

# Teaching *Kim Jiyoung Born 1982* in Wisconsin A Guide for Educators

2024–2025 Great World Texts Program  
UW-Madison Center for the Humanities



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## Table of Contents

<b>LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>UNIT 1. PUTTING YOURSELVES IN HER SHOES .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>UNIT 2. 1982: SITUATING JIYOUNG’S LIFE IN HISTORY .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>UNIT 3. 1982-2000: CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE, HUANTING PATRIARCHY.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>UNIT 4. 2001-2011: WOMEN’S EDUCATION AND WORK .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>UNIT 5. 2012-2014: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY .....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>UNIT 6. EVERYDAY VIOLENCE, EVERYDAY RESISTANCE .....</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>UNIT 7. PREPARING TO MEET THE WRITER.....</b>	<b>175</b>



## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Wisconsin–Madison occupies ancestral Ho-Chunk land, a place their nation has called Teejop (day-JOPE) since time immemorial.

In an 1832 treaty, the Ho-Chunk were forced to cede this territory.

Decades of ethnic cleansing followed when both the federal and state government repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, sought to forcibly remove the Ho-Chunk from Wisconsin.

This history of colonization informs our shared future of collaboration and innovation.

Today, UW–Madison respects the inherent sovereignty of the Ho-Chunk Nation, along with the eleven other First Nations of Wisconsin.



## INTRODUCTION

### Reading Across Time and Place

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is a work of fiction. While a novel can help us to teach culture, history, politics, and so on, no single piece of literature can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people. Teaching *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* requires understanding both the specifics and the generalities of the experiences described in the novel. As you teach this text, please keep in mind the cultural specificities that make it unique while finding ways to emphasize when certain social and cultural phenomena are universal experiences. Doing so in a clear and explicit way will help you and your students appreciate the text's ability to speak across both time and space. Certain sections of the teaching guide, such as Units 1, 2, 3, and 6, will be especially useful for this purpose.

### How to Use This Guide

The material in this guide is intended to provide a variety of approaches for teaching Cho Nam-joo's novel and its many contexts. We believe that understanding the historical and cultural background is necessary for appreciating this work and the questions it provokes. We also encourage you to teach the text thematically, tying it to related disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

### Recommended Readings

The recommended readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some are also accessible to students. These readings provide further information for instructors as well as a variety of materials that might aid instructors in creating handouts and supplementing class discussions and project research.

### Discussion Topics, Assignments, & Activities

The discussion topics, assignments, and activities provided in this guide are designed to be tailored to the way you teach the text in your own course, as well as your particular time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units might be taught over one or several days, or over the course of a few weeks. You can mix and match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus. Each unit is organized according to themes that include points for lecture and discussion, suggestions for close reading, specific quotes from the text or other readings, as well as in-class activities and assignments that might be used to further discussion.

### Close Reading Strategies

The guide assumes that you will have read the entire text, but all units also offer suggestions for specific passages within the text that would benefit from careful and attentive reading, analysis, and discussion. During class discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to

support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close reading lends itself well to both large-group work and small-group discussions, and it is an excellent way for students to develop their critical thinking skills as they make connections, use textual evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of various literary techniques. For close reading to work successfully, it is important that the teachers always remind the students to point to the passage, line, or occurrence that supports their position when sharing their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between “opinion” or “personal reaction” and “analysis.” It also allows students to assess the text on its own merits without essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

### **A Note on Characters’ Names**

In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, you will encounter many Korean names. In Korean tradition, names are written with the family name first, followed by the given name. For example, in the name Kim Jiyoung, “Kim” is the family name and “Jiyoung” is the given name. When discussing the characters, students and teachers can choose to refer to them by either their family names or given names.

### **Addressing Violence in the Novel**

Teaching *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* promises to be an enriching and exciting experience. Given the sensitive nature of the topics the book addresses, however, it is important to proceed with care. In the interest of supporting trauma-informed teaching, we begin Unit 6 of this guide with content warnings that alert you to topics—such as sexual violence and sex crimes—that some students could find triggering and/or difficult to navigate without prior preparation. Teachers can use the activities, guidelines, and more in this guide to emotionally prepare themselves and their students.

### **Teaching Toward the Student Conference**

Schools participating in the 2024-2025 program will bring students to the University of Wisconsin-Madison on April 15, 2025 to present their work to their peers and meet the author Cho Nam-joo.

Unit 7 in this guide is explicitly devoted to preparing students for a successful conference by encouraging them to challenge themselves with projects that provide critical interpretations of the text in unique and complex ways. There is no limit to the type of project they might prepare. Past projects have included essays, painting, sculpture, weaving, photography, film and other multimedia, dramatic performances, song, dance, and more. The only requirement is that the students’ projects must present a critical analysis of the text.

Students will be required to write a short summary of their projects, which will be submitted to the Great World Texts coordinator ([greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu](mailto:greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu)) approximately three weeks before the student conference. Each school will nominate one student, or group of

students, whose work is exemplary, to present to the entire conference. It's recommended that the students themselves select (by voting) the "best" project for this presentation, which will be about 3 minutes in length.

It is our expectation that these presentations will be polished, rehearsed, and timed (3 min max), and that they will provide an opportunity for your school to feel pride and investment in its participation in the program. All other students are expected to present their work in poster sessions during the conference and will have the opportunity to stand next to their projects and answer questions about them from other students and conference participants. Every student who attends the conference should present their work at the conference.

### **A Note on Embedded Links**

You may notice throughout this guide that recommended readings and other sources contain embedded links. These links are available in the digital version of this guide, which can be found on the UW Madison Center for the Humanities webpage [[humanities.wisc.edu](http://humanities.wisc.edu)].

## UNIT 1. PUTTING YOURSELVES IN HER SHOES

### ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit is designed to provide a gateway for a reading of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by highlighting the form and narrative strategy of the novel that oscillates between detailed description and general analysis. It is important to understand that the novel’s individual depiction of Jiyoung’s life is intimately linked to the collective experience of women. Although it is titled “a novel,” *Kim Jiyoung*’s form resembles more a journalistic report or a documentary script than a traditional novel, interspersing statistics and factual accounts with a fictional story. Therefore, this novel requires its readers to adjust their focus when reading, so that they may see the big picture as well as the details together.

The novel begins in the fall of 2015, then travels back to 1982 to describe Jiyoung’s life in chronological order, before returning to 2016—the present. Using the first and last chapters of the novel “Autumn, 2015” and “2016” as touchstones, this unit contains different ways to imagine individual lives both as entry points for personal connection and as representative of a collective experience. Before we dive deep into Jiyoung’s life, this unit will examine whose point of view and voice the novel focuses on and how that affects our reading of the novel.

The first subunit includes an introduction to the book and opening activities.

The second subunit examines the author’s personal life and career path and how they influenced the novel’s style. It investigates Cho Nam-joo’s motivation to write and publish this novel, and how she aimed to sound the alarm in a society that historically takes women’s sacrifice and pain for granted.

The third subunit delves into Jiyoung’s mental crisis described in the novel’s opening. Jiyoung’s “abnormal behavior” (Cho 2) is, primarily, an expression of social pressures that have accumulated throughout her entire life. In this subunit, students can explore an overview of mental disorders historically considered and diagnosed as “feminine,” and unpack their greater social implications.

The final subunit focuses on the collective experiences of Korean women that are illustrated by Jiyoung’s experiences. In her state of distress, Jiyoung assembles and compiles multiple individual’s voices. The women she becomes are from different generations and backgrounds, yet their stories supplement each other’s experiences. They speak for and through Jiyoung. This subunit suggests ways to read this novel ethically and sympathetically across both time and space, allowing students to connect with the experience of a South Korean woman born in the 1980s.

Each subsection is designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the novel through close-reading exercises, discussion questions, and in-class assignments. Ideas for possible unit projects including comparative essays, creative writing tasks, and presentation prompts are listed at the end. Below is the table of contents for this unit.

Subunit 1. OPENING ACTIVITY

Judge the Book by Its Cover

Subunit 2. (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions

Suggested Close Reading Exercises

Subunit 3. MAD WOMAN IN THE ATTIC

Suggested Questions for Discussion

Suggested In-Class Activities

Subunit 4. ARE YOU KIM JIYOUNG?

Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions

Suggested Close Reading Exercise

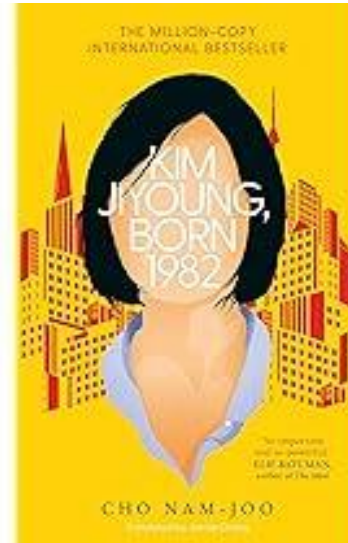
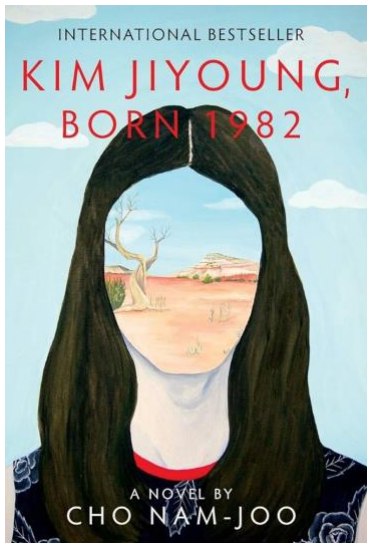
**PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS**

- [Allebest, Amy McPhie. “Episode 28: Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982—with Translator Jamie C hang.” \*Breaking Down Patriarchy\*, July 11, 2023.](#)
- [Alter, Alexandra. “The Heroine of This Korean Best Seller Is Extremely Ordinary. That’s the Point.” \*The New York Times\*, April 14, 2020.](#)
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2000.
- [Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. “The Yellow Wallpaper.”](#)
- [Hong, Euny. “In This Korean Best Seller, a Young Mother Is Driven to Psychosis.” \*The New York Times\*, April 14, 2020.](#)
- [Lim, Jiyoung. “The World Sympathizes with Kim Jiyoung.” \*Sisa In\*. December 2, 2019.](#) (This interview is conducted in Korean with the Minumsa editors of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, Park Hye-jin and Seo Hyoin. Took place after the book’s megahit, the interview focuses on the editors’ reflection on the publishing of the novel and interaction with the author.)
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. Penguin, 1985.
- [White, Edward. “Cho Nam-joo: The Novelist Inspiring East Asia’s #MeToo Movement.” \*The Financial Times\*, January 17, 2020.](#)
- [William, Holly. “My Book is Braver than I Am.” \*The Guardian\*, February 15, 2020.](#)

## OPENING ACTIVITY

### Judge the Book by Its Cover

Before students analyze the novel's content, they can be invited to share their thoughts on the cover image. This activity can be done before reading begins, at any time during reading, or after students have finished the book—and potentially repeated at different stages of reading (comparing what students expected before and after reading). Students may be encouraged to compare the covers of various editions. While the illustrations vary, many publishers feature faceless women on the front pages. For example, the front cover of the Liveright edition of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* features an illustration of a faceless, long-haired woman. There is a barren desert landscape in place of the woman's face. In the Scribner edition, a short-haired woman with no face is depicted in front of an urban cityscape. To start a productive exchange of ideas, here are some questions that can help to initiate a discussion on the first impression of the book:



Liveright and Scribner Cover Images of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. [Amazon Book](#).

1. What similarities and differences can you find in these cover images? What version do you think best depicts the novel?
2. How can we interpret these images in relation to the book's title and narrative structure? Juxtaposed with the book's title, what kind of visual impressions do you get from these cover designs? What is their effect?
3. How would you imagine the women's faces? Why do you think the designer chose to represent Jiyoung this way?
4. Who do you think these women are? Can you imagine yourself as this woman? If yes or no, why?

## (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “[novel](#)” is “a long fictional prose narrative, usually filling one or more volumes and typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity.” In this sense, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* diverges from the traditional novel form in multiple ways. First, it is not a pure work of fiction—*Kim Jiyoung* weaves both fiction with nonfiction elements such as statistics, sociological research, journal articles, and social phenomena that took place when the novel was written. Synchronizing Jiyoung’s biography with the historical development of contemporary Korea, the novel brings together key events in Korean history and women’s lived experiences throughout those historical developments. The novel, with exhaustive footnotes and endnotes, sometimes reads like a sociology article or a medical report—it is not until the end of the novel, that the reader comes to understand Jiyoung’s story is documented by her male psychiatrist. Second, while characters in novels have unique, complex interiorities, *Kim Jiyoung*’s characters are more often depicted as collective beings with similar fates. By portraying the protagonist’s life as a biography of sorts, the novel focuses more on ordinary events that embellish Jiyoung’s life than her internal descriptions, such as her interpretation of the world or her thoughts and feelings on certain events. Cho Nam-joo, in her interview with *Financial Times*, explains that Jiyoung is a character that “doesn’t undergo great tragedy or happiness,” which makes her be “seen as the collective experience of Korean women [...] with the element of the individual taken out.” Throughout the novel, readers are introduced to the lives of not only Jiyoung, but also her sister, mother, grandmother, college friends, boss, and even the wife of the psychiatrist who examines her. As the author’s interview illuminates, the novel shows how the protagonist shares similar experiences with the characters around her as a mosaic of the bigger picture of “collective experience of Korean women,” rather than focusing on Kim Jiyoung as an individual.

Cho shared that she wrote this novel in two months, with most of that time spent researching “statistics about women’s lives” and “the indicators such as the average age of marriage and childbirth of women, and the number of career breaks due to childbirth and childcare,” and she “put it into a novel in the form of a report” ([Sisa In](#)). Like Jiyoung, Cho was born into a family that favored boys, and her career was interrupted by childbirth. Born in 1978 in Bucheon, a city near Seoul, Cho Nam-joo moved to Seoul when she was five. She was born the youngest of three children, with an older brother and sister. According to Cho, before she was born, her father and uncle made a deal: her uncle, who had five daughters, wanted a son, and Cho’s father agreed that if he had another son, he would give the newborn baby to his uncle. Fortunately—or unfortunately, for her uncle—Cho was born a girl and raised by her parents.

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is not Cho’s first book. She has previously published two works of fiction, *If You Listen* (2011) and *For Comaneci* (2016). However, this is her first book to garner international acclaim. After completing her B.A. in Sociology at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, Cho spent almost a decade working as a television scriptwriter for TV programs focusing on current issues before turning to fiction. Like Jiyoung, Cho had to quit her

job when she gave birth to her daughter. The author describes the strong energy that possessed her to write *Kim Jiyoung* as follows: “For two years, I was a stay-at-home mom for full time, while writing only when my child slept. Some people called me crazy for not catching up on my sleep at the time. In fact, I felt like I would go crazy if I didn’t write. Having worked as a television scriptwriter for years, I was falling apart when I had to mumble only babytalk all day” (SisaIn). *Kim Jiyoung* is not only an autobiographical novel that reflects Cho’s frustration after giving birth to her child, but also serves as a means of healing and sublimating a painful transition in her career. In this sense, this book is both diagnostic and therapeutic. The novel sheds light on the multilayered pathologies created by sexism in Korean society and attempts to bring healing to not only the author herself, but also women in and outside of Korea.

### **Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions**

This activity aims to help students understand how the novel combines fictional and nonfictional elements. By researching the author’s life and drawing connections to the novel, students can explore similarities between the author and the protagonist.

Instruct students to research Cho Nam-joo’s life, her previous works, and the author’s opinion on the domestic and international reception of *Kim Jiyoung*. Students are encouraged to consult various online resources such as interviews, book reviews, or newspaper articles. In small groups, students may share the information they have gathered. Useful questions to prompt discussion include:

1. What aspects of the author’s biography remind you of Jiyoung’s story?
2. Which interview questions and responses did you find the most interesting, and why?
3. What would you ask Cho Nam-joo in an interview?

### **Suggested Close Reading Exercises**

Ask students to read from pages 7–9 of *Kim Jiyoung*, paying attention to its form and content. The passage starts with “Then came the Chuseok harvest holidays” and ends with “She turned to Jiyoung and put her on the spot: ‘Was it too much for you?’” This quote describes an ordinary holiday gathering in Korea, where family reunites from afar to share food. In this excerpt, there is no hint of anything out of the ordinary, and everything seems to go smoothly until Jiyoung’s mental “episode” begins.

1. Ask students to draw a family tree of Jiyoung and Daehyun’s family based on the first chapter of the book.

Staying on the same passage, ask students to analyze the quote in depth. Encourage students to closely examine the events in the novel that are seemingly innocuous, pleasant, and happy. Facilitate a class discussion where students can share their insights and interpretations of the quote. Encourage them to engage in respectful dialogue, building upon each other’s ideas and perspectives. Some questions that may be a good starting point, include:

2. Focus on the narrative style of the excerpt. What is the most significant element of this passage, how does this writing style compare to other novels that you have read before? Why do you think the novel chose to describe the scene in this manner?
3. What domestic labor did Jiyoung have to perform before and after she arrived at her in-laws' house? Try to list them all.
4. Why does Jiyoung not take the wheel anymore? Why do you think it is assumed that Jiyoung is better than Daehyun at keeping their daughter “occupied and happy”?
5. How would you imagine Suhyun’s relationship with her in-laws? How does Suhyun’s role change when she is with her in-laws and with her original family?
6. Why do you think Suhyun says “I wish I had a daughter. Daughters are the best”?

### MAD WOMAN IN THE ATTIC

One book reviewer introduced *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* in the following way:

Kim Jiyoung is a girl born to a mother whose in-laws wanted a boy. Kim Jiyoung is a sister made to share a room while her brother gets one of his own. Kim Jiyoung is a daughter whose father blames her when she is harassed late at night. Kim Jiyoung is a model employee who gets overlooked for promotion. Kim Jiyoung is a wife who gives up her career and independence for a life of domesticity. Kim Jiyoung has started acting strangely. Kim Jiyoung is depressed. Kim Jiyoung is mad. Kim Jiyoung is her own woman. Kim Jiyoung is every woman. ([Goodreads](#))

The novel depicts the mental crisis that Jiyoung experiences as something that could happen to any woman. *Kim Jiyoung* goes beyond describing the social pressures that women endure; it reveals how female depression, neurosis, and psychosomatic symptoms are generated and diagnosed by widely accepted social structures. Therefore, it is important to understand Jiyoung’s symptoms not as an individual deviation but as an exposure to mentally debilitating and disabling sexist social systems that prescribe corrections to women who cannot adjust themselves to patriarchy. This subunit will address how various social factors define women’s mental illnesses, and even further, how they produce and even nurture these “abnormalities.”

The idea that societal systems and institutions distinguish between normal and abnormal in arbitrary ways is already familiar to us. Just as the Diagnostic and Statista Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) once listed homosexuality as a mental disorder, which was only removed in 1973, societal norms influence the classification of mental illnesses. In a similar vein, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain how women outside of domesticity were considered “mad” in nineteenth-century England’s literature in their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Reading *Jane Eyre*’s “mad wife” of Edward Rochester, Bertha Mason, Gilbert and Gubar argue that female characters written in the eighteenth century usually fell into the dichotomy of angel or monster. Women who existed outside the confines of domesticity—the ones who refuse to be an “angel in

the kitchen”—were often portrayed as monstrous or aberrant. In other words, “mad” women in many canonical novels defied traditional roles of wife and mother, and instead inhabited realms of autonomy, intellect, and desire. According to Gilbert and Gubar, this portrayal serves to warn against the disruption of established gender roles, incarcerating women in domestic spaces by offering women only two viable options: kitchen or attic.

Psychiatric institutions often colluded with patriarchal family units and intensified female “madness.” Elaine Showalter, in her book *The Female Malady*, inspects Victorian and Edwardian Europe’s diagnosis and treatment of neuroses that were typically considered “feminine” such as depression, anorexia, neurasthenia, and hysteria. Such disorders were considered “feminine” because women were perceived as uniquely susceptible. Doctors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries studied so-called “nervous women,” who they believed were delinquents that succumbed to their neurosis to avoid traditional mother/wife roles that were imposed on them—or, per Showalter, chose “sick roles” over “sex roles.” Showalter examines that in Victorian and Edwardian period, where the domestic role of family was solidified, women’s role as angels in the house were naturalized: “Woman’s work was clearly motherhood, which fulfilled and exercised her nature as it also served the needs of society and the race. [...] Mental breakdown, then, would come when women defied their ‘nature’” (Showalter 123). Through extensive analysis of medical reports and women’s writings in mental asylums, Showalter shows that treatments for “mad women” were focused on the “rest cure,” usually synonymous with a total limiting of the patients’ outdoor activities: “to lead a thoroughly domestic life, to limit her reading to two hours a day, and to give up writing altogether” (Showalter 140-141). These measures often aggravated the patients’ situation, even incurring new mental and physical symptoms.

Gilber, Gubar, and Showalter’s explorations of modern female “madness” shed light on new ways of reading women’s mental health, not only attending to genetic or biological factors, but also to constraining social factors. Showalter argues that common nineteenth- and twentieth-century women’s neuroses were an implicit expression of female distress caused by limited social, economic, and political participation:

The nervous women of the *fin de siècle* were ravenous for a fuller life than their society offered them, famished for the freedom to act and to make real choices. Their nervous disorders expressed the insoluble conflict between their desires to act as individuals and the internalized obligations to submit to the needs of the family, and to conform to the model of self-sacrificing “womanly” behavior. As the feminist novelist George Egerton wrote in 1894, “When we shall have larger and freer lives, we shall be better balanced than we are now.” (144)

Even today, the medical diagnosis and treatment of mental health is often rooted in gender biases. According to [Medical News Today](#), even though women tend to endure higher

levels of persistent pain compared to men, research indicates that healthcare providers often dismiss female patients by labeling them as overly emotional, sensitive, hysterical, or even as malingerers. The article shows that patients identified as female are inclined to get less pain medication, more antidepressant prescriptions, and more referrals to mental health services from doctors. At the same time, women are nearly twice as likely as men to have mental health conditions due to risk factors that disproportionately affect women, such as gender-based violence, lower social status, and lower average income. While gender inequality plays a significant role in the global prevalence of mental illness, gender prejudice in medical diagnoses can lead doctors to prioritize mental health conditions as potential explanations for symptoms in women more so than in men.

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* reveals how psychiatry as a medical institution can sometimes be conservative and patriarchal in its attempts to diagnose “female maladies,” cure them, and integrate women back into the “normal” society. The male psychiatrist at the end of the novel attempts to diagnose her. He suspected that Jiyoung is suffering from “dissociative disorder when [he] first heard Daehyun’s description” (Cho 156) but concludes that “she had a typical case of postnatal depression that progressed to childcare depression” (Cho 156). While he demonstrates some sympathy toward Jiyoung, he nevertheless perpetuates her condition. Prescribing antidepressants, sleeping pills, and therapy do not appear to solve Jiyoung’s fundamental issues. In fact, none of the medical diagnoses seem to satisfyingly explain Jiyoung’s condition. Unlike patients who suffer from depression, Jiyoung does not remember the episodes she experiences. Her symptoms do not follow the typical pattern of those who suffer from dissociative identity disorder (DID). According to the [American Psychiatric Association](#), “the vast majority of people who develop dissociative disorders have experienced repetitive, overwhelming trauma in childhood,” such as physical or sexual abuse. However, Jiyoung’s experiences do not appear to clearly map onto these triggers. Also, rather than creating novel identities, Jiyoung borrows other’s voices: “Jiyoung became different people from time to time. Some of them were living, others were dead, all of them women she knew. [...] Truly, flawlessly, completely, she became that person” (Cho 155). Jiyoung even knows about the things that she could not have known, like Seungyeon asking Daehyun out. To sum, diagnosing and treating Jiyoung’s symptoms as an individual’s mental crisis and isolating her problem as a personal issue do not capture the true nature of her suffering.

Ostensibly, Jiyoung’s inexplicable “abnormal behaviors” seem to make her fit into the category that Gilbert and Gubar criticize—the madwoman in the attic. However, Gilbert and Gubar also highlight that female writers have often tried to subvert the angel and monster stereotypes, using the “monstrous” female figures to critique and dismantle the limitations imposed by patriarchy, thereby reimagining and reclaiming spaces of autonomy and creativity for women outside of domestic spheres. In this sense, Jiyoung’s mental breakdown serves as a catalyst both for the story and for the societal change. Her experiences reflect the psychological toll of pervasive sexism and social pressures, emphasizing the importance of systemic change.

### Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. Jiyoung’s husband, Daehyun, says that when Jiyoung first developed symptoms, he thinks she is playing a prank and shrugs it off. Later, as her mental issues become more pronounced, he is “baffled, sad, and scared.” How did you feel while reading Jiyoung’s symptoms? How do you think you would react if this happened to your family?
2. Do you think Jiyoung can be “cured?” What will happen when Jiyoung goes back to her “normal” state? In your opinion, what would help alleviate Jiyoung’s symptoms?
3. What are the moments and specific contexts in which Jiyoung speaks in other people’s voices? What are they trying to convey through Jiyoung’s body? Why do you think Jiyoung speaks in someone else’s voice in these specific circumstances?

### Suggested In-Class Activities

Read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “[The Yellow Wallpaper](#)” with students. It is a story of a housewife who gets sick for no discernible reason and is prescribed a “rest cure” by her physician husband. She is confined in a room with nothing but yellow wallpaper to look at. In small or large groups, discuss the similarities and differences between the short story and the first chapter of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, and even Cho Nam-joo’s experiences. Some questions to initiate discussion include:

1. John, the husband of the narrator, abhors her writing habit. Why do you think writing is considered so “dangerous,” especially to a woman? According to John’s view, how is writing incompatible with a women’s duty as housewife and mother?
2. What are the most conspicuous differences between the short story and *Kim Jiyoung*? Focus on the style of the two stories, such as narration or the description of the protagonists’ inner thoughts. How do these differences affect your reading?
3. Why do you think the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Jiyoung became “mad?” Do you think they share similar reasons?

*Kim Jiyoung*’s first chapter introduces a family gathering scene taking place during *Chuseok*, which is similar to American Thanksgiving. Instruct students to research Korea’s *Chuseok* and “holiday syndrome,” and whether Americans experience similar symptoms on holidays. Students are encouraged to look up online newspaper articles from [Korea Times](#) or [Korea Bizwire](#). In small or large groups, instruct students to discuss their own holiday experiences and how they are similar or different from the family gathering scene in the novel. Possible discussion questions may include:

1. What is different and what is similar between *Chuseok* and American Thanksgiving?
2. Why do you think the “holiday syndrome” exists in South Korea? Why you think it affects women more than men? Do you think it is specifically Korean phenomenon?
3. What are some your experiences of holidays? Have you ever experienced stressful circumstances during or after holidays?

## ARE YOU KIM JIYOUNG?

“In a few years, that precious daughter of yours will find herself exactly where I am now. Unless people like you stop treating me this way” (Cho 105, emphasis original). As her inner thoughts reveal, Kim Jiyoung is simultaneously an individual and everywoman. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* depicts the life of an ordinary woman in South Korea, offering an overview of covert and overt gender discrimination in contemporary Korean society. Even though the text closely focuses on Jiyoung’s personal life from 1982 to 2016, the novel offers a broader societal commentary on quotidian gender biases and discrimination imposed on women who live both in and outside of the specific time and place of the novel. Like Jane Doe, Jiyoung—whose name was the most common female baby’s name of the 1980’s—is both anonymous and specific at once. There is nothing special about Jiyoung—her character fits perfectly into a ‘normal’ Korean female in every aspect—except for the fact that she talks in multiple voices, speaking about women’s experiences that are not only her own.

Due to the hyperrealist character of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, which at times verges on a sociological case study, the novel was harshly criticized by some for its lack of “literariness.” Literary scholar Moon Hyong-jun criticized the novel “that it does not have literary value because it is similar to an article,” and that the novel is a reflection of the contemporary Korean culture that wants to “sanitize” cultural creativity with political correctness ([Moon](#)). Critics also have argued that *Kim Jiyoung* is too straightforward in its delivery of its core message, and that Cho’s protagonist is too unrealistic because she is a poorly imagined average of Korean women: “Those who criticize the book say it presents distorted views, is highly subjective, and makes negative, sexist generalizations against men” ([BBC](#)). In fact, one could argue that Jiyoung is a privileged example of a Korean woman born in the 1980s: her family is well-to-do; her parents were not abusive, despite them implicitly prioritizing their only son; she is a college graduate who found employment; and she is married to a husband who at least tries to understand her distress. We will talk more in later units about the South Korean economic and political context of the novel, but for now, it is enough to say that despite the familiar tropes of Jiyoung’s story, her situation does not represent every woman. Nevertheless, aspects of Jiyoung’s experience often remind readers of someone they know—maybe even of themselves.

At the same time, Jiyoung encourages readers to imagine someone they do not know. Jamie Chang, the English translator of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, confesses that there was “small part of [her] that had to really work to understand some aspects of Kim Jiyoung’s thinking” ([Breaking Down Patriarchy](#)), because her upbringing and personality were different from the protagonist of the novel. Born in 1982 like Kim Jiyoung, Chang confesses that she did not follow Jiyoung’s exact footsteps; but she admits that many women she knows—including her friends and her wife—have sympathized with one or more elements with the protagonist. One could therefore argue that perhaps the book’s political potential comes from its power to encourage readers to examine their surroundings in a new light. Jiyoung can therefore be best understood as a vehicle to encourage empathy; her story invites people of diverse cultural, economic, and

political backgrounds to consider the experiences of someone whose background does not fully align with their own.

Kim Jiyoung is not an extraordinary heroine in the literary sense—she does not appear to strive to make radical changes against an oppressive society, and even sometimes chooses to conform to the societal expectations that cause her distress. According to “[Common Character Archetypes](#)” published by University of Texas at Austin College of Liberal Arts, the everyman archetype in literature serves as a stark foil to the hero/heroine characters that are often in the spotlight: “Unlike the hero, the everyman does not feel a moral obligation to his or her task; instead, these characters often find themselves in the middle of something they have barely any control over. Unlike the hero, the everyman archetype isn’t trying to make a great change or work for the common good: these characters are just trying to get through a difficult situation.” And yet, Jiyoung’s singular characteristic comes from her anti-singularity: she is composed of numerous mosaics capturing the non-heroic, ubiquitous women living in our vicinity. Although her individual voice is somewhat muted, the voices of the multiple women that speak through and for Jiyoung expose striking instances of gendered inequality: Jiyoung in Seungyeon’s voice tells Daehyun about the difficulties of childcare, and Jiyoung in her mother’s voice reproves her in-laws about unfair distribution of domestic labor in holiday seasons. The women of different generations and different backgrounds supplement each other’s stories. That is, while the experiences of these women are not identical, one can trace their similarities and discern the persistence of gendered inequality even as society develops over time.

Jiyoung’s story, while deeply personal, is a multivocal production of dissonance and consonance made by women of various identities and backgrounds. Great World Texts in Wisconsin invites American students’ to consider its melody. Reading *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* with a certain distance of both time and space—in Wisconsin high schools across the world from Korea and nearly a decade from its publication—can be a challenging task for students. Our program therefore aims to foster empathy among participating students which moves beyond cultural and historical differences. This will allow students to recognize the historical, economic, and cultural specificities of South Korea while also appreciating the ways in which their cultural context is intertwined within a chronic and global sexist tradition.

### Suggested Discussion Questions

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is a novel that was first published in Korean and translated in to multiple languages, including English. Recognizing this novel’s cultural differences can be conducive for richer understanding of *Kim Jiyoung*.

1. Ask students to share their thoughts on the differences between reading novels originally written in English and those translated in English. What did they notice? Were there any challenges? Surprises?
2. If there are specific terms that were difficult to understand (such as Korean vocabulary, family titles, or certain pronunciations) have students make a list as a class, then break down the class into small groups to research specific items (for example, *Chuseok* or how family titles are structured). Then have students report what they have learned to the class.

### Suggested Close Reading Exercise

The Minumsa—the original Korean publisher of the novel—version of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* includes commentary written by Korean feminist scholar Kim-Go Yeon-Joo. The following is an English translation of a short passage from this commentary:

In an era where diversity and individuality are valued, what can a typical, representative character speak for us? Today, it has become a personal challenge to find out what “I” am, but it’s not easy to find one. Individuality is constituted by the differences one has with others. Of course, there are many different elements that make up an individual’s identity, and one’s experience may vary depending on which identity one attaches more meaning to. However, among the various identities, gender is at the core of identity. If we focus on the identity of “female,” half of the South Koreans have a fairly similar experience. This is because gender is a powerful system that operates in all areas of life, from the private sphere—love, marriage, family formation, childbirth, parenting, and aging—to the public sphere—including the economy, religion, politics, media, and schools. (“Kim Jiyoung of All of Us,” 82 *Nyeonseang Kim Jiyoung*)

In a July 2023 episode of the podcast *Breaking Down Patriarchy*, the translator Jamie Chang shares her experience of reading *Kim Jiyoung*:

I was born in 1982. I was raised in a family that moved around and my upbringing was very different from Kim Jiyoung’s upbringing. And I think that was maybe good and bad as a translator because part of me was able to see Kim Jiyoung’s life through fresh eyes because her experience was so different from mine. And then there was another small part of me that had to really work to understand some aspects of Kim Jiyoung’s thinking. For instance, her need to conform or her need to be, I guess, a “nice girl” or a model

student, a good daughter and so forth. But anyway, I went to nine schools across three countries between K-12. So unlike Kim Jiyoung, I didn't really have a community that I needed to fit into. [...] Because of my upbringing, I can't say that I'm able to speak for the average Korean heterosexual woman because I'm not a heterosexual woman. And I was also raised as an only child, like Kim Jiyoung has a sister and a brother. The brother is the youngest and sort of like the treasured child of the family. But I was raised an only child in a family where you were able to be sort of discreetly and passively sexist and racist and all these things but, you know, saying things overtly was frowned upon. So I didn't encounter a lot of discrimination based on my gender growing up, but I can tell you what I have been able to observe in my time here. I've been living in Korea for the last seven years and I did go to middle school in Korea. [...] I think [my wife] would be a better point of reference because she was also born somewhere around 1980 and she actually, unlike me, did not leave the country until she was 29. So she has that continuous exposure to one culture, one language. But my wife is the middle daughter of three girls. And when her younger sister was born her father was so disappointed that he didn't even come to the hospital to see her. I mean, that's fairly common in Korea.

*(Breaking Down Patriarchy)*

Circulate copies of these passages and invite students to reflect and share their thoughts on them. Facilitate a class discussion where students can share their insights and interpretations of the excerpts. Possible discussion questions may include:

1. How are Kim-Go Yeonju and Jamie Chang's readings on *Kim Jiyoung* similar to one another? How are they different? What can you identify as some of the reasons their understanding of the novel may diverge?
2. Kim-Go argues that "gender is a powerful system that operates in all areas of life, from the private sphere [...] to the public sphere." Do you think your gender has defined your experiences and relationships? Why or why not? What other social factors are important to your sense of identity?
3. Chang explains that she "was able to see Kim Jiyoung's life through fresh eyes because [Jiyoung's] experience was so different from [hers]," and "that was maybe good and bad as a translator." Why do you think Chang's different personal experiences may be both "good" and "bad" to her role as a translator?
4. How do you think your cultural differences from Jiyoung contribute to your experience as a reader of the novel? Were there any unexpected areas of overlap between your experiences and Jiyoung's?

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## UNIT 2. 1982: SITUATING JIYOUNG’S LIFE IN HISTORY

### ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit is designed to help students gain a deeper understanding of Jiyoung and her female family members’ lives by introducing them to an overview of modern Korean history from the 1950s to the 1990s. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* not only follows the protagonist’s life from her birth to the present day (2016), but also includes a complex web of additional characters with their own social, historical, and political backgrounds.

This unit primarily focuses on the second chapter of the novel, “Childhood: 1982-1994,” in which students will learn about the “compressive modernization” of postwar South Korea and its political, economic, and social consequences. *Kim Jiyoung* introduces the intricate fabric of social dynamics both in and outside of the family. Readers find out that Jiyoung’s grandmother, Koh Boonsoon, survived a wartime where “people died, young and old, of war, disease, and starvation” (Cho 16) and detests “the very idea of Jiyoung eating her brother’s formula” (Cho 14), and that her mother Oh Misook, “erase[d]” the baby due to the family inability to afford another female child. With broader historical context, students will explore how the lives of these three generations of women—Kim Jiyoung, Oh Misook, and Koh Boonsoon—were influenced by certain social, political, and economic developments of the period.

The first subunit includes an opening activity that gives students a glimpse into life in South Korea around the time of Jiyoung’s birth and helps them to imagine how deep and long the effects of the Korean War were. At the end of the subunit, a brief historical timeline of South Korea during the 1950s-1990s is provided for teachers and students for reference.

The second subunit, “Compressed Modernity: Miracle, Mirage, and Melodrama,” is comprised of three smaller sections: “The Korean War and Its Aftermath,” “Postwar Maelstrom,” and “IMF Economic Crisis.” These sections delve into the impact of the Korean War in the 1950s, the postwar economic and political maelstrom that South Korea experienced from the 1970s to the 1980s, and the ending of the country’s explosive economic boom marked by the 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis.

The last subunit explores how the trauma and devastation of the war and the postwar period shaped familial values and behaviors. It delves into South Korea’s challenges of rebuilding a nation from the ruins of the war and the ways in which economic development influenced individual choices, particularly the female members of Jiyoung’s family. By following the life trajectories of the three female characters through close-reading exercises, this subsection examines how the novel bears witness to Korean history through Koh Boonsoon, Oh Misook, and Kim Jiyoung.

Each subsection is designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the novel through close-reading exercises, discussion questions, and in-class assignments. Ideas for

possible unit projects including comparative essays, creative writing tasks, and presentation prompts are listed at the end. Below is the table of the contents for this unit.

**Subunit 1. OPENING ACTIVITY**

Finding Dispersed Families

**Subunit 2. COMPRESSED MODERNITY: MIRACLE, MIRAGE, AND MELODRAMA**

The Korean War and Its Aftermath

Postwar Maelstrom

IMF Economic Crisis

Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions

**Subunit 3. THREE WOMEN AND THREE GENERATIONS**

Suggested Close Reading Exercises

Suggested In-Class Activities

**Subunit 4. UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS**

Life Course Essay of Your Own

Paper Prompt on South Korean Veterans Extra Point System

**PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS**

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## OPENING ACTIVITY

### Finding Dispersed Families

On June 30, 1983—which is roughly one year after Kim Jiyoung’s birth—Korea Broadcasting System (KBS) created and aired a special live broadcast program named “Finding Dispersed Families.” Park Chung-hee, the president at the time, ordered the creation of the program to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Korean War armistice. The idea of the program was to reunite families who were separated during the Korean War or afterward—mostly due to economic hardships—and were unable to contact each other thereafter. The program was originally planned to be 95 minutes of the morning show, but due to the overwhelming number of applicants from all over the country, it was expanded into a special program and aired live for 435 hours and 45 minutes for over 138 days. The program brought more than 53,000 individuals to the screen, resulting in nearly 10,000 family reunions. This historical video documentation is an invaluable record of the little-known Korean War and Cold War civilian sufferings that have lasted for more than 30 years. “Finding Dispersed Families” was nominated as [UNESCO Memory of the World](#) in 2015.



Posters Finding Families Covering the Walls of KBS Main Building (Left) and Reunited Sisters (Right). [UNESCO.](#)

Watch a short clip of “Finding Dispersed Family” titled [“Death Certificate”](#) on YouTube with students. It is highly recommended to watch other clips in the video playlist featuring various family stories and reactions. In the recommended clip, a wife and a husband who considered

each other dead during the Korean War reunite. The wife, who had reported her husband's death, raised two sons and one daughter by herself and ensures that her sons observed their father's memorial rituals.

Encourage students to share their reactions to the video. Possible questions to facilitate the discussion include:

1. What is your first impression of the video clip and "Finding Dispersed Families" program? Did you sympathize with the families shown in the video?
2. Why do you think the families were dispersed and could never reach out to each other for decades, even when they were in the same country?
3. What kind of family dynamics can be assumed through "Death Certificate?" Why do you think the wife barely shows tears while the husband cries loudly? Why do you think the daughter of the couple is not shown in the video? What would it mean to practice their "dead" husband/father's memorial ritual to the remaining family?

Have students research the Korean War and create a timeline of key events. Together, discuss the social, political, and economic events that led to the war and contributed to the long-standing impacts on the Korean people. Explore what factors contributed to this war's classification as "forgotten war" to many American people. Students can refer to the Jacobin article titled "[How Korea Became a Forgotten War](#)," or the entry "Korean War" made by the [History.com](#).

In small groups, compare the Korean War with the Vietnam War.

1. What are some of the similarities and differences between the two wars?
2. How do these similarities and differences contribute to the American understanding of
3. and involvement in these wars?

### Timeline for this Unit

Timeframe	1950s	1960s-1980s	1990s
Background	Korea's independence from Japan  The ending of the Second World War  The emergence of the Cold War system	Compressed modernization under military dictatorship	South Korea's democratization  Globalization and Asian financial crisis
Major Historical Moment	The Korean War (1950-1953)	Park Chung Hee (1961) and Chun Doo Hwan (1979)'s Military Coup	South Korea's International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout package request (1997)
Key Features	National building process of South Korea after Japanese occupation and the Korean War	Rapid Transformation in the Political Field (Authoritarian regime and democracy movement), the Social Field (educational expansion), and the Spatial Field (urbanization)	Restructuring of the labor market and male-bread winner model for the families

### COMPRESSED MODERNITY: MIRACLE, MIRAGE, AND MELODRAMA

#### Frameworks for Understanding Rapid, Massive Transformation

Minsu Lee—which was a common name for South Korean males born in the 1980s—the protagonist in Kim Young-ha's novel *The Quiz Show* (2007), is an unemployed college graduate. Due to his “abnormal” family background, he experiences challenges on the job market, suffering from a chronic sense of unfairness and constant anxiety about survival. Although *The Quiz Show* focuses on youth unemployment and ingrained social inequalities in 2000s South Korea, it offers us a helpful snapshot of the generation in which Kim Jiyoung was born: they experienced drastic social changes and rapid “growth rate” of South Korea and were forced to quickly adapt to the ever-changing social landscape of the country.

We were born in the 80s, growing up with the advent of color television and professional baseball, and went to school in the affluence of the 90s. In college, we studied abroad and backpacked around the world, and we saw our country reach the quarterfinals of the 2002 World Cup. [...] We grew up in a completely different country than those who came before us and are equipped with so many abilities that we are almost like supermen

compared to our predecessors. We were born in an underdeveloped country, grew up in a developing country, and went to a college in a developed country. But still, we don't have a job. (*Quiz Show* 232)

The year 1982, and the period that follows, offers a particular picture of South Korean modern history, and captures the so-called “underdeveloped,” “developing,” and “developed” phases described by Kim Young-ha. The historical, economic, political, and social upheavals generated by the Korean War and the postwar period, thrust Korean society into a “compressed modernization process,” as described by Korean sociologist Chang Kyung-sup in his article, “Compressed Modernity and Its Discontent.” According to Chang, “compressed modernity” refers to the condensed process of economic, political, and social transformations that South Korea and other previously colonized Asian countries experienced over a relatively short period of time between the 1950s to 1990s. Unlike the “gradual” modernization seen in Western countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, South Korea’s modernization was highly accelerated, in part due to intense external pressures and internal drives for development such as the country’s independence from Japan, the Korean War, and military dictatorship. The world, including the people of Korea, were awestruck by the “fastest” growth in human history, thus naming the process “the Miracle on the Han River”—the “miracle of achieving [economic development] over a mere few decades what took Westerners two or three centuries” (Chang 31). As the word “miracle” implies, the way South Korean society barreled towards the threshold of modernity broached the fantastical, almost to the extent of the surreal.

Some sociologists describe the “unreal” aspect of the country's economic boom as a “mirage” rather than a miracle. This is particularly relevant when we consider the myth of the “ideal middle class” that characterized the 1960s and 1970s. This middle class was based on the acquisition of real estate, stable employment, and access to quality education, but it was a myth because achieving this social status was nearly impossible for most of the population. According to Yang Myungji’s *From Miracle to Mirage*, the explosive economic growth of South Korean benefited only certain groups of people who were complaisant or lucky enough to seize the opportunity, making the process of class mobility “speculative and exclusionary” (137). These lucky few succeeded in entering the middle class during this period only because they happened to buy land at the right time, not because they necessarily worked harder than others. But for most of the Korean population, this middle-class ideal was unattainable; it may as well have been speculation or a mirage. Not only did this “mirage” of rapid growth engender a heightened level of anxiety across the entire population, but it also frustrated the majority of the people chasing an impossible dream of becoming middle class. Rather than diagnosing the downfall of the South Korean economy and its bubble burst in the late 1990s and the early 2000s as an abrupt tragedy,

Yang interprets these events as symptoms that reveal the unfair and defective nature of South Korea's fast-track modernization that "did not reward hard work and fair play" (132).

Whether miracle or mirage, there is something dramatic—even melodramatic—about South Korea's historical narrative that catches people's interest, both at home and abroad. Nancy Abelmann argues that whether or not South Korea has achieved the fastest economic and social "growth" in human history, the country and the people's stories are heavily influenced by the melodramatic tone which describes the drastic ups and downs of this society between the 1950s to 1990s. The three female characters in the second chapter are "neither exceptionally poor nor particularly politically active" (Abelmann 282), and yet they find themselves trapped in the current of rapid modernization.

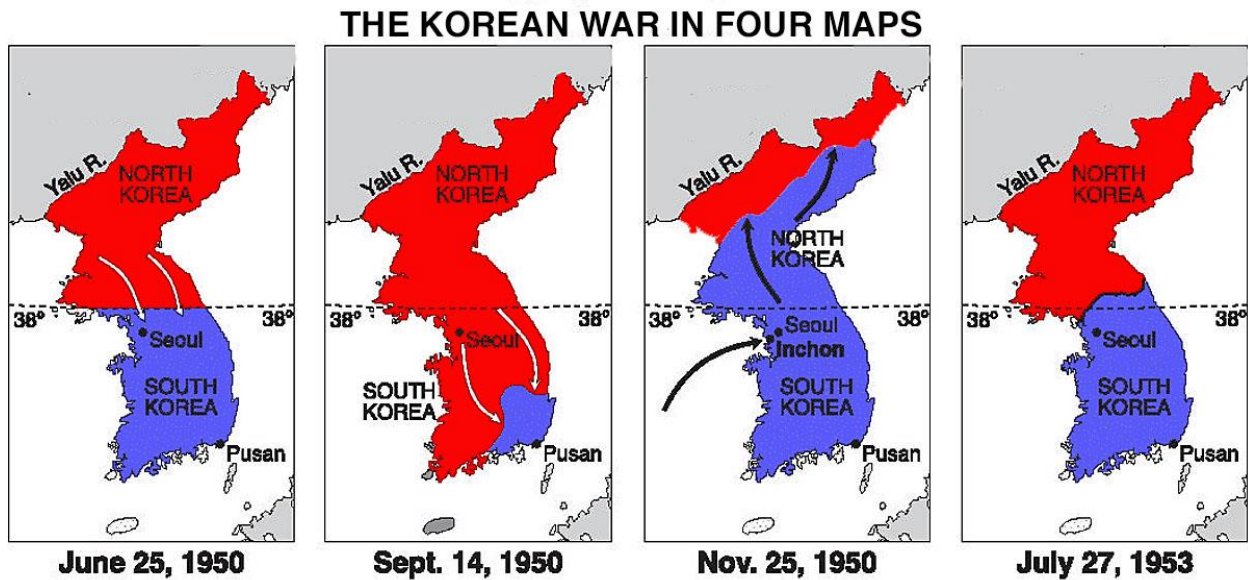
### **The Korean War and Its Aftermath**

To understand South Korea's compressed modernization in the late twentieth century, it is crucial to explore the reasons for the country's desperate need for such rapid growth. Behind the aspiration for the development that dominated South Korea for the decades, there was the experience of colonization and the war that devastated the entire Korean peninsula.

During Imperial Japan's pursuit to integrate the "Greater East Asia," Korea (which was at that time known the Joseon Dynasty), fell under Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945. Following Japan's defeat in World War II and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Korea was liberated and gained independence. However, the political vacuum following the liberation was soon filled by the two superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States. After 1945, the Eastern Bloc and Western Bloc recognized the strategic significance of the Korean Peninsula, which served as a crucial link between the East and West due to its borders that touch both China and Russia and extend into the Pacific Ocean. Under the pretext of establishing political stability, the United States and the Soviet Union partitioned the Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel. The U.S. supported Syngman Rhee's administration centered in Seoul, and the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union supported Kim Il Sung's regime in Pyongyang.

The Korean War, commonly known as the "6.25" in Korea, broke out on June 25, 1950. Backed by financial support and weapons from the Soviet Union and China, North Korea used severe communist oppression to justify the military invasion of South Korea. The rapid advance of the North Korean army was inexorable; within three months, they had seized control of almost all South Korea, save for Busan in the southeastern corner of the peninsula. Upon the invasion, the United Nations Security Council denounced the attack and dispatched the allied troops to support South Korea. The United Nations assembled a coalition of military personnel from 21 nations, with the United States contributing the majority of the troops. UN forces landed at Incheon in September 1950, and succeeded in cutting off the North Korean army's supply lines. Over the following months, the allied forces pushed northward toward the Yalu River, the border

between North Korea and China. Shortly thereafter, however, Chinese intervention and support of North Korea led to two years of intense fighting as both forces fought to control Seoul.



The Timeline of the Korean War. [Steemit](#).

The Korean War came to a close on July 27, 1953, with both sides agreeing to the Korean Armistice Agreement. Despite the ceasefire, the devastating three-year war left a deep scar across North and South Korea. With almost the entire Korean peninsula changing hands multiple times—in the case of Seoul, four times—the war resulted in an estimated 3 million casualties, mostly civilians. The indiscriminate carpet bombing made no distinction between enemies and allies, soldiers and civilians; on top of that, numerous refugees were mercilessly massacred by the occupying armies on suspicion of sympathizing with the enemy’s ideology. Vital infrastructures such as schools, hospitals, roads, factories, and electric systems were laid in ruins by relentless air raids. The war forced up to 3.7 million people in North and South Korea to abandon their homes and migrate both within and out of the country, many never able to return due to the division of the Korean peninsula. It is estimated that nearly 100,000 children were orphaned, separated from their parents during evacuations, or lost in the chaos of attacks.

The two Koreas are still at war—they have maintained a ceasefire state for the past 70 years. Military and political tensions between North and South Korea are ongoing. In South Korea, one can be punished under the National Security Act for possessing political pamphlets or publications made in North Korea. There are numerous U.S. military bases deployed in the South Korean territory—especially near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea’s border—in defense against possible North Korean military advances. Movement of people, communication channels, and trade between the two Koreas are strictly prohibited. Despite various efforts to formally end the war, including the most recent attempts in 2021 led by

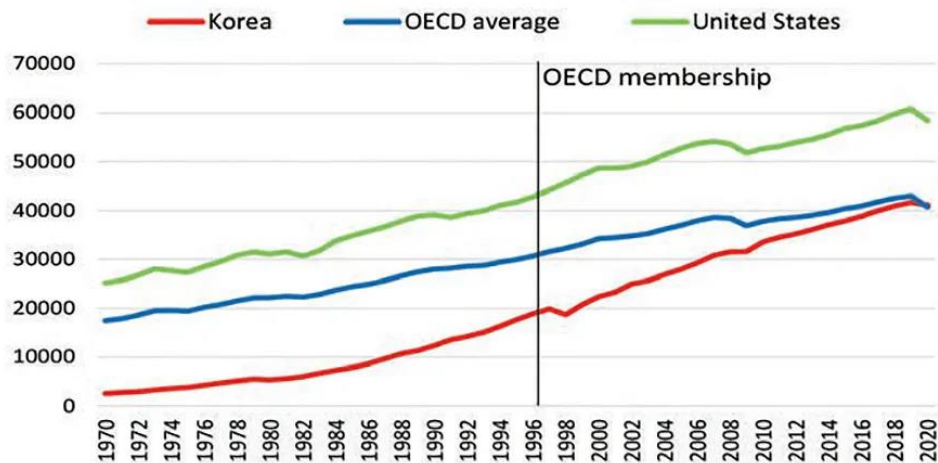
former South Korean President Moon Jae-in and former U.S. President Donald Trump, such endeavors face significant obstacles due to complex political and diplomatic challenges. The unification of North and South Korea would require cooperation of and agreement from not only North and South Korea, but also the United States and China.

While many believe that the Cold War ended with the fall of the Soviet Union, the legacy of Cold War tensions persists in Korea. Similar to the Vietnam War, which began in 1955, the Korean War served as a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union and China, with each superpower vying for hegemonic control by supporting their respective allies. Contrary to the outcome of the Vietnam War, where North Vietnam emerged victorious over U.S.-backed South Vietnam and unified the country under communism, the Korean War ended in a stalemate. Despite North Korea's support from the Soviet Union and China and South Korea's backing from the United States and the United Nations, neither side achieved a decisive victory, ultimately leading to an armistice that has gone unresolved for more than 70 years.

### **Postwar Maelstrom**

In the 1950s and 1960s, South Korea faced severe economic challenges. The country had endured resource theft during the Japanese occupation—most of the farmlands and major production facilities were owned by Japan—and suffered further setbacks due to the Korean War, which devastated its economy. Compared to North Korea, South Korea had a weaker industrial base and lacked essential raw materials like iron, coal, and oil, making economic recovery even more daunting. As a result, South Korea became one of the poorest countries in the world in 1955, when the country first joined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank ([The World Bank](#)).

However, from the 1970s onwards, South Korea experienced a remarkable economic transformation known as the “Miracle on the Han River.” The country pursued state-led development projects that led to rapid economic growth: its gross national income (GNI) per capita surged from \$67 in 1955 to \$33,745 in 2023, marking a 500-fold increase; its gross domestic product (GDP) soared 85 times; and its exports grew 153 times (The World Bank). Within three decades of the Korean War, South Korea successfully hosted the Asian Games in 1986 and the Seoul Olympics in 1988, showcasing its remarkable recovery.



The GDP Growth of South Korea. [The Korea Times](#).

This rapid development came at a cost. Behind South Korea’s economic growth was a political and social climate that stifled individual rights and freedoms. One cannot talk about South Korea’s postwar period without mentioning Park Chung-hee, a military dictator, who seized power in 1961 via military coup and maintained his presidency for two decades through multiple constitutional amendments. Under his authoritarian rule, Park drove the massive economic boom in the 1960s and 1970s by implementing Five-Year Economic Development Plans and promoting industrialization. To nurture the manufacturing industry, heavy and chemical industry (HCI), and export-oriented growth, Park politically and economically supported the rise of *chaebol*, the family-owned, hereditary-managed mega conglomerates such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai that started to play an essential role in the Korean economy. Park believed that building large-scale heavy chemical plants would increase the growth rate more than fostering small and medium-sized enterprises and actively encouraged the *chaebols* to participate in the HCI by giving them immense financial and tax privileges. Due to the “successful” corporate-led economic growth, a back-scratching alliance of government and select business in South Korea has dominated economic development since the 1970s, widening the gap between rich and poor.

To overcome the lack of natural resources, Park Chung-hee focused on “human resources,” the only exportable goods South Korea could produce at the time. Under his regime, South Korean workers were sent to Germany and the Middle East as laborers, miners, and nurses and to the Vietnam War as soldiers to facilitate the flow of foreign capital for domestic development. At the same time, Park started a nationwide movement called *Saemaoul Undong*, also known as the New Community Movement, a nationwide initiative in South Korea that aimed to modernize rural communities and boost agricultural productivity in the 1970s. Through

this movement, Park emphasized the spirit of hard work and diligence for the sake of the survival of the community and the nation, enforcing strict collectivist thinking on the entire population.

Donald Gregg, a retired CIA Korea Chapter director who worked under Gerald Ford's administration, recollected that Park was a tricky alliance for the U.S., "whose agenda was shaped by his country's immediate needs, not broader issues such as human rights or free trade" (*Time*). Park's regime truly was the time when the "country's immediate needs" preceded all others. Up until his assassination by his subordinate, Kim Jae-gyu, in 1979, Park established harsh suppression of political dissidents and crushed all voices of discontent. His decision to hastily normalize diplomatic relations with Japan and accept their financial aid in the early 1960s sparked major public backlash and nationwide protests in June 1964, which he violently suppressed, and declared martial law to contain. Park amended the constitution several times to serve unlimited terms as president and manipulated elections. During his presidency, he suppressed student movements and political opposition with brutal military force. South Korean culture also suffered strict censorship: foreign cultural influences such as American pop, long hair for males, and miniskirts were banned; Korean music and TV programs could not contain even the slightest sexual or political connotations.

Park's assassination, unfortunately, did not lead to South Korea's political stability, but rather to a period of harsher military dictatorship. Chun Doo-hwan, one of Park's military subordinates and the head of Defense Security Command at the time, raised another coup in December of that same year. In May 1980, Chun subdued nationwide democracy protests by military force, killing many citizens, especially in Gwangju. During his reign in the 1980s, Chun imprisoned and tortured political opponents and human rights activists, accusing them of being communists or North Korean spies. Ironically, the Asian Games and Olympics that were held in Seoul, which showcased the economic development of a "free Korea," took place at the height of Chun's political control, a time during which college campuses reeked of tear gas and riot police forces were everywhere. Chun stepped down from office in 1988 after the death of two college student activists—Park Jong Chol by torture death and Lee Han-yeol by police brutality during a protest. Their deaths sparked a storm of public protest known as the June Democratic Struggle in 1987, which demanded a direct and transparent presidential vote, basic human rights, and freedom of the press (*Korea JoongAng Daily*).



Crowds Gather at the State Funeral of Lee Han-Yeol in Seoul, July 1987. [History Maps.](#)

### **IMF Economic Crisis**

The 1990s in South Korea was a watershed era as the country reached “modernity.” Much like Jiyoung’s family moved to a brand-new apartment instead of their old house, which was “an odd mix of traditional and modern due to years of partial renovations” (Cho 38), South Korea rebranded itself as a new country that was socially humanitarian, politically democratic, and economically neoliberal. The 1998 presidential election of Kim Dae-Jung—a democratic activist who was previously imprisoned and sentenced to death under military dictatorship—was the first election of a member from the left-wing party directly elected by the people. Kim’s presidency and his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 for his human rights efforts and attempts to reach out to North Korea seemed to demonstrate that South Korea was moving forward.

However, the so-called “IMF bailout” triggered by the 1997 Asian financial crisis brought to the forefront the social, political, and economic side effects of rapid growth in South Korea. In 1990s, South Korea was viewed as a worthy investment for foreign capitals, because mega conglomerates, *chaebols*, had achieved significant growth during the 1970s and 1980s. Not only South Korea but also the Asian market, at large, was considered a lucrative investment market for foreign dollar-holding investors: low labor prices, solid fiscal surplus, high annual GDP growth rates, and high savings rates were among the factors that attracted foreign investors. The needs of Asian corporations and foreign investors were well matched—Asian companies wanted to rapidly expand their businesses, and investors expected high returns with low risks. As

a result, an unseen amount of short-term foreign debt accumulated. Inflation in the real estate and stock markets intensified, and state and private debt began to pile up.

The global economic slowdown in 1996 led to a decline in foreign investors in Asian financial markets. From Thailand, where the foreign exchange speculation was the severest, the Asian financial crisis spread to other Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, Hong Kong, and South Korea. This gave foreign speculative capital the impression that it would be difficult to recoup its investment in Asia, further destabilizing Asian investment markets and encouraging massive outflows of U.S. dollars. As the demand for Asian currencies such as the Hong Kong dollar, Korean won, and Thai baht decreased, and the demand for U.S. dollars increased, the value of Asian currencies plummeted.

A large-scale investment panic struck South Korea. A shortage of U.S. dollars and the weakness of the won led to the inability of companies to repay short-term foreign debt and the depletion of national foreign exchange reserves in the Korean government. Numerous banks and mega-corporates declared bankruptcy. Huge motor companies like Kia, Samsung, and Daewoo also suffered and were forced to partially liquidate their firms or sell their business to foreign companies. During this widespread financial panic, the Korean government tried to comfort its people by announcing that its dollar reserve was US\$30 billion, however it was later confirmed that the country had US\$150 billion in foreign debt—more than five times its foreign exchange reserves. In the end, the South Korean government requested the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout package of US\$58.4 billion in return for a total “restructuring measure.” In effect, South Korea’s entire economy fell into the hands of the IMF: the government had to implement a massive financial sector reform program, under which more than 800 “insolvent financial institutions” were closed or merged. In 1998, approximately 3,300 companies went bankrupt every month, and there were unprecedented layoffs (*The New York Times*). In 1999, “the unemployment rate jumped to close to 9 percent in February from less than 3 percent before the crisis hit” (IMF), and millions of people were laid off and faced unpaid wages.

South Korea’s 1997 financial crisis marked the end of the country’s high-growth economic era of the 1970s and the 1980s, and revealed chronic social maladies which were suppressed for the past two decades. It was a tipping point that disclosed the “speculative and exclusionary” (Yang 137) nature of the neoliberal late-capitalist market logic that South Korea had relied on for its rapid economic boost. The spectacular financial failure of South Korea was caused by several factors. These include international factors—such as speculation funds flooding the Asian investment market—and numerous domestic issues, including the “incestuous relationship between government, banks, and enterprises,” as criticized by then IMF Managing Director Michel Camdessus (IMF). On top of that, poor labor laws, oppression of labor unions, unstable housing, rising household debts, and skyrocketing housing prices due to property speculation all played significant roles in the crisis. Even though the IMF management ended in August 2001 when South Korea repaid its borrowings in full and ahead of schedule, the adverse effects on South Korea’s economic growth that surfaced during that period are still being felt

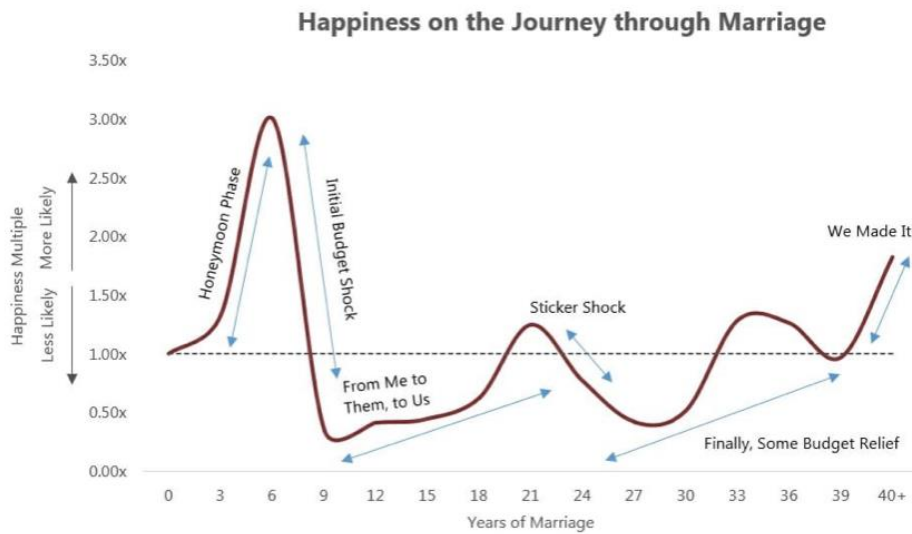
today. Economic, social, and political polarization among the people, job insecurity, youth unemployment, and ever-increasing suicide and divorce rates are still among the most persistent problems in South Korean society.

## Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions

### Happiness Graph of South Korea

This activity aims to help student recap and digest the compact and complicated modern history of South Korea in their own way. Teachers and students can keep the output of this activity and utilize it as a scaffolding to discuss the characters' lives later in this unit.

1. Hand out a large piece of paper to students. In small groups, ask students to draw a "Happiness Graph" of South Korea from 1945 to the present day based on the country's modern history. On a piece of paper, students draw a horizontal axis for time and a vertical axis for happiness and mark the rise and fall of South Korea over time. Based on what they have learned, students mark the historical events that have occurred in South Korea since 1945 that indicate the significant turning points of the country.



Happiness Graph Example. [Clark.com](http://Clark.com).

2. If South Korea were a person who could feel happiness and sadness, what would a happiness timeline in South Korea since 1945 look like? There is no one answer—the level of happiness does not necessarily have to correspond to the country's economic development. Encourage students to draw their own graphs using a set of criteria as discussed in the group.
3. Ask students to share their graphs with the class and explain why they drew the happiness

timeline in that way.

Teachers may want to keep the graphs students made to use them in the next subsection, “Three Women and Three Generations.”

### About *Gye*

The following activity can help students better understand South Korean society and the characters’ lives.

1. Ask students to individually research *Gye*, a traditional collective private fund system in Korea that appears on page 38 of the novel. Students are recommended to watch the [YouTube video, “Rotating Savings Among Koreans – Gye,”](#) by [Talk to Me in Korean](#) that explains what *Gye* is, and refer to additional online and offline sources, such as *The New York Times* article titled “[A Korean Secret to Keeping Friendships Strong: Saving Groups.](#)”
2. In groups, students discuss the following questions:
  - a. Based on the comment section of the video, what similar examples of *Gye* can be found in other countries? Why do you think these fund systems exist in many Asian countries?
  - b. What do these private funds systems contribute to, especially in traditional agricultural society? What are their benefits and risks?
  - c. Why do you think Oh Misook refused to organize private funds with her relatives, saying: “Blood relations who live far away are the least reliable. I don’t want to lose money and get resentful” (Cho 38) when thinking about Oh’s experience with her original family?
  - d. Why do you think this system still survives in post-agricultural societies?

### THREE WOMEN AND THREE GENERATIONS

As we have seen in the previous subunit, Jiyoung’s life is heavily affected by South Korea’s social, political, and economic transformations following WWII. Her birth year—which took place towards the end of the economic boom of South Korea—is representative of a time where society was beginning to lose hope that the “national uplift” would benefit every individual member of the nation-state. Just as Jiyoung is an everywoman who represents the Korean women who were born around the 1980s, Jiyoung’s mother, Oh Misook, and her grandmother, Koh Boonsoon, also serve as typical “mom” and “grandma” figures that represent their own generations. These characters testify to the price of modernization that South Korean society had imposed upon its people, especially women. This subunit looks closely at the three generations of women who each survived rapid transitions in Korean history. In each of their own ways, these women were responsible for supporting their families and struggled to achieve self-fulfillment. Oh Misook, Koh Boonsoon, and Kim Jiyoung work days and nights as much as—if

not harder than—their husbands and brothers, not because they are exceptionally poor but because they cannot maintain their family’s social status if they do not participate in supporting their family. Despite their status as middle-class or even upper-middle class, Jiyoung’s family experiences anxiety about falling behind because they know that there will be no second chances to climb the social ladder should they ever fall back into poverty.

Jiyoung’s earliest childhood memory is connected to her grandmother. Like the taste of Jiyoung’s brother’s formula that is “rich, sweet, nutty” yet leaves “a strange feeling in her mouth that wasn’t quite dry or bitter” (Cho 13-14), the novel’s description of Jiyoung’s grandmother—Koh Boonsoon—is complex and nuanced. She explicitly favors her grandson over her granddaughters and even physically punishes Eunyong and Jiyoung when they “dare” to “take something that belongs to [her] precious grandson” (Cho 15). Koh never acknowledges her daughter-in-law’s efforts to support her and further presses Oh Misook to give birth to a son. This leads Oh to “voluntarily” get an abortion of the unborn daughter. These hardships aside, one cannot judge Koh for her actions without a proper understanding of her personal history, which is full of its own ups and downs. While the novel describes her as “easy-going considering the life she’d had, and relatively caring towards her daughter-in-law compared to other mothers-in-law of her generation” (Cho 17), Koh’s attitude towards her family should be read within the context of Korean history and the collective experience of Korean females of her generation. Koh is both a witness and a survivor of whirlwind-like modern Korean history: she experienced the plunder of Imperial Japan, sudden independence, and the Korean War in the span of only a few decades.

Based on the novel’s description of her husband, we can assume he belongs to the aristocratic class. Koh’s husband’s appearance—his “fair complexion and soft hands” (Cho 16)—suggests that he has never engaged in manual labor, unlike most Koreans at the time, and raises the possibility that he is a fallen *yangban*, a gentry class in traditional Korean society. However, despite being upper-middle class, Koh and her husband do not seem economically well-to-do. Koh still had to work hard, “fighting tooth and nail to raise the four boys” (Cho 16) for his husband’s incompetency. To bridge the gap between their social and economic status, Koh throws herself into farming, peddling, and laboring for someone else. One of her sons is dead, one immigrated to the United States, and another one repudiated his family; Jiyoung’s father is the only remaining son who is willing and able to support his elderly mother. A harsh history has robbed her of her sons, but instead of blaming this outcome as a grand failure of her country or the circumstances of this period in history, she chooses to interpret it as a humble personal accomplishment: “Still, I get to eat warm food my son made me, and sleep under warm covers my son arranged for me because I had four sons” (Cho 16).

Not unlike Koh, Oh Misook’s story represents the challenges that women dealt with during this time. The extent of the economic and political upheavals of the 1970s and 80s are not directly mentioned in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. However, the atmosphere of the era that forced individual sacrifice in the name of the “national economy” can be seen in Jiyoung’s family backstory, particularly in Oh Misook’s journey. The novel focuses on how such personal sacrifice

for “the greater good” was more heavily forced upon women than men, while the rewards were more exclusive to men. In the 1970s and 80s, when industrialization and urbanization were on the rise, Oh Misook worked in a textile factory, staying in a “chicken coop dormitory” with her sister, “without adequate sleep, rest or food, thinking that was what working entailed for everyone” (Cho 24-25). The meager wages of the female workers “went toward sending male siblings to school,” in the belief that “the family’s wealth and happiness hinged upon male success” (Cho 25). When her eldest brother monopolized the honor of “provi[ding] for his family,” Oh and her sister realize that “their loving family would not be giving them the chance and support to make something of themselves” (Cho 26). Similarly, when Oh aborted her unborn daughter at the clinic out of pressure, “all the responsibility fell on her, and no family was around to comfort her through her harrowing physical and emotional pain” (Cho 19). Oh’s original family and in-laws—a microcosm of postwar Korea—speaks volumes about the women’s unrecorded toil and sweat.

### Suggested Close Reading Exercises

To understand Jiyoung’s grandmother and mother’s relationship described in the novel, it is crucial to grasp Korean family dynamics. Korea was under the strong influence of patriarchal Confucianism, where the head of the family was considered equal to the head of the country—as a famous idiom says, “a monarch, a teacher, and a father are one and the same” (君師父一體). In this tradition, serving one’s ancestors was at the center of the family relationship. The eldest son should not only carry out the responsibility to support the parents and other family members but also perform the ancestral ritual for the dead. In *Chuseok* and *Seollal*, families gather and perform ancestral rituals in front of food preparations. Most of the labor-intensive responsibilities fall to the female members of the family, while the most important part—bowing and offering spirits to the dead—is performed by the male members.

In traditional Korean marriage culture, once married, daughters are considered the “outsiders” of their original family and incorporated as members of the in-laws family instead. From the wedding ceremony to death, the bride was often not allowed to visit her original family except for special circumstances. During this *sijipsari*—life with the in-laws—mothers-in-law took charge of the “education” of their daughters-in-law. From housekeeping and taking care of the elders to household finance management, it was taken for granted that daughters-in-law would obey their mothers-in-law’s commands. If the daughter-in-law did not satisfy her mother-in-law’s standards—from serious family matters like not giving birth to sons to minute mistakes like the unpalatable seasoning of food—her mother-in-law could harshly scold her. This strict hierarchy sometimes gave mothers-in-law strong authority within a family, sometimes even greater than her husband and son, at least within the domestic realm. This relationship dynamic still lingers in Korean marriage culture, where families tend to be more and more nuclearized,

often produced severe daughter- and mother-in-law conflicts—where the daughter-in-law did not wish to abide by her traditional values.

Circulate the copy of the following passage to students and ask them to read it carefully:

The four brothers were born and raised at a time when mere survival was a struggle. As people died, young and old, of war, disease, and starvation, Koh Boonsoon worked someone else’s field, peddled someone else’s wares, took care of domestic labor at someone else’s home, and still managed to run her own home, fighting tooth and nail to raise the four boys. Her husband, a man with a fair complexion and soft hands, never worked a day in his life. Koh Boonsoon did not resent her husband for having neither the ability nor the will to provide for his family. She truly believed he was a decent husband to her for not sleeping around and not hitting her. Of the four sons she raised thus, Jiyoung’s father was the only one to carry out his duties as a son in her old age. Unwanted by her ungrateful children, Koh Boonsoon rationalized this sad outcome with an incoherent logic: “Still, I get to eat warm food my son made for me, and sleep under warm covers my son arranged for me because I had four sons. You have to have at least four sons.” Oh Misook, her son’s wife, was the one who cooked the warm food and laid out the warm covers for her, not her son, but Koh Boonsoon had a habit of saying so anyway. Easy-going considering the life she’d had, and relatively caring toward her daughter-in-law compared to other mothers-in-law of her generation, she would say from the bottom of her heart, for her daughter-in-law’s sake, “You should have a son. You must have a son. You must have at least two sons...” (Cho 16-17).

1. Ask students to research family dynamics in Korean extended families and contemporary nuclear families. Useful online resources can be found at *The Korea Herald*’s [“World of the In-laws, where Gender Stereotypes Persist.”](#)
2. Ask students to research Korea’s memorial/ancestral rites practices. Useful online resources can be found in [National Folk Museum of Korea](#), *The Korea Times* article “Challenge for ‘Jesa,’” and [Korea.net](#)’s “Life After Death—The Beguiling World of the Korean Jesa Ceremony.”
3. In groups, have students discuss the passage above. Suggested facilitation questions include:
  - a. Based on your experience, how do you think the American familial relationship is different from South Korea? Where do you think these differences come from?
  - b. What can be inferred about marriage relationships in Korea before and after the Korean War when the novel says: “Koh Boonsoon did not resent her husband for having neither the ability nor the will to provide for his family. She truly believed

- he was a decent husband to her for not sleeping around and not hitting her?”
- c. Considering the family dynamics in Korea, why do you think Koh Boonsoon is obsessed with having sons? How would you explain her “incoherent logic,” attributing all the benefits she enjoys to her son?
  - d. The novel does not give enough context to assume Koh Boonsoon’s previous life and her marriage, but we can imagine what her life before, during, and after the Korean War may have been like. Why do you think Koh’s husband had “a fair complexion and soft hands?” What do you think her husband’s occupation was? How would you imagine Koh’s social and economic status based on her husband’s appearance?

### **Suggested In-Class Activities**

#### **Revisiting the Timeline and Situating Individuals’ Lives**

This activity is based on the timeline students draw in the “Happiness Graph of South Korea” activity.

1. In small groups, students draw three new happiness graphs that depict the three female characters’ lives on top of the previous drawings using different colored pens. Instruct students to indicate important life decisions or events that mark the ups and downs of Koh Boonsoon, Oh Misook, and Kim Jiyoung over time. Again, the level of happiness does not necessarily have to correspond to the character’s economic level. Encourage students to draw their own graphs using a set of criteria as discussed in the group.
2. After drawing the graphs, students discuss in their group how the three women’s lives are related to events in South Korean history. Do the happiness graphs of the characters synchronize with the country’s happiness graph? Why or why not?

#### **Understanding Koh Boonsoon**

Although readers cannot know exactly what year Koh Boonsoon was born, it is possible to assume that Koh was born in Korea under the Japanese occupation and gave birth to and raised her four sons around the 1950s. Unlike in Jiyoung’s case, the novel does not give enough information to specify Koh’s life—Cho only offers fragments of Koh’s uneasy life. Nevertheless, readers may fill certain gaps with historical knowledge of the period and a little bit of imagination.

1. In small groups, have students research key historically significant events in Korea from the 1920s to early 1950s. Make sure the students consult with social indexes, such as poverty rate, literacy rate, birth rate, children mortality rate, family forms, etc. Some sources to get students started, include: Statista (for [child mortality rates](#) and [fertility rates](#)), [Ki-Ok](#) (for insight into Korean life during the Japanese colonial period).
2. Assuming that Koh was born in 1920, encourage students to imagine Koh’s childhood, marriage, and family life with their group. Imagine Koh’s life during Japanese

occupation and the Korean war, such as how many siblings she would have, what may her father did for a living, how may her education level, and what her relationship with her husband may have been like.

3. Ask students to individually write a short description of Koh Boonsoon’s life in approximately 300 words.
4. Pair students in two and ask them to share their stories with each other. Students explain to their partners the reasons why they chose to write Koh’s life this way.

### “Hey, *Ajumma!*”

1. Ask students to Google the Korean word *ajumma* (Cho 20) and to additionally do an image search in Google for images related to the word, and to take brief notes on what they initially discover.
2. Now read “[Care for Ajumma!](#)” from *The Korea Times*, a piece that explains the stereotypes related to the term *ajumma*.
3. Compare/contrast the phenomena of the *ajumma* to American stereotypes about middle-aged women—consider examples like “Karen,” “almond mom,” “kooky aunt,” “girl boss” from popular culture.
4. Students and teachers can also look up Ajumma EXP, a San Diego-based flashmob dance crew that is composed of middle-aged women with sun visors and colorful and comfortable outfits. [Their homepage](#) and their [YouTube account](#) offer various sources to refer to.
5. Based on the searched images and the article, begin a discussion around the reclamation of the *ajumma* stereotype. Ask students what marks the key features of stereotypical Korean *ajumma*—fast, powerful, tough, determined, loud, fierce in survival, etc. Some questions you might discuss, include:
  - a. Why do you think it is important for communities to find ways to reclaim, or reframe, stereotypes that might otherwise be harmful or offensive?
  - b. Can you think of other ways people have used humor to combat oppression? Can you think of examples in history or contemporary popular culture (books, movies, comedy specials, etc.).
  - c. What do the *ajummas* have in common with other people in your life who you admire and respect?
6. Read page 20 of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, which describes Oh Misook’s “odd jobs on the side”—in other words, “made-for-housewife jobs” (Cho 20). In small or large groups, encourage students to discuss the following questions:
  - a. Why do you think *ajumma* is sometimes used as a derogatory term in Korean society? Why are some Korean women offended when they are called with this term?
  - b. What are the similarities of the “side jobs” that are commonly performed by

*ajummas*? What kind of personality or behavioral traits do these jobs require of the workers? Why do you think the employers of these “side jobs” preferred middle-aged married women like Oh Misook?

## UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

### Life Course Essay of Your Own

This unit has followed South Korean history through Jiyoung’s grandmother and mother, Koh Boonsoon and Oh Misook. As *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* demonstrates, to get a better understanding of a person born into a society of upheaval, it is sometimes helpful to examine not only the individual level but also on the lives of the generations who came before. In the same way that the novel sheds light on the power of family histories, students are encouraged to research and write stories about their own families. These short personal essays, or “life course” essays, are one way students can contextualize their personal stories in the greater landscape of recent history and better digest the novel’s narrative style. Typically, “life course” essays are writings that analyze and reflect on various stages, events, and transitions in a person’s life from birth to old age. They often explore the individual’s experiences, relationships, challenges, achievements, and personal growth over time.

Students can begin their essays by interviewing a person two generations before them. People of interest can include, but are not limited to, their family members, teachers, or neighbors—any person they know who was born 50-60+ years before them. Students should ask about their interviewee’s life courses: their birth, family life, key turning points, choices, and experiences that have shaped their identity. Afterwards, students can choose a person who is one generation ahead of them and conduct similar interviews.

After the interviews, students are asked to compile their own life courses and their interviewee’s experiences in one essay. Encourage students to focus on the differences and similarities between the three people that are described in their essays. Some questions they can ask themselves to get started, include:

1. How do the three lives interplay and diverge?
2. What are the significant events and choices that shaped your interviewees’ lives that you can relate to?
3. How do you feel about the passage of time that is marked in your essay?
4. Do you sense continuity or discontinuity between those three people’s lives?

### Paper Prompt on South Korean Veterans Extra Point System

The overarching influence of the Korean War is not limited to the political and economic sectors of Korean society. The ongoing mandatory military service for South Korean men is deepening the rift between Korean males and females. Every Korean male over 18-years old is required to serve in the military for two years, and avoiding military service is punishable by imprisonment for one to five years. The hazing, cruelty, harsh work environments, and low pay of serving

soldiers and veterans exacerbates certain societal problems in South Korea. While efforts have been made by the government to enhance the welfare of military personnel, South Korean males' frustration continues.

Although it is important to acknowledge that the deep-rooted gender conflicts and inequalities in South Korea cannot be solely attributed to mandatory military service for men, this system contributes to feelings of deprivation among Korean males and serves as a convenient justification for favoring men over women in various aspects of Korean society. One example is the Veterans Extra Point system, which granted benefits to military veterans in government employment and led to the pervasive and prevalent trend of gender discrimination in the job market at a governmental level. Although the system was ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court and subsequently abolished in 2001, the debate surrounding the potential revival of this system ignited intense offline and online discussions throughout the 2010s, further fueling gender conflicts in South Korea.

In this unit activity, students can research South Korea's Veterans Extra Points System in depth. By surveying the history of the system's implementation and abolition and the heated discussion regarding the revival of the system that followed, students can understand the impact of modern warfare and how it shapes gender dynamics of societies today.

Encourage students to conduct research on both the supporting and opposing perspectives regarding Veteran Extra Points, as well as the reasons behind the system being deemed unconstitutional in 2001. Prompt students to critically analyze the contrasting viewpoints. Emphasize the importance of considering the potential ramifications of either maintaining or eliminating the system across different societal facets such as the job market, gender relations, and human rights. Ask students to propose potential revisions or alternative solutions to address the shortcomings of the previous system.

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## UNIT 3. 1982-2000: CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE, HUANTING PATRIARCHY

### ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit tackles a particular hierarchical social system which reproduces and reinforces the “‘woman’ stigma” (Cho 60) central to *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*: patriarchy. As an overarching social system, patriarchy is one of the key threads that connects Kim Jiyoung, who is born in the 1980s, to American high school students born in the 21st century. Patriarchy, an ideology that justifies and reestablishes sexism in society, operates by attributing gender inequalities to biological factors. Patriarchal ideology “explains” gender norms and the ensued discrimination towards women as “natural:” from the time of Aristotle and Plato to now, patriarchists argued that women are passive and emotional because they have a uterus and thereby are “pregnable” (Bonnard 7). As a system of social relations, patriarchal social structures define the “appropriate” relationship between men and women, assign each genders’ “adequate” places, thereby reproducing the dominance and prominence of men over women (Becker 38).

*Kim Jiyoung* testifies that under patriarchal social structures, girls are allowed to climb the social ladder as high as they want as long, and only as long, as they do not threaten boys’ social status and maintain their assigned roles: wife and mother. While Korean society was undergoing rapid changes in family forms and traditional familial values in the 1980s, these patriarchal stereotypes continued to dictate women’s roles in society. The last unit covered the ways in which modernization in Korea dictated the familial sacrifices for “the greater good” of the collective of the three women in Jiyoung’s family, a burden which historically fell more heavily on women. In this unit, students will learn the way gender-based inequalities and inequities stem from systemized and hierarchized gender biases. This unit serves as an overview of the upcoming units, introducing patriarchal social institutions and how they systematically and disproportionately distribute opportunity and privilege among different genders, as well as how we understand the complex and heterogeneous faces of patriarchy depending on time, space, culture, and history.

The first subunit includes opening activities that will help students to understand representations of patriarchy with contemporary culture.

The second subunit, “Conceptual Mapping of Patriarchy,” further examines the definitions, context, and discourses that surround patriarchy. It focuses on how patriarchy relies on and reinforces sexist ideas and how it can be found in numerous social institutions. It also suggests a productive reading of the novel in relation to patriarchal family and school systems and provides a guideline for how American students can gain a deeper understanding of the context of patriarchy in South Korea.

The third subunit, titled “Korean Family as Patriarchal Institution and Fetal Femicide,” delves into the collusion of two patriarchal institutions—family and government—in postwar South Korea that committed brutal violence on female bodies. Focusing on Oh Misook’s abortion of

Jiyoung’s unborn sister, this subunit will explore the historical, political, and cultural context that led to the national trend of sex-selective abortion during the 1970s to 1990s.

The final subunit, “Continuities and Changes,” explores how patriarchy still affects people’s present lives in South Korea, and how, simultaneously, culture has changed due to the relentless efforts of those who want to break down patriarchy.

Each subsection is designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the novel through close-reading exercises, discussion questions, and in-class assignments. An idea for possible unit projects is listed at the end. Below is the table of the contents for this unit.

#### Subunit 1. OPENING ACTIVITY

“I’m Just Ken”?

#### Subunit 2. CONCEPTUAL MAPPING OF PATRIARCHY

What Is Patriarchy?

Suggested In-Class Activities

Reading Patriarchy in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

Patriarchy in the United States

Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions

Suggested Close Reading Exercises

#### Subunit 3. KOREAN FAMILY AS PATRIARCHAL INSTITUTION AND FETAL FEMICIDE

Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions

Suggested Close Reading Exercise

#### Subunit 4. CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

Suggested Close Reading Exercise

Suggested In-Class Activities

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## OPENING ACTIVITY

### “I’m Just Ken”?

“You guys are clearly not doing patriarchy very well.” In Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023), Ken is thrilled to know that the “Real World” is dominated by men, “We are doing it well. We are just hiding it better now,” a suited businessman instructs him.

Watch the scene where Ken discovers patriarchy in the Real World (on [YouTube](#)), and he believes that, unlike the Barbie World, the Real World is where “men and horses run everything.” The movie cleverly points out that although girls are taught from a young age that they can do and be anything—presidents, professors, engineers, and so on—the “real world” does not reflect this belief. In large or small groups, ask students to discuss how they think the patriarchy is portrayed in the scene. Some questions you might ask, include:

1. Based on his short experience in the Real World and his fragmentary research on patriarchy, Ken interprets that patriarchy is a system “where men and horses run everything.” Why do you think Ken says that? What is the relationship between men and horses? How do images of the “Wild West” portray men’s roles in the greater context of American history?
2. How did you feel when you saw this clip, especially in the scenes where “masculinity” was shown?
3. What is your understanding of patriarchy? How would you define the term in short?
4. What are your personal experiences of these mixed signals? Circulate a slip of paper to

students and let them write down their experiences.

5. What do you think Ken (in this scene or the film as a whole) seeks and desires? Power? Relationships? Jobs? To be an “alpha male?”
6. What is the difference between masculinity and patriarchy? What aspects of masculinity can you think of that exist outside of patriarchy?

## CONCEPTUAL MAPPING OF PATRIARCHY

### What Is Patriarchy?

According to [Britannica](#), the word “patriarchy” was originally an anthropological term that described a specific type of family form in which a father held absolute power over the other family members. Many anthropologists agree that patriarchal families appeared with land ownership in agricultural society as far back as 5,000 years ago ([UVA Today](#)). The father, the primary “man” of the house, represented the family and was the sole owner of the family property, including its members; the son, especially the eldest son, was the next in line who would carry the family name, bloodline, and inheritance. As we can see in Jiyoung’s family, the son, even the youngest, holds the most critical position in the family next to his father. In this family dynamic, female members are under custody of the male members, whether they are their fathers, brothers, or sons. Female bodies, as potential childbearing bodies, had to be “controlled” in order to secure the legitimacy of the inheritor: “The parentage of children previously attributed to the mother had to be disintegrated, imposing chastity on women only, while men could choose wives and girlfriends as desired, so long as it did not prejudice their land ownership” ([Capire](#)). These familial hierarchies are reproduced and authorized by various other systems, including religion, legal systems, marriage cultures, and childrearing practices.

Patriarchal social forms can be found in nearly all postindustrial societies. Today, there are two predominating perspectives that explain the prevalence of patriarchal social norms. One explanation—the essentialist perspective—heavily depends on biological gender determinism: that men and women are inherently different, and men are physiologically built to dominate women. Sociobiologists like Steven Goldberg argue in *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* that patriarchy is historically and socially universal because there is a necessary biological difference between men and women: men, fueled by testosterone, are active, logical, risk-taking, adventurous, aggressive, and thus advantageous to attainment; while women, lacking testosterone, are passive, soft, caring, nurturing, sentimental, illogical, and fickle. Therefore, according to the essentialist perspective, patriarchy is not only inevitable in every possible scenario in human civilization but also the most prominent and inexorable social system. The second perspective—social constructionism—links patriarchy’s emergence with human historical, cultural, economic, and political developments, such as the advent of agriculture, where the division of labor, often dictated by gender, became more crucial. According to the social constructionist view, patriarchy is built upon and perpetuated through socialization processes where individuals learn and internalize gender roles through various patriarchal

institutions. Family, education systems, media, and religious institutions play a significant role in teaching and reinforcing gender norms that support patriarchal structures. Therefore, this perspective recognizes the importance of multivalent patriarchal organizations such as family, schools, religious institutions, government, law enforcement, legislation, hospital, military, and media as patriarchal organizations that reproduce and educate gender hierarchy to their members. Sylvia Walby, an English feminist sociologist, argues that patriarchy's long-reaching influence can be found in "the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions, such as religion, the media and education" (214). Its consequences include gender inequalities in income, social status, and education; control of the reproductive rights of women; gender stereotypes and objectification that are solidified and reproduced by media; and gender-based violence such as sexual harassment and assault. Other social constructionists, such as Raewyn Connell, emphasize that patriarchy affects every member of society by relying both on the domination of women and intermale hierarchy, thereby being oppressive and discriminatory not only for women, but also for men.

## Two Perspectives on Categorical Differences and Ideological Foundation of Patriarchy

Essentialist Perspective	Social Constructionist Perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biology is binary.</li> <li>• There are only two sexes—male and female.</li> <li>• The sexual difference between male and female is singular and true, and it is more important than other dimensions of human differences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biology is a bush not a pyramid: bodies are diverse and malleable. They adapt to changing environments.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biology is purposeful: bodies are teleological and built “just-so.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biology is and can be managed for social purposes.</li> <li>• We work on and “fix” bodies.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biology is moral. Being “natural” is true and just.</li> <li>• Nature tells us inequality is right and unfixable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social values, not biology, dictate social purposes.</li> <li>• Religion and ethics, commerce and advertisements support or undermine androcentrism as social values and patriarchy as social system.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can justify inequalities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can question inequalities.</li> </ul>

It is hard to say that biological essentialists like Goldberg provide a satisfactory explanation of the origin of patriarchy—their arguments have been heavily refuted and criticized by numerous feminist sociologists, including Walby, Connell, and Eleanor E. Maccoby. However, such an essentialist logic is often utilized to justify the existence and necessity of patriarchy. Due to the sexist assumption of determinism, sexism as a gender-discriminatory system is more often found in patriarchy. For example, by bolstering the sexist idea—that women are inherently soft and caring, less aggressive and competitive than men, and prone to “delightfully undertake” housework and childbirth—patriarchy has systematically rationalized the wage gap between men and women: “If women make different life choices than men do (on average, of course), work fewer hours, negotiate less hard for their pay, take career breaks, don’t fight as hard for promotions as they find other things in life as or more important, then employers are being entirely rational in not paying them as much as men” (*Forbes*). This patriarchal system fixated on workplaces contributes further to fortifying sexist ideas that women are less valuable than men in the job market, and therefore belong in domestic spaces.

Male dominance over women is omnipresent beyond domestic spaces and often buttressed by other social systems and organizations. Patriarchy stubbornly survives by maintaining symbiotic relationships with various ideological bases for “modern” institutionalized

oppressions, such as nationalism, rationalism, imperialism, and capitalism. As Virginia Woolf contends in *Three Guineas*, patriarchy that values and justifies “masculine aggression” also served militarism and extreme forms of nationalism, including fascism, all too well. With sarcasm and hyperbole, Woolf criticizes that the male-dominated English upper-class society in the 19th and 20th centuries was driven by systemized male violence: “[your men’s] finest clothes are those you wear as soldiers.” Woolf points out there is an essential connection between “the sartorial splendors of the educated man and the photographs of ruined houses and dead bodies” (137-138)—the glamour of professional male communities and the horror of modern warfare.

The values of patriarchy were well matched with colonial capitalism and its resource extraction. Working men outsourced domestic and reproductive labor to women. The role of a housewife—an angel in the kitchen—operated as a stable, stationary anchor for men’s lives and identities in the social, political, and economic realms. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844*, Karl Marx describes the patriarchal bourgeois family and marriage system as the “slavery of women,” where women’s labor was considered a freely extractable resource, which their husbands and the entire capitalist social structure relied on. Marx points out that the same logic is operating behind the patriarchal social system, and the 19th and 20th-century Imperials “legitimately” and freely exploited their colonies’ and “mother nature’s” resources and transmuted them into market values. In other words, the hierarchy between men and women was applied to and reinforced by the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized or “man” and “nature.” To “naturalize” the violent exploitation of women by men and “effeminate” a particular group of people to justify the very exploitation, patriarchal gender stereotypes were widely mobilized in every corner of the modern world to build intricate yet brutal hierarchies.

### **Suggested In-Class Activities**

#### **The “Inevitability” of Patriarchy and Male Aggression**

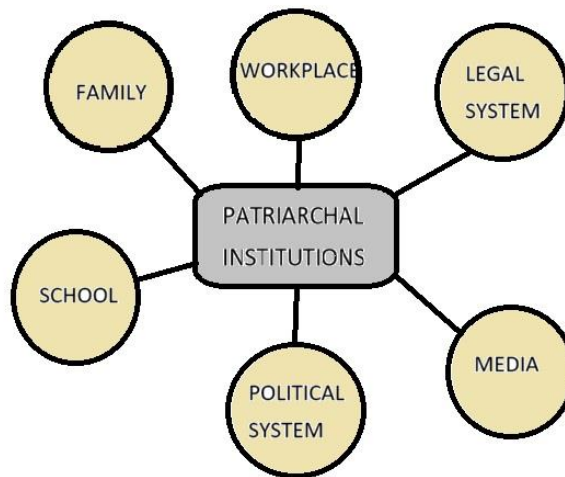
Read Steven Goldberg’s argument about masculinity. He argues that masculinity is the primary developmental impetus for every society, thereby leading males to occupy higher social status in every society. Goldberg argues it is by nature’s law that men, who are innately aggressive and competitive, become the “developers” who drive the as industrialization, science, and democracy of modern society:

We could lower the degree to which male aggression is present in American society to the minimal level possible in an industrial society, though this is not likely to happen. We could, theoretically, lower it to the level found in Pygmy society if we were willing to give up science, bureaucratic organization, industrialization, and democracy (all those changes which tended to raise the threshold of the possible minimal degree of sexual differentiation and of the importance of aggression). (Goldberg 123-124)

1. To this bio-essentialist view that supports sexism and patriarchy, Eleanor E. Maccoby responded and debunked Goldberg’s argument in “Sex in the Social Order.” Page 470 of the article neatly summarizes Goldberg’s argument. Read the quote above from Goldberg alongside page 470 from Maccoby with students.
2. In a large group, ask students how they understood Goldberg and Maccoby. When read with Maccoby’s counterargument, what can be found problematic in Goldberg’s argument? How would you argue against his logic?
3. Watch Vogue India’s “[#StartWithTheBoys](#)” Campaign with students. This is a video that criticizes how society, in general, justifies and aggravates male aggression and violence.
4. In small groups, encourage students to discuss the issues and consequences of defining men as inherently and biologically violent and aggressive. What are the other problematic consequences of using masculine aggressiveness as the critical element of the development of society? Do you think patriarchy and male aggression are inevitable? How might this theory culturally limit and hurt men?

### Patriarchal Institutions Map

Draw a picture on the board depicting diverse patriarchal institutions. These can include the family, the workplace as an economic system, the school as an educational system, the legal system, the media, the nation-state, and so on.



Example of Patriarchal Institutions Map.

1. Assign each circle to a group of students.
2. In small groups, students discuss what examples of patriarchal and sexist systems they can find in the assigned institution and write them down as a mind map that branches out from the original map. It is recommended for students to start with the examples they can find in the novel, but they can always include their own experiences. i.e., school—uniform, student numbers, class president/family, diet and other norms around food,

distribution of household resources, workplace, legal system, culture, and media, children's toys, sports, movies, advertisements, etc.

3. In large groups, students share their map drawings. Teachers may recap the group presentation and include the keywords and concepts on the larger map on the board.
4. Discuss how those patriarchal systems contribute to forming and reinforcing sexist stereotypes.

### **Reading Patriarchy in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982***

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*'s third chapter, "Adolescence: 1995-2000," talks in depth about how patriarchal social systems in the modern world deliver confusing messages to children. Children in the 1990s were taught that girls have equal rights as boys and "girls can be/do anything." However, the novel testifies that the girls born in the 1980s and the 1990s still are set back by patriarchal norms and value systems that lurk in every corner of their lives:

Gone were the days when parents thought girls didn't have to get good grades or receive the same education as boys. It had long since been the norm of girls, like boys, to put on a uniform, carry a backpack and attend school. Girls thought about what they would like to do when they grew up, just as boys did; they planned their careers and competed to achieve their goals. [...] But in certain pivotal moments in women's lives, the 'woman' stigma reared its head to obscure their vision, stay their hands and hold them back. The mixed signals were confusing and disconcerting. (Cho 59-60)

South Korea in the 1990s, thanks to continued feminist movements and human rights activism, was a period of seemingly rapid advancement in women's rights. Like adolescent Jiyoung, girls were sent to schools, entered higher education institutions, and even became class presidents. And yet, old messages continued to infiltrate social structures, and young girls were told that the most important thing they can achieve was to become a wife and mother. Jobs that reinforced these feminine ideals, such as primary education, were therefore extremely popular for they allowed women to maintain certain societal expectations and were conducive to raising children.

The novel portrays how family and school as patriarchal social structures scrupulously educate their children to accept the "woman's stigma." Even before the third chapter, where the novel focuses on Jiyoung during puberty, the novel depicts the subtle and overt discrimination between sons and daughters in Jiyoung's original family. Jiyoung's nameless younger brother, although the youngest, is the most valuable and cherished member of the family, while Eunyoung and Jiyoung are "ranked below" (Cho 15): "It was a given that fresh rice hot out of the cooker was served in the order of father, brother, and grandmother, and that perfect pieces of tofu, dumplings, and patties were the brother's while the girls ate the ones that fell apart" (Cho 15). The order in which food is served represents the order in which family members are valued—father, brother, the elder, and the rest of the family. However, since "that's how it had

always been,” Jiyoung does not recognize the unfairness, and she becomes “accustomed to rationalizing things by telling herself that she was being generous older sibling” (Cho 15).

The novel’s third chapter, “Adolescence: 1995-2000,” shows Jiyoung’s realization and recognition of the meaning of “becoming a woman.” Eunyoung, Jiyoung’s older sister, describes the first period as the end of “the happy days” (Cho 47) because she knows well about the weight and burden of being a woman and how sexual/sexualized female bodies are treated as shameful. Jiyoung experience of puberty, like most girls in 1990s Korea, “was a secret shared only among mothers and daughters,” a secret that is “an irritating, painful, somehow shameful” (Cho 49). There is no bouquet or cake to celebrate with; Jiyoung’s mother quietly offers her an additional bowl of ramen soup and advises her to “eat lots of warm food” and “dress warm” (Cho 49). The pads are “packed separately at the store in black plastic bags to hide them from view” as if they are eyesores, and when the blood leaks onto Jiyoung’s clothes or bedding, she “would rush into her room as if she’d done something horrible and change” (Cho 49-50). Jiyoung’s family is the first patriarchal institution that teaches girls they are less precious than boys, and becoming a woman is the first step towards their future as mothers—that they should hide their bodies and bodily fluids, “dress warm,” and keep their uterus-possessing-body drug-free as “sacred grounds in a virgin forest” (Cho 51).

School is also one of the earliest patriarchal institutions that Jiyoung encounters. The school uniform makes clear that girls and boys are different. The school dress code is stricter for girls, while the boys enjoy relatively lax uniform rules: “The skirt had to be long enough to cover the knees and roomy enough to hide the contours of the hips and thighs. As the thin, white fabric of the summer blouse was rather sheer, a round-neck undershirt was mandatory” (Cho 42). The female school uniform is designed to hide all the body parts and clothing that could be considered “indecent:” knees, hips, thighs, bras, spaghetti straps, colorful shirts, lace, and sheer black tights. In other words, school uniforms instruct girls on which body parts they can reveal and which they should hide or face punishment. The flasher incident in Jiyoung’s school and Jiyoung’s father’s victim blaming illustrate that the school’s dress code represents and reinforces the unfair, sexist norms regarding women’s bodies and clothing. Even though the girls are “not the ones who flashed [their] junks” (Cho 45), they should be “ashamed of [themselves]” (Cho 46) upon encountering sexual harassment; Jiyoung’s father accuses Jiyoung of not checking her behavior and attire when she was stalked by her cram school classmate (Cho 56).

As discussed in the first unit, reading *Kim Jiyoung* in the American classroom context—where students may not have experienced a cultural preference for sons or gendered public-school uniforms—requires a subtle balance when recognizing similarities and differences between America and South Korea. It is essential to acknowledge that the United States is still under the influence of patriarchal institutions. As Chandra Mohanty says, while patriarchy is a powerful social system that seeps into almost every cultural and social layer in existence, it is crucial to notice that “a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what

[she] shall call the ‘third-world difference’” (335). The “third-world difference” gives the false impression to feminists—especially to white western feminists—that patriarchal experiences are universally the same for every woman of different regions, cultures, and periods. It supports the illusion that the women in the “third world”—where patriarchy is still alive and kicking—are oppressed, remain in victimhood, and are in need of intervention from those of the “first world,” where active feminist movements “defeat” patriarchy. Mohanty underscores the need to move beyond these false binaries and engage in intersectional feminist dialogues that reflect the complex and multifaceted experiences of women.

Readers should therefore be aware of the pitfalls of “othering,” and refrain from labeling Jiyoung’s experiences as a young woman born in the 1980s South Korea as foreign or exotic—as something that happens because of “the third world difference.” Recognizing the differences in culture, time, region, and economic and political specificity is as vital as understanding the ways in which Jiyoung’s experiences are fundamentally connected to what American women in the 21st-century experience. Understanding that patriarchy has diverse, heterogeneous, and protean faces empowers individuals in varied backgrounds and situations to empathize with each other and effectively stand in solidarity against patriarchy.

### **Patriarchy in the United States**

Just as Confucianism influenced many social fields in the east, western religious institutions had much to do with political patriarchalism in Europe and the United States. The idea of Eastern Confucianist patriarchy, that “a monarch, a teacher, and a father are the one and the same” (君師父一體), is not far removed from ideology of the Western Judeo-Christian patriarchy, which used the family as an analogy of a nation-state. Sir Robert Filmer, an English political theorist in the 17th century, writes in *Patriarcha* about a similar idea to Confucianism that the head of a kingdom should be considered the head of a family. The Bible frames patrilineality of Adam and the dominance and authority of the husband over wife as God’s order. From this idea, patriarchalism emerged as a royalist political ideology and argued that the role of a good monarch was to “take care of” their subjects, much like an attentive father. Developed by political thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, who imagined a nation-state as a gigantic living organism called Leviathan, patriarchalism secured the idea of seeing a specific social institution as an organism with an intellectual center or head ([Pateman 455](#)). As one can see in the word “patriot,” which is rooted in the Greek word *patrios* (of one’s fathers) and *patris* (fatherland) ([Merriam-Webster](#)), the notion of Western sovereign nation-state is intimately related to that of “fatherland,” where the subject-children are dominated by the monarch-father and the compatriots are imagined to be linked with “having the same father”—namely, brotherhood.



The Frontispiece of *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes, 1651. [The New Statesman](#).

On the other hand, John Locke argued against Filmer's divine right theory and proposed a social contract theory of government, laying the foundation for modern liberal democracy. In his work *Two Treatises of Government*, which was a response to Filmer's *Patriarcha*, Locke emphasized that political authority is based on the consent of the governed, not on the patrilineal descended authority of a monarch. According to Locke's idea, humans are born free and equal yet agree to delegate their innate rights to a government in exchange for social and political benefits. The [American Declaration of Independence](#), written primarily by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, drew heavily on the ideas of Lockean social contract theory. The document asserts that all men are created equal and have unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Unlike under aristocracy or monarchy, the United States as a democratic republic is founded based on the idea that "neither physical features nor social status indicates that a person is divinely ordained to rule over others without their consent" ([National Affairs](#)).

Therefore, it could be argued that the founding of the United States began with a rejection of the accomplice relationship between hereditary monarchy and patriarchy from the start because the Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal." However, there was no place for women in this version of "men." Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams who participated in writing the declaration, asked in her letter to her husband to "remember the ladies;" upon her request, John Adams replied: "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems" ([Massachusetts Historical Society](#)). He argued that women are the ones who pull the strings beyond the veil of politics—female influence and power come from being wife and mother by "morally influencing" her husband and educating her sons. Indeed, the governance of American patriarchy was "fair and soft" compared to its European predecessors, as John Adams

promised to his wife: in the 19th century, post-colonial American women’s rights were “granted” by having the freedom of choosing a spouse on their own will and rights to retain property after marriage. Nevertheless, it did not grant women a chance to act by themselves in the economic and political domain—women were not allowed to vote until 1920, while their entrusted “rights” were transferred from their fathers to their husbands. The stubborn vestige of patriarchy is shown best in the form of married women’s last names. Until the late 20th century, U.S. state laws required a woman to assume her husband’s last name to be included in voter registration, make a bank account, and get a passport or driver’s license (Goldin and Shim). Still, almost 80% of the American women who engaged in opposite-sex marriage took their spouse’s last name, while 92% of the men retained their last names after marriage ([Pew Research Center](#)). This clearly shows that America still operates based on conventional patrilineal family units, unlike some people’s argument that the country has “toppled the patriarchy” (National Affairs). The legislation of free marriage, private property, and suffrage of women has not abolished the long-lasting influence of patriarchy; it just offered women more options to choose among the varieties of patriarchal systems.

bell hooks writes that sexism and patriarchy in the United States does not mean the “absolute lack of choices” for women—rather, it guarantees women certain freedoms in other domains and encourages them that they do not need to fight against the system because they are not “oppressed:”

Many women do not join organized resistance against sexism precisely because sexism does not mean an absolute lack of choices. They may know they are discriminated against on the basis of sex, but they do not equate this with oppression. Under capitalism, patriarchy is structured so that sexism restricts women’s behavior in some realms, even as freedom from limitations is allowed in other spheres. The absence of extreme restrictions leads many women to ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against; it may even lead them to imagine that no women are oppressed. (5)

It is hard to say that women in the U.S. are “oppressed” by men in the same manner they were decades or centuries ago. However, it does not mean that women having choices and rights negates the existence of patriarchal and sexist discrimination or exploitation. As the businessman in *Barbie* and John Adams both confess, patriarchy became subtler—“fairer and softer”—than before. The illusion that today “no women are oppressed” is the new sexism, and we need to keep our eyes peeled for the covert operation of patriarchy. Additionally, the values pushed by sexism and patriarchy enforce masculine norms, affecting boys, men, and whole family systems.

## Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions

### Case1: About School Uniform

1. Why do you think there is a stricter uniform rule for female students in Jiyoung's school? What is the explicit reason that the teachers tell the girls? Do you think there are other reasons that go unsaid?
2. Do you think schools should impose dress codes? Why or why not? What kind of message do school dress codes convey to students of all genders?

### Case 2: Talking About Periods

This discussion session aims to allow students to resist the taboo of talking about menstruation. Teachers may inform students that the classroom should be a safe and non-judgmental place to discuss women's sexuality and its taboo in a respectful manner.

1. Why do you think Eunyoung said to Jiyoung that "Your happy days are over" when she found out her younger sister started her period?
2. What messages do you observe in media and culture about periods and "becoming a woman?" Do these messages reflect those given to you by your school, family, and peers? Are the messages given to boys different from those given to girls? If so, how?
3. What are the common euphemisms for periods and menstruation?

### Other Examples from the Novel

Students now connect what they have learned so far about patriarchy with the novel. Open this section by asking questions about specific incidents and cases within *Kim Jiyoung* that demonstrate patriarchy.

1. In small groups, ask students to think of one scene in the novel that demonstrates patriarchy.
2. In groups, students will create a short skit of about three minutes based on scenes and lines from a novel that they chose.
3. Each group performs the skit in front of the other students.
4. After each group has finished, teachers and students identify the scene and the context. Students talk about what patriarchal institutions the situation just described is based on and what gender stereotypes are at play here.
5. After the performances, as a class, students share a short reflection on what they felt about the scene as they watched the other students perform it. Ask the actors' feelings and emotions during their performances as characters in the novel.

## Suggested Close Reading Exercises

### The Ramen Incident

Circulate a copy of the passage below and ask students to read it in small groups. Possible questions to prompt discussion are listed below.

Father said he'd be late, there wasn't enough rice in the cooker to go round, and the mother and the three siblings agreed to make three packets of ramen to share and finish off rice. As soon as a large pot of ramen and four bowls were placed on the dining table, the younger brother filled his bowl to the brim. "Hey! Leave some for the rest of us!" Eunyoung gave him a noogie. "And Mother should serve herself first, not you." Eunyoung filled her mother's bowl with noodles, soup, and an egg, and took half of her brother's noodles. The mother then gave her noodles to her son. "Mom!" Eunyoung screamed. "Just eat! From next time on, we're gonna make ramen in individual pots and all stick to our own portion!" [...] Eunyoung slammed down her chopsticks and stormed off into her room. The mother sighed at the closed door with a conflicted expression on her face, and Jiyoung worried about the noodles getting soft but didn't dare eat. "If Grandma were alive, she would have ripped into Eunyoung. A girl hitting a man's head!" The youngest slurped his ramen and grumbled. (Cho 47-48)

1. What can be inferred from this scene about Jiyoung's family's hierarchy?
2. Why do you think Jiyoung's younger brother says "If grandma were alive, she would have ripped into Eunyoung. A girl hitting a man's head"? Why do you think he says this? Do you think he genuinely endorses his grandmother's lesson about patriarchy?
3. Why do you think Jiyoung's mother gave her noodles to her son again?

### The Flasher Scene

Circulate a copy of pages 44 to 46 of the novel to students and ask students to read the passage in small groups. Possible questions to prompt discussion include:

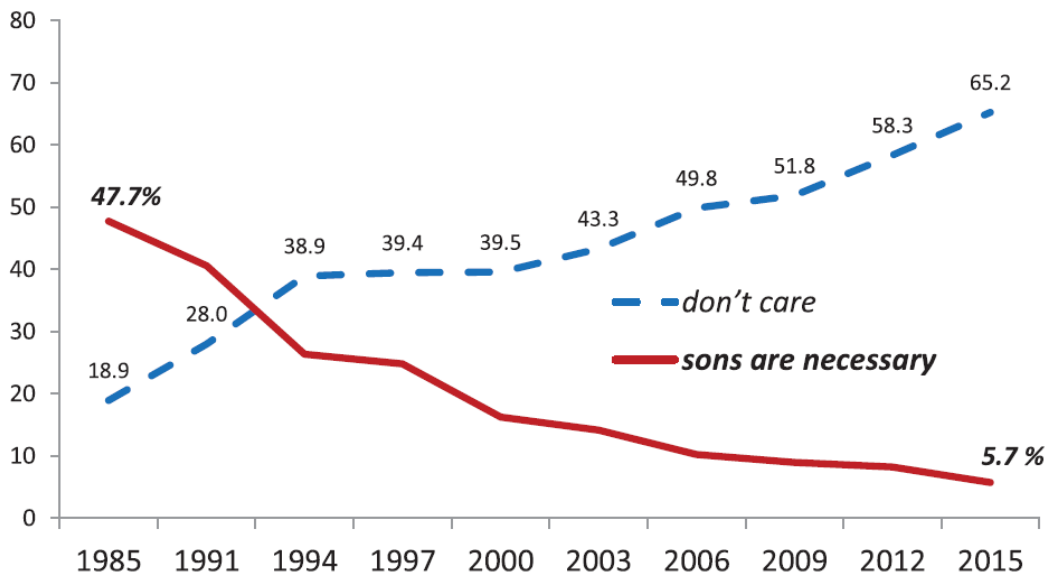
1. Why do you think the "less 'well-behaved'" students' reactions to the flasher are considered inappropriate and punishable?
2. What does the message of the school and the society convey to the female students about sexual harassment? What should they feel ashamed about?
3. What would be the "appropriate" reaction of female students to the flasher? How would you react? Do you think the female students' "violent" reaction—"pouncing on him with clotheslines and belts, tied him up and dragged him to a nearby police station"—was too much?

## **FAMILY AS A PATRIARCHAL INSTITUTION: EVIDENCE FROM FETAL FEMICIDE**

\*Students and teachers can revisit the “Patriarchal Institutions Map” and talk about one of the institutions, family, as the main topic for this subunit.

As we have seen in the previous subunits, South Korea has gone through intensive economic, political, and social changes in a relatively short period. The year Jiyoung was born, 1982, was only 30 years after the end of the Korean War, and the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan was still in place. At the same time, the scent of democratization and freedom was in the air, and the dream of a national economic revival was coming true as South Korea finally joined the ranks of other developing countries. Korean society was ready to move from traditional to modern, and the year 1982 was a time when old and new Korea clashed.

This rapid change in Korean society was also seen in the shifting of family forms. As South Korea’s industrial base changed significantly—from a manual labor-intensive agricultural society to a machine-intensive industrial one—the traditional extended family form, where the more children meant the better, dwindled in favor of the urban nuclear family. However, this trend in the family was not fast enough to keep pace with the country’s breakneck speed of economic development—at least from the perspective of the Korean government. According to Bonnie Tilland’s “Dreaming, Making, and Breaking Family and Kinship in Contemporary South Korea,” the 1960s was still a time when South Korea was facing a shortage of jobs and a weak industrial structure, so the growing population was seen as a surplus that would soon become a problem. Simultaneously, the traditional Confucian idea of favoring boys over girls was still deeply rooted in Korean society. As shown in the below graph, many South Korean parents thought “sons are necessary” as recent as the 1980s.

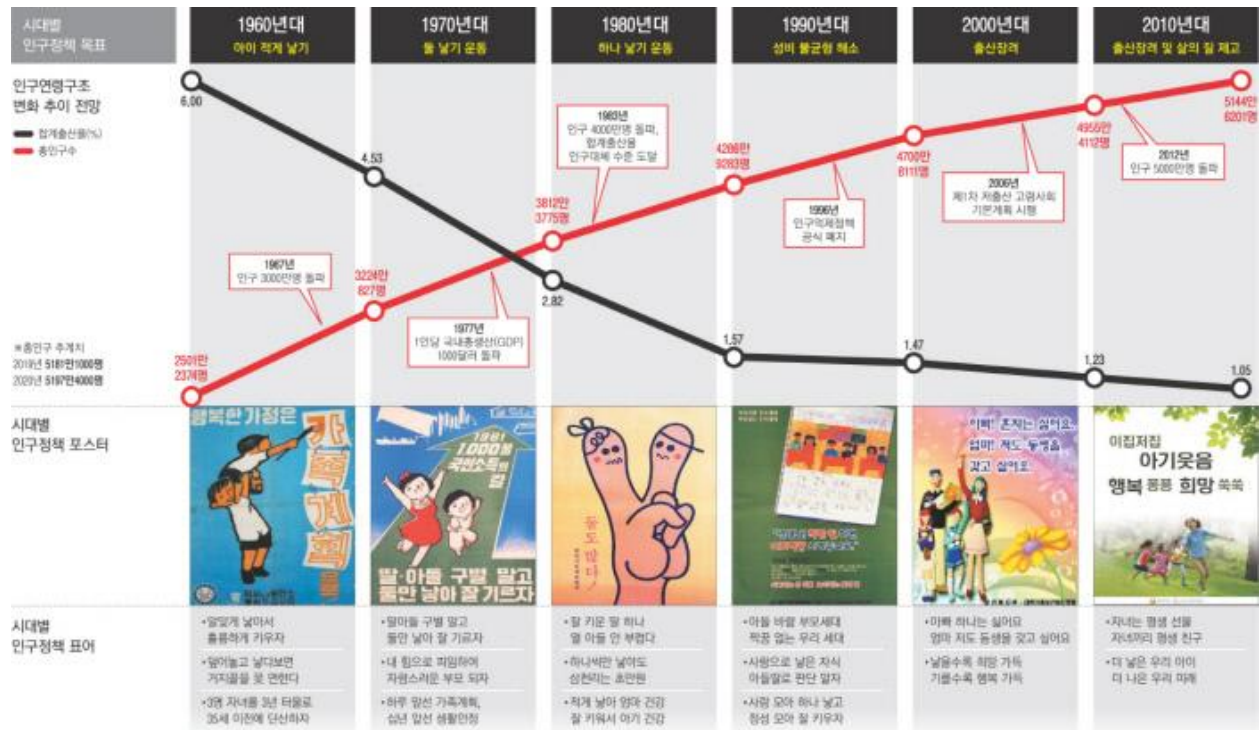


**Figure 2.** Trend in the percentage of women reporting that ‘it is necessary to have a son’ versus ‘do not care about this’, South Korea 1985–2015. Source: KIHASA Korean National Fertility and Family Health Surveys, various years.

South Korea’s Son Preference Trend. [H. Chun and M. Das Gupta.](#)

To curb the explosive population growth caused by medical advances and the postwar baby boom, the South Korean government actively pursued a population control policy starting in the 1960s. The government gave incentives to families with fewer children, such as giving tax breaks to couples with three or fewer children and prioritizing two-child families for public housing. It also actively encouraged women of childbearing age to use temporary or permanent contraception and even sterilization. The government also put effort into creating a social atmosphere that favored fewer children through media, like posters and slogans. The infographic below captures the total fertility rate and population growth trends in South Korea over time, as well as the government’s population policy keynotes, posters, and slogans of the times. The posters introduced below illustrate the South Korean government’s fertility policy, which changed dramatically per decade. In 1960, during the aftermath of the war, the popular saying was: “Don’t have too many and suffer, have a few and thrive.” The Korean government also sponsored the “3.3.35” exercise, which recommended that families have three children in three-year gaps and no children after the mother becomes 35. In 1970, the slogan became “Don’t separate girls and boys, just have two and raise them well.” During this time, the South Korean government focused on promoting the image of a family of four—a couple with one son and one daughter—as the “normal” family. In the 1980s, the slogans became more explicit and blatant: “Two is still too much” and “From three on, it is embarrassing.” Prenatal ultrasounds were

widely recommended, and obstetricians often openly mentioned abortion if the fetus had a disability. Consequently, the Korean government’s population control achieved huge success: in the 1960s, the average number of births expected in one Korean woman was six children; it plummeted to 1.5 in the 1990s.



South Korea’s Population Policy Keynotes, Posters, and Slogans Through the Decades. Black Graph Indicates Total Fertility Rates, Red Graph Indicates Total Population. [Kyunghyang](#).

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* portrays the change in Korean family through Oh Misook—presumably born in the 1950s or 60s and gave birth to her children in the 80s—as the following:

Traditionally an agricultural society, Korea was industrializing fast, and [Oh’s] family couldn’t get on by crops alone. Her father sent his children to the cities like most parents from rural areas did in those days. But he didn’t have the means to support all five of them through school or training that would lead to their respective career choices. In the city, rent and living costs were expensive, and tuition was even more difficult to afford. (Cho 24)

Like Oh Misook’s family, many families in postwar South Korea could not “afford” to have all their children continue education. Some children were less affordable than others; daughters were considered less worthy of investment than sons. Many impoverished families implemented

choice and concentration strategies—parents funneled most of their resources to their sons, especially the eldest, while daughters were married off early or worked in factories after only completing elementary school.

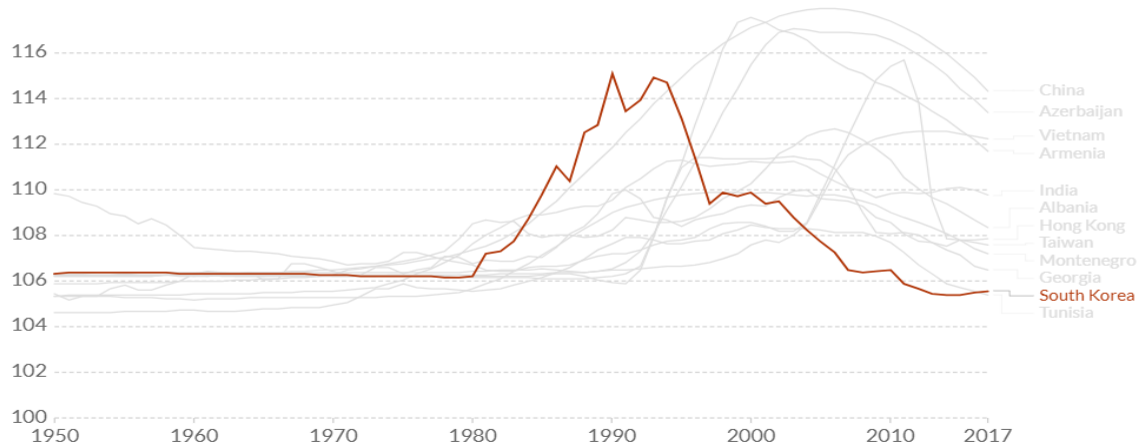
Even when people had many children, daughters were seen as liabilities; after the Korean government imposed economic disadvantages for having many children, merely giving birth to girls became a luxury. In the 1960s, many families tended to continue having children until they had a boy to carry on the family name, and birth control and family planning had yet to take hold in Korean society. Therefore, Korean women still gave birth to an average of six to seven children, as seen in the *Kyunghyang* infographic. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, under the aggressive government population policies, many South Korean parents “decided” not to have “too many” girls. As shown in the graph below, from the 1970s to the 2000s, the sex ratio at birth—the number of male births per 100 female births—of the first child did not change much, while the sex ratio of the third and fourth children surged dramatically, reaching as high as 250. Experts interpret this result as sex-selective abortion on a national scale ([Park Chai Bin and Cho Nam-Hoon](#)). In the 1980s and 1990s, they chose to take a shortcut by aborting “surplus” female babies when they came as the third or fourth child. As a result, the overall sex ratio at birth in South Korea surged to 115 in the 1990s. The mass abortion—fetal femicide or female foeticide—was the worst in 1990, the Year of the White Horse, because of the superstition that says “girls born in the Year of the White Horse have an unfortunate destiny.”

## Sex ratio at birth, 1950 to 2017

Sex ratio at birth, measured as the number of male births per 100 female births. Birth ratios are slightly male-biased, with an expected biological ratio of 105 male per 100 female births.

Our World in Data

+ Add country



CC BY

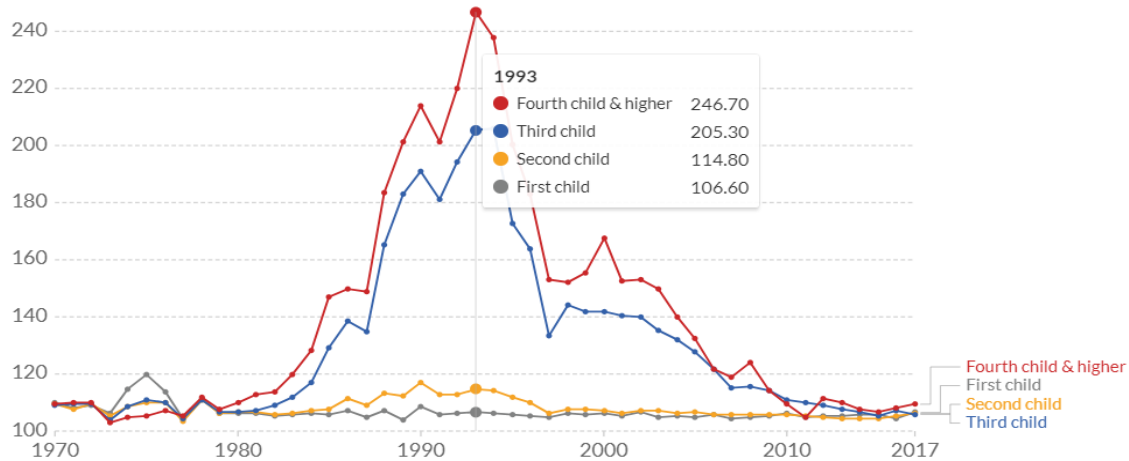
## General Sex Ratio at Birth in South Korea. [Our World in Data.](#)

### Sex ratio at birth by birth order, South Korea, 1970 to 2017

Sex ratio at birth measures the number of male births per 100 female births. This is shown below by birth order of children i.e. the first, second or third-born child. Birth ratios are naturally male-biased, with an expected ratio of 105 male births per 100 female births.

Our World in Data

⇄ Change country



## Sex Ratio at Birth by Birth Order in South Korea. [Our World in Data.](#)

Like Jiyoung's unborn younger sister, aborted girls in this period were victims of a collaborated violence of the ingrained Korean gender preference for male children and the government's "modern" need to push population control at any cost. As Yang Hyuna interprets in *From Criminality of Abortion to Reproductive Rights*, "the high rate of abortion during this period is not evidence that Korean women were living up to their right to self-determination, but

rather an indicator of their lack of control over their own lives” (132). Mothers who “voluntarily” decided to abort their daughters were also victims: even though difficult economic circumstances and pressure from other family members who wanted a son were the main reasons women decided to have an unwanted abortion, if it became known that one had an abortion, it was the mother who took the sole emotional, physical, and legal responsibility. According to “South Korea Rules Anti-Abortion Law Unconstitutional” from [The New York Times](#), under the previous South Korean criminal code, “a woman who undergoes an abortion [could] be punished with up to a year in prison or a fine of up to 2 million won, about \$1,750,” and “a doctor who performs an abortion [faced] up to two years in prison.” Since South Korea’s abortion law was ruled unconstitutional in 2019, there are no criminal grounds to punish individuals based on abortion in South Korea as of now.

### **Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions**

#### **Reading Population Control Propaganda**

This activity encourages students to learn about the novel and its rich historical and social background from a variety of sources beyond the text. This activity can help students improve their media literacy, teaching them how a combination of images and texts can have significant emotional and social impact and why it is important to read them critically.

1. Divide students into five groups, each representing South Korea’s 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s. Each group researches what propagandistic posters were created and circulated during their time assigned period. While many posters are in Korean, some have been translated into English in “Learning from Korean Family Planning Advertisements of the 1960s-1980s” from [The Grand Narrative](#). If students cannot find English translations from this page, they are encouraged to use Google Translate get an idea of what the posters say.
2. In each group, students share their ideas about what messages are conveyed by the posters based on their slogans, images, and layouts. Some useful questions may include:
  - a. Why do you think the designers chose these specific images, color schemes, and layouts?
  - b. What kinds of gender stereotypes are found in these posters? Do you think they are important to the message of the posters?
  - c. How are the “normal” families visually represented?
  - d. Do you think these images and slogans are problematic? If so, why?
3. Each group briefly presents their thoughts on the posters.
4. As a class, discuss the following questions:
  1. If you were married during these periods, do you think you would be influenced by these posters in any way? If so, how?
  2. If you were Oh Misook, who saw these posters in the 80s, how would you feel

- about them? What might you think of their messaging?
3. If you were Kim Jiyoung, growing up in the 80s and 90s, how would you feel about them? What might you think of their messaging?
  4. Can you think of advertisements or other forms of contemporary media that attempt to convey similar values or messaging? How are these similar? How are they different?
4. Encourage students to research famous government-made propaganda posters in the United States and ask them what can be read beyond the conspicuous messages. What is the tone of the posters? Why do you think they are effective or ineffective? What can be learned from these posters based on their historical context?



The Examples of American Propaganda Posters During the WWII. [National Archives](#).

### What are the Boys' Names?

Historically, many women have used male names to access privileges not granted to women. For example, female writers, such as George Eliot, have used male pennames to publish without gender-based bias. Many American parents in the 1970s and 1980s also named their daughters traditionally boys' names, like Tyler, Jackson, or Dakota, to “empower” their girls with “strength and coolness,” according to [The Atlantic](#) article titled “Why Some Parents Turn Boys’ Names Into Girls’ Names.” The article says that many “unisex names” of today and even names considered only girls’ names originated from boys’ names: Addison, Ashley, Beverly, Dana, Harper, Jodie, Leslie, etc.

Pamela Redmond Satran, who runs the baby-name website [Nameberry](#), says that “it is clear from the data that boys are not being named Sue or Sarah or Elizabeth,” which are typical girls’ names. In other words, subverting gender norms is allowed when females take on masculine traits or activities, but it is not necessarily socially acceptable for men to take on traditionally feminine qualities or conventions. This phenomenon is related to gender norms that

“is considered perfectly fine for a girl to exhibit traits associated with masculinity, yet a ‘serious problem’ when men or boys reveal ‘even a whiff of femininity’” (*The Atlantic*).

1. Think of gender-neutral names as a large group. Ask students to guess whether they originated from a “typical male name” or “typical female name.” Check whether they are right in [Nameberry](#).
2. Ask students to think of the male names originating from girls’ names. If they cannot find them easily, ask them why there are so few “appropriate” boys’ names that sound “girly.”
3. What can be inferred about masculinity compared to femininity by male names and female names? Why do you think masculinity is “protected” more strictly than femininity?
4. So far, we have learned Jiyoung’s grandmother, mother, and older sister’s names. Ask students to search for Jiyoung’s father and her brother’s names, the “most important” people—men—in Jiyoung’s family. Why do you think the novel does not provide their names?
5. Why do you think the novel reveals her husband’s name, unlike the other male characters? What is the significant difference between Daehyun and other nameless male characters?
6. For more, read “The Mysterious Tyranny of Trendy Baby Names” from [The Washington Post](#).

### Suggested Close Reading Exercise

Circulate copies of pp. 17-19 of the novel, where Oh Misook becomes pregnant with her third child and decides to “erase” her daughter.

1. Ask students to analyze the passages concerning the social, economic, or political climate of South Korea in the 1980s.
2. Encourage students to look up footnote 2 mentioned in the novel. Ask them to research the “natural” sex ratio at birth, too. Our World in Data entry “[Gender Ratio](#)” and “[Sex Ratio at Birth by Birth Order, South Korea, 1970 to 2017](#)” provide helpful summaries.
3. In large groups, students share their thoughts and analysis of this scene. Useful discussion questions include:
  - a. Based on these data, how would you interpret the events of pp 17-19?
  - b. What does it mean that “the ratio for the third child and beyond was over two-to-one” (Cho 19)?
  - c. How do the trends in South Korea compare to the sex ratio at birth statistics of other Asian countries, like India and China? What are the similarities between these countries? Why do you think this trend continues today in South Korea? Students are encouraged to refer to online resources such as “100 Women: How

South Korea Stopped Its Parents Aborting Girls” from [BBC](#).

- d. What social pressures and economic challenges influenced Oh Misook’s “decision” to end her third pregnancy?

## CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

If *Barbie* and *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* have taught us anything it is that the patriarchy is alive and well, both in South Korea and in the United States. As we have learned in the previous subunits, nation-states, educational institutions, workplaces, and media are also forms of patriarchal structures that significantly affect gender roles and relations through a variety of strategies. The decisions of states and justice systems (laws and court rules on divorce and marriage, fertility and legalizing or criminalizing abortion, contraception, wage discrimination, homosexuality and same-sex marriage, and court practices on rape and sexual crimes), and the corresponding actions of society (to decide getting married, divorced, having children, form a family, getting a job, and purchasing goods), shape conceptions of gender. Even when it seems that society has created legislation to prevent gender-based discrimination, it is crucial to recognize the patriarchal prejudices and stereotypes that continue in everyday life.

At the same time, thanks to the centuries of individual and collective feminist struggles to make women’s voices heard in societies, our societies have gained much more gender equality; women have achieved many political, economic, and social rights. Recognizing the continuities and changes in society—in family forms, education systems, laws and regulations, and media representations—under the tenacious patriarchy is pivotal in understanding *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, especially in reading the novel’s third chapter. As the above figure from Chun and Gupta’s work demonstrates, son preferences have declined and by 2015, the gender preferences of children disappeared.

Following the IMF financial crisis, Korean society moved quickly and painfully into a late-capitalist society. The notion of a “lifetime job” and job security, which was the pivotal feature of the bourgeois middle-class nuclear family model, became outmoded. Many “fathers” lost their jobs and were laid off by their employers under the severe “restructuring measure” (IMF). The press described this nationwide incident as the “crisis of the family,” but indeed, it was the joint crisis of late capitalism and patriarchy. The traditional bourgeois nuclear family system, which relied on the idea that the head of a family supports the entire family began to collapse. The “normal” modern family model—a male breadwinner and a female housewife who takes care of the rest of the family matters—proved untenable. The mass layoffs and job losses of “heads of households” have created a need for women who had traditionally filled the role of homemakers to join the economy. According to Kim Seung-kyung and John Finch, this phenomenon has offered the pretext and necessity for women to enter the job market, albeit imperfectly and disproportionately: “Although women rarely had jobs of equal status to those of their husbands, the number of married women working increased throughout the early and mid-1990s. By 1997, according to surveys, as many as 51.1 percent of married women worked

outside the home, although the idea of married women with jobs remained somewhat controversial” (123). The increased number of two-income couples is still taken for granted today. As women’s economic participation became expected and encouraged in society, women’s empowerment became a major social issue. After the 1990s, Korean families increasingly sent their women to higher education, compared to previous generations of women who were more severely excluded from education.

While the economic crisis in South Korea spurred women to enter the workforce, it also entrenched the wage gap between women and men. Even though Korean women started to bear the same economic burden as their husbands, women’s voices in the household and workplaces did not get louder. Men were still considered the “head of the family” and got a head start in their promotion and employment because they were considered responsible for providing for the entire family by themselves. The widespread perception was that firing a man from his job meant cutting off the entire family’s livelihood. As many corporates faced financial hardships, women became the first targets for layoffs: “Because many women are not the primary earners in their families, employers feel less guilt about dismissing them” (Kim and Finch 128). Even when women were the primary earners, they were not guaranteed fair treatment, as this role was not traditionally seen as theirs. Women were more likely to work in the informal sector, which could be easily fired, or in “side jobs”—which Oh Misook frequently engaged in—rather than formal employment. Despite women’s empowerment and access to higher education they continued to face significant disadvantages at crucial moments.

The status of the patriarch—the head of the family—also dwindled in the household. In response to the diminished economic and social status of men, several movements have emerged to reclaim the old patriarchal order. Newspaper articles and even academic articles published at that time pointed out that several unemployed household heads committed suicide, and they also argued that, to prevent this, the entire family should unwaveringly support their fathers and husbands ([Smart Ajumma](#)). The so-called “Save our household heads” sentiment became popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s: newspaper articles, columns, the “Boost your husband’s spirit” movement, and television commercials and dramas all started talking about firmly reestablishing the patriarch’s—and male’s—position and authority in the society. In 1998, at a rally for unemployed fathers, more than two thousand wives and children gathered to share their “thoughts of love” for their husbands and fathers. One high school girl wrote on a postcard to her father, “Even though others would call you an unemployed person, you are still my hero, Dad” (Kim and Finch 130). In one beer TV commercial, “a girl passes her wallet under the table to her boyfriend so she can pay without letting anyone see” (Kim and Finch 130). These backlashes were clear indications that the patriarchal family system in Korean society was in “crisis.”

Despite this push to reassert traditional patriarchal value systems, the strict gender role dichotomy of the male breadwinner and female housewife collapsed rapidly. The women’s rights movement in South Korea gained momentum, with activists demanding better legal and social protections for women. At the same time, the country faced international pressure to improve its

gender equality standards as a member of global organizations like the United Nations. In response to intense demands from within and outside the country, the Kim Dae Jung government created the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001, consolidating family and gender-related departments that had previously been spread across the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Health and Welfare ([Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in South Korea](#)). This was to centralize and coordinate efforts to promote gender equality including domestic violence, sexual violence, women’s human resource development, abolition of gender-based discrimination, and prevention of various forms of violence against women. This trend continued, and the Hoju system—a legal family registration system that organized family members around the center of the patriarch (hoju) and perpetuated the genealogy from generation to generation through the male line from father to son—was abolished in 2008 ([The Korea Herald](#)). At least legally, South Korea was heading toward a non-patriarchal society.



Members of a Civil Society Organization Celebrate After the Constitutional Court Ruled the Hoju System Unconstitutional in 2005 (Left). Confucian Scholars Dressed in Traditional Hanboks Protest Against the Abolition of the Hoju System in 2003 (Right). [Hankook Ilbo](#).

### Suggested Close Reading Exercise

Circulate copies of the following passage to students.

Being civil servant, Jiyoung’s father had a stable job and a steady income. But it was certainly a challenge for a family of six to live on the wages of a low-level government employee. [...] Mother did not commute to a job like Father did, but was always doing odd jobs on the side that allowed her to make money while doing chores all on her own and looking after three children and an elderly mother-in-law. This was common among mothers in the neighborhood who were more or less in the same situation. [...] One day, Father came home from the office later than usual to find his young children still rolling

around in the weather strips, and complained for the first time: ‘Do you really have to leave this smelly, dusty stuff around the children?’ Her busy hands and shoulders suddenly stopped. She crawled around, putting away the wrapped weather strips in boxes, and Father knelt down next to her to sweep sponge and pieces of paper into a large plastic bag. ‘I wish I could give you an easier life. I’m sorry,’ he said and let out a heavy sigh. A huge shadow seemed to balloon over him and fade away. Mother lifted and stacked boxes bigger than herself in the living room, and swept the floor next to Father. ‘You’re not giving me a hard life, Daddy,’ she said. ‘We’re working hard together to make it. So stop feeling sorry for yourself as if our home is your responsibility alone. No one is asking you to, and, frankly, you’re not doing it on your own,’ Mother retorted coldly, but she quit the weather strip job right away. (Cho 19-22)

In this passage, Jiyoung’s mother, Oh Misook, works day and night to take care of her three children and an elderly mother-in-law. Even before he got laid off from the government job, Jiyoung’s mother earned a non-negligible amount of money, equally bearing the burden of feeding their children with her husband. Jiyoung’s father cannot and does not support his family on his own. However, her husband still thinks of himself as the head of the household, who takes the sole responsibility of feeding the family.

In small groups, encourage students to discuss expected gender roles in the family. Ask them to focus on the relationship dynamic between Jiyoung’s mother and father based on the given passage. Possible discussion questions include:

1. Why do you think Jiyoung’s mother chose “odd jobs on the side” that she could engage in at home?
2. Why do you think Jiyoung’s father was upset when he saw the house messy and children playing around with the weather strips? Why do you think he complained to his wife, “Do you really have to leave this smelly, dusty stuff around the children?”
3. How would you assume Jiyoung’s father’s feels when he says to his wife, “I wish I could give you an easier life. I’m sorry”? Is he ashamed or embarrassed?
4. What are the hidden assumptions behind Jiyoung’s father saying, “I wish I could give you an easier life”?
5. Even though Oh Misook responded somewhat coldly to her husband’s complaint and apology, she quits her job immediately. Why do you think she “retorted coldly” to her husband? Why do you think she quit the job despite her willingness and ability to do the weather strip job?

## Suggested In-Class Activities

### Chosen Family

This activity is designed to help students understand the critical role of family as a patriarchal institution. Recognizing that the percentage of “normal” families in the United States is surprisingly low, and that there are numerous alternative family forms that already exist will encourage students to rethink the notion or “normalcy” of marriage, family, parenthood, and kinship. It will also give students opportunities to cast doubt on the typical male-female couple relationship depicted in media,

1. Ask students to research America’s gender and family related policies and how they define the “family.” A useful places to begin is with the [Center for American Progress](#).
2. Ask students to research what “chosen family” is. The [Forbes](#) interview titled “How Expanding The Legal Definition Of Family Helps Us All” with Dian Adams, the founder of [Chosen Family Law Center](#), will be helpful. Students can also consult a recent [CNN newsletter](#), “Why Chosen Family Is Even More Important During the Holidays,” about chosen family.
3. In small groups, ask students to discuss alternative forms of family. For example, informal marriage, chosen family based on different attachment styles, different family forms in different races, birth in non-married couples, single-parent household, multi-generational family, and so on.
  - a. Is traditional marriage and childbirth essential to building a family? How is the type of family you want in the future similar to, or different from, a traditional family?
  - b. For you, what are the most important elements of forming a family community with other individuals?
4. As a class, students discuss why the notion of “chosen family” is important to subvert gender norms and achieve gender equality.
  - a. What happens when the society does not focus on the romantic marriage of one man and one woman and their biological children as a basis of family?
  - b. Why is it important to think about family forms other than the traditional nuclear family with heterosexual two parents and their biological children?
  - c. Do you think traditional marriage and childbearing reinforces patriarchy? If yes or no, why do you think so?

## “Tradwife” Trend

Watch [Nara Smith’s](#) video in YouTube “The Best of Nara Smith” (from 0:00 to 1:17) and Harrison Butker’s Benedictine College 2024 [Commencement Speech video](#) (from 11:50 to 13:10) on YouTube. After watching two videos, instruct students to read “What Is a ‘Tradwife’? Meet 3 TikTok Influencers Pushing the Trend” from [Newsweek](#).

1. In small groups, students discuss Nara Smith’s video. Encourage students to point out what is conspicuous about the video. What social media trends arise here and why do you think they have become increasingly popular? What can they tell us about the evolving nature of online content and the role that some women play in its production?
2. In these videos that show the audience moms/wives cooking “from scratch,” why do you think Smith uses frequent edits and cuts? What do those editing techniques imply? What is not shown in her video?
3. According to the *Newsweek* article, what is a “tradwife?” Do you think being a “tradwife” is realistic today? If yes or no, why do you think that?
4. In a large group, ask students about what can be unpacked from the “tradwife” trend and how it relates Harrison Butker’s commencement speech. Do you think the “tradwife” trend and Butker’s speech on gender roles are related?
5. How do you think these SNS “influencers” influence people’s view on women’s gender role? What is their ideal family or marital relationship like? How these views affect people’s view on stay-at-home mothers or on working women?

## UNIT ACTIVITY AND PROJECT IDEAS

### *Ode to My Father and Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

Students watch *Ode to My Father* (*Gukje Sijang* in Korean) on Netflix. This is a Korean movie that claims to depict the “ordinary father” in Korea who struggled to raise his family in the 1960s to 1980s, illuminating important nodes of contemporary Korean history in a similar way to *Forrest Gump*. What are the key differences between the two representations of the postwar Korean Society? When watched with *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, what kind of problems related to gender equality can you find in *Ode to My Father*? Ask students to write a short essay that critically compares the movie and the novel.

### **The Collective Portraits of Patriarchy**

In this activity, students compose a personal short art piece on their daily experiences with patriarchy. In a notebook, students create a collage of texts or images that capture a snapshot of patriarchy in their own lives or the world around them. Students can choose 5 pieces in any format, including short personal anecdotes, newspaper articles, works of fiction, poems, images, social media posts, photos they took, video screenshots, etc. Students write about 4 to 5 sentences explaining why they think the items they selected represent a certain aspect of

patriarchy, what gender biases they stem from, and how they felt when they experienced them. After students submit their assignments, teachers collect them and display them on a large board. Students can browse freely and are encouraged to comment on other students' work. This scrapbook or collage does not necessarily have to be in print format; teachers can use digital media such as collective Google Docs to compile students' assignments at their convenience.

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## UNIT 4. 2001-2011: WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WORK

### ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit will focus on two major patriarchal systems: education and the labor market. Using the novel's fourth chapter, "Early Adulthood 2001-2011," as a touchstone, this unit will explore women's education and their career paths through Jiyoung's life trajectory. Patriarchy's deeply rooted "woman stigma," which we covered in the previous unit, follows girls relentlessly through adolescence and into adulthood. Throughout the novel, Jiyoung is treated differently from her younger brother, male classmates, and coworkers, and experiences discrimination at home, school, university, and in her professional life after graduation. This unit will take an in-depth look at how women and men are treated differently based on gender stereotypes in education and vocational training, as well as in hiring practices and work culture. Focusing primarily on Korean and American contexts, the unit will first address how gender roles that associate women with domestic labor treat girls and boys differently at home and in school. Next, we will explore how such gender-differentiated education perpetuates the gender pay gap and, by extension, negatively impacts women's hiring, promotion, and job retention.

The first subunit includes opening activities that will help students to get a better idea of patriarchy. It encourages students to imagine life in different countries through researching gender equality indices in both education and employment.

The second subunit, "Different Expectations for Girls and Boys," explores the different expectations placed on girls and boys in households and schools, focusing on educational opportunities. While many countries have seen significant progress in women's education, gender stereotypes and societal norms continue to affect educational choices and career paths. The subunit includes statistics on gender disparities in education from South Korea and the United States and discusses how these disparities perpetuate the gender pay gap and occupational segregation.

The third subunit, "Systemic Gender Inequality in Employment," explores systemic gender inequality in the labor market, specifically the gender pay gap and the glass ceiling that prevents women from advancing to higher positions. It examines how gender biases influence career choices, hiring practices, and promotions. The subunit provides examples from both Korean and American contexts, highlighting the persistent barriers women face in achieving equal pay and career advancement.

The final subunit addresses the issue of career breaks that many women take, often due to family responsibilities. It explores the long-term impact of these breaks on women's careers, including challenges of re-entering the workforce and achieving further career advancement. Students will learn about the importance of policies and support systems that can help women balance work and family life without sacrificing their professional aspirations.

Each subsection is designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the novel through close-reading exercises, discussion questions, and in-class assignments. Ideas for possible unit projects are listed at the end. Below is the table of the contents for this unit.

Subunit 1. OPENING ACTIVITY

Connecting the Dots Around the World

Subunit 2. DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS FOR GIRLS AND BOYS

Suggested Close Reading Exercises

Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions

Subunit 3. SYSTEMIC GENDER INEQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT: GENDER PAY GAP AND THE GLASS CEILING

Gender Bias in Career Choice and Hiring

The Glass Ceiling and Gender Discrimination in Promotion

Suggested In-Class Activities

Suggested Close Reading Exercise

Subunit 4. FEMALE CAREER BREAK

Suggested In-Class Activity

Subunit 5. UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

The Prospect of All of Us

*The Feminine Mystique* and *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

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## OPENING ACTIVITY

### Connecting the Dots Around the World

"See this here? This is Seoul. It's just a dot. A dot. We all of us are living in this tiny, cramped dot. You may not get to see all of it, but I want you to know: it's a wide world out there" (Cho 39-40). In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, Eunyoung and Jiyoung's mother hangs a large map of the world on the wall of the girls' room. Even though they all are physically confined in the "tiny, cramped dot" of Seoul, South Korea, their mother wants her daughters to have a broader perspective of the world and think about possibilities beyond their current reality.

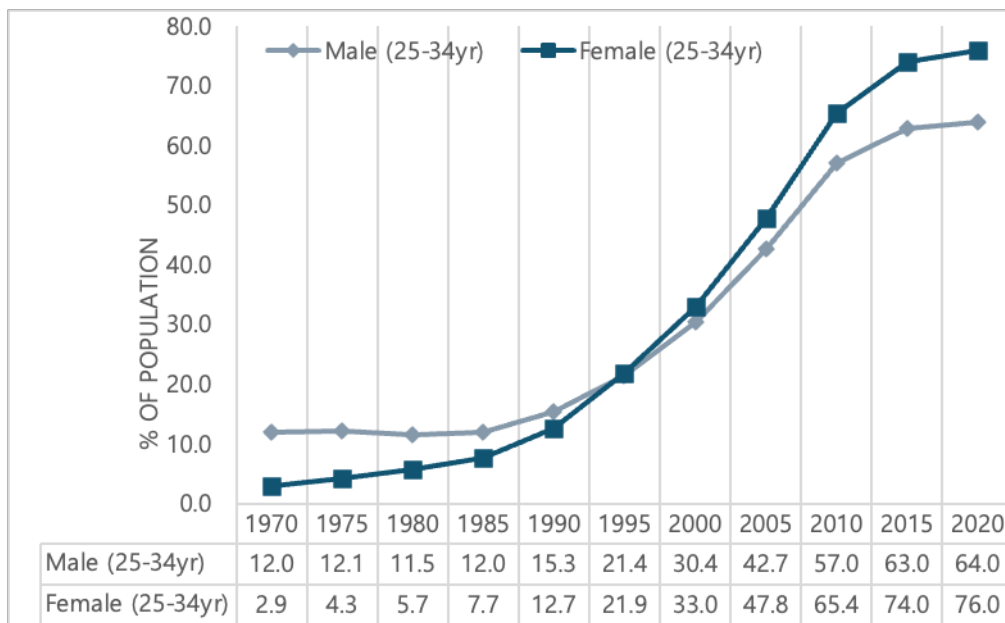
This activity is designed to invite students to “imagine otherwise” via the world map and different social factors throughout the world. Students will be asked to research indexes related to gender equality in education and employment in Wisconsin and other parts of the world. Based on the societal barometers in different countries and states, students will be able to imagine their lives in different social contexts.

1. In a large group, ask students to pick a country from a map that they want to visit or live in. Ask them why they chose this country.
2. Individually, students research the country’s gender related indexes in education and employment fields, such as the college graduation rates of different genders, employment laws against gender discrimination, employment rates for different genders, the gender wage gap, or parental leave policies. For example, students could research the Gender Inequality Index (GII) for countries like Denmark, Sweden, or Finland, which Eunyoung wanted to visit, or the United States, Japan, or China, which Jiyoung wanted to visit. The GII is an index provided by the [United Nations Development Programme](#) that offers information on maternal mortality ratio, gender share of seats in parliament, labor force participation rate, etc. by country.
3. With the teacher’s help, students research the state of Wisconsin’s gender equality and inclusion indexes and their national rankings. Useful sources can be found in [The Best and Worst States to Be a Woman](#) report, published by Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security. Students and teachers can Ctrl-F the word “Wisconsin” in this report to find targeted information.
4. Ask students to think about how social policies shape their opportunities and experiences as individuals. What would these indexes mean in real life? How would the legislative, political, and social changes affect their lives?

## **DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS FOR GIRLS AND BOYS**

Over the past few decades, the door to educational opportunities for women has opened in many parts of the world. In many Western countries—including the United States—women have actually surpassed men in education: women graduate high school faster, attain more bachelor’s degrees, and enroll in tertiary education (beyond college education) more often than men. In many European countries, the educational attainment of female students has surpassed that of male students since the 1960s ([M. Van Hek et al.](#)); in the United States, women obtained more bachelors and master’s degrees than men in 2010 through 2022 ([Education Data Initiative](#)).

South Korea has also witnessed improvements in women’s education over the past 70 years. According to Ahn Jae-Hee’s article, “Analysis of Changes in Female Education in Korea from an Education-Labor Market Perspective,” since girl’s education was included in the Korean Constitution in 1948, the enrollment of girls in any form of education raised from 36.3 percent in 1952 to over 90 percent in 2009: “in 2009, 98 percent of girls were enrolled in elementary school, 96 percent in middle school, and 92.9 percent in high school,” and “68.1 percent of girls were also enrolled, with 82.4 percent of young women in secondary education continuing on to university” (114). from 1970 to 2020, the percentage of women aged 25 to 34 who completed some form of college education grew from 2.8 percent (1970) compared to 76.4 percent (2010), a rate unmatched anywhere. Compared to 64% of their male peers and to 52% of their female peers in other OECD countries, Korean women now have the highest human capital in the world (OECD, 2021). As a result of a sharp increase in women’s educational attainment level, the generational gap among Korean women is extremely high. The majority of women who had children in the 80s did not attend college, but three-fourths of their daughters’ generation did.



Percentage of Male and Female Population Age 25-34 with Tertiary Schooling. [Korean Ministry of Education.](#)

Statistics seem to prove that, in many post-industrial countries in the 21st century, not only are women enjoying equal educational opportunities as men, but they are also achieving more and spending longer time in education. Quantitatively, it seems that there is no gender-based educational inequality anymore. However, it is necessary to investigate the gap between the education of women and men qualitatively. Some questions you might pose to your students, include:

1. Do girls and boys have equal access to education?
2. Do women and men have the same opportunities to pursue education and careers paths they want inside and outside school gates?
3. What are some of the structural discriminations against women’s education that still exists in our societies?
4. What are some the social conditions that develop “most girls’ strengths and most boys’ weaknesses” which may lead girls to perform better in primary education? What are some of the reasons these behavioral expectations are placed on young girls more often than young boys?

Ruth Bader Ginsberg, the former U.S. supreme court justice, once pointed out about the society’s different standards applied to women’s and men’s success in career: “When I’m sometimes asked when will there be enough [women on the Supreme Court]? And I say when there are nine, people are shocked. But there’d been nine men, and nobody’s ever raised a question about that” ([YouTube](#)). Likewise, when women were low on their educational profile, it did not matter to the society; when girls started to outshine boys, it became a “social problem.” Once girls began to outperform boys, some people started to question the “unfair” educational conditions in the school grading systems that “favors” girls. One article titled, “Why Girls Tend to Get Better Grades Than Boys Do” in *The Atlantic* contends that girls are prone to have better capacity than boys to “pay attention, follow directions, finish schoolwork, and stay organized,” concluding that “these days, the whole school experience seems to play right into most girls’ strengths and most boys’ weaknesses.” However, this article avoids answering the crucial question (which we recommend you ask your students): what are the social conditions that develop “most girls’ strengths and most boys’ weaknesses”? To avoid falling back into the biological determinism, which argues that girls are “built” to be calm, obedient, and “organized” while boys are not, it is important to ask why society has required girls to be more self-regulated and patient than boys.

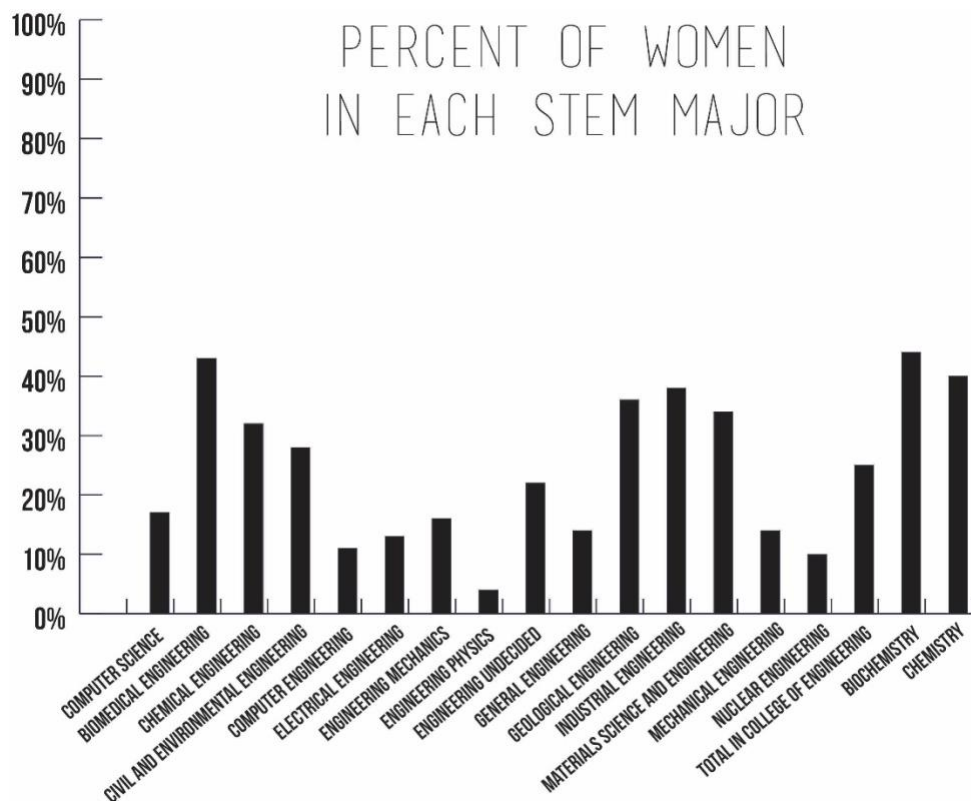
While it may seem that many countries have “leveled the playing ground,” or even according to some peoples seems to “favor” girls more than boys, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* testifies that the traditional patriarchal gender roles continue to affect girls’ educational choices. The novel shows that girls and boys are raised differently: girls are often encouraged to focus more on domestic duties and care work for siblings, and boys are often exempt from the housework. “Most girls’ strengths”—self-discipline, self-regulation, patience, responsibility, attentiveness, and empathy—are emphasized less for boys than to girls in their families. Girls are expected to be more tolerant and generous toward other family members—especially toward their male members—and even to clean up their mess instead. For example, Jiyoung and Eunyong are raised to be “independent,” while their youngest son is allowed to be cared by his female siblings. While her parents are always busy making ends meet, it becomes Eunyong who does most of the caring work in the household:

After an adjustment period, Eunyoung was put in charge of getting Jiyoung to school. Eunyoung checked the timetable each morning and packed her sister's books, notebooks and class announcement log, and filled her fairy princess pencil case with one eraser and four pencils that were not too sharp or blunt. On days Jiyoung needed extra supplies, Eunyoung asked Mother for money and picked up the items at the stationary store by the school gate. (Cho 27-28)

Like Eunyoung complains to her mother, when the two sisters were their brother's age, they "mopped the floor, hung laundry, and made ramen and fried eggs for [themselves]" while their brother was exempt from house chores, "never lift[ing] a finger" (Cho 48). Even though Eunyoung and Jiyoung have "never once told by their parents to meet a nice man and marry well, to grow up to be a good mother and good cook" (Cho 59), these unspoken expectations within the Korean families that girls are better at—and that they even enjoy—"reading to her younger siblings, helping them with homework, and doing crafts and drawing with them" (Cho 62) are enough to convince Eunyoung to curb her aspiration to be a television producer.

The tendency for young female students to take on a "supporting role can also be observed in the American educational system. While American male high school students are recommended to choose more 'innovative' majors, female students are encouraged to choose majors that lead to "emotional careers," according to [Mary Ellen Guy and Meredith A. Newman](#)'s article "Women's Jobs, Men's Jobs: Sex Segregation and Emotional Labor." Traditionally, women were considered apt for care works or service works such as nursing, parenting, or teaching, while men are encouraged to pursue more "glamorous"—and thus more lucrative—majors such as law, finance, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), or management. Stark gender disparities in American college majors prove that this trend is ongoing: in 2021, early childhood education and teaching major consists of 96.2% female students and 3.8% male students; human development and family studies consists of 92% female and 8% male; social work, 88.7% female and 11.3% male. On the other hand, computer engineering, mechanical engineering, information sciences are heavily male-dominated ([Chicago Tribune](#)). This gender-based choice of majors is also evident at the University of Wisconsin, especially in STEM majors. According to the Badger Herald's article "[Women Feel Extra Pressure to Prove Themselves in Male-Dominated Majors](#)," women make up 25 percent total of the College of Engineering at the University of Wisconsin. Students who identify themselves as women comprise "17 percent of computer science majors and 40 percent of chemistry majors," and "in some engineering majors, women make up even fewer percentages, such as computer engineering, where women make up just 13 percent of students." The different choices in majors lead to occupational segregation by gender, which perpetuates the barrier to career choices of students by endlessly regenerating the societal norm that men's and women's places are

designated to certain areas. This guide will elaborate more on occupational segregation in the next subunit.



Percent of Women in Each STEM Major In UW. [\*The Badger Herald\*](#).

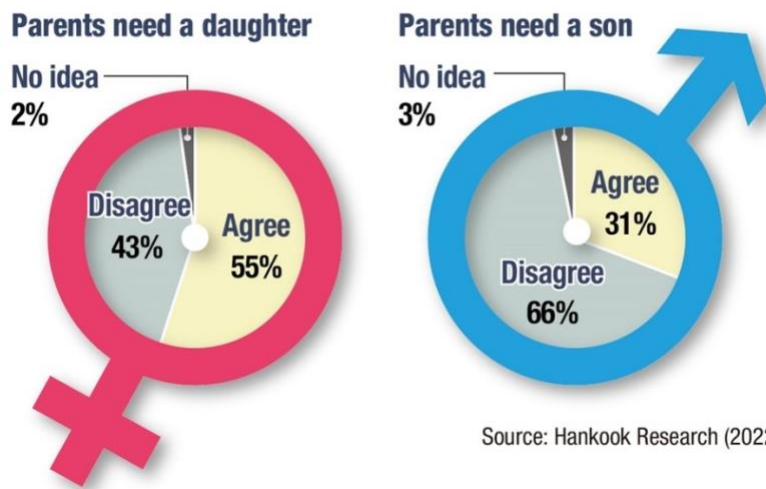
Patriarchy, with its age-old bias that girls must grow up to become good daughters, wives, and mothers, weighs on girls even after they choose their college majors and future career paths. The learned familial responsibility for girls lingers throughout their lifetime and heavily influences their life choices. At the end of the novel’s third chapter, Eunyoung is recommended by her mother to matriculate into teacher training college, because “there’s no better job for women than a schoolteacher” (Cho 59). As Jiyoung’s mother advises her eldest, “to become a working mum” is often the most commendable goal for “smart girls.” In other words, girls getting their degrees in college and entering the job market are encouraged only when their professional career paths do not interfere with their future “family lives.”

Especially in contemporary Korean families, where the generational education gap between mothers and daughters is wider than other countries, girls are conditioned to be more “family-oriented” than boys, despite—or because of—their mothers’ high expectations to be more successful in their careers (Oh 13). The sense of burden toward their mother’s sacrifice heavily affects Korean daughters’ decisions to “support” the family both financially and

emotionally, not only in their original family but also in their marriage and childcare. The Korean daughters' sense of guilt of not being “responsible enough” for the family and the internal conflict between “family-orientedness” and “career-orientedness” of contemporary Korean adult females is best demonstrated in the recent K-Jangneo (the eldest daughter) syndrome, which is not exceptionally a Korean phenomenon. According to [“Burden of Being Firstborn Daughter”](#) from *The Korea Herald*, this syndrome depicts the prevalent trend in many firstborn daughters in Korean households toward becoming the “cornerstone” of their family—the most realistic, reliable, responsibility-driven, and sometimes overachieving individuals among the siblings. Many firstborn daughters are educated to tolerate their family’s unfair distribution of affection and resources and to feel guilty for putting themselves first. Not unlike Eunyoung, many Korean firstborn daughters get used to putting their desire and aspirations after the responsibility of meeting their family’s needs, giving up their first choices in education and career—because “the tuition is cheap,” for “the relative job security,” because she “can start bringing paycheck right after graduation,” and because she has “two younger siblings” to send to college after her (Cho 61).

The recent trend of daughter preference in South Korea is not unrelated to K-Jangneo syndrome. As South Korea has entered an aging society and women have become more economically active, parents have begun to favor daughters who can be “trusted” to take care of their old age over “ungrateful” sons.

**Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**



South Korea’s Daughter Preference Trend in the 2020s. [The Korea Times](#).

On the surface, South Korea's shift from boy preference to girl preference in the 21st century may seem to prove that the country has ended patriarchy. In reality, it is a different manifestation of the same gender stereotypes that women are "worth investing" in for their "family-orientedness:" "In the past, when patriarchy was more prevalent, the role of the eldest son in the family was to support the parents as they became older as daughters made other sacrifices within the household until they got married," but "today, women earn money and are able to make the choice to support their parents. But for many, the reward for their sacrifice remains meager, even if they sometimes become the breadwinner of the family" (*The Korea Herald*).

### **Suggested Close Reading Exercises**

#### **"Great Jobs for Working Mums"**

Circulate the passage below from the novel.

Eunyoung, whose dream was to become a television producer, chose journalism as her major and was already looking at previous years' essay test material from the school she was thinking about. When her mother brought up the idea of teacher training college, Eunyoung said no in a heartbeat. 'I don't want to be a teacher. I already have something I want to do. And why do I have to leave home and attend university so far away?' 'Think ahead. There's no better job for women than a schoolteacher.' 'What's so great about being a schoolteacher?' 'You get off work early. You have school vacations. It's easy to take time off. There's nothing like teaching for working mums.' 'Sure. It's a great job for working parents. Then isn't it a great job for everyone? Why specifically women? Do women raise children alone? Are you going to suggest teaching to your son, too? You're going to send him to a teacher training college, too?' [...] The mother looked up at the world on the wall. On the map with tattered corners were a few green and blue heart-shaped stickers. It was the elder sister's idea to put stickers on the countries they wanted to see. Kim Jiyoung chose the more familiar countries such as the USA, Japan, and China, while Eunyoung chose northern European countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Finland. When asked why she picked those places, Eunyoung said she wanted to go someplace with few Koreans. The mother knew what the stickers meant. (Cho 58-61)

To get a better understanding of the passage above and the context around the family's conflict regarding Eunyoung's college entrance, students are encouraged to reread pages 57 to 63 in the novel.

1. What do you think are the differences between a "great job for working mums" and a "great job for working parents?"

2. In your opinion, what would Eunyoung have thought when she saw her mother “giv[ing] up [her] dreams for the sake of the family, having made that sacrifice herself,” a sacrifice that is “made without truly understanding the consequences, or even having the choice to refuse” (Cho 61-62) that eventually broke up the family?
3. Why do you think Eunyoung put stickers on Northern European countries such as “Denmark, Sweden, and Finland?” What do those countries have in common, especially compared to the countries like “USA, Japan, and China?”
4. How would you interpret Eunyoung’s desire to “go someplace with few Koreans?” Do you think she wants to escape her own country or culture? If so, what do you think is the most significant reason for her to be in a country that is so different from Korea?
5. Why do you think the novel says that “Eunyoung’s entering college was a good thing for the whole family?” Why do you think Eunyoung eventually decided to become a teacher, even though she did not want the job at first? Do you think Eunyoung has sacrificed her dream for the entire family? If yes or no, why?

### **Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions**

#### **Clean Girls and Dirty Boys**

The novel shows that Eunyoung, the eldest daughter of Jiyoung’s family, is discontented by the dynamic in the household that treats her differently from her younger siblings. While Eunyoung has taken care of not only herself, but also her two younger siblings from a young age, her younger brother is excluded from all chores and takes his elder sister’s care for granted. This activity is designed to get students thinking about the different expectations that these families, and by extension, society, have for girls and boys.

1. As a class, ask students what gender of child they would like to have if they were to have children. Ask them why.
  - a. What are the strengths of a son and the strengths of a daughter?
  - b. In home, in what areas are daughters thought typically “better” than sons?
  - c. How might these expectations hurt or otherwise affect sons? Daughters?
2. Read “More Korean Parents Now Prefer Daughters Over Sons” from [The Korea Times](#). This article explains the daughter-preference trend in the 21st century South Korea.
3. Read *The New York Times* article titled “[Why Your Big Sister Resents You](#).” Do you sympathize with this article? Do you think the eldest daughter syndrome is real? What do your family dynamics—especially between your siblings—look like?
4. Revisit page 8 of the novel, where Jiyoung’s mother-in-law, Suhyun, says that “daughters are the best.” Do you read it differently now that you have read more of the novel? Why do you think Korean parents in the 21st century prefer daughters over sons?
5. Ask students how the eldest daughter syndrome and Korea’s recent trend of daughter preference are related to gender roles and gender bias.

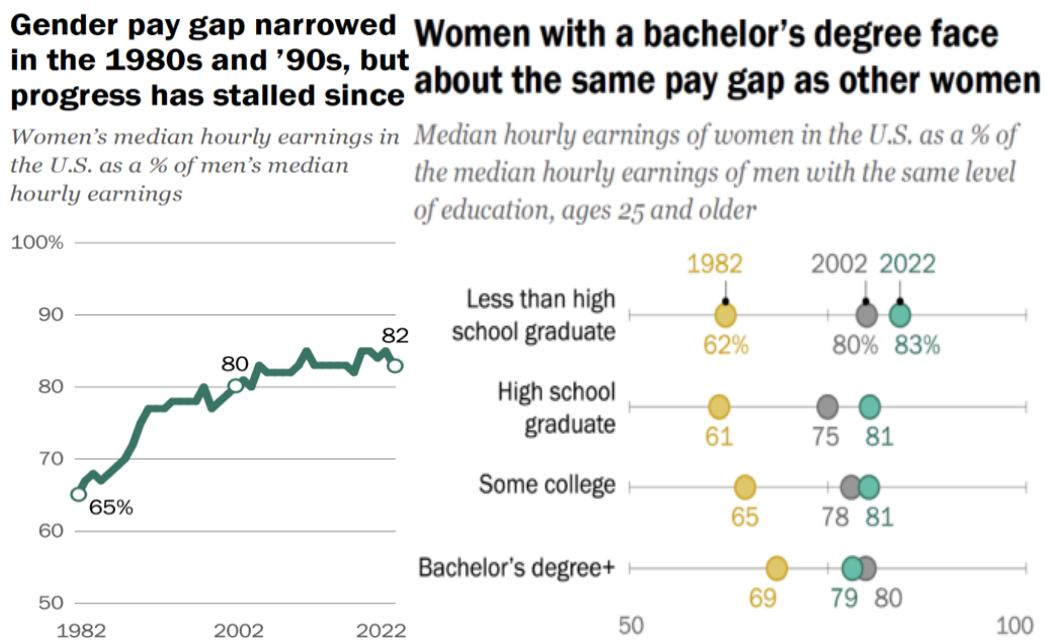
## SYSTEMIC GENDER INEQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT: GENDER PAY GAP AND THE GLASS CEILING

If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? [...] If she tried to tell her husband, he didn't understand what she was talking about. She did not really understand it herself. For over fifteen years women in America found it harder to talk about this problem than sex. Even the psychoanalysts had no name for it. "I don't know what's wrong with women today," a suburban psychiatrist said uneasily. "I only know something is wrong because most of my patients happen to be women. And their problem isn't sexual." Most women with this problem did not go to see a psychoanalyst, however. "There's nothing wrong really," they kept telling themselves. "There isn't any problem." (Friedan 14-15)

In 1963, Betty Friedan, an American journalist who led the second-wave feminist movement in the United States, wrote about "the problem that has no name." While many American housewives in the 1950s and 60s were college graduates, they found out that "sixteen years of academic training is realistic preparation for wifehood and motherhood" (18). "Like a two-headed schizophrenic" (18), they had to bear the disparities between the expectation formed by high education levels and employment/family patterns that locked them inside their houses. Being herself a college-educated suburban housewife and a freelance writer mostly for women's magazines run by men, Friedan attempted to name the unnamable depression of college educated women in the post-WWII America: *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan argues that postwar American society was taking a terrible toll on educated women by telling them that they could and should find their self in their "feminine" achievements in domesticity. *The Feminine Mystique* sold over three million copies within the first three years. Resonating with countless women who felt isolated in their own struggles, Friedan's book galvanized the second wave of feminism in the United States. In line with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, second wave feminism called for substantive, not just nominal, equality between women and men: equal pay for equal work, equal job opportunities, and equal legal standing ([Britannica](#) and [Origins OSU](#)).

The suburban psychiatrist’s bewilderment that Friedan refers to—“I don’t know what’s wrong with women today”—powerfully resonates with *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. Jiyoung has a prosperous life and a seemingly perfect family yet suffers from mental difficulties that cannot be named by clinical psychology. Not unlike *The Feminine Mystique*, *Kim Jiyoung* demonstrates that in the 21st century South Korea, “the problem that has no name” plagues many women. Even though many women in the post-industrial societies, including Korean women born in the 1980s and the American housewives in the 1960s, were taught that attaining a higher educational degree would provide them with economic freedom and the possibility of self-actualization, the two countries have proved that higher education did not expand the radius of most women’s lives beyond a certain level.

In the United states, the “learn more, earn more” ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)) principle does not seem to fully capture the relationship between women’s learnings and earnings. Indeed, women who “learned more” have earned more in the past few decades—but still less than men.



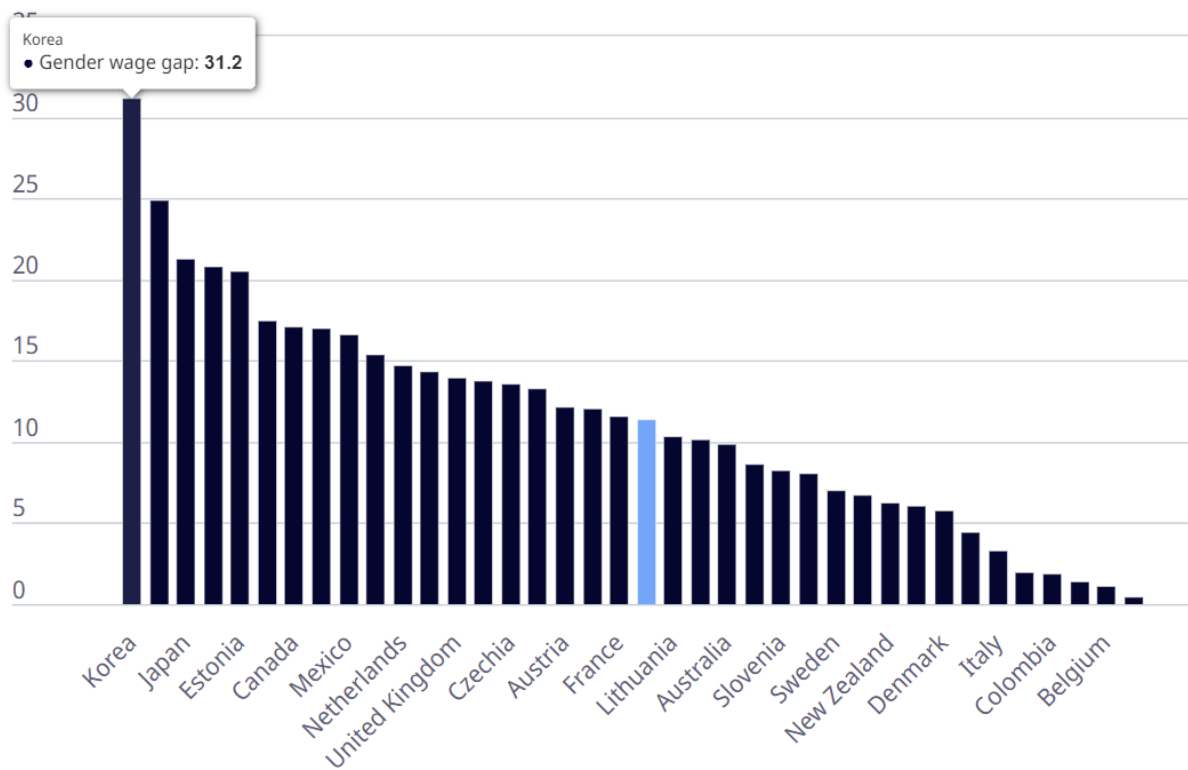
Gender Pay Gap in the United States (Left) and Pay Gap According to the Level of Education (Right). [Pew Research Center](#).

As seen in the above graphs from Pew Research Center, the gender pay gap in the United States has narrowed since the 1980s, but the trend stagnated in the 21st century. In 2022, American women earned 18% less on average than men, and this is only a two percentage-point increase compared to 20 years ago. In comparing statistics from 1982, 2002, and 2022 it can be seen that over the past 40 years, a woman’s education level has not made much of a difference in the gender pay gap between the men and women with same level of education. In other words, education has not contributed much to women earning similar wages to men. In fact, in 1982, the gender pay gap tended to narrow slightly as women’s education levels increased; but by 2022, the opposite trend is observed: as women’s educational attainment increases, the pay gap with similarly educated men widens.

In South Korea, which is notorious for the largest gender pay gap among the OECD countries, it was reported in 2022 that women earned 31.2% less than men. This number is nearly three times the OECD average of 11.4%, and it beats Japan—which is similarly conservative in its gender stereotypes—by a significant margin of 10%.

### Gender wage gap

% of median earnings of men, 2022



Gender Pay Gap in OECD Nations in 2022. [OECD](https://www.oecd.org/).

Although “girls are more likely to graduate high school on time and perform substantially better on standardized reading tests than boys” according to “Boys Left Behind: Education Gender Gaps Across the US” from [Brookings](#), girls’ academic performances have not lead to improved positioning on the job market. In 2022, women in the United States and South Korea experienced the paradox of high educational attainment coupled with low employment rates, as compared to men. In the United States, the employment rate for men was 67.9% and 55.4% for women. Likewise, South Korean women witnessed the same trend in the employment rate: while men’s employment rates were consistently above 70% from 2000 to 2023, women’s employment rates did not surpass 50% until 2015 and did not reach 55% until 2023 ([Statista](#)).

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* outlines the difficulties women face in finding employment after graduating from college:

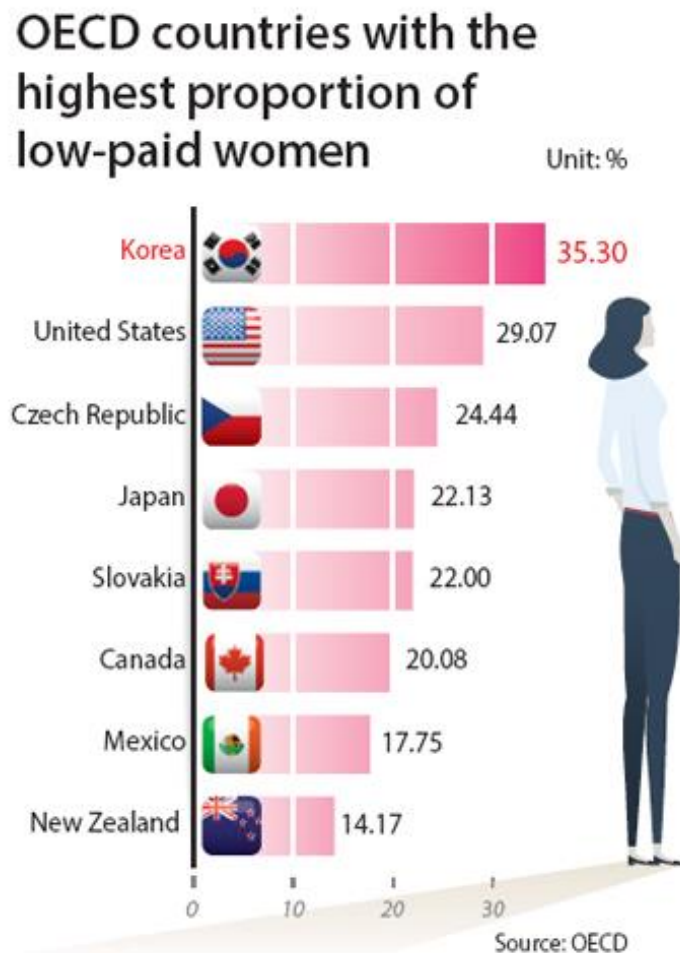
In 2005, the year Kim Jiyoung graduated from college, a survey by a job search website found that only 29.6 per cent of new employees at 100 companies were women, and it was even mentioned as a big improvement. Another survey conducted in the same year showed that, among recruiting managers of fifty large corporations, 44 per cent of respondents chose that they ‘would rather hire male to female candidates with equivalent qualifications,’ and none chose ‘would hire women over men.’ (Cho 82-83)

The novel shows that South Korean corporations in the 2005 are decidedly against hiring women. This is not because women are less educated or less qualified than men; the statistics cited in the novel prove that Korean society perceives and treats women and men differently as a workforce despite the equal qualifications and educational attainment between the two.

This subunit investigates the systematic disadvantages imposed upon women in the workplace, focusing on the United States and South Korea. From hire to retire, a woman must jump through countless hoops to get a job, be promoted, earn as much pay as her male colleagues, and maintain her position in career. In this subunit, students will navigate the major constituents of the enduring grip of gender wage gap within two contexts: before and after employment. First, students will learn how gender stereotypes and discrimination keep women in relative poverty by not permitting them opportunities to access high paying jobs. They will cover occupational segregation, where traditionally considered masculine jobs are better paid, and unfair hiring customs that favor men over women. Next, students will address the sexism that women face in the workplace once they are hired. Students will learn about how women and men in the same job are paid differently and given different promotion opportunities, and how different “attitudes” are required of women and men doing the same job.

## Gender Bias in Career Choice and Hiring

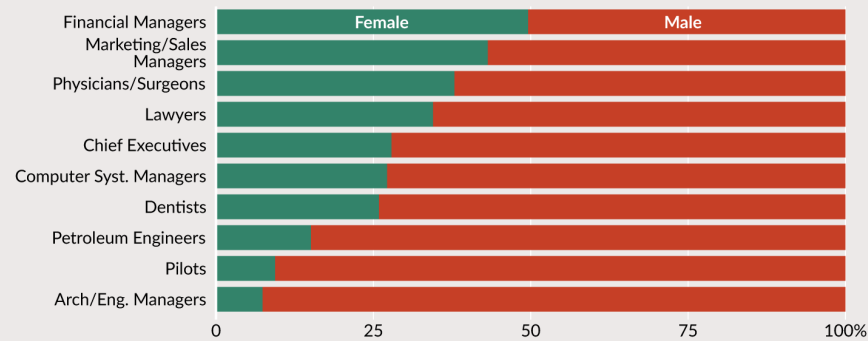
In the United States and South Korea, the gender divide in the job market keeps women from entering high-income jobs. In both countries, women are overrepresented in low-paying jobs, while many of the highest-paying jobs are male-dominated. According to OECD, the two countries ranked the first and second places with the highest proportion of low-paid women, meaning a significant portion of working women are paid less than two-thirds of the gross median earnings of full-time workers. OECD reported that in 2017, 35.3% of Korean women and 29.07% of American women were paid less than two-third of the gross median earnings, while the OECD's overall average is 20.01 percent.



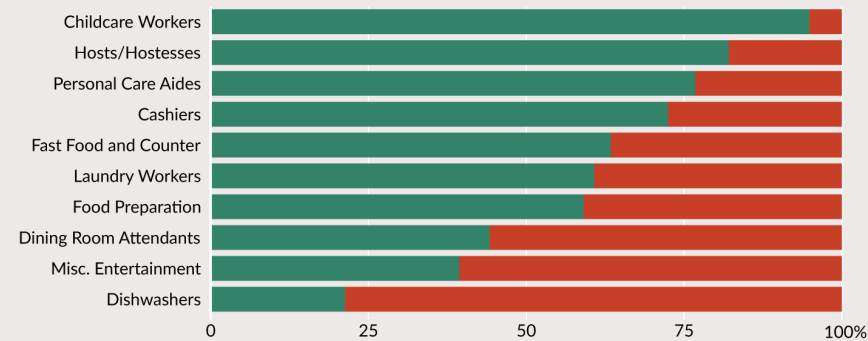
Proportion of Low-Paid Women in OECD Countries. [Korea JoongAng Daily](#).

**The enduring U.S. divide between men and women at work**  
 The gender composition of the highest- and the lowest-paying U.S. occupations, 2015

**Gender composition of highest-paying occupations**



**Gender composition of lowest-paying occupations**



Source: Author's compilation of available gender composition data for broad occupational categories with highest and lowest according to Bureau of Labor Statistics tables "May 2015 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates" and "Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity," mean wages



Gender Composition of Highest- and Lowest-Paying Occupations. [Washington Center for Equitable Growth.](#)

In the case of the United States, the high proportion of low-paid women can be attributed to gendered occupational segregation. Occupational segregation refers to the division of the labor market based on innate characteristics of the employees, particularly gender and race. It results in the concentration of specific groups of people in particular jobs or industries. As seen in the graph above, the highest-paying jobs such as engineers, pilots, chief executives, or lawyers—male-dominated career fields—tend to be paid better, while childcare workers, host/hostesses, or cashiers—jobs that were traditionally done by women—mark the lowest-paying jobs. This is because when a certain type of work is done predominantly by women, it is valued less in the labor market. According to the [Washington Center for Equitable Growth](#), “as the rate of women working in a given occupation increases, the pay in that occupation declines—even when controlling for education and skills.” The Center also points out that “half of the gender wage gap since 1980 can be attributed to women working in different occupations and industries than men, making it the single largest factor.” This means that occupational segregation affects more than taste-based gender discrimination of the employers in the gender wage gap.

The phenomenon of men working in high-income, professional, or managerial jobs and women working in non-regular, secretarial, or blue-collar jobs is also seen in Korea. As the novel details in Oh Misook’s side work—*ajumma*’s work—a large proportion of undereducated, married, and middle-aged Korean women with children are often employed as door-to-door salespeople, house cleaners, and gas or electric meter-reading workers. *Kim Jiyoung* describes that the situation is not much different for single women who have graduated from college. As Eunyong was recommended by her mother, certain types of occupations were often considered to be a “best women’s job” in Korea such as teachers, nurses, flight attendants, or pharmacists. Lee Seulki and Seo Hyunju, the coauthors of *Women Who Quit Their Jobs*, explore why certain careers have become “feminine jobs,” through 32 Korean women’s experiences. The book reveals that beneath the label of “great work for women,” there lies a long history of exploitation and oppression of women’s labor. The authors summarize the characteristics of “feminine jobs:” they do not pay as much as male-dominated jobs, yet they “support” feeding the family; they are usually licensed professions, so there is less a risk of career interruption ensued by childbirth and childcare; and they are “flexible” so women can juggle motherhood with work. In short, according to Lee and Seo, “feminine jobs” are the ones that enable women to support their husbands while simultaneously fulfilling the role and demands of “motherhood.”

While there are many causes of occupational segregation, experts diagnose that occupational segregation in the labor market is closely tied to the societal gender bias that encourages or discourages certain career paths according to race and gender. Women who seek employment modify and change their professional aspirations based on family, school, and societal expectations: “Girls perform on par or better than boys in fourth to eighth grade math and science exams and equally enroll in advanced math and science courses as they move into high school, but a gap emerges and widens as they progress through high school and higher education.

This gap is particularly large for Black and Latino girls, who are underrepresented in science and math professions. Vocational education can also more directly track, or segregate, students into certain occupations” ([Center for American Progress](#)).

Another important social factor that creates barriers for women entering the job market is gender discrimination in the hiring processes. While occupational segregation is rooted in structural gender bias in society, gender discrimination in hiring is often based on the taste-based preferences of companies or recruiters who favor male applicants over female ones. The blatant “distaste” for female applicants in the job market is conspicuous in South Korea. Despite the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the country’s decision in implementing “blind hiring” for all public jobs to combat background-based discrimination ([Korea Economic Institute of America](#)), female candidates continue to face disadvantages in many fields. In 2015 and 2016, several major South Korean bank corporations manipulated the paper or interview scores of 154 applicants to meet a predetermined ratio of male to female hires. When many female candidates outperformed their male counterparts in terms of objective scores, the companies decided to arbitrarily add extra points to male applicants and penalize female applicants. The fine for hiring irregularities was only US \$4,000. Apparently, many banking organizations have decided that paying a \$4,000 fine is more economically beneficial than a fair hire. According to *The Korea Herald*’ article titled “Labor Ministry to Investigate Alleged Gender Discrimination in Hiring,” hiring disadvantages for women are a common practice in the banking industry: another bank was also fined for disqualifying female applicants “after the company set up much higher prerequisites for them to meet.” Discrimination against female applicants in other jobs is not much different. In an online employee forum, an anonymous recruiter in real estate trust industry even exposed outrightly misogynistic hiring practice in their company that resonated with several other recruiters: “As a corporate recruiter, it’s not like we exclude all women but if [the applicant] is from a women’s college, we don’t even read the resume.” This is because women’s college graduates are perceived to be more progressive in their gender views and politically active. Truly, “companies find smart women taxing” (Cho 84).

The novel details Jiyoung’s struggle to get through the narrow door of employment. Not having graduated from a prestigious university and not being a man, Jiyoung must fight against the recruiters’ “unacceptable reasons” to favor men: “it’s a recompense for the years they lost serving in the military” or “they are future heads of the households” (Cho 84). Even when she passes the paper reviews, discrimination against her continues in the interview. Jiyoung must answer the interviewers’ sexually suggestive question that is completely irrelevant to her work: “You’re at a meeting with a client company. The client gets, you know, handsy. Squeezing your shoulder, grazing your thigh. You know what I mean? Yeah? How will you handle this situation?” (Cho 88-89) Likewise, many South Korean women report encountering discriminatory questions during job interviews, such as possible response to sexual harassment or future life decisions such as marriage or child birth, while other male applicants were only asked questions about their job experiences ([CNN](#), “[South Korea’s Glass Ceiling](#)”). Some part-

time employers are blunt in saying that female employees need to “look better”—wear makeup, heels, or skirts—if they are to get the job; other female applicants were rejected for jobs because they were “too outspoken” (*CNN*).

The trend of not favoring female applicants for certain jobs is also evident in the United States, particularly in the tech industry. Several practices continue to screen women from employment: “In 2023, 38% of job positions exclusively invited male applicants to interviews,” and female applicants were “35% less likely to get a job interview if the hiring manager discovers they have children at home,” says “Unveiling Gender Bias in Hiring” from the [Lighthouse Labs](#). This gender bias extends beyond the tech industry, affecting women pursuing various career paths. In many workplaces, especially those emphasizing “cultural fit,” women often must navigate the contradictions of being both “competent” and “sociable.” According to “How Gender Bias Hurts Women During Job Interviews” from [ADP](#), a human resource management software and services company, female candidates are often penalized twice in job interviews due to gender norms that expect women to be soft-spoken and amenable: “If [female candidates] acted like a confident, ambitious leader, they were seen as lacking social skills. But, if they were more cooperative, modest, and communal, they were perceived as far less competent than their male counterparts.”

### **The Glass Ceiling and Gender Discrimination in Promotion**

In the novel, an unnamed female student who graduated a few years earlier than Jiyoung decides that complaining is pointless—no matter how smart or qualified she is for the work, the companies would not hire her because she was a woman. “*What do you want from us? The dumb girls are too dumb, the smart girls are too smart, and the average girls are too unexceptional?*” (Cho 84, italic original) Even when women do manage to slip through the needle’s eye of hiring and employment, climbing the professional career ladder is much more difficult than it is for men. The term “glass ceiling,” coined by a management consultant Marilyn Loden in 1978, refers to the “sometimes-invisible barrier to success that many women come up against in their careers” ([BBC](#), “100 Women: ‘Why I Invented the Glass Ceiling Phrase’”). Loden, in her 2008 blog post, wrote that she wanted to counter the prevalent notion of her time that women struggle in workplaces because they “weren’t properly socialized for success” or “they limited their own career aspirations due to low self-esteem” ([NPR](#), “Remembering Marilyn Loden, Who Gave a Name to the Glass Ceiling”). Loden names the invisible social structures that place the blame for professional slippage on the female individual: the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling upholds the male-dominated executive and managerial positions in the workplace and makes it harder for women not only to “break” in but also to find emotional support or role models.

Despite being a term that has been around for over 40 years, the concept of the glass ceiling continues to accurately describe the challenges faced by women and people of color in many countries. In 2023, there is a clear trend in the United States, where women and people of color are less likely to advance to senior positions in the workplace. For example, “for every 100

men promoted from entry-level positions to managerial roles, only 87 women were promoted. For women of color, 73 women are promoted per 100 men” ([Lighthouse Labs](#)). Furthermore, a study by the Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago reveals the stark underrepresentation of women in top corporate roles. According to their 2017 census of Fortune 500 companies in the US, “women hold only 19.9 percent of corporate board seats and comprise just 5.8 percent of CEO positions in those companies,” while in Europe, “the numbers are 23.3 and 5.1 percent, respectively” ([Becker Friedman Institute for Economics](#)). The political arena also reflects similar disparities. In the United States, women occupy only 29% of the seats in the House of Representatives. The underrepresentation for women in politics contributes to the continued reproduction of the glass ceiling by making it more difficult to change laws or introduce legislation for the betterment of women’s lives and work. The situation is the same in South Korea. According to Ahn Jae-hee, in 2009, “women in higher positions, such as council women, senior staff, managers and professionals, make up just 20.6 percent of women in the labor force” (Ahn 114). Women hold just 19% of seats in South Korea’s parliament, says the [World Bank](#).

Women with higher education degrees are more likely to face gender-based discrimination in climbing up the professional ladder. “Roughly three-in-ten working women with a postgraduate degree say they have experienced repeated small slights at work because of their gender, compared with 18% of those with a bachelor’s degree and 12% with less education” ([Pew Research Center](#)). This means that the higher the female worker aims, the more difficult it gets, regardless of their enthusiasm or aspiration.

## Suggested In-Class Activities

### The Cost of Being a Girl

This activity is designed to prompt students to think about the perceived “market price” of women’s labor compared to that of men. Working women, even though they do not lack qualifications and experiences, often are believed to be “less worthy” of equal treatment with men.

1. Ask students to think about a handful of typically high-paying and typically low-paying jobs.
2. Research the employee gender ratio in the mentioned fields. Students can refer to the U.S. Department of Labor website, referencing the entry titled “[Employment and Earnings in Select Occupations](#)” to get started.
3. Encourage students to research the “glass cliff.” This *Vox* article, “Why Struggling Companies Promote Women,” provides useful information regarding the term. The term describes the phenomenon that women get the chance to rise to the executive position in corporations once the position becomes unattractive—with high risk, more chance of failure, and more chance to get blamed.
4. Read *The New York Times* article titled “[As Women Take Over a Male-Dominated Field, the Pay Drops](#)” with students. According to the article, once women enter the previously male-dominated field, pay then drops for those positions; when a certain occupation becomes “female-dominated,” then the work is considered less professional and not requiring advanced skills. For example, the average pay grade of recreation workers, designers, housekeepers, and biologists decreased over the years when women started to enter the field. On the other hand, computer programming was mainly dominated by female workers with lot of manual labor, but when males started to enter the field, the pay increased, and the job earned increased prestige.
5. In groups, prompt students to discuss these topics based on the following questions:
  - a. Why do you think this happens? Is it because of the society’s gender bias, which believes that men are better workers than women? Or is it because of the law of supply and demand of the labor market that does not want women in the labor force? If so, why do companies not want to hire women? There is no definitive answer to these questions—students are encouraged to discuss freely.
  - b. What are the conditions for women to be promoted and maintain their high-profile jobs? What can be changed to “level the playground” that would guarantee the equal pay for women and men? Ask students to consider political, social, and educational factors.
  - c. How do these adjustments to pay for certain career fields also affect men, and their career outcomes, job satisfaction, and aspirations? Are men pushed away from careers that would suit them because of these factors? Judged for being in certain fields? In other words, how does this affect all of society?

## Suggested Close Reading Exercise

### “Women’s Role” in Workplaces

Jiyoung, as the youngest recruit in her team, performs certain chores without being asked:

Jiyoung made everyone in her team coffee every morning according to each member’s taste, set the table every time they went out to eat, went around with a notepad and took everyone’s request when they had to order in take-aways, and cleared their dishes when they were done. [...] “You don’t have to make my coffee from now on, [...] It’s just not your job, Jiyoung. I’ve noticed this about new employees over the years. The women take on all the cumberosomes, minor tasks without being asked, while guys never do. Doesn’t matter if they’re new or the youngest—they never do anything they’re not told to do. But why do women simply take things upon themselves?” (Cho 97-99)

As we can see in Jiyoung’s case, women are often expected to be a “social lubricant” in the workplace. The [\*Forbes\*](#)’s article “5 Unique Things Female Employees Offer Their Employers” lists several “unique things that female employees can offer their employers:” female workers are more likely to be satisfied with their roles, they are emotionally supportive, and more likely to prioritize flexibilities.

[\*The Meaning of Success\*](#), a guidebook that aims to provide inspiration and advice for women in the academia published by Cambridge University, explores the different expectations for female and male employees. A female Cambridge University faculty member explains her experiences:

When the women described their workplace experiences, there seemed to be a discrepancy between the behaviors that a man could demonstrate without negative consequence—and sometimes even exploit—and those seen as acceptable for women. Outspokenness, assertion and even anger were ways of behaving that seemed to be judged differently when coming from a man. For women, there was the risk of being seen as frightening, aggressive, strident or disruptive when holding a reasoned but determined position. (47)

Circulate copies of the passages above from the novel and from *The Meaning of Success*. Ask students to read both passages, focusing on the different gender roles that are expected of women and men in workplaces. Useful questions to prompt discussion can include:

1. Why do you think that Jiyoung makes coffee for the teammates, sets the table for the meals, and takes everyone’s order for take-aways, even when no one asked her to do so?

2. Why do you think only female new recruits bear the “cumbersomes,” while men never do? What would happen if the female new recruits refused to do the chores? What are some of the contradicting expectations that female employees experience in the workplace?
3. If you were the youngest recruit in the company, what would you do?
4. Have you ever felt the unspoken pressure to take on work that no one else is doing? When and where did you experience this?
5. Jiyoung’s mother, when her husband tells Jiyoung to “stay out of trouble and get married,” urges Jiyoung to “Run wild” (Cho 93). What does “staying out of trouble” mean? Why do you think Jiyoung’s mother is so infuriated by her husband’s comment? How can Jiyoung “run wild” in her given situation in the workplace?

### **FEMALE CAREER BREAK**

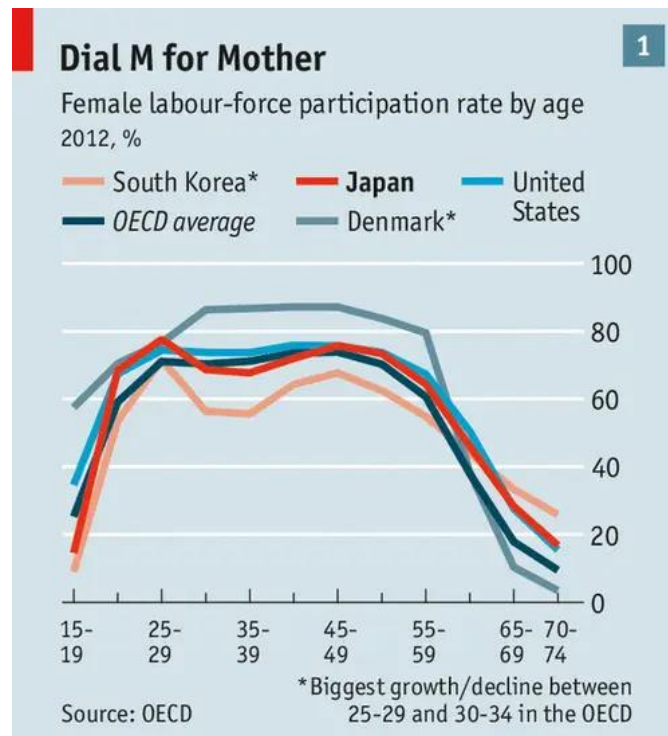
“Smart women are taxing,” says the department head in Jiyoung’s major. The department head implies that smart women are emotionally taxing and too outspoken compared to “undereducated” women—but there is more. Companies in many countries believe that hiring women is *taxing* in a literal sense too: hiring women is economically disadvantageous. As several examples of gender inequalities in South Korea introduced in the previous subunit demonstrate, some companies would rather pay fines for unfair hiring than take the “risk” of hiring women. Some questions you may ask your students, include:

1. Why would companies not want to hire women?
2. Why do they think women are less economically efficient than men?

To answer these questions, we need to revisit the deeply ingrained gender roles that were mentioned earlier about women being family-oriented rather than career-oriented.

This subunit investigates the “risk factors” that women in the workforce must bear when they want to maintain a work-life—or work-family—balance. As we saw in the previous subunits, a woman’s education level does not guarantee her the same pay grade as a man. Even if some women successfully rise high enough in the workplace to earn similar wages to their male coworkers, they must face more challenges outside their work: pregnancy, childbirth, and career breaks required to raise children. Unlike men, women with children do not have much flexibility to choose how much time they spend at work and how much time they spend at home. For many men, the matter of work-family is a matter of balance; for many women, it becomes an either-or choice.

As can be seen in the graph below, a remarkable trend is shown in the female-labor force participation in South Korea and Japan. Whereas other OECD countries have a smooth curve for women’s labor force participation, peaking in their 20s and 50s and then gradually retiring into old age, South Korea and Japan have an M-shaped curve, with women dropping out of the labor force in their 30s. Compared to other countries, South Korea shows the “biggest growth/decline between 25-29 and 30-34 in the OECD” (*Business Insider*). While nearly 70% of South Korean women aged 25-29 are economically active, the employment rate for women aged 30-39 drops by nearly 15 percentage points. Considering that many women typically get married, give birth to, and take care of their children in their late 20s and early 30s, this graph can be interpreted that many Korean women leave the workforce in certain period of their lives to focus on the housework.



The M Curve in Female Labor-Force Participation Rate in Korea and Japan. *Business Insider*.

There are several reasons that account for this conspicuous drop in the female labor force participation rate after childbirth and childrearing in South Korea. Sociologist Oh Eunsil, in “Defining Female Achievement: Gender, Class, and Work in Contemporary Korea,” explains the career breaks for Korean women after childbirth is a result of several macro social structures. According to Oh, there are several barriers that make it difficult for women to maintain their jobs: persisting gender role ideologies that require women to be the primary caregiver for children; disproportionate division of domestic labor between men and women; workplace norms and labor market structure that demand undivided attention to workers; and lack of childcare support. According to the [Korea Economic Institute of America](#)’s 2017 data, South Korea reports a huge gap between the amount of time men and women spend on unpaid labor—in other words, domestic labor—per day. While women spend in average of 228 minutes of unpaid labor daily, men spend 42 minutes a day. This is because in Korean society, mothers are still expected to be the primary caregivers of their children, handling care work and household chores: “In 2016, 85 percent of Koreans supported gender equality in the labor market and viewed women’s employment positively, yet 54 percent felt that mothers with young children should prioritize their role as mothers rather than focusing on work” (Oh 20). The perception that mothers are more important than fathers in raising children, combined with a workplace climate that wants employees to focus solely on work, makes it extremely difficult for female workers in South Korea to juggle family and work responsibilities.

The situation for working women in the United States, as depicted in the above graph, is slightly better than in Korea. However, pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare still significantly impact many American women’s careers. According to [LinkedIn News](#), “nearly 43% more women have a career break listed on their LinkedIn profile than men in the U.S.,” with the most common reason being full-time parenting. The United States is one of the few countries without government-mandated paid parental leave ([Pew Research Center](#)), placing a heavier burden of childcare and housework on women. This lack of support is one of the reasons why women are more likely to choose industries that emphasize flexibility in work hours rather than higher salaries or job security. Research from the [Becker Friedman Institute for Economics](#) reveals that female undergraduates are more willing to take jobs offering greater flexibility and part-time options, while male students prioritize jobs with strong earnings growth. This leads to the gender pay gap in America, which employed women earn 50 percent less than their male counterparts 10 years after graduation. According to the Becker Friedman Institute, most of this gap is explained by a labor supply differential: “female graduates work shorter hours, have less work experience, and are more likely to have taken time off from their careers.”

Claudia Goldin, the 2023 Nobel laureate in economics, attributes the persistent gender pay gap to what she terms “greedy work.” In her book *Career and Family*, Goldin describes greedy work as a field that demands employees to be constantly “on-call.” These are typically high-income jobs in sectors like finance and law, where employees face high work intensity and strict demands. Goldin argues that when both parents hold greedy work positions and face significant life events—such as childbirth or a family illness—it is usually the mothers who sacrifice their careers. Women who continue their careers post-childbirth are often unfairly labeled as having “a heart of stone” or as hindrances to their husbands’ career advancement. This dynamic is exemplified by the case of Kim Eunsil, Jiyoung’s team leader:

The team leader, Kim Eunsil, was the only woman among four team leaders. She had a daughter in elementary school, and lived with her mother who took care of all childcare and domestic labor. Some people said Kim Eunsil was awesome, others that she had a heart of stone, and still others found the arrangement a credit to her husband. “Living with the spouse’s parents is harder for the husbands than the wives,” they’d say. “Conflict between married men and their in-laws is becoming a societal problem these days. I don’t know him but he must be an obliging person to take in his mother-in-law.” Jiyoung thought about her own mother, who had lived with her mother-in-law for seventeen years. [...] But no one praised the mother for being obliging. (Cho 98-99)

Despite the rapid entry of women into the workforce, the notion that a woman's place is in the home remains deeply ingrained. When a woman prioritizes her career over her family, she is often viewed as cold and unfeeling, whereas a man who prioritizes family is seen as “obliging” or even “emasculated.” Women who remain in the workforce instead of returning home are perceived as harming both their jobs and families. They are accused of “stealing” jobs rightfully belonging to men, thus undermining societal job security, and “abandoning” their roles as wives and mothers, thereby eroding family structures.

As Goldin points out, the more overtime and high work intensity the job has, the more challenging it is for women to survive in the workplace after childbirth.

The competent middle-management section managers were chosen because the planning team needed a strong foundation, and the men were picked because the planning team was a long-term project. The head of the company knew that the nature and intensity of the marketing agency job made it difficult to maintain a decent work-life balance, especially if childcare came into play, and therefore he did not think of female employees as prospective long-term colleagues. He had no intention of giving employees better hours and benefits, either. He found it more cost-efficient to invest in employees who would last in this work environment than to make the environment more accommodating. That was the reasoning behind giving the more high-maintenance clients to Jiyoung and Hyesu. It wasn't their competence; management didn't want to tire out the prospective long-term male colleagues from the start. (Cho 111)

A couple may have started a family on equal economic and social footing, but the moment they become mom and dad, the dynamics within the home begin to change: "Greedy work also means that couple equity has been, and will continue to be, jettisoned for increased family income" (*The Harvard Gazette*). Goldin points out that both workplace and home cultures need to change for women and men to have equal opportunities and be on equal footing in the workplace.

In both South Korea and the United States, women who return to the job market after raising children often find themselves relegated to lower-wage jobs with less job security. An article from *The Korea Times* titled "[Mothers Who Left Workplace Struggle to Win Careers Back](#)" highlights that career-interrupted women typically earn just 84.5 percent of their pre-break salaries. The job landscape is harsher for them, offering fewer opportunities in office and professional roles and more positions in sales, service, and temporary work. One interviewee in the article shared her frustration: "The [job placement center for women with career interruption] did not even have a comprehensive list of the local businesses. They mainly offered basic, low-paying jobs, like packaging positions at 12,000 won (\$8.91) per hour." Another interviewee laments that "with 17 years of experience in financial accounting, HR and asset management, my skills are highly specialized and require expertise. Yet, the job suggestions I receive fail to reflect this. It's as if society views me merely as a person who did nothing at home." The U.S. job market is similarly unfriendly to women with career interruptions due to pregnancy and childcare. According to LinkedIn, "When the women who experienced a career break following childbirth and childrearing go back to work, about one-third return to the same industry they left." Moreover, only 4.3% of these women achieve higher-level positions in the same industry post-break, compared to 13.9% of those who switch industries. This underscores the significant barriers women face in regaining their career momentum after a break.

## Suggested In-Class Activities

### Interview with Working Moms

This activity aims to engage students in a conversation with working moms that could provide one of the closest and most intimate examples to students: working mom teachers. This activity is designed to give students the opportunity to personally experience how work and family are compatible for women today, and what the challenges are. Students might also have the valuable opportunity to recognize their teachers as a professional and an individual.

1. Invite a few female teachers who are raising children to do a group interview with students. The more teachers the students have, the better, but one is also fine. Teachers who will be interviewed are encouraged to read a part or the entire of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* that is covered in this unit in advance.
2. Students should come up with two or more questions to ask the teachers based on what they have learned in this unit. The questions may or may not be related to the content of the novel; however, encourage students to focus on how the teachers balance their job and family life.
3. After the interview, students briefly share with other students how they felt about the interview. Possible questions that might be useful include:
  - a. What are some of the differences or similarities that stand out when you compare the teachers' experience to Jiyoung's or Oh Misook's?
  - b. What is unique about being a high school teacher compared to other jobs?
  - c. In your opinion, are there differences between female teachers with children and male teachers with children? If there are, do these differences come from individual personalities or from structural issues in family and school system?

## UNIT ACTIVITY AND PROJECT IDEAS

### The Prospect of All of Us

Ask students to select a career field that interests them and give a short presentation. Encourage students to include a variety of images, short text, and images in their presentations. The presentation should include why they are interested in this career and why they would like to work in this field. Encourage students to also include what they need to do to prepare for this career. For example, students can research what majors they should pursue, what degrees or certificates or training they may require to be successful, or what job experience post high school they would need to pursue. Ask them to think about what virtues or attributes are commonly required of workers in this profession. Once students have done some general research on the occupation, have them also research the gender ratio of the population working in the occupation.

If the data demonstrates that profession has different outcomes for men and women, have students cite these trends in their presentation. Students should conclude their presentation with a discussion of how the prospects of their desired career relate to their gender identity. Is being a

particular gender an advantage or disadvantage in this career? If they think it does not matter, why do they think that?

### ***The Feminine Mystique and Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982***

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Cho Nam-joo's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* have many notable similarities. One, for example, is that both books foreground middle-class, college-educated, married women with children, portraying the "malaise that has no name" that such women experience. In this activity, students will write an essay analyzing the similarities and differences between the two texts. Students will begin by researching the content of Friedan's book, its historical resonance, and its limitations through a variety of media, including books, articles, and documentaries. Students will then examine how Jiyoung's life is similar to and different from the homemakers of 1960s America mentioned in Friedan's book. Students will practice reading both texts critically based on what they have read so far in the novel. Students can center their essays around questions such as: Why do the two texts feature middle-class, college-educated women as protagonists? What are some women's issues that the two texts do not address? How have the two texts nevertheless resonated with many women of different classes, occupations, and backgrounds?

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## UNIT 5. 2012-2014: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

### ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit delves into the evolving dynamics of marriage and family structures, with a particular focus on Jiyoung’s marriage and family formation. Using the fifth chapter of the novel—“Marriage 2012-2015”—as a foundation, this unit explores the various pressures and changes affecting contemporary marriage and family life, especially in South Korea and the United States. By examining the protagonist’s experiences and broader societal trends, students will gain a deeper understanding of how economic, legal, and social changes influence personal decisions regarding marriage and family.

The first subunit includes an opening activity designed to help students understand modern marriage and family trends. This activity introduces students to current trends in marriage and family in Korea and the United States, encouraging them to research and discuss new family forms and the changing significance of marriage.

The second subunit focuses on Jiyoung’s marriage and family dynamics depicted in the novel. It closely reads Jiyoung’s marriage, highlighting the traditional and contemporary pressures she faces in the South Korean family and marriage culture. Students will analyze key passages from the novel, examining how Jiyoung’s experiences with her husband, in-laws, and societal expectations shed light on the challenges faced by modern women in balancing personal aspirations with family responsibilities.

The third subunit examines the family as a patriarchal institution. Suggested exercises and discussion questions in this subunit explore how family structures perpetuate patriarchal norms and their impact on women's lives, using examples from both the novel and real-world contexts. Students will investigate how traditional family roles and expectations reinforce gender inequalities, and how these dynamics are challenged or upheld in different cultural settings.

The fourth subunit is a comparative analysis of family and marriage practices. It includes comparative exercises and discussions that explore the differences and similarities in family and marriage practices between Korea and America, historically and in the present day. This subunit will compare factors such as legal frameworks, cultural norms, economic conditions, and social policies that influence marriage and family life in both countries. It aims to provide a broader perspective on how different societies adapt to changing family dynamics and the role government and other institutions play in shaping these changes.

Each subsection is designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the novel through close-reading exercises, discussion questions, and in-class assignments. Ideas for possible unit projects are provided at the end. Below is the table of the contents for this unit.

Subunit 1. OPENING ACTIVITY  
Understanding Marriage and Family Today

Subunit 2. Jiyoung’s Marriage and Family  
Suggested Close Reading Activity

Subunit 3. Family as a Patriarchal Institution  
Suggested Close Reading Exercises  
Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions

Subunit 4. Family and Marriage Now and Then  
Now and Then (1): Korea  
Now and Then (2): America  
Suggested Close Reading Exercises  
Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions

Project Ideas and Unit Activities  
Clock in the Unpaid Labor  
What Do Marriage and Family Mean in South Korea and the United States

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## OPENING ACTIVITY

### Understanding Marriage and Family Today

Today’s marriage culture and family forms are very different from the past. This activity is designed to explore emerging trends in marriage and family in 21st century Korea and the United States. By investigating the neologisms that refer to the new marriage and family forms in Korea and the United States, students can learn about the choices individuals make—or do not make—in forming families today and how they differ from previous family forms.

1. Have students research the terms below. This guide provides a brief definition of each term and where to find context for the term. Teachers can add any family or marriage-related neologisms they know to the list below. Notable words include:
  - a. **Gold miss:** A gold miss is a Korean word that refers to a high-income, highly educated woman who has not married past the “marriageable age.” Gold misses are “gold,” because these women enjoy economic freedom and high social status, contrary to the stigma that often accompanies the derogatory term “spinster,” which is “old miss.” Students can search [“‘Gold Miss’: To Be or Not to Be?”](#) from *The Korea Times* for further information.
  - b. **Bihon(非婚):** The Korean word *bihon* refers to the lifestyle of not getting married. *Bi* means anti-, and *hon* means marriage. It is different from the state of being unmarried—which is usually called *mihon* (未婚, not married yet). *Bihon* is a lifestyle that rejects marriage altogether, thereby often collocated with *-juui(-ism)*. Students can refer to [“The Young Feminists Rejecting Marriage”](#) from *The Dial* to get more information.
  - c. **4B Movement:** The 4B movement is a recent feminist movement popular among South Korean women. It refers to a lifestyle that starts with the four B(非/anti-)’s: no sex with men, no dating with men, no marriage, no childbirth. For further information, read [“A World Without Men”](#) from *The Cut*.
  - d. **DINK:** DINK is an acronym for dual (or double)-income, no kids. For further information, read [“Dual income, no kids ... and loads of free time”](#) from *The Guardian*.
  - e. **Chosen family:** [“What ‘Chosen Family’ Means — and How to Build Your Own”](#) from *Healthlife*.
2. Ask students why each word might have originated in Korea or the United States. Useful questions include:
  1. What do you think the most common form of American family looks like?
  2. Find the entry for [“nuclear family”](#) in Merriam Webster and look up what the word means. What are some of the biases about family and marriage implied by this concept?
  3. What are the traditional notions of family to which these new terms refuse to conform?
  4. Why do you think more people are choosing these new family forms or marital statuses today?
  5. Do you feel that the traditional nuclear family form—with two heterosexual parents and biological children—is a good fit for you? If yes or no, why?

## JIYOUNG'S MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

In Korea, as in many other cultures, marriage has traditionally meant a union between two families rather than a union between two people. In the 21st century, many Koreans young and old follow this tradition ([Korean for Internauts](#)). Marriage requires significant preparation—including wedding planning, housing options, and how the parents will financially support the wedding and the newlyweds' settlement—and in Korea, parents are usually involved in every step. Like Jiyoung and Daehyun's parents, who “met for the first time at a nice Korean restaurant in Gangnam” (Cho 114), *sang gyun rye*, a term that refers to the event where the bride and groom's parents and the two wedding parties meet, dine, and formally greet each other, is considered the most important part of wedding preparations. This is a formal meeting between the two families and the official start of wedding preparations, and the “incompatibility with the family sometimes even leads to a breakup” ([NAKD Seoul](#)).

In marriage, especially in Korea, marrying another person means taking that person's family into one's own. Making a good first impression on in-laws is always important—especially for a Korean bride-to-be, it is mandatory to impress her future mother-in-law. At the meeting described in the novel, Daehyun's mother compliments Jiyoung: “She's level-headed, amiable, and sensible. She remembered that I didn't drink coffee and brought me herbal tea the next time we met, and noticed just by talking on the phone that I was coming down with a cold” (Cho 114). Jiyoung realizes that her future mother-in-law judges her every move and feels overwhelmed. To her compliment, Jiyoung's mother replies: “She's all grown-up, but she doesn't really know much about keeping a home” (Cho 115). Oh Misook's modest comment on her daughter's “home keeping” ability indicates what both mothers value most in sending off daughters in marriage and welcoming daughters-in-law: being level-headed, amiable, sensible, and good at home keeping—in other words, being a *hyunmo yangcheu* (賢母良妻, a good wife and wise mother).

The qualities of a good wife and wise mother do not just come from “good” behavior. Traditionally, in Korea, a good daughter-in-law is one who gives birth to a son. The bride and groom's original and extended family are all tremendously interested in the “family plan” of the newlyweds: “Parents, uncles, and aunties kept having ‘auspicious dreams,’ prompting them to call Jiyoung the next morning to ask after her. A few months passed, and they began to suspect solicitously that Jiyoung had health problems” (Cho 120). Unlike her husband, Daehyun, who talks about family planning as casually as if he were saying, “Let's try the Norwegian mackerel,” for Jiyoung, having a child is a decision of a lifetime:

She couldn't gauge what about her body would change and to what degree. Most important, she wasn't sure if she could take on both childcare and her career. Daycare centers and babysitters would not be enough, as the couple always worked late and on weekends. Their respective parents were in no position to help out. Then she felt awful that she was already thinking about putting her child in someone else's care when it wasn't even born yet. (Cho 123)

Compared to Jiyoung, who thinks about the many things she will give up after having a child, such as “[her] youth, health, job, colleagues, social networks, career plans, and future” (Cho 124), her husband simply says that he will “help out” around the house. The things that will be different in Daehyun's life—such as “won't get to see [his] friends as often,” “to come home and help out with chores after working all day,” and the burden of “financial support”—“seemed like such a trifle” (Cho 124) compared to what Jiyoung will lose after giving birth to their child. The novel does not show the scene where Jiyoung and Daehyun eventually agree to have a child. The conversation about having a child ends with the couple's unbridgeable gap between their positions. Jiyoung was hesitant about pregnancy, childbirth, and the uncertainty of her future after giving birth, but it seems that she ultimately decides to have a child at the request of her family and husband.

In South Korea, couples with two incomes often look to their parents for childcare or find a care worker. Many Korean grandparents often take care of their grandchildren instead of their working children: according to [“Family Business: Korean Grandparents Demand More for Child Care”](#) from *Reuters*, “the share of families whose children were looked after by grandparents rose to 35.1 percent in 2012, the last year for which government data is available, from 31.9 percent in 2009.” However, Daehyun's parents live in Busan, far from Seoul, and are unable to watch their children because they are unwell; Jiyoung's parents are busy with work. The couple also do not want to hire a live-in nanny because of the cost and other issues. Eventually, they conclude that Jiyoung should quit her job and focus on raising her child. Jiyoung expected to quit her job at some point once she had a child, but she is distraught when she is forced to leave her hard-earned career.

Upon marriage, Jiyoung's life continues to go awry due to the expectations of her in-laws, which are difficult to fulfill, and the naivete of her husband, who does not truly understand his wife's struggles. Jiyoung seems to have lost control of her life—her transformed body and a newborn baby who constantly whines and needs round-the-clock care turned Jiyoung's life into something she could not plan for. The day after she quits her job, Jiyoung breaks down in tears as she realizes that there is no longer a “plan” for her, that she is no longer in control of her life: “it suddenly hit her that she didn't have an office to go to anymore. Her daily routine would be different from now on, and, until she got used to it, predicting and planning would be impossible. That's when the tears came” (Cho 132). A stable family and home do not seem to mitigate the pain of Jiyoung's precariously planned birth: “Breastfeeding every two hours and therefore

unable to sleep for more than two hours at a time, ... [Jiyoung] cried far more than she'd ever cried in her life. Above all, she hurt all over" (Cho 135).

The novel shows that Jiyoung could not have known exactly how marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth would affect her life: "her sister, who have married a year earlier, did not have a child, and neither did most of her friends who had also married late, so Jiyoung had never had close contact with a pregnant woman or a newborn infant. She couldn't gauge what about her body would change and to what degree" (Cho 122). Even her mother never told Jiyoung about the anguish of having and raising children: "No one had shared this in detail with Jiyoung—not her mother, relatives, older friends, or even friends her own age who'd had children. The babies on television or in movies were all pretty and cute, and mothers were always portrayed as beautiful and noble" (Cho 138). When Jiyoung talks to her husband about quitting her job, she "couldn't help feeling she was bargaining something away" (Cho 124), and after experiencing the realities of motherhood for the first time, she feels almost betrayed, as if those around her have deceived her. The novel makes it clear in this chapter that Jiyoung's symptoms introduced at the start of the novel do not stem from any specific event. Jiyoung has been slowly losing control of her life without realizing it, and after giving birth to her child, she feels extremely lethargic and depressed by her inability to control anything.

### **Suggested Close Reading Exercise**

Hand out the following passage from the novel to students.

In the end, they concluded that one of them had to be a stay-at-home parent, and that one person, of course, was Jiyoung. Daehyun's job was more stable and brought in more money, but, apart from that, it was more common for husbands to work and wives to raise the children and run the home. The fact that Jiyoung saw this coming did not make her feel any less depressed. Daehyun patted her on her slouched back. "We'll get a sitter once in a while when our baby's bigger, and send her to daycare, too," he said. "You can use that time to study and look for other work. Think of this as an opportunity to start a new chapter. I'll help you out." Jiyoung knew that Daehyun was being sincerely supportive, but she couldn't hold back her anger. "Help out? What is it with you and 'helping out?' You're going to 'help out' with chores. 'Help out' with raising our baby. 'Help out' with finding me a new job. Isn't this your house, too? Your home? Your child? And if I work, don't *you* spend my pay, too? Why do you keep saying 'help out' like you're volunteering to pitch in on someone else's work?" Jiyoung felt bad about jumping down his throat after the two of them had done a good job of making a tough decision together. She apologized to her stunned, stuttering husband, and he said, "No worries." (Cho 131)

In small groups, ask students to discuss the passage. Useful questions include:

1. This scene is one of the few times in the novel where Jiyong vents to her husband and expresses her anger. Why is Jiyong suddenly so angry in this scene?
2. What do you think about Daehyun's word choices and tone in this conversation? What are the clues in this scene that imply that Daehyun is talking to Jiyong in a particular manner? How might Jiyong have felt when her husband "patted her on her slouched back" and promised her "help"?
3. What are the differences between "work," "help," and "volunteering" in this conversation, especially in the context of partner relationships?
4. Do you think Daehyun will "start a new chapter" after his child's birth? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think Jiyong apologized to her husband after their conversation? How do you think Jiyong should have handled the conflict?
6. If you were Jiyong's husband, how do you think you would have made decisions about economic activity after having a child? If your partner was in the same situation as Jiyong, how do you think you would have responded?

### **FAMILY AS PATRIARCHAL INSTITUTION**

One month after their wedding, Jiyong's husband brings the marriage registration form home. Jiyong asks: "What's the rush? We had a wedding and we live together. Nothing will change because of one document." To this, Daehyun, Jiyong's husband, replies: "It changes how we feel" (Cho 117). Indeed, getting "legally" married changes a lot of things, not only "how [they feel]" about their relationships. In the United States and many other countries, legally married couples have certain legal benefits and obligations immediately upon marriage. According to [American Civil Liberties Union Wisconsin](#), some of these benefits and obligations include the sharing of property, the acquisition of permanent residence or citizenship, tax deductions, health insurance, parenting and custodial rights, family visitation rights, next-of-kin status for emergency medical decisions, joint adoption or foster care, mutual benefit from insurance, federal protection, veteran or disability status, and so on. Marriage certificates move the relationship between two individuals from romance to institution.

As the couple's exchange about filling out the marriage registration form illustrates, marriages don't just happen because two people love each other. American historian Nancy Cott describes marriage as the following:

To be marriage, the institution requires public affirmation. It requires public knowledge—at least some publicity beyond the couple themselves; that is why witnesses are required for the ceremony and why wedding bells ring. More definitively, legal marriage requires state sanction, in the license and the ceremony. Even in a religious solemnization the assembled guests know to expect the officiating cleric's words, "By the authority vested in me by the state of . . . I now pronounce you husband and wife." (2)

As Cott points out, marriage is simultaneously a private and public event, and family is not just a personal business. Marriage not only involves other family members, friends and acquaintances, but also government administration and legal systems, or more seriously, law enforcement and the criminal code. Historically, managing and controlling marriage were considered important tasks for the state. According to Cott, many states have intervened and interfered in the domestic sphere to influence the distribution of assets, the distribution of citizenship, public order and governance, population and births, and many other areas. As shown in the previous unit, birth rate management and population control have been the most important government policies in South Korea, too; the country's case exemplifies how "family matters" were and are national matters.

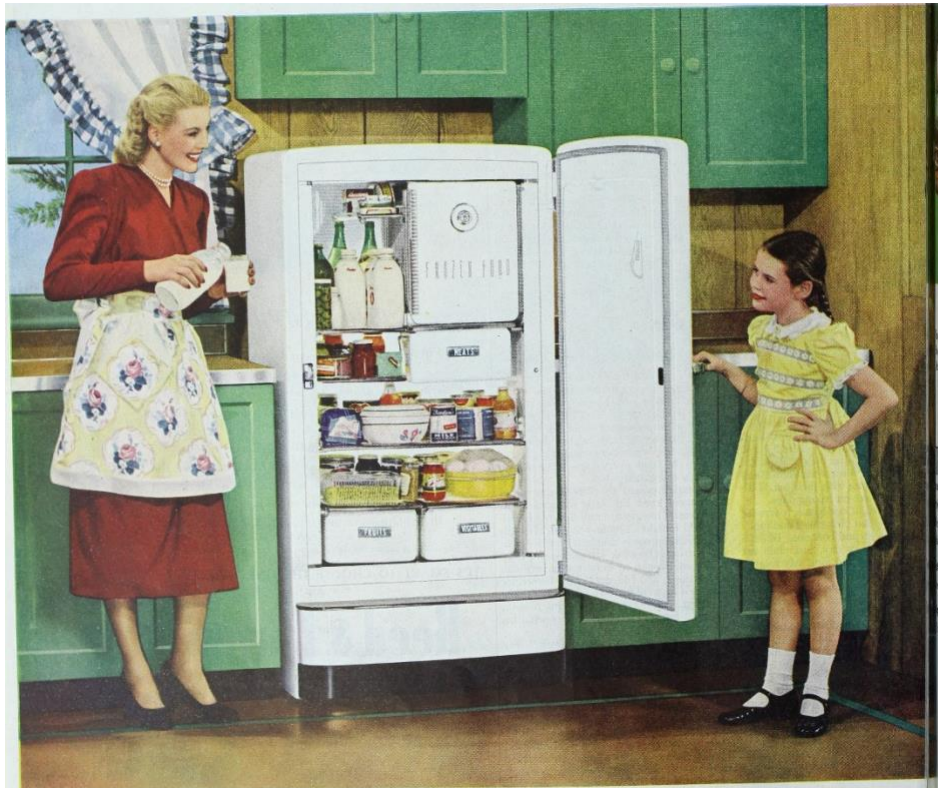
Why is family important on a national scale? Lynn D. Wardle, a professor at Brigham Young University Law School, argues that families are crucial because they are the "nursery" where individual character is shaped and the "seedbed" where national ideology is first cultivated. He emphasizes that "there is a relationship between the structures and forms of family relations that a society fosters, encourages, or restricts, and the social and political welfare of that society," and further, "a reciprocal relationship exists between a society's political structure and family welfare" (2). Families are the primary site for reproduction, elementary education, socialization, and nurturing of the population. Low birth rates are a significant problem in many post-industrial countries, including the United States. According to the [U.S. Department of State](#), global fertility rates have declined over the past few decades, and in some countries, populations are aging rapidly, placing increased pressure on public pension systems and social welfare programs. Additionally, a declining working population leads to decreased tax revenue and increased welfare and pension expenses for the government. These challenges explain why many governments intervene in the "private realm" of family life through the codification of marriage and various legal definitions of family.

Just as governments expect households to function in specific economic, educational, and cultural ways, today's households fulfill many social roles, reproducing and resisting societal systems. In doing so, families often assign specific roles to each member. As discussed in the previous unit, many families remain entrenched in patriarchal gender roles, which continue to oppress many female members within the domestic sphere. In Jiyoung's family, for instance, daughters and sons, husbands and wives, are often treated differently, even if the father does not act as the family's economic, emotional, or physical leader. Previously, we explored the different expectations placed on daughters and sons. This unit will examine how husbands and wives assume different roles within the family and how women face oppression and discrimination in these roles.

In Jiyoung's experience, the burden of giving birth and caring for children highlights the significant toll reproductive labor continues to take on women in contemporary families. This type of labor, often called domestic labor, includes tasks such as care work, cleaning, food preparation, laundry, home maintenance, and transportation. It encompasses all unpaid work

necessary to maintain life and a standard of living, enabling the “reproduction” of waged labor ([A History of Domestic Work and Worker Organizing](#)). As Jiyoung and Eunyoung’s case illustrates, in many Korean families today, the burden of reproductive labor falls heavily on mothers, wives, and daughters. Daehyun’s statement that he will “help out” reflects the ongoing perception that mothers are the primary caretakers, while fathers provide occasional assistance.

Unlike Jiyoung’s orthopedist, who dismisses Jiyoung’s difficulties as “whining” (Cho 136), the development of modern appliances has not freed women from the pain of reproductive labor. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, in *More Work for Mother*, explains that household appliances have not decreased the time women spend on domestic labor.



A Refrigerator Advertisement in *The Ladies Home Journal*, 1948. [Origins OSU](#).

Before modern technologies, families did not expect mothers to handle all housework alone. However, as appliances made housework easier, the perception emerged that wives and mothers should manage the household unassisted ([Robin Mark Phillips](#)). Cowan argues that household appliances have intensified the division of labor, turning women into “professional housekeepers.” This is why Jiyoung is frustrated by Daehyun’s “helping out” comment—she feels her role as the primary housekeeper was predetermined before their child was born. Especially in case of South Korea and other East Asian countries, women were not “liberated” from domestic labor at all. In fact, according to Man-Yee Kan et al.’s article “Revisiting the

Gender Revolution,” the disproportionate distribution of household chores among East Asian men and women stands out. As the table below demonstrates, women conduct a majority of domestic work, including those who are employed in the paid workforce in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The total amount of labor—paid and domestic together—that women conduct often exceeds men’s.

*Time diary data from Kan et al. (2022) indicating minutes per day*

		<b>Paid work</b>	<b>Domestic work</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>China</b>	men	357.4	72.7	430.1
	women	304.6	135.4	440
<b>Japan</b>	men	419	25.2	444.2
	women	173.7	253	426.7
<b>Korea</b>	men	356.2	41.7	397.9
	women	206.6	237	443.6
<b>Taiwan</b>	men	380.3	32.3	412.6
	women	241.4	231.7	473.1

Time Spent on Paid and Domestic Work in Four Societies. [Kan et al.](#)

The issue of domestic work cannot be solved by leaving it solely to women or mothers and offering occasional “help.” Changing the disproportionate division of domestic work involves more than acknowledging the difficulties of reproductive labor and the hard work of those who primarily bear the burden. This approach merely sanctifies motherhood and reduces reproductive labor to something “only mothers can do.” Addressing this problem requires dismantling the forced association of women with reproductive labor and valuing care work that has been traditionally devalued. As more and more women, especially white, educated, “professional” women in the United States seek to disengage from the burden of reproductive labor with their increasing economic and social leverage, reproductive labor is becoming increasingly racialized and ethnicized. As long as reproductive labor is considered a free resource, this “offshoring of reproductive labor” (*Dissent*) will continue. Regardless of economic activity, reproductive labor should be undertaken by any individual capable of self-care; and if someone else is delegated to perform these tasks, they should be compensated accordingly, because “everyone either performs reproductive labor or relies on someone else’s” (*Dissent*).

Reproductive labor extends beyond domestic tasks. Amy Mullin, in *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare*, argues that pregnancy, delivery, and childrearing are “social activities that involve simultaneously physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral work from those who undertake them” (Mullin 186). She further contends that these experiences are often “misconceived” as purely natural rather than social. Challenges to this natural view, especially when separating biological sex roles from the activity of caring for a fetus or a child, are harshly critiqued and seen as “undue interference” with the “natural” order (Mullin 1).

What are the consequences of this societal misconception that regards these labors as natural? It leads to the taken-for-granted sacrifice of mothers by idealizing motherhood as natural, beautiful, and blissful. This is called the “goddess myth,” according to [“Motherhood Is Hard to Get Wrong. So Why Do So Many Moms Feel So Bad About Themselves?”](#) from *Time*. This myth highlights the powerful message that women are built to bear children, will feel empowered by doing so, and that the baby’s future depends on their natural maternal instincts. This narrative dictates that breastfeeding is the best, vaginal birth should be preferred over surgery, and that a mother’s body is sacred, requiring careful nourishment. Any deviation from these norms, such as sending a baby to the hospital nursery after birth, is seen as a “failure.” Jiyoung, for example, faces her in-laws’ expectations to eat certain foods or take medicine to facilitate pregnancy, and when she “failed” to meet their expectations, she was considered to “have health problems” (Cho 120). In the “goddess myth,” mothers are perceived less as individuals with the power to choose and more as vessels for incubating and delivering human beings. The notion that it is “natural” for women to want, conceive, give birth to, and raise children leads to them bearing the risks and pains of childbearing, even with supportive partners. According to the article, pregnant women sometimes feel the pressure to have a vaginal birth without an epidural or C-section, to breastfeed, and to provide constant care, all deemed necessary for the baby’s health and a healthy mother-child relationship.

As Jiyoung’s case demonstrates, societal pressures sometimes compel women to contribute to birth rates for the good of society and family well-being, often without acknowledging the dangers and physical tolls of pregnancy and childbirth. Discussing the pain and debilitating effects of childbirth is taboo, even among families. Jiyoung’s mother, for instance, did not warn her about the difficulties and pain of the process. Jiyoung’s feelings of anxiety and guilt about having children are silenced, as vocalizing these emotions brands mothers as “bad moms.” The atmosphere of a society that worships motherhood and makes it taboo to discuss its difficulties makes Jiyoung “feel guilty about being exhausted” (Cho 138). This myth of motherhood compartmentalizes and isolates the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, preventing them from being politicized, historicized, and socialized. As Mullin argues, only by recognizing pregnancy and childbirth as social issues can society work together to alleviate the suffering of childbearing individuals, transforming childbearing from an internal family affair into a shared social responsibility.

## Suggested Close Reading Exercises

### Mother Goddess or “Mum-roach”

What is a mother? As we covered in this subunit, some people believe that mothers should be exalted like goddesses. They say that mothers are honorable beings who create and sustain life, and therefore domestic labor is “divine.” Others say that reproductive labor is worthless because it does not produce economic value, and that stay-at-home mothers are “mum-roaches” (Cho 153) who live parasitically and “cush[ily]” (Cho 153) based on their husbands’ economic activities.

These opposing notions of motherhood are two sides of the same coin. Both perspectives place pregnancy, childbirth, and reproductive labor in a realm that is radically different from other value-producing activities. By separating mothers from ordinary “human beings,” patriarchy and capitalism have made maternal sacrifice a given and reproductive labor “priceless” so that other family members can economically, physically, and emotionally depend on it.

Circulate the passage below to students to discuss.

The doctor chuckled to himself. “Back in the day, women used clubs to do the laundry, lit fires to boil baby clothes, and crawled around to do the sweeping and mopping. Don’t you have a washing machine for laundry and vacuum cleaner for cleaning? Women these days—what have you got to whine about?” Dirty laundry doesn’t march into the machine by itself, Jiyoung thought. The clothes don’t wash themselves with detergent and water, march back out when they’re done, and hang themselves on clotheslines. The vacuum doesn’t roll around with a wet and dry rag, wipe the floor, and wash and dry the rags for you. Have you ever even operated a washing machine or a vacuum cleaner? The doctor checked Jiyoung’s previous records, said he’d prescribe drugs that are safe for breastfeeding and clicked the computer mouse a few times. Back in the day, physicians had to go through filing cabinets to find records and write notes and prescriptions by hand. Back in the day, office clerks had to run around the office with paper reports to track down their bosses for their approval. Back in the day, farmers planted by hand and harvested with sickles. What do these people have to whine about these days? No one is insensitive enough to say that. Every field has its technological advances and evolves in the direction that reduces the amount of physical labor required, but people are particularly reluctant to admit that the same is true for domestic labor. Since she became a full-time housewife, she often noticed that there was a polarized attitude regarding domestic labor. Some demeaned it as “bumming around at home,” while others glorified it as “work that sustains life,” but none tried to calculate its monetary value. Probably because the moment you put a price on something, someone has to pay. (Cho 136-137)

1. As a class, lead a discussion with the suggested questions below:
2. Why do you think Jiyoung felt uncomfortable in this situation but didn't say anything to the doctor?
3. What is the problem of regarding domestic labor as “work that sustains life?” How does this glorification of domestic labor oppress women and force them to solely manage housework?
4. What is the difference between domestic labor (or reproductive labor) and other forms of paid/productive labor? Why does the old doctor demean modern day domestic labor as “bumming around at home”? What makes reproductive labor so “invisible”?
5. What would happen when we start to “put a price” on reproductive labor?
6. Do you think the development of technology has freed “mothers” from domestic labor? If yes or no, why?
7. What do you think mothers are like? Are they ordinary or extraordinary? Do you think anyone can fulfill the role of a mother? If yes or no, why?

### **Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions**

#### **“A Woman’s Place is in Home”**

According to the [Center for American Progress](#), there is a noticeable difference in how household labor is divided between married American men and women with children. Mothers of young children are significantly more likely to report engaging in household activities than fathers—85.2 percent compared to 61.5 percent—and they also spend more time on these tasks, averaging 1.59 hours versus 1.26 hours. This discrepancy becomes even more apparent when examining the specific types of housework each gender typically performs. Men generally take on occasional domestic tasks, such as home maintenance, repair, decorating, and lawn or garden care. These activities are less frequent than the daily, repetitive tasks like food preparation and laundry, which women are more likely to handle. Thus, while men tend to focus on episodic chores, women are responsible for the ongoing, day-to-day household activities.

Watch a YouTube clip titled [“Leave it to Beaver a Woman’s Place is in Home.”](#) Leave it to Beaver is an American TV sitcom that aired in the 1950s and 1960s, which, as the later subunit will cover, was a time when the “traditional nuclear family” was heavily promoted and endorsed in post-World War II America. Leave it to Beaver was a TV show that portrayed the epitome of this suburban-white, nuclear family while also poking fun at the ironies and absurdities of such a family stereotype.

After watching the clip, students discuss the above statistics and the video. Useful discussion prompts include:

1. In your family, or in the families around you, do you see a lot of “mom cooks inside, dad cooks outside”?
2. Do you agree with the father’s explanation in this video? Why do you think the father needed to mention “caveman” to explain the division of household activities? Given the

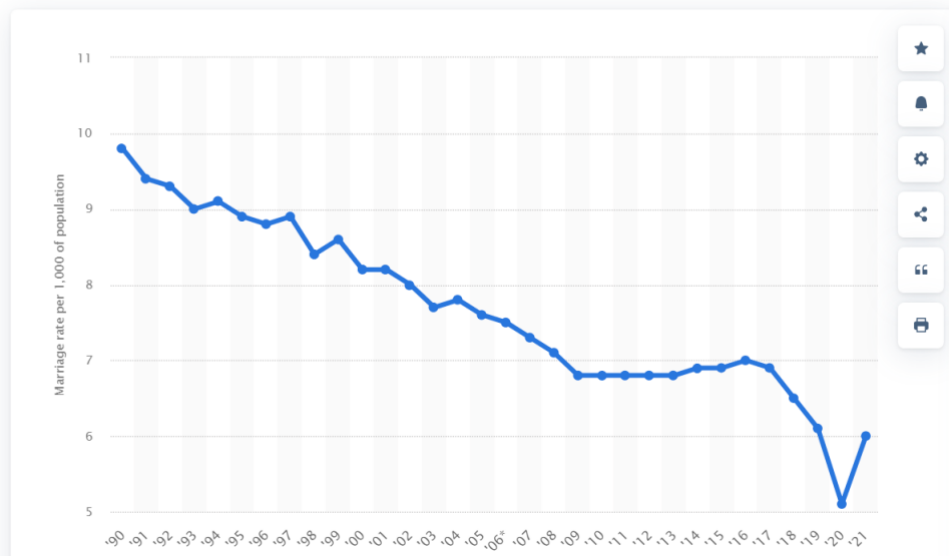
father's reference to the "throwback to caveman days," from where does he seem to be drawing to explain the different gender roles of men and women?

3. At the end of the video, when the father asks for "asbestos gloves," why does the son look at his father with suspicion? Why do you think the combination of caveman and asbestos gloves evokes laughter?
4. What does the video demonstrate to us about the relationship between today's technologically advanced society and evolutionary psychology, which finds its dubious basis in prehistory?
5. What do you think the father in this video would say about the relationship between the development of household appliances and the "emancipation" of women from domestic labor?
6. Do you think the father's explanation and justification of household activities between genders are related to Center for American Progress' statistics?

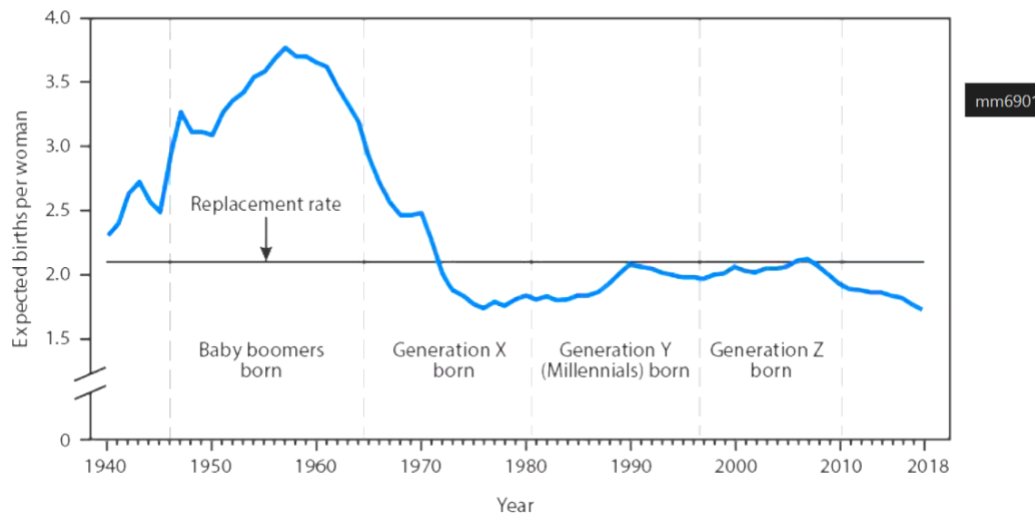
### **FAMILY AND MARRIAGE NOW AND THEN**

In many countries, including South Korea and the United States, patriarchy and sexist gender ideas still have a strong influence on many families. But today's world is changing rapidly—women are becoming more educated and economically empowered, rejecting or revising traditional family forms, and government's laws and policies are being changed by individual efforts to achieve gender equality in the home. According to [CNBC's](#) "Why Are People Not Getting Married Anymore?," "almost 90% of the world's population now live in countries with falling marriage rates. In the U.S., marriage has declined by 60% since the 1970s, while the median age for first marriages has increased for both men and women." The U.S. has a fertility rate of 1.7 children per woman as of 2022 ([World Bank](#)), which is the 49th lowest birthrate country out of 243 countries. This is less than the 2.1 children per woman needed to replace the population, which means that without another external influx of people, the U.S. population will continue to shrink in the future. In Japan and South Korea, marriage and birth rates are correlated, and a downward trend may foreshadow a brewing population crisis.

## Marriage rate in the United States from 1990 to 2021 (per 1,000 of population)



Marriage Rate in the United States from 1990 to 2021. [Statista.](#)



Expected Births per Woman in the United States. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.](#)

Why are so many people in the 21st century delaying or not getting married, or choosing not to have children? Carol C. Nadelson and Malkah T. Notman, in “To Marry or Not to Marry,” an article published in 1981, tried to explain the decline of marriage: “In the past, few women chose not to marry because remaining unmarried carried with it a strong social stigma; an unmarried woman was seen as unattractive, unworthy, and unwanted” (Nadelson and Notman 1352), but nowadays it is more acceptable. Individuals choose to remain unmarried because they want “increased freedom and enjoyment of life, opportunities to meet people and develop

friendships, economic independence, more and better social experiences, and opportunities for personal development” (Nadelson and Notman 1352). Indeed, the reasons vary from country to country and person to person, but the biggest reason seems to be that people are no longer as drawn to the benefits of marriage and childbearing as they once were. Individuals today are trying to rebuild, reject, or partially revise traditional family institutions to find a compromise between community and individual freedom and equality. In this subunit, we will explore how today’s families are both similar to and different from “traditional” families, using examples from South Korea and the United States.

### **Now and Then (1): Korea**

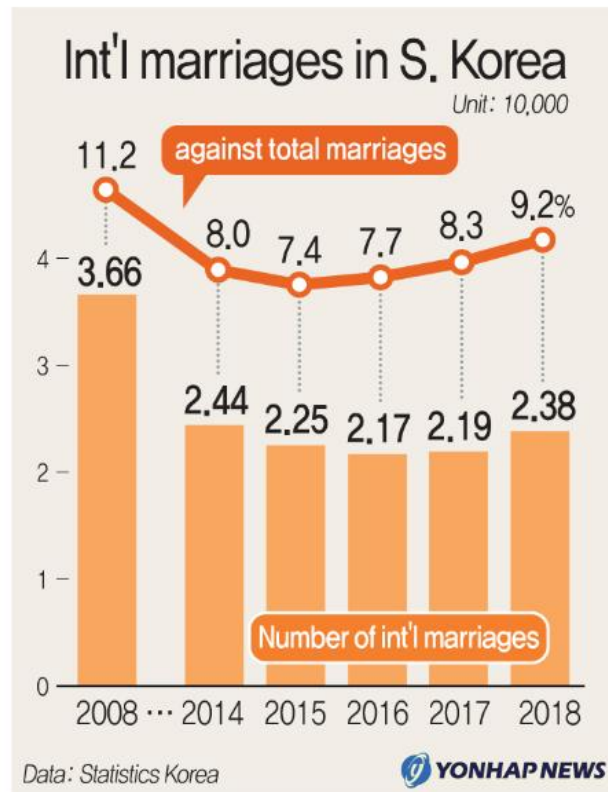
As we see in Jiyoung’s family formation, South Korea has traditionally been, and still is, a country dominated by Confucian family values. However, South Korean culture is evolving rapidly, and young people’s views on family and marriage are changing dramatically. Modern changes in family laws have sought to address various issues, reflecting evolving societal values and norms. This section will examine how South Korean patriarchal family values have and have not changed through family registration systems, state support for single mothers, and societal views on the need to “carry on the family line” by marrying and having children.

A landmark shift occurred with the abolition of the hoju system, which has historically nominated the male as the head of the household and centered family registration around male genealogy. As we briefly mentioned in the previous unit about the abolition of the hoju system, the previous Korean family registration system was declared unconstitutional in February 2005 and was abolished on January 1, 2008. The previous family registration system delegated the right to legally represent the entire family as the hoju, the head of household. “When a husband dies, [the legal right of the household head] is usually succeeded by his first son, not by his widow. When a daughter gets married, she is removed from her father’s hojeok (family registry) and transferred to her husband’s. Children are added to the father’s hojeok. Even when a couple divorces and the mother retains custody of children, the children keep the father’s surname and remain in his hojeok unless he gives permission to transfer” (*The Korea Herald*). In other words, the hoju system was an administrative law that legally guaranteed the dominance of fathers over other family members and the patrilineal inheritance from father to son. Under this system, Korean families did not belong to women; women were only expected to be part of their father’s family before marriage and part of their husband’s family after marriage.

“Today, there is no such thing as ‘family registry,’ and people are living their lives with the new individual identification system” (Cho 119). This change marked a significant departure from traditional practices. Despite this progress, it remains common for Korean children to adopt their father’s family name (Cho 118-119). In Korea, couples decide which of their children will take their last name when they register their marriage, not when they register their child’s birth. According to *Segye Ilbo*, the number of applications for children to take their mother’s surname

is gradually increasing—from 198 in 2017 to 612 in 2021—but it still accounts for less than 0.2% of all marriages.

Meanwhile, international marriages are on the rise in South Korea, a country that has not had much racial or ethnic diversity. According to Yonhap News article [“Int’l marriages in S. Korea up 8.5 pct in 2018,”](#) international marriages in South Korea accounted for 10% of all marriages from 2008 to 2024, excluding the Covid pandemic period.

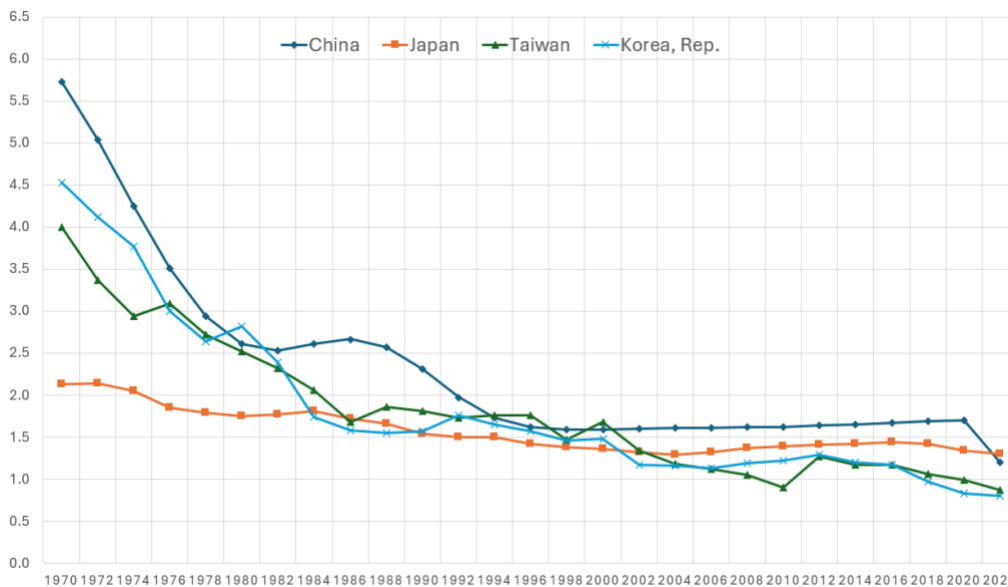


International Marriages in South Korea. [Yonhap News.](#)

This is because many South Korean men are unable to find women to marry, interprets *The New York Times*. According to [“Korean Men Use Brokers to Find Brides in Vietnam,”](#) the widespread availability of sex-screening technology for pregnant women since the 1980s has resulted in the birth of a disproportionate number between South Korean males and females. What is more, South Korea’s growing wealth has increased women’s educational and employment opportunities, even as it has led to rising divorce rates and plummeting birthrates. South Korean government and society has actively encouraged international marriages as a solution to demographic challenges, particularly in rural areas where bride shortages are prevalent ([CNN](#)). Many “rural bachelors” who have missed the marriageable age in South Korea often go on marriage tours to find brides in “the poorer corners of China and Southeast and

Central Asia” (*The New York Times*). According to the *CNN* article “South Korean Authorities Encourage Men to Marry Foreign Women. But Their Brides Often Become Victims of Abuse,” some local governments in rural areas even subsidized the fee for marriage tours and brokerage to increase marriage and childbirth. However, these policies have faced severe criticism for promoting “mail-order brides” and raising concerns about high rates of domestic violence experienced among foreign wives. Consequently, many local governments have discontinued such subsidies in response to these criticisms.

As Korean women increasingly delegate reproductive labor and childbirth to grandparents, low-paid immigrant workers, and foreign wives, societal attitudes towards marriage and childbearing are shifting. The South Korean government’s population policy, which was implemented during the 1960s to 1990s, has been, in a sense, overly successful. As the graph below shows, South Korea’s population has been in decline since the 1980s, with birth rates below the population replacement rate. Since the 1990s, the birth rate has continued to decline, reaching a total fertility rate of 0.72 in 2024, marking the lowest in the world (*BBC*).



Total Fertility Rates in East Asia. [World Bank](#).

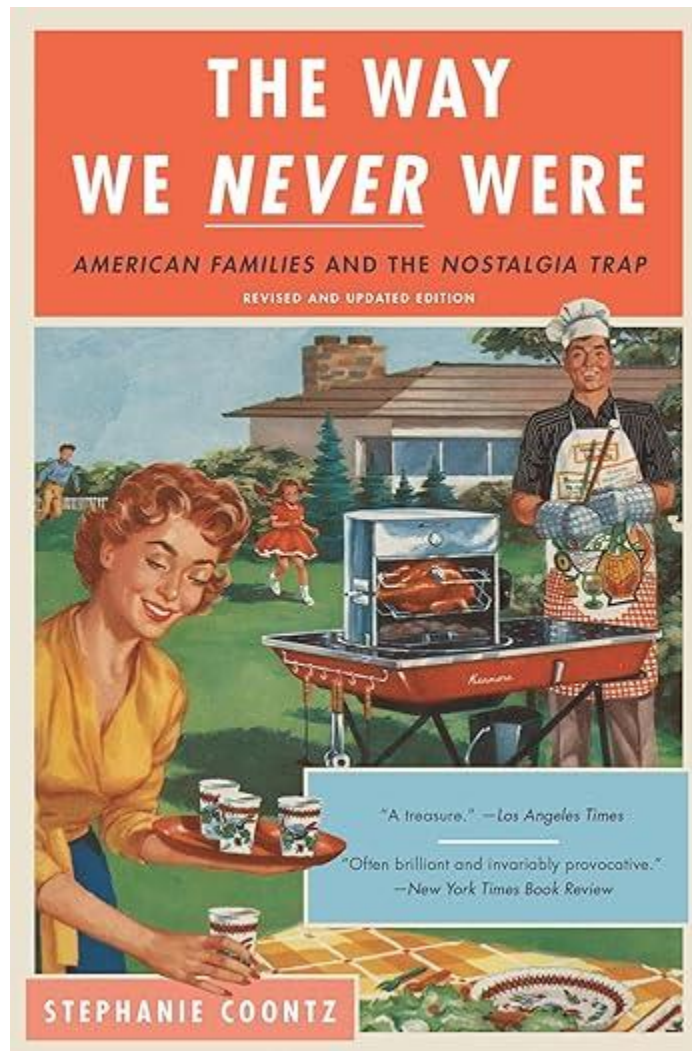
Despite substantial government investment aimed at boosting the birth rate, skepticism remains widespread among South Korean women. A recent survey cited in *The Korea Times* article “Only 4% of unmarried Korean women think marriage, childbearing essential,” highlighted this trend (*The Korea Times*). As the article title suggests, just 4% of Korean women agreed that “marriage and childbirth are essential in a woman’s life,” compared to 13% of men. Furthermore, over 53% of women indicated that “marriage and childbirth are not important in a woman’s life,” in comparison to 26% of men. This reflects the country’s alarmingly low fertility rate.

These attitudes are not surprising given the economic and social disadvantages Korean women encounter during childbirth and childrearing. As of 2023, South Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world, highlighting the broader demographic challenges the country faces. The generational divide on this issue is vividly illustrated in Jiyoung’s conflict with her in-laws and husband about having children. While younger generations often view childbearing as an unnecessary burden and fear its potential negative impact on their lives, older generations, like Koh Boonsoon’s, view it as essential. This clash of perspectives is evident in the experiences of individuals like Jiyoung and Daehyun, who initially saw having children as a natural progression after marriage but now find their views on the matter diverging significantly (Cho 122).

While the Korean government is scrambling to boost birth rates, abortion laws in South Korea are currently in a state of flux, reflecting ongoing debates and legal uncertainties. Following a pivotal 2019 ruling by the Constitutional Court, which deemed the country’s anti-abortion laws unconstitutional, the National Assembly has yet to pass comprehensive new legislation ([Human Rights Watch](#)). This legislative vacuum has left women in a challenging position, with limited access to abortion services. Imported injectable abortion pills remain illegal, and many Catholic and Christian hospitals refuse to perform the procedure altogether.

In situations like this, Korean women receive mixed signals from society about having babies. On one hand, their government and families push them to have children; on the other hand, they are told that they should only have “legitimate” babies in “legitimate” families. Since Korean society still stigmatizes birth outside of wedlock, single mothers remain in the gap between prevailing social stigma and access to safe and proper abortion. The Korean Unwed Mother’s Families Association (KUMFA) explains that Korean society “judges and criticizes unwed mothers for being sexually promiscuous, and even their families don’t protect unwed mothers. During pregnancy, families force them to have an abortion, and there is no way but to leave their homes only to save their children, and when they enter unwed mothers’ facilities, they are continually pressured or forced to give up their babies for adoption” ([KUMFA](#)). Social pressure drives thousands of unmarried women to choose between abortion and adoption—which options are both painful and traumatizing to women. Korean government is increasing the fund for support for single mothers, but it is economically and socially difficult to bear the burden of raising children alone—especially for women—in Korea. The few women who decide to raise a child alone risk a life of poverty and disgrace, explains [“Group Resists Social Stigma for Unwed Mothers”](#) from *The New York Times*. The article explains that in 2019, 100% of overseas adoptees from Korea were children of unwed mothers. For this reason, South Korea has a very low rate of out-of-wedlock births. According to [OECD’s 2020 report](#), “in Japan, Korea and Turkey, the rate is as low as around 2-3%.” Unless the marriage system is changed to favor women or society actively helps single mothers have and raise children, South Korea’s birth rate is unlikely to rebound.

## Now and Then (2): America



Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were* Cover Page. [Amazon Books](#).

A boy and a girl are playing in the yard of a suburban home with a well-managed lawn. The father is cooking on the grill in the backyard, and the mother is setting an outdoor table. The picturesque middle-class nuclear family of mom, dad, and two kids—they're all white—is the front page of Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were* (2016). With the image of the typical American nuclear family in the foreground, Coontz challenges the “idealized” image of the 1950's American family. Coontz emphasizes that the 1950s American family model was not representative of most American families. This model, often cited as “traditional,” was feasible only under the specific economic and political circumstances of the time. “The decade of the 1950s” in the United States, Coontz explains, “was extremely atypical” and “Job security was greater then than it has been for the past twenty years. Housing was more affordable for a single-

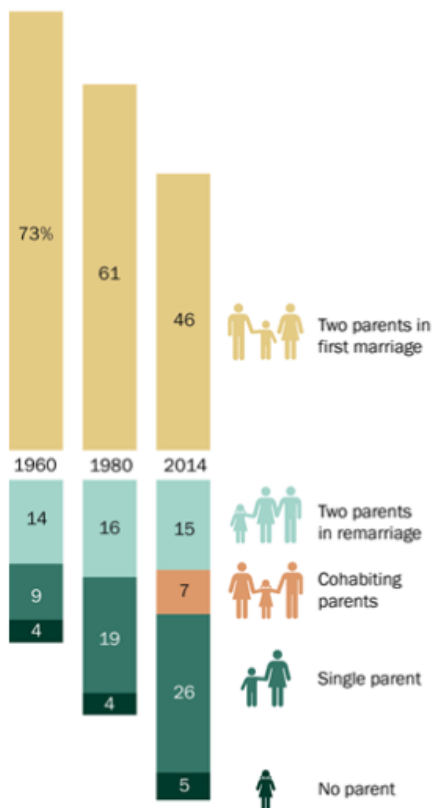
earner family. Although poverty was higher than in the 1980s or 1990s, it was decreasing much more rapidly than even at the height of the 1990s boom, while income inequality, unlike today, was also falling” (13-14). Moreover, the Cold War era emphasized traditional gender roles as a means of promoting social stability and combating perceived threats of communism. This political climate reinforced the image of the nuclear family as a bulwark against social upheaval: “A ‘normal’ family and vigilant mother became the ‘front line’ of defense against treason; anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition” (Coontz 53-54).

Coontz emphasizes that, like South Korea’s ideals, the American middle class was a “mirage” in the rapid-growth era. The assumed desire for the “traditional” American family—where gender roles of husband and wife are clearly divided, and the “breadwinner” earns enough to support a family of four—is no less than a nostalgia for a past that does not even exist. She explains that the “traditional model” and “traditional value” of the American family was only possible in the 1950s, and it never was, and never will be a sustainable model for many families. Coontz points out that even in the 1950s, these “normal” families were not the only ones that existed, but that the media, government, and mainstream society “denied” the other forms of families that deviated from these “new norms” (52). Single parenthood, divorced couples, gay and lesbian couples, working mothers, extended families, and adoptive families have always existed in American history.

Nowadays, many states and the federal government are more open to more diverse forms of family other than families of heterosexual couples with biological children. Trends in American family formation are changing ever more rapidly in the 21st century. The number of marriages is decreasing, and the proportion of “traditional” family with two-parent in their first marriage is also decreasing. Births outside of marriage have been increasing since the 1950s, meaning that children born outside of the institutional family system are also increasing. Some people call these diverse forms of family “broken homes” ([The Heritage Foundation](#)), while many others say that the trend simply reflects that the benefit and comfort of the institutional marriage is plainly becoming less appealing to the contemporary individuals.

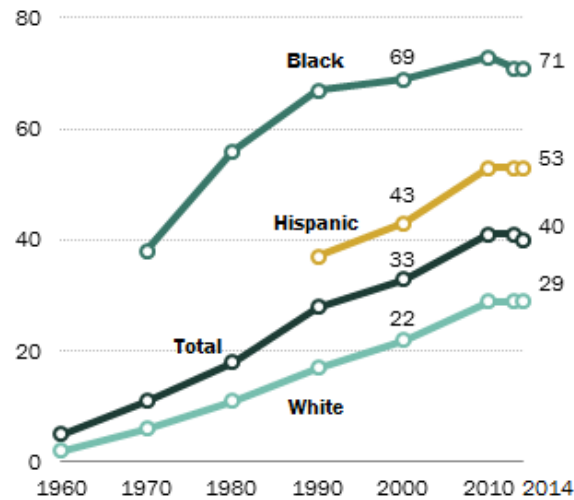
### For children, growing diversity in family living arrangements

% of children living with ...



### The decoupling of marriage and childbearing

% of births to unmarried women



Note: Whites and blacks include only single-race non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. 2014 data are preliminary. Data for Asians only not available.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics natality data

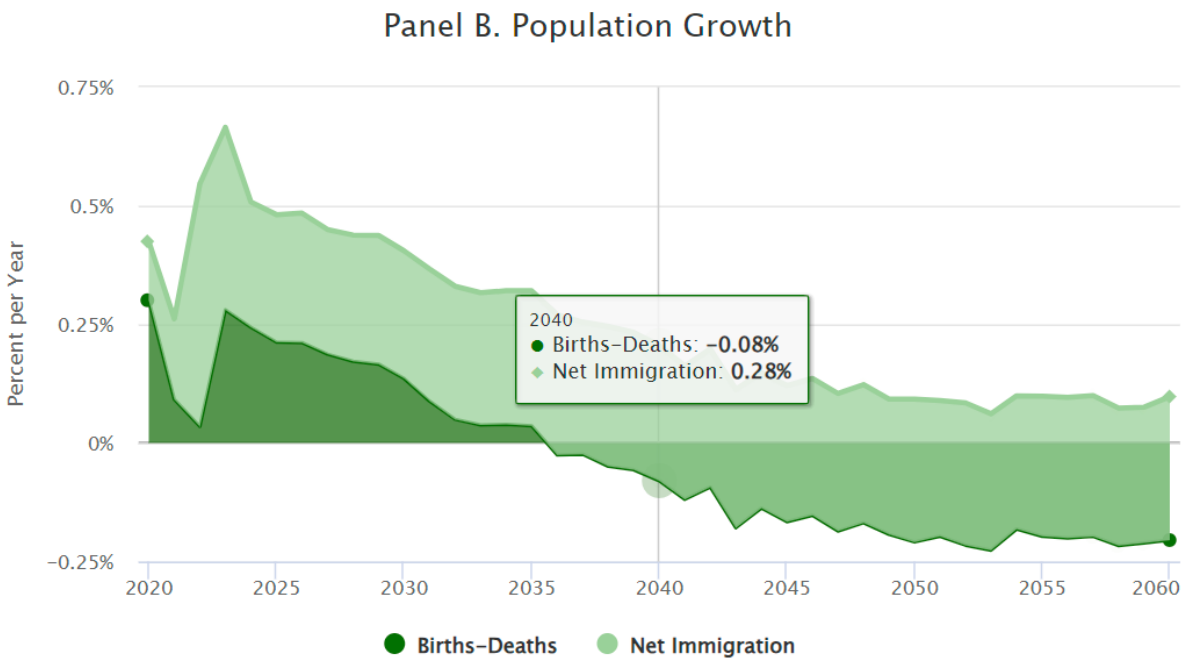
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

American Family Today (2015 Survey). [Pew Research Center](https://www.pewresearch.org).

American families have never been homogenous, either historically or culturally. In fact, the country has experienced radical changes in related policies and legal decisions since its foundation. The traditional family notion of “family is what it always has been” is a precarious one, especially in the United States, which has seen many changes in legal decisions regarding family and sexual intimacy. In the case of the United States, even though the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledges that “the U.S. Constitution protected a “private realm of family life which the state cannot enter” (Cott 1), “the right to privacy” and the governmental intervention or intrusion have clashed over the entire U.S. legal history. The four landmark Supreme Court decisions related to the right to privacy show this well, according to VOA article [“Four Supreme Court Rulings That Could Be Impacted by Reversal of Abortion Decision.”](#) For example, since the founding of the country in the 1770s, “interracial” marriages between white and non-white individuals were illegal in many states. This changed with the 1967 Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, which struck down laws banning interracial marriage as unconstitutional. Also, the U.S. legal system banned the use of birth control or contraception until the landmark 1965 case *Griswold v.*

Connecticut, which ruled that such bans violated the “right of marital privacy.” Similarly, in 2003, *Lawrence v. Texas* invalidated sodomy laws nationwide, affirming that consensual sexual conduct was part of the liberty protected by the constitution. *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 was a monumental decision that legalized same-sex marriage across the United States. This decision underscored that the legal definition of marriage can evolve with societal changes. Another significant case, *Roe v. Wade* (1973), recognized a woman’s constitutional right to privacy, which extended to her decision to have an abortion. However, this ruling was overturned in 2022 by *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, affecting many women and families’ reproductive rights. These Supreme Court rulings illustrate how marriage and family can be defined dramatically differently as society changes.

Further contributing to the diversity of U.S. households is the acceptance of immigrants, which is still vibrant in the 21st century. The U.S. has a fertility rate of 1.7 children per woman as of 2022 ([World Bank](#)), which is the 49th lowest birthrate country out of 243 countries. However, the government is not in a panic as in South Korea. The United States government declares that “the U.S. does not endorse population ‘stabilization’ or ‘control.’ The ‘ideal’ family size should be determined by the desires of couples, not governments” ([U.S. Department of State](#)). The country’s birth rate is well below the 2.1 births per woman that is needed to sustain its population, but immigrants are coming in every year to fill the gap. The [Penn Wharton Budget Model](#) predicts that “although U.S. birth rates have declined and are projected to remain below the population replacement, net immigration and improvements in longevity will continue to generate positive population growth through 2100.”



U.S. Demographic Projections with Immigration. [Penn Wharton Budget Model](#).

## Suggested Close Reading Exercises

### Whose Family?

In the novel, Jiyoung and Daehyun have different sentiments about getting a marriage certificate. Having a wedding and moving in together does not legally consummate a marriage. By detailing the scene where Jiyoung and Daehyun fill out their marriage license, the novel shows how families are legally established in South Korea and how it affects individuals.

Circulate the following passage to students:

On the Wednesday that marked the one-month anniversary of their wedding ceremony, Jiyoung caught the last train home from work, and Daehyun came home unusually early, made himself ramen, did the dishes, cleaned out the fridge and folded laundry while watching a TV show. When Jiyoung walked in, he was waiting for her with a piece of paper on the dining table. It was the form to legally register their marriage. He'd downloaded and printed it out at work and had two guys from work sign as witnesses. Jiyoung couldn't help but laugh. "What's the rush? We had a wedding and we live together. Nothing will change because of one document." "It changes how we feel." Jiyoung had been oddly moved that he was in a rush to make the marriage legal. [...] She didn't think legal procedures changed how she felt. Was Daehyun more committed for wanting to make the marriage legally binding, or was she more dedicated for thinking she'd always feel the same whether they were official or not? Jiyoung saw her husband in a new light—more dependable, yet oddly more alien. [...] Then came section five: "Do you agree that your child will take his or her mother's surname and place of family origin?" "What do you want to do about this?" "About what?" "Number five here." Daehyun read the question out loud, looked at Jiyoung and casually said, "I think 'Jung' is a decent surname." [...] "Most people still take their father's last name. People will think that there's some story behind the kid if they have their mother's last name. There will be a lot of explaining and correcting and confirming to do if the child takes the mother's name," Jiyoung said and Daehyun nodded. (Cho 116-119)

In small groups, ask students to discuss this passage with the following prompts:

1. Why do you think they have different thoughts and perspectives on marriage? Why does Daehyun think that getting legally married would make him feel different about his relationship with Jiyoung?
2. Do you think getting legally married is different from living with your partner? What is the difference between doing a wedding ceremony and turning the marriage registration form in? How does marriage affect the relationship between the two people?
3. Why do you think Daehyun "came home unusually early" and did all the housework before filling out the registration form?

4. Why do you think Jiyoung “saw her husband in a new light” when Daehyun brought the marriage registration form home? Why does she feel that her husband is “in a rush”? How do you think Jiyoung felt while filling out the marriage license?
5. Why did Jiyoung and Daehyun choose to follow Daehyun’s surname instead of Jiyoung’s? What do you think about their decision and how it was made?

### **Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions**

#### **To Marry or Not to Marry**

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” The famous first line of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was considered true for a very long time. How about today? This unit prompts students to think about the alternative forms of familial relationship by taking marriage “seriously.”

1. Do you want to get married? Do you think marriage is essential to your life? Why do you want to get married? What do you think is the most important element in deciding who should become your spouse? Love, trust, economic stability, social acknowledgement, to have children, or something else?
2. In your opinion, what are some disadvantages you might face if you do not get married in the future? In contrast, what are some advantages of marriage?
3. If the United States could legally recognize a special relationship with another person outside of the current institution of marriage, what kind of relationship or community would you like to have?

#### **“Broken Families”?**

One of the most powerful messages that *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* conveys is that the ineffable, unspeakable problems and dysfunctions of family not only exist in the “broken” ones, but also can be found in the most “normal” and “traditional” families. It is questionable that the problems often thought to be caused by “broken families,” such as abuse, violence, unstable emotional support, social stigma, or economic hardships stem from the family form itself. Indeed, conflicts between family members are always harmful to other members, especially to children. However, as Shawn Briley, a licensed clinical social worker says, “the level of conflict between parents—not the fact that parents won’t be living together—is the factor that contributes the most to this risk” ([Our Family Wizard](#)). In other words, the mental stress of being in a family comes not from the shape of the family, but from how the family deals with conflicts and problems. As Jiyoung’s family demonstrates, if a “broken” family is malfunctioning, oppressive to its members, and emotionally and economically taxing, then traditional and non-traditional families alike risk falling into these problems.

Read “[Today’s Families are Resilient—not Broken](#)” from *Our Family Wizard* with students. After reading the article, lead a group discussion with the questions and prompts below:

1. What makes a family? Ask students to finish the sentence starting “A family is...,” focusing on the essential elements of a family.
2. This time, have students complete the sentence that starts with “A family is broken when...” Have students focus on what makes family relationships unstable and toxic. What do you think is the biggest factor that makes a home dysfunctional?
3. Do you think Jiyoung’s family is “broken?” Or do you think her family is “normal?”
4. Do you think the conflicts and rifts between her family are mendable?
5. If you were one of Jiyoung’s family members, what would you do to relieve Jiyoung’s stress and mental symptoms? How would you show your support? How is this connected to the family values that you listed as “essential?”

## UNIT ACTIVITY AND PROJECT IDEAS

### Clock in the Unpaid Labor

This activity demonstrates why unpaid labor is difficult to track and translate into time and money, and that this “invisible” work or “ghost labor” is nonetheless essential to the lives of individuals and communities. This activity will encourage students to think about how domestic labor is distributed within their own families and whether it is fair.

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Laundry							
Dishes							
Cleaning							
Meal Prep							
...							

1. Teachers create a table like the one above and hand it out to students.
2. Based on what they have learned, ask students to think of about 10-15 different types of labor that take place at home and are often unpaid. Examples of types of labor might include food preparation, laundry, doing the dishes, grocery shopping, yardwork, searching for products, talking to or listening to other family members, etc.
3. For a week, ask students to time themselves each day to see how many minutes they spend on the tasks that they think constitute reproductive labor.

4. After a week of recording, students will go over what they wrote and conduct an analysis.
5. First, try to analyze the different types of unpaid labor. A suggested categorization includes physical, emotional, mental, and cognitive labor.
6. Second, students analyze how much money would cost if they were to put a value on these tasks reproductive labor they performed during the week.
7. Third, step back and write a brief note on which member in the family spend more time on what task.
8. After the activity, students write a short paper describing what they learned from filling out the reproductive labor timesheet for a week and by analyzing the labor. Encourage students to focus on what they learned about the distribution of domestic labor within the household.

### **What Do Marriage and Family Mean in South Korea and the United States**

In this activity, students will draw on what they have learned so far in this unit to write an essay that comparatively analyzes the marriage and family cultures of South Korea and the United States. Students are encouraged to do further research from online sources, newspaper articles, books, etc. on the areas they want to focus on as they write their essays. Make it clear that the purpose of this activity is not to argue that either culture is superior or more commendable than the other. Points students can consider deeply as they write their essays may include:

1. Do Korean and American family views reflect cultural differences between East and West?
2. What are the differences between Korean and American views of family and marriage? How are the two countries' histories and forms of family related?
3. What would *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* have been like if it had been written with an American woman born in the United States as the main character? What if she was a white female born in 1982 in the United States? What if she was a non-white woman? What would her family history have been like?

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## UNIT 6. EVERYDAY VIOLENCE, EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

### ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit is designed to explore the intricate and deeply rooted issues of violence and resistance, with a particular focus on how these themes intersect with gender. Through a careful examination of both overt and subtle forms of gender-based violence, as well as the various ways individuals and communities resist such oppression, this unit aims to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of these critical social dynamics. By engaging with a range of texts, activities, and discussions, students will be encouraged to critically analyze the ways in which gender and power are intertwined, both in everyday life and in broader societal structures.

The first subunit introduces an opening activity that challenges them to think critically about the societal norms and expectations surrounding gender. This activity sets the stage for the unit by prompting students to reflect on their own experiences and assumptions, fostering a deeper awareness of how gender roles are constructed and maintained.

The second subunit, titled “Everyday Violence,” delves into the pervasive nature of gender-based violence. This section explores various forms of violence, including rape culture, femicide, and the evolving landscape of sexual violence in the digital age. Through case studies, media analysis, and critical readings, students will gain a nuanced understanding of how these forms of violence are perpetuated and normalized within society. This subunit also encourages students to consider the ways in which such violence is both a product of and a means of reinforcing patriarchal power structures.

In the third subunit, “Everyday Resistance,” the focus shifts to the strategies and actions taken by feminist individuals and groups to resist and challenge gender-based violence. This section highlights examples of resistance within South Korea, examining how feminist movements both online and off around 2015 have responded to issues such as digital sex crimes and misogyny. Additionally, the global impact of movements like #MeToo is explored, allowing students to see how acts of resistance against patriarchal oppression can transcend cultural and national boundaries. This subunit aims to show the importance of recognition of scenes of violence and action against them—both collective and individual—however trivial they might be.

Each subsection is designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the novel through close-reading exercises, discussion questions, and in-class assignments. Ideas for possible unit projects are listed at the end. Below is the table of the contents for this unit.

Subunit 1. Opening Activity

Subunit 2. Everyday Violence

Sexual Violence

Femicide

Sexual Violence in the Digital Era

Suggested Close Reading Activities

Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions

Subunit 3. Everyday Resistance

South Korea's "Feminism Reboot"

#MeToo as Global Phenomenon

Subunit 4. Situating the Novel in the Current Context

How Korean and Global Readers Received This Book

Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions

Subunit 5. Unit Activities and Project Ideas

Forming Solidarity

Library Project

"[Insert your name], Born [insert your birth year]"

Video Book Review of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

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## OPENING ACTIVITY

*\*This activity is based on The New York Times article [“The Reckoning: Teaching About the #MeToo Moment and Sexual Harassment with Resources From The New York Times.”](#) Since this unit will cover sensitive topics that require more caution in teaching, teachers are encouraged to prepare using this article and [“10 Ways to Talk to Students About Sensitive Issues in the News”](#) from The New York Times. Referring to these articles, teachers can add or subtract activities at their discretion.*

Have students write about what they already know, or think they know, about sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement. Teachers can have the class submit their thoughts anonymously by putting folded pieces of paper into a basket, or you can have them write publicly by using a board.

To prompt their thinking, start by asking:

1. What have you heard or learned about sexual harassment?
2. What do you know about the #MeToo movement?
3. How do you feel about the movement? You can represent your feelings with a word or a n image.
4. What questions and thoughts do you have about this movement and the many issues it has raised over the past several years?
5. Why might this be a difficult topic to discuss in class?

After students have had time to reflect, discuss all but the last question as a class. If students wrote anonymously, teachers might read aloud from some of the submissions to get the discussion started. As the class talks, highlight patterns in their feelings and observations and write down student questions on a poster paper so you can continue to address them over the course of the unit.

Finally, take on the following questions:

1. Why might this be a difficult topic to discuss in class?
2. What barriers might there be to learning about this topic and discussing it as a group?
3. Are there ground rules that should be developed? If so, what should they be?
4. Overall, do they think this is an important topic to take on in school? Why or why not?

After discussion, invite students to a [“barometer”](#) activity. In this activity, students listen to a statement and then stand up and move to a point between “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree” that reflects their opinion. Begin by stating the prompt, then allow students to find

their place on the continuum. After all students have moved, ask a few to explain why they chose that position. If they feel so moved by the discussion, let them change their place on the barometer and explain why they did so. You may also want students to prepare their answers in writing before engaging in the discussion. Some possible prompts include:

- Stereotypes about men and women are harmful.
- Gender stereotypes are harmful not only to women, but to others well.
- It's hard to tell the difference between sexual harassment and flirting.
- Even when someone said “no,” it sometimes means “yes.”
- If someone said “yes,” it always means “yes.”
- If we wanted to end sexual harassment, it would be easy to do.
- Sexual harassment is mostly a women's issue.
- Sexual harassment is a problem at our school.

## EVERYDAY VIOLENCE

**Content Warning:** This subsection covers sexual violence, such as rape, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and digital sex crimes. Prior to introducing potentially disturbing topics in class, teachers might articulate a verbal content/trigger warning such as the following:

“Next class our discussion will touch on the sexual harassment described or implied in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. This content can be disturbing, so I encourage you to prepare yourself emotionally beforehand. If you believe that you will find the discussion to be upsetting, you may choose to not participate in the discussion or to leave the classroom with no consequences.”

The decision to preface potentially disturbing content with a content warning is ultimately up to teachers. A teacher who does so might want to include in the course outline a preliminary statement, such as the following:

Our classroom provides an open space for the critical and civil exchange of ideas. Some readings and other content in this course will include topics that some students may find offensive and/or upsetting. I'll aim to forewarn students about potentially disturbing content and I ask all students to help to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity.

For more information about content/trigger warnings, read [“Content Warnings.”](#) published by the University of Waterloo.

## Sexual Violence

“Boys are like that. They’re meaner to the girls they like. I’ll give him a talking-to. Why don’t you take this incident as an opportunity to become better friends instead of changing desk-mates on unfriendly terms?” (Cho 31). Jiyoung’s memory of her “first social experience” begins with the “pranks of the boy desk-mate” (Cho 28). The boy desk-mate harasses Jiyoung by repeatedly hitting her, taking her things, quibbling over her words, and making fun of her outfit. One day, he kicks Jiyoung’s shoes in class, causing her to get in trouble with the teacher. When Jiyoung says that she never wants to share a desk with him again, the teacher explains that his “pranks”—or “harassment or violence” in Jiyoung’s own words—are all an expression of interest. Jiyoung is confused and she thinks to herself: “If you like someone, you’re friendlier and nicer to them. To friends, to family, to your pet dogs and cats” (Cho 31). This anecdote from the second chapter of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* illustrates a particular message that Korean society conveys about male-female relationships as early as elementary school. According to Jiyoung’s elementary school teacher, the relationship between a woman and a man—a heterosexual relationship—is different from the relationships between her and her “friends, family, pet dogs and cats.” The message is loud and clear: if a boy likes a girl, he will be “mean” to her, follow her around relentlessly, and even hit her. And if this happens, other people around them will tell the girl to “become better friends” with him rather than keep them apart.

The novel describes sexual microaggressions and unpleasant sexual encounters throughout Jiyoung’s various stages of life. As Jiyoung grows older, she learns that “that it was a wide world out there filled with perverts” (Cho 51). From the “infamous flasher who lurked around the school gate” (Cho 44) and the anonymous and “suspicious hands grazed her bottom and breasts” (Cho 51) to her cram school classmate who believes that Jiyoung is “flirting with [her] hi’s and goodbyes” (Cho 55) and “male teachers who reached up and pinched the soft flesh of the underarm, patted students on the bottom, or ran their hands down the spine over the bra strap” (Cho 52), Jiyoung must always be prepared for the threat of sexual violence lurking around every corner. *Kim Jiyoung* does not go into detail about the pain and suffering Jiyoung experienced through these events. However, by introducing and passing over these examples in a casual manner, the novel makes the reader realize how pervasive sexual harassment is in everyday life.

The novel demonstrates that a patriarchal and sexist society does more than limit women’s choices, curb their aspirations, and keep them in relative poverty; it inflicts physical and mental harm, and sometimes even death. As in the previous unit, girls including Jiyoung are taught that if something happens, it is their fault, not the perpetrators’. As seen in the examples of Jiyoung’s desk-mate, ex-boyfriend, and cram school classmate, the people around Jiyoung either defend the perpetrator, “he likes you,” or blame Jiyoung for her behavior. In many cultures, including South Korea and the United States, sexist gender views, which hold men and women to different sexual standards, make violence against women tolerable, acceptable, or even

encouraged. This subunit will explore the ways in which patriarchal and sexist societies convey and reproduce misleading messages about violence against women.

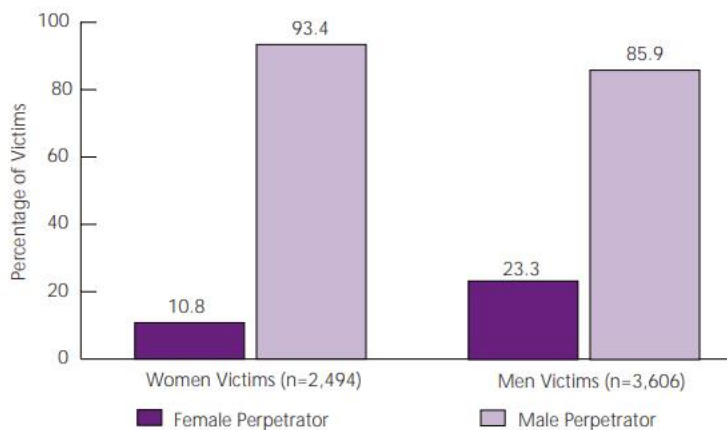
Sexual violence does not always take the form of physical contact. Sexual violence is an all-encompassing term, the legal definition of which differs from state to state in the U.S. It includes both physical sexual violence and non-physical sexual violence. According to [Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network](#) (RAINN), physical sexual violence includes: sexual assault, unwanted sexual touching, rape—that involves vaginal, anal, or oral penetration or being forced to penetrate others—and attempted rape; non-physical sexual violence includes stalking, verbal sexual harassment, voyeurism, exposing or flashing, and production and distribution of sexual video or images without consent.

Feminist sociologist Dianne Herman points out that American culture subscribes the strict gender roles and thereby it nurtures, promotes, and normalizes sexual violence against women—in other words, according to Herman, American culture is a “rape culture.” In her article “The Rape Culture,” Herman argues that sexual assaults are not committed by exceptionally violent men, nor targets particularly “misbehaving” women: “What is clear is that the rapist is not an exotic freak. Rather, rape evolves out of a situation in which ‘normal’ males feel a need to prove themselves to be ‘men’ by displaying dominance over females” (Herman 33). Anyone can be a perpetrator or victim of sexual violence in a society that subscribes to the “dominant-submissive” gender roles. Herman explains that “the aggressive-passive, dominant-submissive, me-Tarzan-you-Jane nature of the relationship between the sexes in our culture, there is a close association between violence and sexuality. [...] Thus, it is very difficult in our society to differentiate rape from ‘normal’ heterosexual relations” (Herman 45). By Herman’s definition, all societies that endorse these gender norms promote rape culture.

Sexual harassment and violence are prevalent not only in the United States but worldwide: according to the [World Population Review](#)’s 2024 report, “approximately 35% of women worldwide have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime.” Considering that in many countries “with data available on rape (including the U.S.), fewer than 40% of those women seek help—and fewer than 10% seek assistance from law enforcement,” (World Population Review) it is expected that there are many more victims of rape and sexual assault/harassment than are captured in statistics. According to RAINN, “on average, there are 463,634 victims (age 12 or older) of rape and sexual assault each year in the United States,” meaning that “every 68 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted.” As of 1998, an estimated 17.7 million American women had been victims of attempted or completed rape, indicating that “1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.” Many South Korean women also experience sexual violence throughout their lives. According to a [survey conducted by the South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2022](#), about 10% of female respondents reported victimization using communication media such as PCs and cell phones, 17% reported genital exposure, and 7% reported sexual harassment.

Sexual assaults can happen to individuals of any age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or social background; likewise, anyone can commit sexual assault. However, in the United States and South Korea, the distribution of sex of rape/physical assault victims and perpetrators are significantly gendered. Statistics show that “82% of all juvenile victims are female” and “90% of adult rape victims are female” (RAINN) in the United States; and “more than 90% of people who commit sexual violence against women are men” ([Office of Women’s Health](#)). The [National Institute of Justice Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (NIJCDC) reports that “violence against women is primarily male violence,” pointing out that sexual offences in America are primarily a gendered phenomenon. This is because “most violence perpetrated against adults is perpetrated by males: 93 percent of the women and 86 percent of the men who were raped and/or physically assaulted since the age of 18 were assaulted by a male.”

**Exhibit 10: Distribution of Adult Rape and Physical Assault Victims by Sex of Perpetrator and Sex of Victim**



Note: Total percentages by sex of victim exceed 100 because some victims had multiple perpetrators.

The Distribution of Adult Rape and Physical Assault Victims by Sex of Perpetrator and Victim.  
[National Institute of Justice Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.](#)

NIJCDC also defines that “violence against women is primarily partner violence”—“76 percent of the women who were raped and/or physically assaulted since the age of 18 were assaulted by a current or former husband, cohabiting partner, or date; 17 percent were victimized by an acquaintance, such as a friend, neighbor, or coworker.” Even though many women experience sexual and physical violence at the hands of a partner or spouse, rape by a spouse was not recognized as a crime in the United States until relatively recently. Criminal rape accusations between spouses were not available in many states up until 1993. “Marital or spousal rape is illegal in every state, but it’s only been this way since 1993. Until 1976, every state had a ‘marital exemption’ that allowed a husband to rape his wife without fear of legal consequences.

Despite being illegal now, certain states still treat spousal or marital rape differently than other rape offenses” ([Criminal Defense Lawyer](#)). In South Korea, “spousal rape has not been seen as a crime in South Korea since the Supreme Court denied such a crime in the 1970s, except for in special cases, such as when divorce was pending,” reports [“Top Court Recognizes Marital Rape as Crime for First Time”](#) from Yonhap News. According to the article, marital rape was recognized as a crime for the first time in 2013 in South Korea. This legal perspective that decriminalizes marital rape reflects that women’s body and sexuality has been often viewed as something that belongs to her husband. The legal loophole of spousal exemption in the law, Herman argues, implicates that “*violent, unwanted sex* does not necessarily define rape. Instead, rape is *illegal sex* [...] In the law’s eyes, violence in legal sexual intercourse is permissible, but sexual relations with a woman who is not one’s property is not” (Herman 46, emphasis original).

As long as the patriarchal social structure in family, school, government, and media reproduce and reinforce the message that male-dominance and male-aggression is “natural” and “inevitable”—as Steven Goldberg’s *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* argues—current rape culture will prevail. Herman argues that stronger laws, punitive systems, and improved social and economic status for women will help mitigate rape culture, but they are less likely to solve the underlying problem:

American culture produces rapists when it encourages the socialization of men to subscribe to values of control and dominance, callousness and competitiveness, and anger and aggression, and when it discourages the expression by men of vulnerability, sharing, and cooperation. In the end, it is not only the women who become the victims of these men, but also the offenders themselves, who suffer. These men lose the ability to satisfy needs for nurturance, love, and belonging, and their anger and frustration from this loss expresses itself in acts of violence and abuse against others. The tragedy for our society is that we produce so many of these hardened men. (Herman 49)

What Herman emphasizes here is that escaping from the rape culture requires not only a different relationship between the genders, but a different view of masculinity and femininity in our societies. It is important for our societies to move from a rape culture to a consent culture to change the atmosphere around gender and sexual relationships, which emphasizes power dynamics and hierarchy over “vulnerability, sharing, and cooperation.”

Unfortunately, several myths about rape in our societies blame the victims and allow the perpetrators to get away without legal consequences by blurring what constitutes proper consent in sexual relationships. A [2022 survey conducted by South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family](#) reports that 5 out of 10 respondents agreed that people who have been sexually assaulted go to the police immediately after the assault, 4 to 5 in 10 also believed that wearing revealing clothing contributes to sexual assault, and 3 in 10 believed that allowing kissing or touching meant allowing sex. Contrary to these “rape myths,” broken consent does not only

happen when one person submits to another through physical force; victims of sexual violence do not always act like a “typical victim;” and sexual violence can happen even in situations that require the most formal manner and attire. Whereas sexual assault or harassment is usually considered on the basis of a clear “No means no” principle—for example, how fiercely the victim resisted, how clearly the victim communicated, and so on—today’s sex crimes have evolved into something more subtle and covert. In many social circumstances, there are cases [“When Yes Doesn’t Mean Yes,”](#) says [Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Nova Scotia Resource](#). Many instances of sexual violence occur in relationships with a power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim. For example, in the workplace, “quid pro quo” sexual harassment and assault is more likely to take place. This term refers to the case when “a supervisor seeks sexual favors from a worker in return for some type of job benefit—such as a raise, better hours, promotion, etc.—or to avoid some type of detriment like a pay cut, demotion, poor performance review, etc.” ([Thomson Reuters](#)). In such a hostile work environment, victims may be forced to make unwanted choices under the pressure of power and hierarchy.

In South Korea, former presidential candidate Ahn Hee-jung was convicted of rape in 2019, demonstrating that sexual assault can occur outside of “rape myths.” *The New York Times* article [“Ex-Presidential Candidate in South Korea Is Jailed for Sexual Assault”](#) details this case, which is one of the country’s recent rulings that emphasized gender sensitivity in judicial decisions. The supreme court found that sexual assault was established between Ahn and Kim Jieun—the victim—even though the victim “was not like typical victim,” and the defense attorneys of Ahn argued that the victim “had accompanied Mr. Ahn to restaurants and wine bars, [...] showed her friendliness toward him,” because “[the court] found Kim’s testimony credible, consistent and detailed, and that Mr. Ahn had enough power to coerce her into unwanted sexual relations” (*The New York Times*). As this societal shift toward sexual consent continues, awareness of the power disparity between the genders will become clearer, and from there, we can have a better discussion about rape culture.

### **Suggested Journaling Prompts about Sexual Violence**

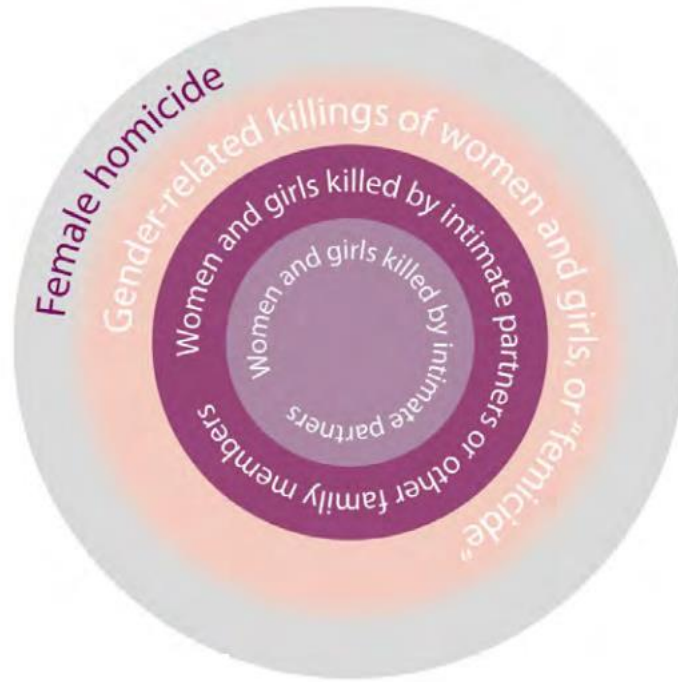
At the end of this section, teachers can encourage students to do a journaling exercise. This is to organize what they have learned and prepare them for what comes next. Students do not have to share their writings with the class (or even, the instructor). Useful writing prompts include:

1. What is consent in sexual context? What are the prerequisites for sexual consent between two people? How does your understanding of consent compare to what was discussed in this section?
2. Reflect on a relationship or situation where you noticed a power imbalance, whether in school, work, or your personal life. How did this power dynamic affect the interactions? How do you think these dynamics relate to the concept of rape culture discussed in this section?
3. Reflect on a time when you witnessed or experienced a microaggression, particularly

- one based on gender. How did you or others respond to it? How might you handle a similar situation differently in the future?
4. Consider the language you and your peers use daily. Are there phrases or jokes that, in hindsight, might contribute to a culture that normalizes harassment or violence? How can you work towards creating a more respectful and inclusive environment through the words you choose?

### **Femicide**

Femicide refers to the intentional gender-related killing of women and girls. Feminist sociologist Diana Russell coined the term in her testimony about misogynist murder before the 1976 International Tribunal on Crimes against Women, defining the term as “killing of females by males because they are female” ([Diana Russell](#)). UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC)’s 2018 research [“Global Study on Homicide: Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls”](#) defines this term more broadly. According to UNODC, femicide includes not only cases where women and girls killed by intimate partners or other family members—such as honor killing or dowry killing—but also female-targeted homicide in other contexts. This includes killings of women in armed conflict, organized crimes, or human trafficking; killings of women because of their sexual orientation and gender identity; because of accusation of sorcery or witchcraft; of sex workers; and under other cultural or religious contexts such as genital mutilation, child marriage, or son preferences. Under this definition, sex-selective abortions that was widespread in 1960s to 1990s South Korea can also be categorized under femicide, since they were committed to mothers and unborn fetuses by their family members based on their sex.



Femicide and Its Range. [United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime.](#)

Many people think of femicide as something that only happens in the “third world,” where women’s rights are often lacking. However, femicide continues to occur in societies where many women have gained economic and social status and independence. Consider these headlines from January 2023: [“Father of ‘Idyllic’ Family is Charged after Driving Tesla off Cliff”](#) (*LA Times*); [“Utah Man Kills Wife, Five Children and Mother-in Law, Police Say”](#) (*The New York Times*); [“Ana Walshe’s Husband, Brian Walshe, is Charged with Murder”](#) (*CNN*). These reports of American women murdered by their intimate male partners demonstrate femicide occurs frequently in the United States. *The Washington Post* article [“Femicide Is Up”](#) reports that “between 2014 and 2020, the incidence of femicide in the United States has increased by 24 percent. In addition, intimate partner violence rose an estimated 8 percent during the coronavirus pandemic and does not appear to have subsided. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that, among our peer countries, the United States accounts for 70 percent of incidents of femicide and ranks 34th among all countries.” Patricia C. Lewis and colleagues, in their article “Femicide in the United States: A Call for Legal Codification and National Surveillance,” points out that an estimated 4,970 female victims were murdered in 2021, one third of whom were documented to have been killed by an intimate partner. Of note, the dynamics of female homicides differ from male homicides, in that most female homicides take place in the private sphere. In America, recognizing the intersectionality of gender and racial/ethnicity factor is crucial: Lewis et al. indicates that indigenous women have higher rates of homicide victimization than all other

ethnic groups, and Black women in America also face a greater risk of being murdered, particularly during pregnancy.

In South Korea, it is also not uncommon to find cases of women being murdered by their husbands, boyfriends, or ex-boyfriends in the news. In 2021, Korean news press *Hankyoreh* published a featured article that follows the trail of 427 murder cases of Korean women who were killed by their intimate partners, which first-instance verdicts were handed down between January 2016 and November 2021: [“500 Women Murdered, and No One Stopped It.”](#) These are a few of the incidents described in the report: In July 2021, a woman in her 20s was seriously injured in an office building in Mapo-gu, Seoul, and was rushed to the hospital, where she later died. She was assaulted by a man she was dating. A month later, in August, two women were killed by a criminal who escaped after cutting off his electronic ankle bracelet. They were in their 40s and 50s, respectively, and had gone to work as karaoke helpers. Another woman in her 50s was murdered in her apartment in April 2021. She was a mother of two precious children who had lived in fear of “wife beating” for 30 years (*Hankyoreh*). *Hankyoreh* names their featured article as “epidemiologist report,” because these murders have “patterns” and “types” like a chronic and widespread disease. The pattern is conspicuous: in South Korea, women of all ages, regions, and classes are being killed by their intimate male partners. “When a pattern of crimes emerges, law enforcement gives them a name to warn the public—serial killing, spree killing, voice phishing, etc. Each crime has a name, but this one, which claims the lives of more than 100 women a year in Korea, has no name yet. The killings have been so long that they became so natural” (*Hankyoreh*).

In South Korea, while fatal assault on women is on rise, there was a particular murder case that made many people aware of the dangers of femicide. In 2016, in Seocho-gu, Seoul, a 23-year-old woman was murdered in public toilet near the exit 10 of Gangnam Station by a total stranger. The assailant in his 30s waited in the toilet for nearly an hour, looking for a victim. He let the six men who entered the restroom go, but when the first woman entered the restroom, he attacked her multiple times with a 13-inch sashimi knife. According to *Hankyoreh*’s [“Gangnam Murderer Says He Killed ‘Because Women Have Always Ignored Me.’”](#) the perpetrator claimed to have killed her because “women have always ignored [him].” The court said this was not a hate crime against women—citing his mental illness—and sentenced him to 30 years in prison. Commonly known as “Gangnam Station murder” in South Korea, the incident shocked many Koreans. A lot of women sympathized with and imagined themselves as the victim, who was murdered near Gangnam Station which is always busy with heavy foot traffic, by a man with whom she had no relationship or acquaintance. “I only survived by luck,” some women said, expressing anger and fear that this could happen to any Korean woman (*Hankyoreh*, Gangnam Murderer). As this guide will discuss in more detail in the “Everyday Resistance” section, this incident was a wake-up call for many individuals in South Korea to begin to recognize misogyny and everyday violence against women.

As the Gangnam Station murderer displays, many femicide cases are perpetrated as a means of retaliation or punishment when women “dare” to challenge or deviate from male-oriented gender power, or when men feel they have been deprived of the power and strength “promised” to them. In Korea, many women were killed for upsetting men’s “feelings.” A woman is murdered for sarcastically responding to a senior man at work instead of listening to his advice; another murdered for nagging a male tenant about a debt. In another case, a woman who was younger than the perpetrator was doused with [paint] thinner and set on fire because she was giving instructions and talking back to him (*Hankyoreh*, 500 Women). Diana Russell explains in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* that “like rape, most murders of women by husbands, lovers, fathers, acquaintances, and strangers are [...] the most extreme form of sexist terrorism, motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women” (15). In a similar tone, UNODC highlights that “more can be done to prevent those killings” (12), especially about our society’s gender norms that tolerate and even encourage hostile and toxic masculinity. The research concludes that “more comprehensive range of coordinated services needs to be provided by police, criminal justice systems, health and social services,” but more importantly, “men need to be involved in efforts to combat intimate partner violence/family-related homicide and in changing cultural norms that move away from violent masculinity and gender stereotypes” (12). As *Hankyoreh* clarifies in their “epidemiologist report,” naming female-targeted homicide as femicide is not to frame men as potential perpetrators. Instead, “it is a methodology and slogan for recognizing the codes and patterns of particular violence to stop them.” Recognizing that society’s skewed gender power has taught men false messages about masculinity, and that these gender norms have caused enormous harm to all men, women, and non-binary people, are the beginning of stopping these “sexist terrorism.”

### **Sexual Violence in the Digital Era**

“‘Kim Jiyoung’s completely done with him, I think.’ Jiyoung heard someone mention her name. *Didn’t you have a thing for Kim Jiyoung. . . It was more than just a thing. . . Well, what are you waiting for, ask her out. . . We’ll help you out*, came the sound of several voices. [...] ‘Ew. That’s like chewing gum someone spat out,’ said a familiar voice” (Cho 79). One day, Jiyoung joins her hiking club’s trip. As she falls asleep in her room, Jiyoung “feels devastated” to hear a senior student that used to like her referring to her as “chewing gum who spat out” (Cho 79). The male student’s assessment of Jiyoung is typical slut-shaming: if a woman who has once “belonged” to another man, she is sexually “unpure,” thereby “worthless.” In this narrative, women’s bodies are priced and categorized according to their age, appearance, marriageability, sexual experience or “virginity,” and reproductive potential. More crucially, this “pricing” of women takes place in conversations between men—between “several voices” of men that strictly exclude women’s presence and their knowledge.

As the example of Jiyoung’s hiking club that is dominated and operated mainly by male members demonstrates, there is a tendency in many male-dominated communities that sexist

views are circulated and bolstered. This exclusionary, misogynistic—and by extension, strictly heteronormative and homophobic—male-dominated society is what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “male homosociality” in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick clarifies that male homosociality refers to the spectrum of male-male relationships that are characterized by social bonding, such as friendship, mentorship, rivalry, or collaboration. According to Sedgwick, these male homosocial bonds are crucial to the functioning of patriarchal society, as they often reinforce male dominance and exclusion of women from power structures. Male homosocial bonds are often intertwined with male homophobia, misogyny—because per Sedgwick, misogyny is not only oppressive of women but also of “the so-called feminine in men” (20)—and the regulation and redirection of male desire towards sexually “worthy” women. In this process, women become crucial commodities that are exchanged between men: “patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (Sedgwick 25-26).

In these male homosocial communities, misogynistic views that do not treat women as equal to men, sexualize women, or treat women as a commodity to be purchased or exchanged are sometimes expressed covertly and overtly, circulated, taught and acquired, and even celebrated. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* makes it clear that this distorted view of women, female sexuality, and femininity that male homosocial communities spread are not only held by men who are “indecent.” Jiyoung remembered the student who shamed her as “level-headed,” with a “practical way of handling things” (Cho 80). The student who made the chewing gum comment about Jiyoung is one of the men who falls into the “decent ones:” he was the one “who enjoyed drinking but didn’t force others to do so, and often bought the younger members food, but avoided eating with them lest they felt uncomfortable” (Cho 80). The toxicity of misogynistic male homosociality stems from the fact that not only does it perpetuate and reproduce misogynistic discourse within that community, but it also influences everyone in that community to endorse that norm, to a greater or lesser extent.

In contemporary society, these misogynistic discourses are not only present in traditional settings but have also found a robust platform online. In today’s age of anonymous internet communities and forums, male chauvinist and misogynistic hate speech can be circulated and reproduced openly and uncensored on the internet. Misogynistic online communities are particularly insidious, as they not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes but also invent new derogatory terms. In South Korea, these communities have coined terms like *doen jang nyeo*—bean paste women, a pejorative word for a woman who buys foreign luxury goods and Starbucks coffee but eats soybean paste stew for meals to scrimp money (*BBC*, [“The Languages with Built-In Sexism”](#))—and “mum-roach,” reflecting disdain and contempt towards women. These neologisms further entrench negative perceptions and fuel gender-based discrimination and harassment. An infamous male-dominated Korean forum whose members identify themselves as “alt-right” and anti-feminist, “Ilbe”—shortened term for *Ilgan Best* (*Daily Best*)—exemplify how

these online spaces facilitate the spread of misogynistic ideologies. Notorious for arguing that women should be beaten once in three days, Ilbe has been at the forefront of virulent misogynistic meme and militant sexist discourse production. *The Atlantic*'s [“The Real Reason South Koreans Aren't Having Babies”](#) describes the website as the following: “[Ilbe] receives about 20 million visits each month, in a country of just under 52 million people. (Its users are anti- lots of other things to anti-LGBTQ, anti-liberal, anti-immigrant). The Ilbe community has elements of the alt-right and the manosphere; some have likened it to 4chan or incel forums. Users refer to Korean women as *kimchinyeo*, or ‘kimchi women,’ stereotyping them as vain, materialistic, and manipulative. Men share sexist memes and complaints about reverse discrimination that one Korean writer has described as ‘paranoid misogyny.’”

In the United States, “Incel” culture is on rise in online communities such as 4chan, Manosphere, and misogynistic Facebook pages. Self-described “involuntary celibates”—many of them white, male, and heterosexual—resent women in general for not choosing them as sexual partners and accuse women who are only attracted to sexually successful “alpha males” of being shallow, materialistic, and superficial. “Chad”—a sexually attractive man, usually described as blonde, muscular white man—and “Stacy”—a “shallow” woman who is hyperfeminine and unattainable to incels—memes have emerged in these contexts. Incels believe that “Chads” are genetically superior to them, and that no amount of effort can make them sexually attractive to women. “[Incels are] particularly drawn to the nihilistic ‘black pill’ theory—the idea that they are the only ones who realize that the game of sex and attraction is rigged from birth. Self-help or positivity is frowned upon on incel forums. Anyone who successfully interacts with women is instantly branded a ‘fakecel’—meaning ‘fake incel’” (*BBC*, [“Incels: Inside a Dark World of Online Hate”](#)). This sense of disenfranchisement and “anger at the haves” can be traced to the gender perspective that treats women as a commodity that should be “fairly” distributed among men. Like the online communities that generate hate speech against women in South Korea, incel subculture believes that women’s right to sexual self-determination is a “usurpation” of men’s gender power—which treats women as the reward that masculinity deserves—and that women are “manipulative” and “exploitative” of men when they do not conform to this gender hierarchy (*BBC*).

What is more dangerous is that these instances of online hate speech and meme production are not just about verbal abuse. In South Korea and the United States, the ideologies produced by these harmful homosocial online communities can lead to more serious crimes, as the Gangnam Station murder demonstrates. In the United States, some incels believe they are revolutionizing a sexually and genetically unfair society. This sense of dark heroism has, in some cases, fueled terrorism such as mass shootings. In 2014, Elliot Rodger, a 22-year-old male, fatally stabbed or shot six people and injured 14 in Isla Vista, California. Rodger reportedly “viewed his actions as ‘retribution’ against womankind for sexually rejecting him,” according to *Vice*'s [“Killer Incels: How Misogynistic Men Sparked a New Terror Threat.”](#) On December 2021, a minor figure in the “Manosphere” went on a targeted killing spree across Denver. In [“He](#)

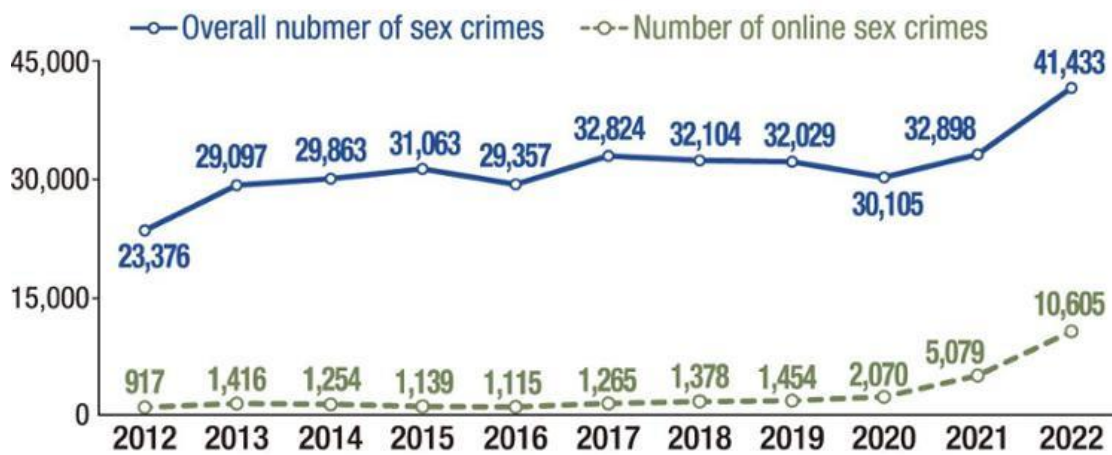
[Murdered 5 People. But Before Then, He Made a Movie About It.](#)” *Vice* describes the Manosphere, an online extremist forum that believes “in response to modernity’s degeneracy, men must form gangs and prepare for a post-collapse society that upholds violence as a natural human state.”

Beyond direct physical violence, misogyny in the digital space can also lead to more covert forms of digital sex crimes. Videos of illegal filming or forced sexual activities against women are often shared and circulated in online communities and social media chat rooms. For example, from 2017 to 2020, a sexual exploitation ring in which South Korea called themselves “Nth Room” distributed sexually explicit videos of women being physically and mentally blackmailed and filmed in Telegram chat rooms. The incident, which is the subject of a documentary on Netflix titled *Cyber Hell: Exposing an Internet Horror*, saw at least 103 known victims, 26 of whom were minors, be targeted. Tudum’s [“Everything You Need to Know About the Nth Room Case in ‘Cyber Hell’”](#) explicates this incident: “the victims were deceived and then blackmailed into uploading sexually explicit photos and videos of themselves to Telegram, which were then sold and shared in chat rooms with up to tens of thousands of users. [...] If they didn’t comply, the chat room operators threatened to release their explicit content to their friends, families and—in the case of minors—their schools.” The perpetrators, who called themselves by nicknames such as Doctor, Joker, and GodGod, reportedly sold the videos and images to “buyers”—who were also the perpetrators and co-conspirators in the crime—in exchange for cryptocurrency. In 2020, after intensive coverage by media outlets such as SBS, JTBC, and *Hankyoreh*, and relentless pursuit by feminist organizations like Team Flame—which began with two female college students—to combat digital sex crimes, 3,575 people, including the operators, administrators, and video owners, were arrested, 245 of whom were detained (*Tudum*). The Nth room case illustrates how voyeuristic and sadistic male sexual desire, coupled with desire for control over women’s bodies, can intersect with the anonymity of digital space to create destructive and harmful crimes.

With the development of internet communities, social media, and computer technology, today’s sexual crimes have taken on a new dimension. The so-called “revenge porn”—“sexually explicit imagery that was stolen, shared, or otherwise distributed without the person’s consent” (*CNN*, [“What Is ‘Revenge Porn’ and Are There Laws to Protect You?”](#))—spycam (in South Korea, *molka*), sextortion—cases where victims are “threatened and coerced into sending explicit images online” (*FBI*)—or “deepfakes” cause irreparable trauma and emotional impact on victims because it is difficult for victims or law enforcement to know exactly how far the videos or photos have spread, making it is difficult to “put faces” to the perpetrators. In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, there is also a scene where *molka* is found in the bathroom of Jiyoung’s former work building and the female employees are traumatized. Hyesu, Jiyoung’s former colleague, confesses that the incident “is driving [her] crazy:” “it feels like the whole world is recognizing me from the pictures. Even random eye contact with strangers makes me wonder if that person has seen my pictures, and when someone smiles at me I think the person is mocking me. Most

women in the office are on meds or getting therapy. Jungeun overdosed on sleeping pills and had to get her stomach pumped” (Cho 143). In Korea, the rapid growth in online sex crimes—including child pornography, sex solicitation, sexting, sex trafficking and sextortion—is a major contributor to the increase in overall sex crimes. According to *The Korea Times*’ “[More than 1 Out of 4 Sex Crimes in Korea Take Place Online.](#)” the number of digital sex crimes totaled 10,605 in 2022, accounting for 25.59 percent of 41,433 cases of sexual violence that took place both online and offline combined in the same year. The increase of sex crimes in general was mainly attributable to a surge in the number of online sex crimes that more than doubled for two straight years — from 2,070 in 2020 to 5,079 in 2021 and then to 10,065 a year after.

## Sexual violence in Korea (2021-22)



Source: Statistics Korea

Increasing Online Sex Crimes in South Korea. [The Korea Times.](#)

### Suggested Close Reading Exercise

In the novel, Jiyoung directly and indirectly experiences sexual harassment and sexual crimes, which range from minor post-breakup harassment to serious digital sexual crimes. This activity examines the issues in Korean society portrayed in the novel related to sexual violence, explores whether these problems exist in students’ own environments, and discusses the appropriate individual and societal attitudes needed to address sexual violence.

Circulate the copies of the below passages. After reading each passage, open discussion with the suggested questions below.

Jiyoung broke up with him. He took it surprisingly well at the time, but drunk-dialed her several hundred times each occasion he came out on leave, texted her in the wee hours—ARE YOU SLEEPING?—and was one time found curled up asleep in front of the porridge shop next to a huge pile of vomit he’d retched up. Rumors spread around the

porridge shop building that the second daughter of the porridge shop owner had cheated on her boyfriend in the army and he had deserted his unit to have his revenge. (Cho 77)

Divide students into groups and ask them to discuss Jiyoung's breakup based on the following questions:

1. Do you think Jiyoung's ex-boyfriend's behaviors are threatening or harmful? Do you think Jiyoung's feelings and reputation were damaged by her ex-boyfriend's post-breakup behavior? In what way? Do you think his behavior could have escalated into something more serious?
2. When someone breaks up with their significant other and wants to reconnect with them, what do you think is acceptable and unacceptable behaviors?
3. What attitude do you think it takes to end a relationship in a healthy way?
4. Read "[11 Common Post-Separation Abuse Tactics](#)" from *Healthline* with students. As a class, ask students to discuss whether any of these tactics apply to Jiyoung's ex-boyfriend's behavior.

"The accused male employees blame us for being too harsh with them," she added. "They say they neither set up those cameras nor took the pictures, they just saw some photos posted on a website everyone has access to, and *we* are treating them like sexual offenders. They *distributed* the pictures and were complicit in the crimes, but they don't understand why that's wrong. It blows my mind." [...] [Eunsil] was also preparing to leave the company and take some of the female staff with her to start her own business, because the male director of the company denied victims' demands that the company officially apologize to them, promise to take measures for prevention, and punish those responsible. All he wanted was to quietly close this case: *It'll ruin this company's reputation if word gets around in the field. The accused male employee have families and parents to protect, too. Do you really want to destroy people's lives like this? Do you want people to find out that your pictures are out there?* [...] In fact, Eunsil was scared and exhausted herself. All of them—the team leader Eunsil, Kang Hyesu, and the victims standing with them—wanted this case to be resolved soon so that they could go back to their lives. While offenders were in fear of losing a small part of their privilege, the victims were running the risk of losing everything. (Cho 144-145).

1. How is the digital sexual assault that Jiyoung's former coworkers experienced different from physical sexual assault? Discuss some of the distress experienced by victims of digital sexual assault that we can infer from this case. What are the things victims have lost by having their photos distributed on the internet?
2. Why do you think the male employee who first saw the photos of his coworkers on the Internet site did not report it to the victims?

3. Do you believe that people who take illegal sexual videos or photos and people who view them are committing the same level of offense?
4. What are some of the secondary harms that the director of the company is perpetrating on the victims? As a director of the company, what do you think was the most ethical and desirable way to resolve this case?
5. Why do you think people are more sympathetic to the perpetrators in this case? Do you think that standard does not apply to the victims? Why do you think the “accused male employees” “blame” the victims?
6. If someone you know has been through a similar situation or experienced sexual violence, how should you react as an acquaintance or friend? Take a look at [“Tips to Help a Friend Who Has Been Sexually Assaulted”](#) from Violence Prevention Initiative for reference.

### Suggested In-Class Activities and Discussion Questions

#### “Boys Will Be Boys”?



A Boy Holding “Boys Will Be Good Humans” Sign. [Varsity](#).

“Boys will be boys,” as the saying goes. According to the [Cambridge Dictionary](#), the phrase connotes that “that people should not be surprised when boys or men act in a rough or noisy way because this is part of the male character.” However, what detrimental or toxic traits of “male character” does this phrase justify? How is this phrase harmful to both men and women?

1. Ask students what traits of “boys” are implied by the phrase “boys will be boys.” Why “boy” and not “men”? In what context is this saying usually used? In those contexts, what is the intent of the person speaking such a phrase?

2. Read [“Boys Will Be Boys, and Girls Will Be Other”](#) from *Varsity*. Based on the article, ask students questions including: What biases about masculinity and femininity does the phrase “boys will be boys” reinforce? How do you think this reinforced gender bias harms both men and women?
3. Watch [“Gillette Commercial 1989 vs Gillette Commercial 2019”](#) on YouTube. What is the difference between Gillette’s 2019 commercial compared to its 1989 commercial? Why do you think Gillette aired a different tone of commercial in 2019? What social, economic, or political events happened around 2019 that may have led to this change?
4. In both the 1989 and 2019 commercials, Gillette appeals to its primary customer demographic—men—in different ways. What aspects of masculinity does the 1989 commercial demonstrate, promote, and encourage? Comparing the two commercials from 1989 and 2019, what are the differences in the picture of masculinity they promote? Do you think this change is positive? If yes or no, why?
5. Read [“Gillette #MeToo Razors Ad on ‘Toxic Masculinity’ Gets Praise—and Abuse”](#) from *The Guardian*. Why do you think people on the far right or conservative sides reacted sensitively to the new commercial? What aspects of masculinity do you think the 2019 commercial “attack[s]”?

### Sexist Buzzwords

Today, sexist buzzwords that originated in misogynistic online communities have become commonplace. This activity aims to explore the fundamental ethics of internet use by critically analyzing memes that continue to circulate in both Korea and the United States, examining their implications on gender roles and the impact of using them. Some of these words are found in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, including:

- ***Doen jang nyeo***: This Korean word, which means soybean paste girl, refers to a Korean woman who loves luxury goods and splurges on them. Korean internet terms that often describe women in a ridiculous way are often prefixed with *-nyeo* (-girl). In this case, soybean paste was specifically chosen because soybean stew is a staple of indigenous Korean food. Although soybean paste girls are often depicted proudly carrying foreign luxury items like Chanel or Louis Vuitton bags and sipping Starbucks coffee, the term mocks them for spending so much on foreign goods while still being unable to hide their “Koreanness.” For more information, read [“Korean Through K-pop 101: The Bean Paste Girl,”](#) which analyzes Psy’s “Gangnam Style” and *doen jang nyeo* meme together.
- ***Kimchi nyeo*** and its antagonistic ***gaenyum nyeo***: *Gaenyum nyeo* is a “concept girl” or “girl with concept” in literal translation but can be interpreted more aptly as “reasonable girl.” A “reasonable girl” pays for her own meals on date, occasionally packs her boyfriend’s lunch, wears simple makeup and clothes, does not splurge on luxury goods, believes that men’s rights should be increased, and is grateful for Korean men’s military service and outspokenly advocates compensation for their military service. “Kimchi

girl,” by contrast, is the opposite of reasonable girl. She is a gold digger who wants her boyfriend to pay for her meal, lives in luxury with the money her man makes and only chases after “capable” men who are financially well off. According to Sisa In’s [“How the ‘Kimchi B—’ Was Born,”](#) men who follow the “concept girl” and “kimchi girl” distinction believe that all Korean women are potentially kimchi girls and need to be distinguished from reasonable girls. For more information, read [“HeForShe, SheForHe: Women, Misogyny, and Feminism”](#) from the Granite Tower.

- **Mumchung (Mumroach):** A mumroach, or *mumchung* (mum+chung, bug) is “a derogatory term referring to mothers who supposedly lack manners in public spaces due to their sole focus on caring for their children” (*The Korea Times*, [“Polarization”](#)). The implication here is that Korean married women who stay at home raising their children are selfish and self-centered, parasitically living on their husbands’ income.
- **Kim yeosa (Mrs. Kim):** This term refers to female drivers who are allegedly bad at driving but still manage to pull their car out onto the road. Read [“The Mrs. Kim Cliché”](#) from *Korea Expose* for more information.

What are some sexist buzzwords that circulate in American internet communities? Teachers can add other words at their discretion or ask students to do guided research or readings. Suggested memes and possible discussion questions about the word include:

- Alpha, Beta, and Sigma Male: Students and teachers can refer to [“The Sad, Stupid Rise of the Sigma Male”](#) from *The Guardian*.
  1. What biases about masculinity are reinforced by the clear hierarchy of these words?
  2. The alpha, beta, and sigma male meme claims that the gap between the “rich and poor” is and never will be closed among men based on sexual attraction. What are the important “goods” that are “traded” in this hierarchy of men? According to this hierarchy, what is a Beta male or Sigma male deprived of compared to an Alpha male?
  3. What is the relationship between women and men that this male hierarchy envisions?

After completing the research on words and memes, ask students to lead a discussion as a class based on the following questions:

1. How are the Korean misogynistic categorization of women similar to or different from American ones?
2. The “soybean paste girl” and “kimchi girl” memes in Korea are closely related to issues of sexuality between Korean men and women, as well as their economic status and consumer culture. Why do you think such derogatory words for “extravagant” women were coined in Korea? What anxieties about women’s sexuality and economic status do these words reflect?

3. What are some common problems with misogynistic memes in Korea and the U.S.? How do they view the relationship between men and women?
4. How are these memes justifying and propagating male dominance and male aggression? Do you think these memes are related to rape culture and the femicide phenomenon? If so, how?
5. Do you think the American alpha male memes are related to the “chewing gum someone spat out” (Cho 79) comment in *Kim Jiyoung*? What unspoken assumptions do they make about female sexuality and sexual self-determination?
6. What are the ground rules when we communicate in online and offline discussions? What are the ethics of consuming memes and buzzwords?

### **EVERYDAY RESISTANCE**

There are individuals and organizations working against everyday gendered violence, against patriarchy, and for social, economic, and political gender equality and justice. We call them feminists. Feminists are not just people who speak out for the empowerment of biological women. Feminism believes that gender norms and gender roles have oppressed and harmed everyone—men, women (including trans women, and those presenting and identifying as women), and non-binary people with different sexual orientations and backgrounds—by perpetuating unequal gender hierarchies and toxic sexist cultures, which are responsible for countless inequality and violence in our society. As the World Economic Forum aptly points out in [“Gender is Where the Feminist and LGBTI Movements Meet,”](#) the “feminist movement has been dismantling the belief that our sex and gender should define our roles in society and has been fighting the inherent gender-based discrimination and violence resulting from that belief for more than a century.” This subunit sheds light on how feminists in South Korea, the United States, and other countries are responding to everyday gendered violence with everyday resistance.

### **South Korea’s “Feminism Reboot”**

In 2015, a significant shift in the discourse surrounding feminism occurred in South Korea, marking the beginning of what many scholars and activists refer to as a massive “feminism reboot” (Sohn Hee-jung, “Feminism Reboot: Post-Feminism Seen through Korean Films and After”). Prior to this, the phrase “I am not a feminist, but—” was commonly heard, reflecting a widespread reluctance among South Koreans to openly identify with the feminist movement. Feminism was often perceived as radical or unnecessary, and many distanced themselves from the label despite agreeing with feminist principles. However, the year 2015 saw the emergence of the #IAmaFeminist movement online, challenging these perceptions and sparking widespread discussion. In “Why Korean Feminism?” Jungmin Seo and Seoyoung Choi describe this period as a critical moment in South Korea’s feminist history, where a new wave of activism began to take shape. According to Seo and Choi, this movement was a response to growing frustrations

with gender inequality and the pervasive anti-feminist sentiment in South Korean society. After a Korean male columnist wrote that “brainless feminism is worse than ISIS”—a comment made after a Korean teenager decided to join ISIS after tweeting “I hate feminists. So I like the isis [sic]”—the slogan “I am a feminist” became a rallying cry, empowering individuals—especially women—to reclaim the term and assert their commitment to gender equality (Seo and Choi 380).

Another pivotal moment in the 2015 feminist resurgence was the creation of the MERS Gallery in 2015, from DC Inside—an internet forum similar to Reddit. Originally a space for discussions about the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak, the forum quickly evolved into a hub for anti-misogyny. *Oh My News*’s [“Daughters of Megalia’ Made Ilbe Sorry”](#) details the birth of this community. In early June 2015, during the MERS outbreak, the internet community site DC Inside created a MERS gallery to share information about the virus. However, the MERS gallery became a center for gender wars when news broke that two Korean women in Hong Kong had refused to be quarantined after showing symptoms of MERS. Online, numerous misogynistic comments—“I knew it, it’s always kimchi-*nyeos*”—were made, but the situation quickly changed when it was reported that the women had gotten into a fight over miscommunication and translation problems. Using the MERS Gallery as a base, the women fired back.

From this community, Megalia was born—a group that would go on to have a profound impact on the feminist landscape in South Korea. Megalia took its name from Gerd Brantenberg’s novel *Egalia’s Daughters*, a satirical work set in a fictional society where traditional gender roles are reversed. The group adopted a similar strategy of “mirroring” the misogynistic behaviors prevalent in Korean society, using satire and parody to expose and critique the deeply ingrained sexism. By reversing the language and tactics often used by men to belittle women, Megalia forced society to confront the absurdity and cruelty of these behaviors when directed at men. Megalia’s strategy was to “hate on hate” by gender-reversing and appropriating many misogynistic memes—the word *hannam*, was also coined by the community. Its literal translation is simply “Korean men,” but it is often used in a derogatory context. The community also created a logo parodying the finger gesture logo used by Ilbe—which you’ll recall has been the spearhead of online misogyny—by transforming it into a gesture indicating a small penis. According to *The Atlantic*’s “The Real Reason South Koreans Aren’t Having Babies,” Megalia’s “mirroring” tactics include the following: “In response to the objectification of Korean women and complaints about their small breasts, women poked fun at Korean men for, they claimed, having small penises. The Megalia logo was a reference to this: an image of a hand with the thumb and pointer finger close together. They flipped the gender of common refrains about women, posting comments like ‘Women prefer a virgin man’ and ‘Men should stay in the kitchen.’”



Ilbe's "Finger Gesture" and Megalia's Logo. [Segye Ilbo](#) (Left) and [Hankyoreh](#) (Right).

The influence of Megalia—which shut down in 2017 after internal strife over its exclusion of LGBTQ and transgender people—and the broader feminist movement was palpable, culminating in high-profile discussions about gender violence, such as the murder at Gangnam Station in 2016. “Even if the language is raw and unrefined, the ‘man-hating’ posts of the Megalians are directly related to the issues women face in the real world,” says a positive reviewer: “These include Kopinos (children born out of Korean males’ international sex trafficking in the Philippines) and criminal behaviors such as dating violence, rape, and sex trafficking” (*Oh My News*). For this reason, many Korean women empathized with Megalia and many female-dominated internet communities joined their cause by providing a forum for public discourse and organizing collective actions and protests to denounce violence against women.

Online feminism in South Korea has spawned many feminist agendas that have gone viral, including the “Take Off the Corset” movement—which rejects “dress-up labor”—and 4B movement. [“The South Korean Women’s Movement: ‘We Are Not Flowers, We Are a Fire’”](#) article from *Feminist Current* explains that the “Take Off the Corset” movement was “inspired by Sheila Jeffreys’ *Beauty and Misogyny*,” which argues for the removal of the modern “corset:” beauty practices like waxing, makeup, high heels, cosmetic surgeries, long hair, restrictive eating regimes, etc. The movement spread online as participants shared “off corset-certified” photos—of women with cut-off hair, ditched makeup products, or comfortable outfits. In a country famous for its beauty products and cosmetic surgeries, the movement has also had a huge impact on the beauty industry: “Between 2015-2016 and 2017-2018, South Korean women spent 53.5 billion Korean won (about 40 million in US dollar) less on beauty products and cosmetic surgeries, investing in cars instead, choosing independence over objectification” (*Feminist Current*).

The 4B movement is also part of the so-called “feminism reboot” in South Korea. The high incidence of dating violence, domestic violence, and femicide in Korean society has led many Korean women to conclude that Korean men are not only dangerous as marriage partners, but also as sexual partners. Anti- to four sexual/romantic interaction with men—anti-dating, having sex, marriage, and childbirth to “eliminat[e] the risks that come from heterosexual marriage or dating” (*The Cut*, [“A World without Men”](#)), 4B movement seems to resonate with many Korean women, not just those who actively and consciously participate in the 4Bs. One Korean woman interviewed by *The Cut* says that whenever she talks to men her age, she realizes how different their perspectives on gender issues are from hers, and thinks, “Oh, maybe I can never find a Korean man [to marry].” According to *The Cut*, “a recent survey by a matchmaking company found that women were reluctant to marry because of the division of housework, while men hesitated because of ‘feminism.’”



One of the “Off Corset” Certification Photos. [Feminist Current](#).

The feminist movement did not stop at being an online phenomenon. Feminist activists organized a large memorial event at Exit 10 of Gangnam Station, near where the murder took place in May 2016. As previously explained, this incident, where a woman was killed in a public restroom by a man who claimed to “hate women,” became a flashpoint for feminist activism. As highlighted in *The Korea Exposé’s* article [“Murder at Gangnam Station: A Year Later.”](#) the tragedy sparked nationwide protests and memorials, bringing the issue of misogyny to the forefront of public consciousness. A makeshift incense burner was set up at Gangnam Station near the crime scene, and hundreds of notes were plastered on the outside walls of Gangnam

Station, mourning the victim's deaths and denouncing Korean society's discrimination against women. The Labor Party, the Green Party, feminist organizations, and others issued statements, and a candlelight vigil was held (*Kyunghyang*, "[We Detest the Misogynic Gaze on the Murder of a Woman Near Gangnam Station](#)"). Gangnam Station, once the site of the famous global hit song "Gangnam Style," which sarcastically poked fun at *doen jang nyeo*—"classy woman who knows how to afford a cup of coffee"—was reappropriated in South Korean feminist history.



Candlelight Protest near Exit 10 of Gangnam Station. [Kyunghyang](#).

From 2015 onward, the “feminism reboot” in South Korea represents a critical turning point in South Korea’s ongoing struggle for gender equality. The reclaiming of the word feminism, the emergence of anti-misogynistic online communities like Megalia, and the widespread activism following events like the Gangnam Station murder have all contributed to a new, more assertive—albeit radical—wave of feminism in South Korea. These waves of feminism continue to challenge the status quo and advocate for a more just and equitable society.

### **#MeToo as Global Phenomenon**

The late 2010s marked a new phase of the feminist movement, not only in South Korea but also in the United States and around the world. The #MeToo movement began in October 2017 when allegations of sexual harassment and assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein were brought to light. *The New York Times* article "[Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades](#)" by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey exposed the “open secret” of the film industry that Weinstein and his colleagues’ pattern of sexual misconduct and sexual assault, and

their use of their power in the industry to cover it up during the past three decades. The term “Me Too” was initially coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual violence ([MeTooMovement.org](https://www.meetoomovement.org)), particularly against women of color. However, it was the viral use of the hashtag #MeToo by actress [Alyssa Milano on Twitter](#) that propelled the movement into the global spotlight. Milano encouraged survivors of sexual harassment and assault to share their experiences using the hashtag, leading to an overwhelming response as millions of people across the world came forward with their stories.

In the United States, the #MeToo movement quickly gained momentum, leading to the downfall of powerful men in various industries, including entertainment, media, politics, and business. According to *NPR*'s [“Where the #MeToo Movement Stands, 5 Years after Weinstein Allegations Came to Light.”](#) “actresses Ashley Judd and Rose McGowan’s initial allegations were later followed by Cate Blanchett, Lupita Nyong’o and many others speaking publicly about Weinstein’s harassment or assault.” High-profile figures such as Harvey Weinstein, Bill O’Reilly, Matt Lauer, and Jeffrey Epstein faced public scrutiny, legal action, and career repercussions as a result of the movement, reports [“Who Are the True Victims of the #MeToo Movement?”](#) by the Shattering the Silence Organization. The article also clarifies that according to a 2018 study on the impact of #MeToo, “in the past 18 months, 417 high-profile abusers have been outed, 193 have resigned or been fired, and 122 have been suspended, while 69 haven’t been impacted.”

The movement also led to legislative changes in the U.S., where several states introduced or strengthened laws related to sexual harassment in the workplace, and the federal government passed the Ending Forced Arbitration of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Act of 2022 (EFASASHA), which makes it easier for victims to take their cases to court ([American Bar Association](#)). The #MeToo movement sparked a national conversation about the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the United States, the culture of silence surrounding these issues, and the systemic power imbalances that allow such behavior to persist. The revelations and subsequent fallout against several celebrities and people in positions of power have shattered the age-old patriarchy that says “powerful men can set their own rules” (*The Economist*, [“#MeToo, One Year on”](#)), and enforced the obvious principle that perpetrators of violence should face consequences regardless of their gender, power, or wealth.

The #MeToo movement resonated globally, inspiring similar movements in countries around the world. In France, the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc (“Expose Your Pig”) gained traction as women began sharing their experiences with sexual harassment and assault (*The Atlantic*, [“#BalanceTonPorc Is France’s #MeToo”](#)). In India, the #MeToo movement led to high-profile accusations against influential figures in the media, entertainment, and political sectors, sparking widespread discussions about workplace harassment and the treatment of women (*The Economic Times*, [“2018: The Year When #MeToo Shook India”](#)). In South Korea, the #MeToo movement had a profound impact, leading to the exposure of sexual misconduct by powerful figures in the arts, academia, and politics. The movement empowered women to speak out against sexual violence in a society where such issues were often swept under the rug. Notable cases included

the conviction of former provincial governor Ahn Hee-jung for sexual assault and the resignation of high-profile figures in various industries, such as prominent movie director Kim Ki-duk (*The Korea Herald*), and poet Ko Un (*The Guardian*, [“Poet Ko Un Erased from Korean Textbooks after Sexual Harassment Claims”](#)).

In Japan, the #MeToo movement faced cultural resistance due to societal norms that discourage open discussion of sexual harassment and assault. However, the movement did gain some traction, with prominent journalist Shiori Ito becoming a symbol of resistance after she publicly accused Noriyuki Yamaguchi, a well-known journalist with powerful political ties, of raping her (*The Guardian*, [“Shiori Ito, Symbol of Japan’s MeToo Movement, Wins Rape Lawsuit Damages”](#)). Her case brought attention to the issues of consent and victim-blaming in Japan, leading to a broader conversation about gender equality and sexual violence. In China, the #MeToo movement also faced challenges due to government censorship and societal taboos around discussing sexual violence. Several journalists who supported #MeToo movement, including Sophia Huang Xueqin and Wang Jianbing were arrested and sentenced to prison for “inciting subversion of state power” (Amnesty International, [“China: ‘Malicious’ Conviction of #MeToo and Labour Activists Shows Beijing’s Growing Fear of Dissent”](#)). Nevertheless, the movement managed to gain momentum, with accusations being made against professors, celebrities, and other public figures.

However, the movement has also faced criticism and challenges. Some have raised concerns about the movement’s focus on high-profile cases and the potential for it to overlook the experiences of marginalized groups, including women of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those in low-income jobs, as demonstrated in [“No #MeToo for Women Like Us”](#) from Human Rights Watch. According to the article, “in part because it was led on social media, the #MeToo movement in India excluded women from the informal sector, where 95 percent of women are employed” in India. Nevertheless, the #MeToo movement has had a lasting impact on the global conversation about sexual harassment and assault. It has brought attention to the pervasive nature of these issues, challenged the culture of silence that surrounds them, and empowered survivors to come forward with their stories.

## **SITUATING THE NOVEL IN THE PRESENT DAY**

### **Korean and Global Reception of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982***

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* was a timely novel in the history of South Korean feminism. Published in 2016, the novel aligned perfectly with the feminist movement that started online in South Korea, making a significant impact on society. Within less than two years, it sold over a million copies (*Kyunghyang*, [“Feminism Launched by ‘a Million Kim Jiyoungs’”](#)). As gender issues became an important political agenda in South Korea around 2015, politicians were quick to recommend *Kim Jiyoung* as the novel of the year, and the novel gained more fame after the late Noh Hoe-chan, a former representative of Democratic Party, gifted the novel to then President Moon Jae-in. Prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun, who opened the door to the #MeToo movement in Korea,

mentioned *Kim Jiyoung* when she exposed the sexual harassment she had endured (*Kyunghyang*). According to Minumsa, the novel's original publisher, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* resonated with women of all ages, not just those born in the 1980s: "*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* topped the borrowing list of female readers in their 20s and 50s [in 2018]. In terms of borrowing volume, women in their 30s, women in their 40s, women in their 20s, men in their 40s, and women in their 50s read the novel most. It also topped the borrowing list of male readers in their 30s and 40s" (Dong-A Ilbo, "[Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 Sells Million](#)"). "Nowhere in the novel is there a description of Kim Jiyoung's physical appearance, so anyone can picture themselves in it" (*Kyunghyang*), says Kim-Go Yeon-Joo, a Women's Studies scholar who also wrote the commentary for the novel. In the process, the novel became more than a text—it became a cultural icon that symbolized the zeitgeist. "*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* was published at the time of the popularization of feminism, and it became a novel that sparked the further popularization of feminism," says Women's Studies scholar Kwon Kim Hyun-young. "It pointed out the common experiences of women living in that era, not the individual experiences of one person" (*Kyunghyang*).

However, as the novel has become a symbol of Korean feminism, it has also become a major target of anti-feminist sentiment. Several K-pop stars and celebrities who posted on social media that they have read the novel experienced online hate speech that is vehemently opposed to feminism. "Many male readers have spoken out against the book, claiming that it is biased and over-generalizes men as the oppressors," reveals *Korea JoongAng Daily's* "[Stars Suffer due to Book Backlash](#)." According to the article, "when Irene of the girl group Red Velvet revealed that she had read *Kim Jiyoung Born 1982* during a fan meet-and-greet event in March [2018], some male fans uploaded pictures of them burning and cutting up her photos." This criticism, backlash, and hate speech mainly focused on female celebrities, especially K-pop girl group idols and actresses. Two years after the novel was published, when news of the movie adaptation broke and announced that actress Jung Yu-mi would star in the role of Kim Jiyoung, her private Instagram account came under severe attack. "People bombarded Jung's private Instagram account with insults and demands that she step down from the role," says *JoongAng Daily*: "'Your career was so perfect until this,' read one of the many disparaging comments that were posted on her most recent post, which had nothing to do with the role she had recently been cast in."

Nevertheless, the novel has been influential beyond Korea, in other Asian countries, and even in Europe and the United States. *The Guardian's* "[Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 Review](#)" describes the novel as "a bestseller in China, Taiwan and Japan," and shares that the book "has been translated into 18 languages, in English by Jamie Chang, and adapted for film." Many English-speaking readers have responded to the book with positive reviews, too. One American YouTube vlogger JESCYU comments on the novel that "this book had filled me with a hypersensitive sense of despair and rage" ("[I Read Irene from Red Velvet's Feminism Book that Made Men BURN Her Photocards](#)"). The YouTuber goes on to say: "If you have immigrant

parents, ethnic background, your grandma lives with you, this hits extra hard. While reading, I couldn't help but think about my childhood and upbringing and analyze everything that everyone ever has told me that they didn't tell my brother, and everything every school bully has said to me and why I was made to be the perpetrator because of how I reacted.”

The uproar surrounding the novel highlights the gender divide in South Korea, which has deepened since the feminist reboot. Many South Korean young males in their 10s and 20s feel threatened, especially compared to older generations who benefited from the “male dominance” of the late 20th century. Meanwhile, the deeply ingrained gendered violence in South Korea continues. In May 2024, eight years after the Gangnam Station murder, another woman was murdered on the roof of a building near Gangnam Station after attempting to break up with her boyfriend. That same month, 34 feminist organizations, civil society groups, and progressive political parties co-hosted the Gangnam Station Femicide 8th Commemoration Action. “Misogyny, sexism, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and murder of women continue to occur, yet the president claims that there is no structural gender discrimination,” said Lee Nayoung, director of the Justice and Memory Alliance (*Hankyoreh*, [“Another Gangnam Station Murder after 8 Years”](#)). The current president, Yoon Seok-yeol, called for the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family as a campaign promise to appeal to young Korean male voters. Many South Korean men still believe that abolishing the ministry, which “promotes gender conflict” and “propagates reverse discrimination against men,” is the solution of gender problems (*BBC*, [“As South Korea Abolishes Its Gender Ministry, Women Fight Back”](#)).

### **Suggested In-Class Activity and Discussion Questions**

#### **Women/Men Going Their Own Way**

If there is a 4B movement in Korea, there is a similar movement in the United States. The difference is that this movement is happening among men, not women. “Men Going Their Own Way” (MGTOW) is an offshoot of the Manosphere, an online community that propagates the “gynocratic myth”—that women are dominating the world with their sexual self-determination. [“Men Going Their Own Way: The Rise of a Toxic Male Separatist Movement”](#) from *The Guardian* describes the movement this way: “while incels plot violent revenge on women, and pickup artists (PUAs) deploy predatory tactics to ‘game’ women into having sex with them, the men of the MGTOW attempt to eschew relationships with women altogether. They are, literally, going their own way. Far, far away from any women. At all.”

Those who consciously join this movement believe that men or women are “beyond redemption” (*The Cut*) and should have as little sexual or social contact with the other gender as possible. Both the 4B movement and MGTOW can be lumped together as gender separatism, albeit to varying degrees. However, the motivations behind the two movements are very different. One is to defend themselves against rampant physical, mental, and sexual violence, while the other is driven by an unwillingness to deal with the experience of being sexually rejected by a woman. This activity aims to further explore the meaning and effects of “radical”

feminism in South Korea by examining it in the context of patriarchy before jumping into pointing out its limitations and criticisms.

Read “A World without Men” from *The Cut* and “Men Going Their Own Way” together with students. After reading two articles, discuss as a class.

1. How are the 4B movement in South Korea and MGTOW in the United States similar or different? Ask students to think about this question while focusing on the context in which they occurred. What social phenomenon did each of these movements arise in response to?
2. What would happen if the 4B movement and MGTOW became socially successful? What would happen if many women rejected heterosexual relationships, marriage, and childbearing? What would happen if many men rejected long-term or short-term relationships with women, or further, reduced their economic activity, going off grid from society? What would a world without women and a world without men look like?
3. Do you think these two movements are “radical?” Why or why not?
4. How do you evaluate these two movements? Do you think they have the same degree of political significance?
5. What underlying problems are each trying to solve (albeit radically, and often through intolerance)? Can you identify societal problems that, if alleviated, would change the attitudes that might fuel these movements? Example: a member of a male gender separatist group feels like he is being economically exploited in male-female romantic relationships. At the same time, a member of a female gender separatist group feels like she is underpaid in her career. Is there a common societal problem that could address both problems/attitudes?

### **#MeToo After Seven Years: Why Hasn’t Sexual Harassment Disappeared?**

*\*This activity is based on The New York Times’ [“The Reckoning: Teaching About the #MeToo Moment and Sexual Harassment with Resources From The New York Times.”](#) Teachers can also add other activities from this article.*

Watch the video [“Why Hasn’t Sexual Harassment Disappeared?”](#), which traces the evolution of sexual harassment in the workplace from the emergence of the term in the mid-1970s, to Anita Hill’s testimony in 1991, to the current deluge of allegations against powerful men in entertainment, media, politics and other industries.

In response to the video and article discuss as a class:

1. What has catalyzed the #MeToo moment?
2. What progress has been made since people first started talking about sexual harassment in the workplace in the 1970s? In your opinion, what still needs to be done and why?

3. What effects have sexual harassment and misconduct in general had on society? What examples can you give?
4. Do men and boys have a different role to play than women and girls in fighting sexual harassment? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. In your opinion, is this a watershed moment or turning point in the conversation around sexual misconduct in the workplace and beyond? Why or why not?

## UNIT ACTIVITY AND PROJECT IDEAS

### Forming Solidarity

The publication of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and the online and offline feminist movement that coincided with the novel caused a ripple in Korean society that can be compared to #MeToo. Just as the #MeToo movement has brought together many “Me’s” and their allies, *Kim Jiyoung* has summoned many “Kim Jiyoungs” in Korean society and beyond. As *Kyunghyang*’s article titled “Feminism Launched by ‘A Million Kim Jiyoungs’” suggests, many women who read the novel expressed empathy and outrage, confessing that “I am Kim Jiyoung.” This activity focuses on examining the solidarities between women in the novel, centered on the character Kim Jiyoung. In doing so, this activity invites students to consider how the novel seeks to effect social change through small, everyday connections between individuals.

In small groups, students identify three scenes in the novel in which emotional connections—such as support, protection, and help—are made between female characters. In what ways do they provide help and support to each other? How does the support affect other characters? Then, ask students to identify three scenes in the novel in which Kim is wronged, isolated, or does not receive adequate help. Students imagine that Kim Jiyoung is someone they know and consider how they might help her, both realistically and in relation to the context of the novel. If you were with Jiyoung in the novel, what would you have said to her or to those around her?

After discussing in their groups, students will present to the class their ideas for scenes of solidarity in the novel, as well as scenes where solidarity is not present. Afterward, students attach Post-it notes on the board what they would like to say to Jiyoung or to the characters around her.

### Library Project

Have students choose 2-3 libraries to visit in their local area or in nearby towns or cities. During their visits, students explore the fiction section, specifically focusing on how books related to feminism are categorized. Ask students to take note of any dedicated sections for feminist literature and observe which novels are included in these sections. Then, students visit two bookstores, which can include local independent bookstores, chain bookstores, or online platforms such as Amazon. In each bookstore, investigate how novels are categorized under feminist fiction. Pay attention to any promotional displays, staff recommendations, or bestsellers

lists that highlight feminist literature. Students are recommended to ask librarians or bookstore staff about their criteria for categorizing books as feminist. For online bookstores, students can explore how feminist fiction is categorized, suggested, and reviewed by customers.

As they visit each library and bookstore, ask students to document the titles of novels they find categorized under feminist fiction. Students can take note of the authors, publication dates, and any common themes or narratives that emerge. What are considered and categorized as novels related to feminism in different countries? In different states within the US?

Have students compile their findings into a written report, presentation, or creative project. Students may include a discussion of the novels they discovered, the themes they explore, and how they are categorized as feminist in different contexts. The outcome may provide insights into the diversity and commonalities of feminist literature across cultures and regions.

### **“[Insert your name], Born [insert your birth year]”**

Encourage students to reflect on their personal growth and life experiences by creating a table of contents for a fictionalized book about their journey. Encourage them to think about the experiences that have shaped who they are today, including both challenges and achievements. This can be done through journaling, group discussions, or quiet reflection. These achievements or challenges do not have to be related to gender, but students are encouraged to write something related to their identity formation.

Ask students to outline the key “chapters” of their life story. Each chapter should represent a distinct period or significant event in their life, such as childhood memories, school milestones, important relationships, or personal challenges. They should give each chapter a title that captures its essence, much like a chapter in *Kim Jiyoung* would. Guide students in arranging their chapters into a table of contents that follows a logical and meaningful flow. Teachers may also suggest including a prologue or epilogue to frame their life story with overarching themes or reflections.

### **Video Book Review of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982***

At the end of the curriculum, students create a short video book review based on what they learned about *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. This review includes students’ personal thoughts and feelings about the book: how they felt as they read the book, what parts of the book were and were not relatable, and how they evaluated the book. Students could also include what new things they learned about Korean or American society, or about gender or feminism, as they read the book and how they can apply it to their own lives. Students can create videos on their own, or they can work in pairs or groups as they talk to each other.

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## Unit 7. Preparing to Meet the Writer

### ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit aims to prepare students to fully engage in the Annual Student Conference by fostering active participation and involvement. It focuses on equipping students with strategies to build their confidence, address any concerns they may have, and set clear expectations for their conference experience. Through this unit, students will be better prepared to contribute meaningfully to the conference and take full advantage of the opportunities it offers.

### CONFERENCE KEYNOTE SPEAKER: CHO NAM-JOO AND JAMIE CHANG

This year, the Great World Texts program will welcome Cho Nam-joo, author of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* to the Annual Student Conference. Students from across the state will have the opportunity to converse with her about the novel. This interaction is the core component of the Annual Student Conference.

### ON MEETING A WRITER AND TRANSLATOR

Meeting the writer will be a thrilling experience for some of your students, but it might also prove nerve-wracking for others. To prepare students for this event, consider the following in advance of the conference:

1. What are the expectations for students' behavior?
2. Considering that Cho Nam-joo is not an English speaker, what are the ground rules for interacting with the writer and translator in a respectful and efficient way?
3. What kind of questions should they ask, and how will they present their work to the keynote speakers?
4. How can they best prepare for the poster sessions and speaking about their projects to viewers?
5. What should teachers do if students are nervous, disruptive, or unprepared?

The preparatory materials listed below will help you and your students develop a deeper sense of Cho Nam-joo, what to expect at the Annual Student Conference and how to prepare for it.

### POINTS FOR LECTURE

#### Prepare your students for meeting Cho Nam-joo

Emphasize that, like all people, our keynote speaker could be nervous, excited, happy, sad, shy, in a good or bad mood, etc. Show clips or articles of the writer doing interviews and show the class their photograph so they can think of them as individuals from the start.

**Emphasize being courteous and respectful**

Those students designated to ask questions during the keynote should always greet and thank Cho Nam-joo, introduce themselves by name and school affiliation, and then ask a question. Encourage students to make eye contact and to be polite and confident!

**Help students avoid feelings of anxiety**

Focus on the experience, not the “performance” or act of talking to Cho Nam-joo and Jamie Chang. Emphasize that they are coming to the conference, travelling long distance from overseas, precisely because they are interested in and excited about the ideas that students have developed as they’ve read *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. Know that they think students have something to say that is worth hearing. Emphasize that this is a dialogue, meaning that student voices matter. Cho wants to hear from students as much as they want to hear from them.

**Encourage them to be specific**

Ask students to avoid being superficial and say things like “I love this book!” or “I hate this book!” Students should be prepared to articulate what they loved most about the novel and *why*. In preparation, ask your class to consider what was most inspiring, thought-provoking, or challenging about the text.

**Tips for asking questions**

Avoid yes or no questions. Instead, ask questions that allow room for thought and interpretation. Consider, too, the “lead in” to the question. Students should give a little context to let the author know where they’re coming from.

**Be prepared**

Ask students to think about how Cho Nam-joo might react to a given question. Once you’ve chosen which questions to ask the keynote speaker, role-play possible answers as a class. Prepare a list of follow-up questions, too.

**On Decorum**

This conference will be a serious academic affair and a lot of planning has gone into this event by teachers, students, UW faculty, staff, etc. The people in attendance have spent months preparing for this event. Disruptive, discourteous, or disrespectful behavior is unacceptable. Teachers whose students do not follow the decorum guidelines are expected to remove them from the room immediately.

### Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. What questions do you most want to be answered? What do you want to know about *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*?
2. Hold a conference dress rehearsal. If your group of participating students is small, this might consist of each student giving a brief but formal presentation of her project, followed by a question-and-answer session. If your participating students are large, split them into two groups. Have one group present their projects first and the other second. Students will alternate between presenting and viewing, just as they will on the official conference day.
3. Role-play meeting Cho Nam-joo. Have students prepared with questions, and practice asking and answering them. What questions got the best (or worst) answers? Why?
4. Brainstorm productive questions. In small groups, students should write down as many questions as they can think of to ask the author. Then switch questions with other groups and select those which seem best and those which seem least effective. Use this as the basis for a discussion about how we decide if a question is “good” or “bad.” Hint: the least effective questions are too easy to answer, produce obvious answers, or could easily be answered by anyone reading the book. You might have students revise with this discussion in mind, practicing how to construct clear, direct, and interesting questions.