day long. I feel like my heart is torn down after being cursed at all kinds of things" (Kang, 2020). Emphasizing social visualization of transgender people, she also shared another experience when she visited the office of education to register for the national college entrance exam. She was in a one-piece dress, and an employee criticized her outfit and told her to dress up "normally" as other students can feel uncomfortable on exam day. Eventually, she wore pants instead of skirts. Before giving up the admission, she stated in the interview that if she was able to get into the university, she would endeavor to inform the public that anyone can be minorities in some aspects. In the interview, she stated her hope for society to embrace every person more and mentioned that people should respect and consider minorities of different identities if they do

not want to be discriminated against and despised in other situations where they are a minority (Kang, 2020).

Conclusion

A number of people suffer and dispute the discord between transgender people and TERFs. TERFs in South Korea started to reject transgender people due to fear and threat to their safety. They do not trust trans women and refuse to embrace them as females who must be protected by feminism's goal for women's rights. However, it is true that transgender people, specifically trans women in this paper, have undergone experiences of both personal and systematic discrimination and exclusion. They are otherized by both males and females and alienated from society. The disharmony between the two groups can eventually lead to more exclusion by having more strict standards for other social groups, which also creates separation among people. Even though feminism is an essential social movement for women's rights and is necessary for a better society, it is crucial to resolve the conflict and accept more people rather than rejecting others with rigid criteria about the category of women.

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