



Unveiling Gender Polarization: *The Rise of Right-Wing Populism and Anti-Feminism Sentiments among* Idaenam

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Abstract

Situated within the context of the rise of right-wing populism, this study aims to explore the enigmatic emergence of the idaenam movement and the prevailing gender polarization witnessed during the recent 19th and 20th presidential elections in South Korea. Among idaenam activists, feminism holds significant hegemonic influence, and their perception of reverse discrimination serves as a critical lens through which they interpret gender dynamics in Korean society. Additionally, the perceived structural injustices and unfulfilled promise of meritocracy, along with the fiercely competitive nature of contemporary society, compounded by the influence of neoliberalism and the overarching context of modernity, contribute to feelings of ontological insecurity among young men in their twenties. This sense of uncertainty and anxiety compels them to rally around a perceived shared objective, aligning themselves with right-wing populism, which espouses the restoration of stability by upholding certain traditional gender norms. By unraveling the complexities of these interconnected factors, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the idaenam phenomenon and its implications for gender equality and identity politics in modern Korean society.

Keywords: *idaenam* (men in their 20s), gender populism, anti-feminism, hegemonic signifier, perceived fairness, unfulfilled meritocracy, empty signifier, ontological security

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Introduction

In South Korea (hereafter Korea), the evolving dynamics of tradition and modernity have brought to light a heightened focus on individual autonomy and political rights. This shift highlights the pivotal role of procedural fairness and merit-based advancement, especially for the younger generation. This article examines the phenomenon of *idaenam*, a term commonly used to describe men in their twenties in Korea who traditionally supported progressive parties but have become more conservative and stand against feminism. Throughout this paper, I will be using the term *idaenam* to refer to men in their twenties who are part of the Millennial and Generation Z in Korea (MZ generation). *Idaenam* is not a phenomenon observed across multiple generations; rather, it is a conflict that originated among young men among the MZ generation¹. While there is a common assumption that young voters typically align with liberal political ideologies worldwide, recent presidential elections in Korea challenge this notion. This is particularly evident among *idaenam*, who are increasingly gravitating towards conservative positions, despite their initial support for President Moon Jae-in's liberal administration.

The ideological stance of *idaenam* remains a subject of debate, as past events have shown that they can hold both conservative and progressive views. This coexistence of seemingly contradictory perspectives highlights the complex dynamics inherent in their political ideology. On one hand, as *idaenam* is much more receptive to certain aspects of globalization and free-market capitalism that promote entrepreneurship and individualism, their attitudes toward neoliberal economic policies are more progressive than those of other age groups. Nonetheless, even as *idaenam* lean towards progressive views, there are noticeable conservative tendencies. This conservatism is particularly evident in their anti-feminist stance and related attitudes. This dual inclination was notably observed during the recent

1. This is a new term in Korea that refers to the Millennial generation (Generation M), born in the late 1980s to early to mid-1990s, and Generation Z, born in the mid-to-late 1990s to early 2010s.

political climate in Korea, exemplified by both the 19th and 20th presidential elections in South Korea.

In the context of my research, the ideological complexity of the *idaenam* movement is approached through a dual-theoretical lens. By leveraging Laclau's (1996, 2005) concept of the empty signifier, my investigation explores how political leaders strategically infuse empty signifiers like *fairness* and *anti-feminism* into populist discourse. This approach enables an exploration of how strategically infused empty signifiers shape the discourse within the *idaenam* movement, with the analysis extending to understanding how this strategic integration contributes to the establishment of hegemonic narratives within the movement. Individuals drawn to populism often seek the perceived stability and identity reinforcement offered by such movements, enticed by the clear-cut solutions and certainty they provide during uncertain times. Simultaneously, by integrating Giddens' (1984) concept of ontological security, my paper aims to illuminate the factors attracting individuals to populist movements, particularly within the sphere of the MZ generation. Together, these frameworks hold the potential to provide a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between political ideologies and the evolving identity of men in this generation.

Social Backlash and Gender Polarization Among Men and Women in Their Twenties

The *idaenam* phenomenon encapsulates the struggles faced by Korean youth in their twenties, commonly perceived as a response to job scarcity, limited opportunities for upward mobility, and a pervasive sense of marginalization. Unlike their parents, who may have enjoyed greater stability and security in their early careers, today's young contend with a job market marked by heightened volatility and diminished job security. For instance, the term *Hell Joseon* (Noh and Park 2015) has emerged as a self-deprecating expression, reflecting the prevailing sentiment that, despite earnest efforts, many find themselves confined to the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. This self-disparagement vividly underscores the depth of

resentment and frustration experienced by Korean youth grappling with unemployment. The traditional adage, distinguishing between those born with a *gold spoon* or a *clay spoon*,² has transformed from a mere expression into a stark reality. The sense of being confined by the metaphorical *clay spoon* becomes more pronounced, as income disparities directly lead to unequal access to essential resources like education, healthcare, and financial services.

Idaenam's embrace of populism can be viewed as an expression of their desire for change and a reaction to perceived injustices in the current political and socioeconomic landscape. More recently, the prominence of the *idaenam* issue surged following the 8th local elections on June 1, 2022, when a significant proportion of male voters in their twenties rallied behind conservative candidates from the People Power Party (PPP). An exit poll conducted jointly by Korea's three major broadcasters (KBS, MBC, and SBS) revealed a noteworthy trend in voting patterns among young adults. Within the 18–29 age group, 75.1 percent of men expressed their support for Oh Se-hoon, a PPP candidate, while 67 percent of women in the same age range favored Song Young-gil, a candidate from the liberal Democratic Party (Ji-hye Lee 2021). This data unequivocally illustrates a distinct pattern, with young men gravitating toward the conservative party and young women displaying a preference for the liberal party. Consequently, as the gender polarization deepened, the term *idaenyeo* (women in their twenties) was coined in contrast to *idaenam*. The generational political disconnect among those under thirty from the ruling party, which became evident after the 20th presidential election on March 9, 2022, has been termed the “twenties phenomenon,” “MZ generation theory,” and “2030 generation theory,” and has emerged as a symbol of unprecedented intergenerational conflict in Korean society.

The *idaenam* phenomenon has persisted alongside a growing

2. The “spoon class theory” (*sujeo gyegeumnon*) categorizes individuals into socioeconomic classes based on their parents' assets and income, suggesting that success is largely determined by family background. This term emerged in 2015 and gained popularity in Korean online communities.

discontent among young male voters regarding various issues during the second year of President Moon Jae-in's administration. Despite President Moon's progressive stance on gender issues, which included efforts to combat structural discrimination against women, gender inequality remains a significant political concern in Korea (Yang 2020). In 2021, Korea's gender pay gap, standing at 31 percent, remains one of the highest among OECD nations (H. Lee 2022). In response, the Moon administration implemented a five-year economic policy aimed at promoting gender-inclusive growth. However, amid escalating inequality and economic uncertainty, policies intended to enhance female workforce participation have been viewed by some men as constituting reverse discrimination and unfair competition. While it is unlikely the Moon administration intended this perception, given the economic downturn at the time, the government's stance was sufficient to generate negative sentiment among these young men (Shin 2021). Many young men felt discriminated against and marginalized based on their gender, despite facing similar challenges as women in their twenties. This discontent has surged on social media, where anti-feminist sentiment has become pervasive. It has also emerged as a powerful mobilizing force for political movements, as evidenced by the marked decline in President Moon's support among young men. While the Moon administration grappled with issues like housing affordability and youth unemployment, his association with feminist causes also proved politically detrimental.

Furthermore, at the heart of *idaenam* politics lies a profound resentment towards a society that enforces antiquated obligations. The *idaenam* movement mirrors a generation dealing with shifting societal expectations, driven by a desire to challenge deeply entrenched gender norms and assumptions. This frustration manifests in concerns regarding military service and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF). There is a prevailing belief that men face unjust discrimination in these spheres, further fueling the grievances articulated by the *idaenam* movement (Ji-hyun Kim 2021). Additionally, as the economic landscape evolves and women gain increased access to education, young men, confronted with limited employment prospects, are increasingly rejecting traditional patriarchal attitudes towards masculinity and eschewing their perceived

duties, departing from the values upheld by their fathers' generation.

For instance, a 2019 report titled "Changing Masculinity and Gender Discrimination" compiled by the Korean Women's Development Institute, addresses the trend of evolving attitudes toward gender roles among Korean men. Specifically, 16.3 percent of men in their forties and 25 percent of men in their thirties did not endorse the notion of men bearing sole responsibility for the family's financial well-being. Among men in their twenties, this percentage rose to 41.3 percent (Korean Women's Development Institute, 2019). Similarly, the National Research Council for Economics, Humanities, and Social Sciences (NRC) issued a 2020 report titled, "Diagnosis of Gender Conflicts from a Youth Perspective and Policy Recommendations for an Inclusive State." The author, Ma Kyung-Hee, highlighted how young Koreans today experience more intense social expectations compared to earlier generations. Specifically, they are pressured to demonstrate traits associated with traditional "strong masculinity," such as being emotionally tough and financially supportive. Additionally, there may be an expectation to hold negative attitudes towards men, which could indicate a cultural or societal bias (Ma 2020).

On the other hand, *idaenyeo*, which emerged in response to *idaenam*, pertains to women in their twenties. The demands in gender politics emanating from *idaenyeo* predominantly revolve around safety and issues related to gender crimes. According to the same study conducted by the NRC cited above, it was revealed that younger women aged 19–34 express heightened concerns about becoming victims of crimes such as "illegal filming" and "homicide, assault, and rape," in contrast to their older counterparts. This trend signifies a departure from prior studies (Ma 2020). For instance, a 2002 research endeavor led by Incheon National University Professor Park Sun-kyoung noted that women born in the 1980s and 1990s were progressively at odds with conventional gender roles and patriarchal norms (Cho 2022). One plausible rationale for this shift in concerns may be attributed to the heightened awareness of gender issues among MZ generation women in Korea when compared to preceding generations. They are more attuned to instances of mistreatment and violence directed at women (D. Lee 2022). As societal consciousness and advocacy initiatives

continue to gain momentum, *idaenyeo* grow increasingly vocal about their safety and well-being. This leads to a divergence in their attitudes and focal points compared to previous generations. An exemplar of this shift is Park Ji-Hyun, who assumed the position of chairperson for the Democratic Party's Emergency Committee after playing a pivotal role in exposing the Nth Room on Telegram, an incident involving organized cybersex crimes led by Cho Ju-Bin, a man in his twenties.

It is discernible that the gender polarization among *idaenam* and *idaenyeo* is driven by distinct concerns; women fear for their physical safety, while men are concerned about economic security. Policies aimed at promoting female workforce participation, while important for gender equality, may be perceived by some men as threatening their economic prospects. Similarly, policies addressing men's fears of economic instability may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles. This can contribute to women's fears for their physical safety in a society where gender-based violence remains a concern. While the concerns brought forth by *idaenam* and *idaenyeo* may appear separate at first glance, they are, in truth, interlinked and grounded in a common foundation related to perceptions of security and safety. Nonetheless, the question remains: does reverse discrimination persist, and is it true that women are given too much privilege?

Despite the implementation of gender equality policies, the enduring impact of traditional norms within the family sphere continues to outweigh government interventions. This is notably evident in the persistent wage gap between men and women. In particular, the deeply entrenched concept of the male breadwinner and female caretaker model imposes significant obstacles to women's career advancement and earning potential (Raymo et al. 2015). South Korea's low placement in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report (99th out of 146 countries) (World Economic Forum 2022) further illuminates the enduring disparities between men and women. This is also evident in the limited representation of women across crucial political and economic domains, reinforcing the stark reality that challenges prevailing notions of reverse discrimination and the belief that women are receiving undue privilege.

In addition, a recent study conducted by Yeon-Jung Lee et al. (2022) reveals that younger Korean men tend to underestimate discrimination against women while simultaneously overestimating discrimination against men, a trend particularly pronounced in comparison to their older counterparts. Arguably, this inclination among younger men is influenced by their exposure to recent political developments and discussions on gender issues, shaping their interpretation of discrimination through a contemporary lens. Within the *idaenam* movement, feminism has transformed into a contentious space marked by conflict and competition. Influenced by the tenets of neoliberal survival, young men within this movement frequently reject feminism, perceiving it as a challenge to their societal standing. This rejection is grounded in the belief that women have achieved equality and are no longer victims of discrimination. Instead, they are seen as competitors who seemingly benefit from the prevailing societal structure. Paradoxically, despite enduring gender disparities, MZ generation men in their twenties and thirties perceive gender equality as a zero-sum game. In this view, the progress or success of one gender is seen as potentially limiting opportunities for the other.

Gendered Populism and the Ascent of Right-Wing Male Youth Activists

In the recent political climate of Korea, populism intersects with ideologies that prioritize “young males” over the “progressive elite” (Hwang et al. 2022). This alignment has been recognized and leveraged by Korea’s conservative party to tap into the discontent among men in the country, effectively addressing their concerns about perceived unfairness (Shin 2021). As demonstrated in previous instances, both the 19th presidential election (2017) and the 20th presidential election (2022) bore witness to gender emerging as a salient point of contention. Significantly, a shift in dynamics on this matter became evident. The 20th presidential election stood out for its manifestation of conservative gender politics, marked by persistent gender differentiation and distinct attitudes prevalent within Korean public

politics. Unlike the 19th presidential election, during which candidate Moon Jae-in overtly championed a *feminist president* slogan, right-wing candidates such as Yoon Suk-yeol in the 20th presidential election directed their focus toward issues concerning young men and highlighted the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family as a significant pledge.

Notably, the *idaenam* movement gained even more momentum after the election of Lee Jun-seok as the representative of the People Power Party in June 2021 (A. Kim 2021). As the first representative in constitutional history to be elected at the age of 30, he emerged as a symbol of political generational change, garnering widespread attention. Serving as a representative, Lee Jun-seok actively utilized the anti-feminism and *meritocracy* narrative to expand his influence within male-dominated online communities. Engaging with these fringe groups, Lee Jun-seok adeptly adopted their distinct language and strategically employed the concept of the *empty signifier*, a symbolic term or phrase that lacks a fixed, universally accepted meaning, allowing it to be mobilized to represent a broad range of ideas or causes within a political context. By assimilating and articulating these fringe group expressions, Lee Jun-seok successfully brought their ideas into mainstream discourse, bestowing them with a legitimacy that extended beyond their status as an online phenomenon. This process empowered young male activists to amplify their perspectives and achieve greater prominence in public dialogues (Lee and Lim 2022).

Furthermore, the rise of gender populism became even more conspicuous when Lee Jun-seok publicly conveyed his opinions in a Facebook statement, contending that the Democratic Party's defeat in the elections could be attributed to its strong emphasis on a pro-women agenda. In his view, the ruling party underestimated the level of involvement and influence wielded by men in their twenties and thirties. Consequently, Lee Jun-seok's public statements have contributed to the promotion and advocacy of distorted beliefs and a fabricated sense of victimhood. These remarks seem to have resonated particularly with online fringe groups characterized by strong opposition to feminism. Notably, one of these groups, Femco (FM Korea), was associated with cyberbullying incidents targeting the 20-year-old Olympic archer, An San, based on the assumption

that she *looked like* a feminist (Choi 2022). The forum's members expressed support for Lee Jun-seok, regarding him as the only politician willing to challenge feminism, which they perceive as being at the apex of Korea's power hierarchy. Additionally, another group known as New Men on Solidarity espouses a slogan branding feminism as a "mental illness." The group's president hailed Lee's election as party leader, viewing it as "empowering" and a significant demonstration that men can unite and make their voices heard. While cyber misogyny is not a new phenomenon, Lee Jun-seok's ascent to prominence has emboldened these groups, giving them a platform to amplify their views (A. Kim 2021).

Subsequently, in the wake of Lee's populist discourse, President Yoon Suk-yeol launched a YouTube channel named "Seokyeolie Hyung TV" and declared on Facebook, "I will consistently endeavor to be a 'dependable elder brother,' Seok-yeol."³ Through his content, which prominently featured themes of security, military strengthening, and preparedness for potential conflict, Yoon Suk-yeol consistently pressed for the urgency of prioritizing the defense responsibilities of young men, especially in the face of escalating security concerns stemming from North Korea. For instance, on January 9, 2022, he proposed a "monthly salary of 200,000 *won* for soldiers."⁴ Concurrently, on the very same day, Lee Jun-seok committed to reallocating the party's budget to actively address the needs of young men.⁵ These actions deepened the bond between these young men and the politicians, particularly in matters related to the military, underscoring their discontent and sense of injustice. Amidst these unfolding events, Yoon Suk-yeol also introduced a measure to provide "basic asset-building opportunities" to young individuals grappling with unemployment, a policy aimed at discouraging them from delaying marriage.⁶ Through this proposal, he

3. Yoon Suk-Yeol, Facebook post, October 24, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/sukyeol.yoon/posts/168128098854465> (accessed July 3, 2023).

4. Yoon Suk-Yeol, Facebook post, January 9, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/sukyeol.yoon/posts/218273307173277> (accessed July 3, 2023).

5. Lee Jun-Seok, Facebook post, January 9, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/junseokandylee/posts/4761381520606221> (accessed July 3, 2023).

6. Yoon Suk-Yeol, Facebook post, January 10, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/sukyeol.yoon/posts/218740373793237> (accessed July 3, 2023).

effectively drew a parallel between the struggles faced by *young men* and those encountered by *youth at large*.

On the flip side, in response to this populist strategy, Korea's liberal party adopted a similar approach by appointing Park Ji-Hyun, a young women's rights activist, as co-chair of their party's steering committee, effectively mirroring the tactics employed by the conservative party. This strategic move clearly delineates the societal schisms between *idaenam* and *idaenyeo*, where both Lee Jun-seok and Park Ji-Hyun symbolize contrasting gender perspectives and embody conservative and liberal values. This dynamic further emphasizes the role of feminist and anti-feminist ideologies as fundamental components within the larger spectrum of left and right-wing politics, where the term "feminist" can serve as a hegemonic signifier in liberal circles, signifying alignment with progressive gender ideals and principles.

Nevertheless, despite men in their twenties perceiving themselves as victims of unfair discrimination by feminism, they find themselves aligned with *idaenyeo* when confronting the influence of the 586 Generation, forging a shared sense of identity as *us* against *them*. Both Lee and Park embody the impatience of the younger generation towards the established values and lifestyles of the older 586 Generation of Koreans. This generation, born in the 1960s, educated in the 1980s, and now in their fifties, played a pivotal role in the democratic student protest movement and subsequently ascended to influential positions in industry and politics as the Korean economy prospered. However, the entrenched power and prosperity of the 586 Generation have now become a point of contention. Korean youth, grappling with challenges in employment and home ownership, are demanding not just economic opportunities but also a more equitable share of influence and decision-making in a rapidly evolving society. Therefore, what may initially appear as a straightforward gender-based division actually masks an underlying generational divide among different groups. On the surface, the *idaenam* movement represents young male activists dissatisfied with what they perceive as the pervasive influence of feminism. Yet, the movement's advocacy extends beyond this singular issue. It addresses common challenges faced by both *idaenam* and *idaenyeo*, focusing on the

scarcity of opportunities due to heightened sense of competition among the youth.

The emphasis of the *idaenam* movement on evolving attitudes and aspirations toward gender equality among the younger generation signifies a significant departure from traditional, patriarchal societal views. In particular, the current youth generation's perception of gender inequalities markedly diverges from their parents' traditional viewpoint. While older anti-feminist activists may see themselves as patriarchs with authority over women, the younger generation perceives themselves as victims of feminism. They perceive that while strides have been made in achieving gender equality, their female counterparts are seen as potential threats, supposedly benefiting from preferential treatment, thus undermining the idea of meritocracy. The growing focus on women's empowerment in the public sphere has engendered concerns among young men that their perspectives and issues may be marginalized. The contrast between men fulfilling mandatory national service and women gaining an early start in their careers and education exemplifies this concern. This disparity fosters the perception of an uneven distribution of opportunities, reinforcing their apprehension about the potential consequences of gender-focused policies.

In a nutshell, the surge of gender populism within the *idaenam* finds its roots in the perception of prevailing disparities and anticipated inequalities. Its overarching objectives encompass the prevention of additional societal transformation and, on select occasions, the promotion of policy reversals. The *idaenam* movement serves as a vivid illustration of the intricate interplay between gender dynamics and generational rifts, notably within the sphere of right-wing populism. Through strategic positioning, the conservative party in Korea has demonstrated a proficient ability to mobilize substantial support. Their contentions pivot around the view that policies supporting gender equality go against the principles of meritocracy and fair competition. They believe that this leads to a situation where men are unfairly disadvantaged, which they view as a form of discrimination against men. Nevertheless, one should be cautious that if the incoming administration prioritizes immediate political gains over inclusive policies, it runs the risk of further undermining South Korean democracy and heightening

disenchantment with the existing political establishment.

The Complex Relationship between Populism and Democracy

The *idaenam* movement seeks to challenge entrenched gender norms and expectations, influencing public discourse and guiding policy decisions to align with the evolving values and aspirations of younger males. Thus, it serves as a tangible expression of democratic participation, underscoring the significance of youth involvement in shaping the political and social landscape of a democratic society. However, within this process, it is crucial to acknowledge the nuanced relationship between populism and democracy. Populism, as a political approach, places a strong emphasis on directly representing the *will of the people* and positions itself as a defender of ordinary citizens against an ostensibly corrupt elite. While populism can effectively galvanize political engagement and shed light on overlooked issues, it has faced scrutiny for its tendency to frame issues in us-versus-them terms, potentially undermining diversity and rights of minorities. Furthermore, populist movements centered around charismatic leaders may raise concerns regarding the concentration of power and the erosion of checks and balances within a democratic system.

When examining populism as a distinct political ideology that opposes specific elements, two distinct categories emerge. The first category, characterized as anti-democratic, involves deliberate exclusion, while the second, identified as anti-structural injustice, is fueled by the resistance of marginalized individuals against prevailing systems of oppression (Hong 2019). Anti-feminism within populism is a multifaceted phenomenon. On one hand, it can be viewed as a manifestation of the anti-democratic strand of populism, marginalizing and excluding women from equal participation in politics and society. On the other hand, some argue that anti-feminist movements seek to counter what they perceive as structural injustice and resist shifts in societal structures that they believe disadvantage men socially. The perspective I wish to convey regarding populism centers on the paradox that populist movements often exploit gender, sexuality, race, ability, social

class, and national prejudices to sow suspicion of democratic political establishments while simultaneously claiming to promote the empowerment of the people. This signifies that the populist movement can exhibit contradictory tendencies, both undermining democratic principles of inclusion and equality, while also confronting structural injustices that uphold societal hierarchies. This duality adds complexity to our comprehension of populism and underscores the significance of scrutinizing the precise objectives and tactics of populist movements within their broader sociopolitical surroundings.

While anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism are often associated with anti-politics, they do not pose an immediate threat to democracy and are not inherently anti-democratic. The danger to democracy arises when leaders engage in negative politics, directing it toward specific groups. To gain a comprehensive understanding of anti-democratic movements, we must shift our focus from the charisma of leaders to the ideologies they employ in mobilizing their followers. According to Nadia Urbinati (2019, 113), populism constitutes a form of “negative politics,” wherein a leader, acting as the representative of the people, utilizes the media to convince their audience that they embody the various forms of discontent harbored against the mainstream politics of traditional parties. This negative identity of populism is constructed by a leader who strategically employs communication technology and incorporates ideologies such as anti-feminism, racism, casteism, or xenophobia to present themselves as the embodiment of the grievances held by the people against the mainstream political establishment. These negative ideologies, promoting discrimination and prejudice, can redirect frustration away from addressing the root cause of grievances, instead fostering scapegoating of specific groups. This process potentially undermines democracy by diverting attention from addressing injustices. Consequently, support for populist leaders may not hinge on their ability to address real problems, but rather on their capacity to channel dissatisfaction towards specific audiences.

According to Sang-jin Han and Younghee Shim (2021), populism has historical and cultural roots in Korea. Etymologically, terms like *minjung*, *inmin*, and *pyeongmin* all contain the common root *min*, specifically in the

sense of representing the common people as a fundamental aspect of the nation. Moreover, the authors also emphasize the notion of “multiple dualities,” which recognizes that populism can be interpreted in two distinct manners. Firstly, it can denote the endorsement of the people as a unifying normative symbol in politics. Secondly, it can signify a distrust towards elites and other groups perceived as enemies of the people. This perspective allows for the application of the term populism within the context of Korean society. In Korea, where collectivism is ingrained, the emergence of populist leaders is arguably more pronounced, given that individuals are profoundly shaped by the shared sentiments and values of the community. Populist leaders in such societies frequently tap into the collective emotions of the people, capitalizing on the sense of unity, shared identity, and common concerns that define collectivist cultures. The emotional impact of populist messages, coupled with a collective yearning for shared values and the safeguarding of community interests, can contribute significantly to the ascent and popularity of leaders who present themselves as champions of the common people. Nevertheless, it is certain that the rise of right-wing populism and the strengthening of neo-conservatism or anti-feminism movements are not unique to Korea but are observed in other parts of the world as well. One example is the election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016. Trump’s campaign rhetoric and policy positions were characterized by anti-immigrant sentiment, nationalism, and a rejection of political correctness and social justice issues. His election was seen by many as a victory for right-wing populism and a setback for feminist and gender equality movements in the United States (Kroes 2018). Similarly, in Europe, the rise of far-right populist parties, such as the National Front in France and Alternative for Germany, has been accompanied by the emergence of anti-feminist and anti-gender agendas that seek to roll back women’s rights and gender equality policies (Hajek and Dombrowski 2022; Heinemann and Stern 2022). These movements have expressed opposition to policies such as gender mainstreaming, quotas for women’s reproductive rights, and agency.

According to Laclau (1996, 36–46), populism is a malleable concept, shaped by the specific socio-historical context from which it emerges. Despite this variability, all forms of populism share a core characteristic: the

construction of a political identity centered around *the people*, positioned in opposition to a perceived corrupt or privileged establishment. Expanding on his earlier work, Laclau (1996) argues populism to be a political strategy that revolves around the construction and mobilization of *empty signifiers*—it asserts that populist rhetoric intentionally maintains political concepts in a vague and undefined state, enabling diverse groups to attribute various meanings to them. Contrary to those who view populism as a threat to democracy, Laclau contends that it is an integral aspect of democratic practice. He posits that populism aligns inherently with politics, as the process of people's formation, intrinsic to populism, mirrors the very logic of politics itself. To illustrate this theory, Laclau turns to the example of immigrant farmers establishing roots in a suburban community. When they encounter shared challenges like housing insecurity and crime, they petition local authorities for action. However, as their appeals face delays, grievances accumulate, leading to the realization that others in the vicinity share similar concerns. Through the aggregation of demands and fortuitous encounters, egalitarian relationships are forged on the foundation of solidarity, creating a distinction between *us* and *them*. This dynamic embodies a mutual agreement, where *what you want is what I want*. In this way, individuals evolve into political agents.

Moreover, Laclau's (2005) theory of populism emphasizes the performative and discursive aspects of politics. Populist leaders, according to his theory, construct their political identity and movement by skillfully deploying these empty signifiers in their rhetoric and actions. Consequently, diverse groups may find a sense of unity in the belief that the populist leader or movement champions their interests, even if their interpretations of those interests diverge. This ambiguity can, however, result in a lack of accountability and transparency, opening the door to potential demagoguery and the manipulation of public opinion. As observed by Mavrozacharakis (2018, 25), "populism rarely presents itself with openly anti-democratic positions but always maintains democratic pretensions." This implies that even within extreme political systems, populists do not openly oppose democracy. Conceivably, one might say that populism is the continuation of dictatorship through democratic means. It embodies a rhetoric characterized by the

“arrogance of ignorance,” emphasizing anti-intellectualism and appealing to traditional conservative values and common sense (Wodak 2015, 22). To put it briefly, the fundamental concept underpinning the notion of the empty signifier is that the common interest is not inherently objective; rather, it arises through a political process where individuals vie to establish positions they consider significant and appropriate. The common interest exists as a constructed ideology. Nonetheless, precisely because this interest is not inherently predefined and constitutes an open void, populist leaders and political actors can compete to occupy and define that space.

Hegemonic Signifier and the Discourse of Fairness among *Idaenam*

To understand the discourse surrounding *fairness* among *idaenam*, I employed Laclau’s discourse theory, which underscores the significance of empty signifiers as essential tools for mobilizing consent and attaining hegemony. According to Laclau (1996, 2005), the construction of reality—such as beliefs, identities, norms, and objects—is not rooted in objective truth but rather in discourse. Discourse refers to how meaning is articulated and demands are transformed into chains of equivalences, thereby establishing connections between various elements. As discussed earlier, an empty signifier is a term or symbol that is temporarily fixed, continuously contested, and open to interpretation in a political setting characterized by power struggles (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). It is *empty* because it lacks a specific, fixed meaning, and can therefore be employed to rally a broad range of people around a particular idea or cause. In comparison, a hegemonic signifier is an empty signifier that has garnered widespread acceptance and dominance in a specific society or culture. It is a term or symbol that has become the norm or common sense, reinforcing existing power structures and inequalities.

Hegemonic signifiers are powerful tools employed to normalize certain ideas, practices, or ways of thinking, presenting them as inherent aspects of reality rather than the result of social and political processes. An illustrative instance of a hegemonic signifier is the phenomenon of *anti-feminism* in

Korea. This serves as a unifying focal point for many young men, albeit without a well-defined set of values or beliefs. For some, it might signify a reaction to perceived shifts in traditional gender roles, while for others, it could represent an expression of frustration, resistance to change, or even an outlet for unrelated social grievances. In this section of my article, I delve into the profound impact of the discourse surrounding *fairness* on the escalating polarization between men and women in their twenties. Through a comprehensive examination of the meaning and implications of this concept, my objective is to shed light on why feminism has garnered negative connotations within Korean society.

The term *fairness* wields significant influence on gender polarization in Korea, particularly within the influence of neoliberalism and the overarching context of modernity, where financial considerations and individual opportunities hold substantial sway. An example of *fairness* impacting gender polarization in Korea is evident in the arguments put forth by some men advocating for higher pay. They might posit that it is *fair* to pay men more due to the expectation of continuous career progression, a norm not typically applied to women, who may take extended breaks for caregiving responsibilities. Conversely, women may contend that it is *fair* to be exempt from military service, citing the perception of men as naturally stronger or more capable. Fairness is invoked by both sides of the gender debate to substantiate their positions. To some, it entails equal opportunities and treatment regardless of gender, while to others, it signifies upholding traditional gender roles and preventing women from gaining an unfair advantage over men.

In Park Won-ik and Cho Yun-ho's book *Not Fair* (2019), the authors suggest that Korean youth are expressing their frustration with the unfair burden placed on individuals as a result of structural issues. The authors argue that what is commonly referred to as gender conflict is not the main issue among people in their twenties. Instead, the most significant conflict related to gender among this age group is the perception of unfairness that they face, which is compounded by feminist-related complaints. The authors acknowledge the seriousness of gender conflict, but they suggest that it should not be seen as the sole defining characteristic of the "twenties

phenomenon” of *idaenam* and *idaenyeo*. By removing the superficial label of gender conflict, it becomes clear that both men and women in their twenties are critical of the unfairness that exists in Korean society, particularly within the context of a class-based social structure. (Park and Cho 2019, 73). However, the criticism of *unfairness* has led twenty-something youth to throw their support to both the opposition and third parties. As Kim Jeong-hee pointed out (2020), this cry for fairness has been weaponized, creating a barrier to healthy debate and alternative interpretations. The demand for fairness has been reduced to the notion that those who put in less effort should be punished, but there is no consensus on what fairness actually means.

The concept of fairness remains a significant focal point of debate and mobilization within Korean politics. The conservative party strategically adopted this term during the confirmation process of former justice minister candidate Cho Kuk in 2019, drawing inspiration from President Moon Jae-in’s inaugural speech (Ji-hyun Kim 2021). President Moon, who garnered overwhelming support during the unprecedented impeachment election of 2017, asserted in his inaugural address that “opportunities will be equal, processes will be fair, and results will be just” (Joyce Lee 2019). He underscored *fairness* as a cornerstone of his administration. However, the recurring *fairness scandals* that unfolded yearly, culminating in the Cho Kuk scandal, heightened disillusionment with politics and ignited a thirst for justice among individuals in their twenties (Park and Cho 2019). Consequently, the frustration of those in their twenties coalesced into a discourse clamoring for *fairness*, aligning their interpretation of fairness with that of the conservative party (Y. Lee et al. 2022). Along this trajectory, they frequently cast liberal parties as *them*, while identifying with the conservative party as *us*. Their allegiance to the conservative party stems from perceptions of unfair treatment and a sense of injustice they attribute to these left-leaning factions. This feeling of relative superiority, drawn from comparisons with perceived outsiders, functions as a coping mechanism to address their anxieties and assert their position. The psychological aspect of this allegiance becomes evident as individuals navigate the complexities of society and evolving identities. In this manner, the pursuit of *fairness*

emerges as a rallying point that shapes their political discourse and informs their perceptions of inclusion and exclusion. In essence, the discourse surrounding fairness wields significant influence in achieving hegemony, offering a platform for projecting varied meanings and desires onto an ambiguous and undefined term.

Similarly, *anti-feminism* has gained currency among *idaenam* who perceive the rising status of women as a challenge to their traditional values and way of life. Within the demographic of men in their twenties, anti-feminism serves as a hegemonic signifier, unifying a dominant faction intent on preserving established power dynamics, entrenched gender roles, and societal norms. By rallying under this banner, such groups actively oppose and contest feminist movements advocating for gender equality and progressive social change. From their standpoint of fairness, some individuals interpret *feminism* as a force that discriminates against men, leading them to adopt an anti-feminist stance. For them, being anti-feminist might involve a complete rejection of the concept of gender equality, perceiving feminism as a threat to their existing privileges. On the other hand, for others, being anti-feminist may not necessarily imply outright opposition to gender equality, but rather an expression of criticism towards certain aspects or perceived extremes within modern feminism. These individuals may acknowledge the necessity of gender equality but question specific strategies or rhetoric employed by certain feminist movements. This diversity in interpretations underscores the complexity of the term *anti-feminism* and the range of beliefs and motivations that can influence its meaning. As a hegemonic signifier, its usage can foster polarized attitudes and impede progress toward genuine gender equality, underscoring the critical need to scrutinize its impact within different societal contexts.

The Interplay of Ontological and Identity Crises in the Attraction to Populism

Populism has emerged as a significant force in contemporary political landscapes worldwide, often resonating with individuals who feel

disoriented by social and economic changes. At the heart of this phenomenon lie profound questions about identity, belonging, and the nature of reality itself. The appeal of populism seems closely tied to addressing the uncertainties and anxieties arising from the complex and rapid changes characterizing the modern world. In political science, the adoption of the ontological security theory is rooted in Anthony Giddens' influential sociological interpretation of the concept (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017). Ontological security, as conceptualized by Giddens (1984, 375), differs from the conventional notion of *security as survival*. While the latter pertains to physical safety, ontological security directs our focus toward subjectivity, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a sense of personal continuity. Ontological security is closely intertwined with a person's sense of identity and self-worth in the late modernity, encompasses the sense of stability and continuity that individuals experience in their daily lives, along with their feeling of belonging to a broader social order. Giddens' scholarly contributions have not only informed our understanding of ontological security at the individual level but have also been instrumental in expanding its application beyond individual experiences to encompass societal dynamics.

Giddens (1984) argues that the formation of an individual's identity is inherently fraught with an enduring sense of anxiety. All individuals, as political actors, must continually manage this fundamental anxiety in their pursuit of agency. Ontological security is achieved when individuals feel they possess a stable, continuous, and recognized sense of self through their interactions with others. However, when these relationships and understandings become destabilized, ontological security is threatened, potentially resulting in anxiety, inaction, or even conflict. Applying the concept of ontological security to the rise of populism offers valuable insights into the motivations and aspirations of *idaenam*, who seem to be particularly concerned with notions of fairness and meritocracy. The surge in youth unemployment in Korea, which has risen from 7.1 percent to 9.5 percent over the past decade (OECD 2019), continues to shape an unfamiliar and challenging landscape for most young individuals coming of age in the post-IMF era into the 2000s. This has a significant impact on young men,

for whom stable employment historically equates to a sense of stability and privilege, as exemplified by the 586 Generation. Moreover neoliberalism's emphasis on free-market principles, limited government intervention, and individual self-reliance has exacerbated the erosion of traditional social structures and safety nets. With market forces and competition now central in shaping economic and social dynamics, the resulting economic uncertainties foster an atmosphere of doubt and disillusionment, intensifying feelings of ontological insecurity among young men.

Throughout history, male identity has been closely tied to the male's role as primary breadwinner and provider for the family. However, as job markets evolve and economic opportunities fluctuate, men face challenges in securing stable employment, which can significantly impact their sense of purpose and self-esteem. In a culture with defined gender roles, media and popular culture often present a limited and unrealistic portrayal of masculinity (Kim and Pyke 2015). This further perpetuates certain expectations that men may feel pressured to conform to, even if it contradicts their authentic selves, potentially leading to an identity crisis. In response to this sense of uncertainty and disorientation, individuals may be drawn to populist leaders who promise to restore stability and certainty by advocating for the preservation of traditional gender norms and promoting an idealized vision of the past. As Hayek (1994, 125) pointed out, in times of heightened uncertainty or threat, individuals become more willing to accept leadership that proposes strict rules and enforces deep social sanctions for their violation. Essentially, by providing *security, stability, and clear-cut answers* and imparting a perception of *truth*, narratives from the past become potent *identity markers* for right-wing populist leaders. These ideologies offer a sense of certainty and continuity in everyday existence.

Viewed through the concept of ontological security, the term *idaenam* not only captures the frustration expressed by young men regarding contemporary gender dynamics but also serves as a manifestation of the challenges they encounter while navigating South Korea's rapidly changing and competitive neo-liberal landscape. From this perspective, supported by Abelman and colleagues (2009), transformations in subjectivity are intricately linked to the evolving socio-economic landscape, where the

imperative for self-management mandates active self-production with the requisite skills for success. However, the focus on individual agency within this generation may inadvertently contribute to concealing deeper structural issues, diverting attention from the underlying challenges associated with increasing inequality in the country.

In furthering this discourse, a comprehensive study titled “Inherited Middle-Class Society,” conducted by Gwi-dong Cho in 2020, emphasizes the dominance of highly educated and skilled individuals in the social hierarchy, particularly within the middle-class stratum. Cho (2020) posits that the root of this complex inequality is influenced by the so-called 586 Generation. This generation witnessed Korea’s transformation from a developing nation into one of the East Asia’s leading economies. They came of age during a period of significant economic growth and social change, which led to increased access to education and technology. As a result, many members of this generation pursued higher education and were exposed to new opportunities and aspirations. To some extent, the experience of the 586 Generation reinforced the notion that individual efforts alone can address social inequality and entrenched the perception that structural problems could be reduced to individual problems. This perspective potentially serves as one explanation for the emphasis placed on guaranteeing procedural fairness for individuals rather than delving into the deeper structural issues that underlie societal inequalities.

Inevitably, the current generation of Korean youth has been uniquely influenced by rapid modernization, which has instilled a strong sense of self-confidence in their abilities and competence. In Korea, those born in the 1990s came of age in educational environment where academic competition was the norm. They are part of a generation conditioned to invest significant time and effort in preparation, leading to a profound desire for evaluations perceived as rigorous and fair (Park and Cho 2019). The *idaenam* movement’s strong emphasis on procedural fairness aligns with the traditional test-oriented educational culture in Korea, where the belief in fair procedures ensuring *fair results* is deeply ingrained, as highlighted in previous studies (Kang 2008; Jang 2011). Consequently, these young individuals may have limited awareness and understanding of the historical

challenges that shaped previous generations. It could be argued that the current generation of *idaenam* in their twenties and thirties possesses a distorted understanding of meritocracy and holds the belief that progress is contingent upon individual ability and talent, rather than class privilege or wealth. They perceive that society encounters fewer social problems due to the fairness in competition fostered by rapid modernization and development (S. Lee 2021).

Furthermore, mandatory military conscription uniquely impacts young males, acting as a barrier to pursuing higher education and entering the job market, which generates frustration. This, in turn, has an impact on the ontological security and male identity of young men. This conscription is a distinctive feature of young Korean men's lives, distinguishing them from women. It plays a role in nurturing gender grievances regarding the obstacle it poses, delaying or impeding their path toward self-actualization (Choi and Kim 2016). In conjunction with this, as highlighted in prior studies (K. Choi 1997; Kwon 2000; Moon 2002; Choo 2020), the impact of conscription on masculinity and its entanglement with patriotism and aggression presents a profound and multifaceted experience for young men in Korea. Consequently, aggression, the marginalization of femininity, and a strong sense of patriotism become intertwined and instilled during a formative stage of life for young men, bringing with it a sense of grievance, frustration, and an amplified perception of victimhood.

Virtually all young men in Korea undergo this coming-of-age ritual, which is deeply ingrained in the national identity and perceived as a sacrifice for the greater good. As highlighted by Insook Kwon (2000), male military conscription intertwines a strong sense of patriotism, a deeply rooted patriarchal ideology that places men in roles of providers and protectors, and a sense of brotherhood. It reinforces traditional gender roles and notions of what it means to be a man. However, unlike the previous generation, today's youth think that the male-only draft is a form of gender discrimination, as women enjoy an advantage in pursuing further education and careers without enduring the delays imposed on men. Arguably, this perception is viewed as a consequence of the hyper-competitive meritocratic model prevalent in Korea's neoliberal society, where the younger generation

resists enforced collectivism that could impede their individual growth and self-development (Moon 2002). Jihyun Choo (2020) provides further insight into this complex dynamic. She argues that “neoliberal ideology,” by treating both men and women as equivalent market agents, creates the illusion that there is no discrimination between the genders. Concurrently, the anxieties young people feel about their future, exacerbated by the pressures of neoliberalism, lead them to perceive gender not as a social structure but as an individual identity. In response, they adopt self-protective strategies, such as advocating for women to undergo the same challenges associated with military service, or concentrating exclusively on men’s identity politics.

The Unresolved Issues of Reverse Discrimination

The 20th Korean presidential race featured a notable stance taken by conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol, who vehemently denied the existence of structural gender inequality and even issued a threat to abolish the Ministry of Family and Gender Equality. His election to the presidency in March 2022 was achieved partly by tailoring his message to *idaenam* who overwhelmingly shared the belief in reverse gender discrimination against men in Korea. However, despite these perceptions, Korea finds itself ranked unfavorably in international gender equality assessments. The World Economic Forum’s aforementioned annual report in 2022 shed light on Korea’s gender equality progress, revealing its ranking at 99th out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum 2022). This ranking signals significant challenges in two key areas: political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity. Slow progress in these areas, illustrated by the underrepresentation of women in senior management and political spheres, where only about 19 percent of National Assembly seats are held by women, impedes the realization of gender parity. Furthermore, South Korea has consistently held the top global ranking in the gender wage gap within the OECD since 1996. Despite a decrease from 43.3 percent in 1996 to below 40 percent in 2004, the gap continues to persist within the 30 percent range (Jung-young Lee 2022).

In response to the unequal opportunities faced by women, reservation quotas, or affirmative action policies, have been introduced to foster gender equality. These measures aim to boost women's representation and participation in various domains, with the objective of leveling the playing field. However, the implementation of reservation quotas has not been without its challenges. Some men in their twenties have voiced discontentment, perceiving these policies as a form of reverse discrimination. This perception creates a complex challenge in balancing the need for redress with the principle of fairness. On one hand, there is a clear imperative to address historical injustices and provide opportunities for underrepresented groups. On the other hand, the principle of fairness demands that benefits and burdens should not be arbitrarily assigned based on gender characteristics. Ultimately, the intricate tension between the principle of fairness and the pursuit of gender equality has evolved into a contentious political issue, garnering the attention of populism, which often exploits such complexities as part of its strategy.

Despite progress toward achieving gender equality in Korea, it is evident that women have yet to surpass men in the public sphere. While anti-feminist sentiments are not a recent phenomenon, some scholars have noticed that there has been a change in context from the earlier misogynistic discussions about women's consumption, which criticized women who valued men's wealth, exemplified by the *doenjang nyeo*⁷ phenomenon in the early to mid-2000s. Earlier anti-feminist activists often portrayed women as inferior to men based on heteronormative and biological determinist perspectives (An 2011). However, in the context of the *idaenam* movement, modern anti-feminism has adopted a different narrative that revolves around the concept of reverse discrimination, wherein proponents argue that women currently enjoy equal opportunities as men. This updated discourse of *equality* advocacy and anti-feminism places a stronger emphasis on men's ethical standing by portraying women as infringing upon fairness norms and perpetuating the notion that men face greater discrimination (S.

7. The term translates to "bean paste girl" in English and is a pejorative term used in South Korea to criticize women perceived as extravagant or materialistic.

Kim 2022).

Furthermore, the sure in the new strain of anti-feminist sentiments among *idaenam*, can be linked to the growing emphasis on competitive consciousness and the rise of a neo-liberal self, characterized by free-market capitalism, deregulation, and individualism. In this context, feminism has become a more focal point of conflict and competition for *idaenam*, who strategically navigate and reinterpret feminist political theory based on their experiences, identities, and relationships. For instance, when gender politics is viewed as a matter of safety and survival in everyday life rather than simply an issue of institutions or ideology, the younger generation accepts feminism as a legitimate means to achieve fair and rational access to resources and power (B. Kim 2019). However, divergences emerge when young men perceive women embrace feminism as a means to envisage and transform their present and future lives, it is then framed as misandry, reverse discrimination, or collective egoism.

Paradoxically, anti-feminism and the logic of *reverse discrimination* have been reinterpreted in line with the logic of neoliberal survival, which prioritizes individual achievement, self-interest, and competition. Women seen through the lens of anti-feminism are not victims of hatred and discrimination, but rather threatening competitors who, after receiving good grades compared to male peers in middle and high school and accumulating credentials while male peers *waste* their lives in military service, benefit from various women's policies and secure good jobs in public enterprises (B. Kim 2019). Nevertheless, Heo (2020) also challenges the notion that modern anti-feminism is solely a generational issue and instead argues that younger men who identify as disenchanted share similar anti-feminist sentiments as those in their fifties. He cautions against attributing the problems of anti-feminism to the generational mindset of *idaenam* without first diagnosing the problem of male-centered patriarchal power that may lead to a lack of awareness of gender discrimination.

To summarize, acknowledging the role of populism in amplifying preexisting gender-related tensions serves as a clarion call for transformative action. It is crucial to recognize that populism's utilization of gender discourse is not a phenomenon unique to Korea. Across the globe, populist

movements surrounding gender, ethnicity, and belief systems have often tapped into existing societal cleavages, manipulating them to consolidate support and advance their political agendas (Agius et al. 2020; Kroes 2018; Mostov 2021). In liberal democracies, there is often an emphasis on consensus-building and compromise, which can sometimes result in the suppression or marginalization of certain voices and issues. Populism, however, thrives on these differences to mobilize support and rally its followers around a perceived common cause. As a result, the persisting controversies and contestations not only remain unresolved in reality but also serve as the driving forces behind the rise of populist politics. Hence, within democratic systems, the inevitability of populism becomes increasingly evident.

Conclusion

The *idaenam* movement, represented by the younger male in the current MZ generation, encompasses a diverse range of identities, reflecting the complexities of their political and social beliefs. The MZ generation's perspective on gender disparities markedly deviates from the traditional viewpoints held by its predecessors. While older male activists may have embraced established traditional patriarchal values, positioning themselves as authoritative figures over women, younger male activists perceive themselves as victims of feminism. Against the backdrop of rising inequality and economic insecurity, certain policies aimed at promoting female workforce participation have been interpreted by *idaenam* as instances of reverse discrimination and unfair competition. Furthermore, the *idaenam* movement's call for greater inclusivity arises from the belief that, despite the advancements made towards gender equality, women are still sometimes perceived as threats to preferential treatment, particularly with the introduction of reservation quotas, thereby impinging on their perceived meritocratic principles.

Furthermore, the drive towards greater equality in Korean society has been significantly influenced by the rise of neoliberal ideology, characterized

by principles such as free-market capitalism, limited government intervention, and individualism. This ideological shift has played a role in shaping the way young Korean men perceive fairness, particularly in regard to policies like mandatory military conscription. This obligation is increasingly seen as not only a sacrifice but also a hindrance to the personal development of individuals aligned with the *idaenam* movement's anti-feminist stance, particularly in terms of pursuing higher education and career advancement. This viewpoint cultivates a pervasive atmosphere of ceaseless competition and an ambiguous future for *idaenam*, leading them to scrutinize the perceived favoritism towards women in government policies.

In addition, aligned with the concept of modernity and evolving identities, as traditional expectations and gender roles undergo transformation, young Korean men find themselves contending with heightened uncertainties about their roles, identities, and future prospects, leading to heightened emotional struggles. Consequently, the mounting ontological insecurity and disorientation among the younger generation contribute to the allure of right-wing populist narratives. These narratives strategically employ *fairness* and *anti-feminism* as empty and hegemonic signifiers to advance their political agenda and rekindle perceived ideals of the past, pledging to restore stability and certainty amidst societal complexities and uncertainties.

Nevertheless, the *idaenam* phenomenon also encompasses a positive aspect, shining a spotlight on politically marginalized young individuals in their twenties and thrusting them into the forefront of Korean politics. Historically, the progressive political party had taken their votes for granted, while the conservative party largely disregarded them. This resulted in a dearth of policy development and decision-making directed towards the youth. The *idaenam* movement can be viewed as a political resistance by young people, aimed at transcending their exclusion and advocating for policies that address youth-specific issues. Alternatively, the *idaenam* movement offers a communal platform of emotional support for MZ generation men in their twenties and early thirties, allowing them to articulate their anxieties in the face of a challenging societal landscape

marked by limited opportunities for upward mobility and the ongoing issue on high youth unemployment.

In summary, the *idaenam* movement, when viewed without the gender lens, reveals a deeper sense of *uncertainty* and discontent with the social structure, underscored by a significant generation gap. This movement mirrors the perceptions and concerns of young male activists dissatisfied with the growing influence of neoliberalism and the perceived inequalities it brings. Furthermore, it is imperative to delve into why men in their twenties, who tend to be relatively more attuned to gender equality, have developed resistance to feminism. It is imperative to engage in critical reflection concerning potential media misrepresentation, whereby the manifold advantages of gender equality may have been overlooked, and feminism erroneously cast as a contentious issue. Moreover, a thorough examination of educational initiatives, promotional campaigns, and policy frameworks pertaining to feminism is warranted, with particular emphasis on discerning potential distortions or dissemination based on misleading premises.

Lastly, populism can serve as an awakening to underlying social issues. However, it is crucial to recognize that the rise of populism alone does not guarantee the resolution of the problems it claims to address. To fully understand the complexities and implications of the *idaenam* movement, it is essential to continue conducting thorough political research on the subject. For future studies, delving into the collective emotions of today's youth and their evolving male identity, marked by competitive consciousness and ontological insecurity through a social psychology lens, can offer valuable insights that can extend to various fields, including sociology and demographic studies. Despite the challenges faced, the emergence of the *idaenam* phenomenon presents an opportunity to channel the grievances, anger, and aspirations of Korean youth into a passion for social progress and transformation.

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