Feminist engagements with South Korea's conscription discourse: A framing analysis

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Abstract: *Male-only conscription has long been a flashpoint in South Korea's gender politics, frequently mobilized by anti-feminist actors to frame men as victims of reverse discrimination. Meanwhile, feminists are often portrayed as disinterested in conscription-related issues. This study challenges such portrayals by centering feminist voices in the conscription discourse through in-depth interviews with twelve self-identifying feminists. Findings reveal that while feminists broadly acknowledge the burdens of conscription on men, they simultaneously reject anti-feminist framings that weaponize the issue against women. Participants employed diverse action frames, ranging from oppositional arguments that criticized the weaponization of conscription by anti-feminists and the state's further instrumentalization of the issue, to rights-based equality frames that presented female conscription as a potential path toward gender equality. Although some respondents preferred gender-neutral conscription to a voluntary model, most emphasized that without systemic reform, implementation of female conscription risked further reinforcing patriarchal institutions. Experiences of backlash and dismissal further contributed to perceived feminist disengagement, illustrating how conscription debates often marginalize feminist perspectives. Ultimately, by reframing the conscription discourse beyond binary gender conflict framework, this study underscores the diversity of feminist positions and highlights the importance of inclusive dialogue reflecting the complexity of marginalized perspectives.*

Keywords: *Anti-feminism; Conscription; Feminism; Feminist Framing, Gender Polarization, South Korea*

1. Introduction

For many years, South Korea's (hereinafter, "Korea") electoral divides were associated with regional and generational differences, with young people showing the lowest support for conservative politicians (Cheong & Haggard, 2023; Lee, 2024; Shin et al., 2022). However, political developments over the last decade have revealed an ideological divide emerging along gender lines, manifested in significant demographic gaps in young people's political attitudes and electoral behaviors. For instance, although the Democratic Party (DP) candidate Lee Jae-Myung secured a landslide victory in the latest snap elections, young men's voting patterns demonstrated a continued shift to the right compared to other demographic groups. A total of 74% of men in their 20s (hereinafter, "20s men") cast their votes for a conservative candidate, with almost 40% voting for the prominent anti-feminist figure Lee Jun-Seok (Chung & Kim, 2025).

Scholars generally link polarization to the politicization of a group's grievances, specifically the formation of male victimhood culture in the context of gender polarization (McCoy et al., 2018). While gender polarization is not unique to Korea, the intensity of extreme othering between young men and women, combined with the world's lowest birth rate, a historical background of militarism, and strong anti-feminist sentiment, makes it a particularly compelling case for study. What sets Korea particularly apart from most developed nations is its male-only conscription policy. In fact, multiple scholars have found that conscription is a major factor contributing to anti-feminist ideology and support for right-wing politicians among young Korean men, with nearly 80% describing military service as reverse gender discrimination (Jenkins & Kim, 2024; Kim & C. Lee, 2022; S. C. Lee, 2024).

The origins of widespread anti-feminist backlash in Korea can be traced to feminist efforts in the 1990s to abolish the military extra-points system, which awarded discharged conscripts five per cent bonus in civil service exams (Bae, 2000). When the Constitutional Court declared the bonus points system unconstitutional in 1999, thus eliminating the main compensatory mechanism for conscription at the time, men responded by collectively targeting the feminist activists involved in advocating for the Court's decision through various online harassment campaigns (Kwon-Kim, 2000). Instead of questioning the conscription policy itself, the discourse shifted toward its male-only nature, sparking consequent calls to include women in the draft.

Discussions on female conscription persisted throughout the 2000s, coinciding with increasing capitalist competition over socioeconomic resources and policy reforms that significantly improved women's social standing (Kim, 2011). The gradual weakening of traditional gender norms, coupled with women's superior performance in recent education and employment trends, led many young men to question the relevance of conversations on gender inequality (Lee, 2024). Meanwhile, the "feminist reboot" of 2015, in response to rising nationwide misogyny, resulted in the popularization of feminism and the emergence of digital feminist communities like Megalia. This dynamic soon escalated into what scholars now term "gender wars" or "gender conflicts", and military service continued to emerge as a flashpoint in the public discourse, with the male-only conscription policy becoming central to men's resentment toward women (Kim & Lee, 2022).

Online petitions calling for female conscription in 2017 and 2021 garnered significant support, often citing labor shortages resulting from declining birth rates as the primary justification (Gyeonggi-do Women's Group Association, 2021). The male-only nature of conscription policy continued to be challenged also before the Constitutional Court, with male petitioners arguing that the system violated their right to equality (Lee, 2025). While the Court has consistently upheld the system's constitutionality on the basis of physical differences between men and women, its recent ruling acknowledged the possibility of future reforms considering demographic changes (CaseNote, 2023). Conscription once again emerged as central to the latest presidential campaign strategies aimed at appealing to young men, with both candidates from opposing major parties making pledges to increase women's participation in the military and improve compensatory mechanisms for male conscripts by either recognizing their military experience in public institutions and salary grade calculations, or reinstating the military bonus points system (Jo, 2025; Park, 2025). Following his electoral victory, President Lee instructed the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family to study reverse discrimination 20s men face, citing military service as a main grievance factor and suggesting the Ministry create a dedicated department on the issue (Baek, 2025).

Because male victimhood narratives dominate the public discourse, calls for female conscription are often framed solely as anti-feminist arguments. At the same time, women and feminists are usually portrayed as selfish and disengaged from military-related issues. However, existing surveys indicate that support for female conscription is not exclusive to young men or anti-feminists. According to a

2024 national survey, only 34% of the overall population opposed female conscription, with men and women showing similar levels of support (Kim, 2024). Notably, according to the same survey, supporters of the left-leaning Democratic Labor Party demonstrated the second-highest support for female conscription, just behind the conservative People Power Party (PPP). Another survey by the Korean Women's Development Institute (2019, as cited in GWGA, 2021) found that more than half of young women supported female conscription.

By addressing the gap in feminist research on conscription discourse, the current study challenges the perception that feminists are voluntarily disengaged from military-related issues. Building on this, it highlights the diversity and complexity of marginalized perspectives by examining how different feminist movement actors frame and rationalize their positions on conscription, as well as the public discourse surrounding it. In doing so, the study ultimately centers feminist perspectives as important, yet often underrepresented, voices in public debates where male victimhood narratives tend to dominate.

Following the introduction chapter, this paper proceeds with a literature review that examines previous research on conscription discourse, with particular attention to feminist framing of female conscription. This chapter also outlines the main concepts and analytical frameworks employed in the study, including contentious politics, social movements, militarized modernity, and specific feminist framing approaches relevant to the research topic. The subsequent chapters present the methodology, the findings, and the conclusion, which summarizes the study's contributions to the literature and highlights possible directions for future research. The findings chapter is organized around three key framing tasks, diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational, followed by a final sub-chapter that explores the diversity of participants' personal voices through the FRDA framework.

2. Framing conscription through contentious politics: feminist and anti-feminist narratives

According to Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) concept of "contentious politics", social movement actors often mobilize in response to existing grievances, with their collective actions involving "claims bearing on other actors' interests" (p: 7). When Korean feminists from Ewha Women's University, in collaboration with men with disabilities, filed constitutional appeals to abolish the bonus points system, their claims challenged the interests of conscripted men who viewed such points as few of the last remaining symbolic and material advantages for conscripts over exempt individuals (Bae, 2000). Describing the contention around the bonus points as the first instance of gender conflict in Korean society, Byeon et al. (2005) argue that although the Court's final ruling reduced an immediate clash, it failed to fully resolve underlying grievances, as the discourse shifted from compensation to the conscription system itself. Following the verdict, over 60% of men opposed the Court's decision, framing conscription as reverse discrimination and asserting that women should also serve if they wanted equality (Choo, 2020; Kwon, 2000).

Although early critiques of the bonus points came not only from women but also from men, specifically such as those with disabilities as well as in self-employment or farming who derived little benefit from it, such issues were deliberately sidelined in public discourse to frame the debate as a gender conflict (Choi, 2018; Kim, 2021). This framing, portraying women as privileged citizens depriving powerless male conscripts of opportunities, redirected men's frustration over mandatory military service toward women rather than the state and the military institution. Consistent with contentious politics scholarship, which emphasizes the emergence of countermovements mobilizing to halt or reverse social change, Korea's anti-feminist countermovement arose directly in response to the success of the feminist campaign to abolish the bonus points system (Derichs & Dana, 2014; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

This research adopts the framing approach in social movement literature, which conceptualizes movement actors as active agents who continuously construct and negotiate meaning. Drawing on Goffman's concept of interpretive schemata, framing scholars define collective action frames as shared interpretations developed through interaction that legitimize movement goals and strategies (Benford & Snow, 2000; Derichs & Dana, 2014). Within this framework, Benford and Snow (2000) identify three main framing tasks: diagnostic framing, which identifies the problem; prognostic framing, which proposes solutions; and motivational framing, which justifies calls to action.

Substantial research has examined the anti-feminist framing of the conscription discourse, with much of the literature focusing on how conscription has historically functioned as a key pillar of patriarchy and gendered citizenship in Korea. Introducing the term "militarized modernity", Moon (2005) extensively analyzes how mandatory military service has operated as a central rite of passage to full citizenship, with women excluded from conscription confined to the domestic sphere and treated as secondary citizens. More recent studies have argued for the weakening of the militarized modernity framework, noting that as Korean women's status improved and compensatory rewards for male conscripts were eliminated, military service came to be perceived less as a fulfillment of manhood and more as a time-consuming obligation disrupting men's education and careers (Choo, 2020; Kang, 2023). In this context, the anti-feminist countermovement's diagnostic framing included men's self-identification as victims of reverse discrimination and the assignment of blame to women and feminists. Additionally, their demands for female conscription and the reinstatement of compensatory mechanisms like the bonus points system, often justified through demographic and national security concerns, constitute prognostic and motivational frames (Bae, 2000; Kang, 2023).

On the other hand, beyond examining anti-feminist perspectives, there is relatively little research on feminist perspectives in the current conscription discourse. Nevertheless, existing studies on feminist movement actors' collective action frames provide a useful foundation for understanding the evolving discursive contest between the feminist movement and the anti-feminist countermovement in Korea.

Miller (1998) identifies two distinct feminist camps in the American female conscription debates: pacifists, who oppose female conscription, and others who promote female conscription through rights-based arguments. The first camp primarily employs oppositional frames, which are largely diagnostic and do not extend beyond problem identification (Hewitt, 2011). These counterframes often emerge in response to opposition and are viewed as discursive opportunities to refute or neutralize opponents' claims (McCammon et al., 2007). Within the framework of this study, oppositional frames address whether and how Korean feminists counter calls for female conscription.

While there are multiple ways to oppose female conscription, the most frequently mentioned frame in the Korean context is the "maternal" framing, which highlights the physiological differences between the sexes and the social roles constructed around those differences, emphasizing women's roles as caregivers and mothers who give birth to future soldiers (Goss & Heaney, 2010). However, this framing has faced sharp criticism by feminist scholars for reinforcing patriarchal notions. Choo (2020), for example, criticizes contemporary digital feminists for their continued reliance on bio-essentialist framing tactics and their apparent disinterest in reforming the conscription system. However, the maternal framing's current relevance is questionable, given Korea's record-low birth rates (Yeung et al., 2024). Beyond maternal framing, Kim (2021) has briefly explored other forms of feminist opposition to female conscription, including concerns about sexual violence and sexism in the military, as well as

pacifist critiques of the military itself as a violent patriarchal institution.

In contrast to oppositional frames that focus on countering anti-feminists, a growing camp of feminists uses rights-based equality frames to argue for women's sameness to men, including eligibility for the draft and participation in combat (Goss & Heaney, 2010; Miller, 1998). Challenging claims that Korean feminists disregard conscription as a "men's issue", Kim (2021) writes that women have historically expressed a willingness to serve in the military. This second camp includes feminist authors such as Ju (2017) and Lee-Kim (2003), who describe female conscription as a means to challenge traditional gender roles that depict women as the weaker sex in need of protection, seeing the military as one of the last remaining institutions upholding the patriarchal order.

Overall, the limited literature on feminist perspectives, mostly based on non-academic sources, reveals contrasting views on whether feminists have largely dismissed conscription as a male problem or have engaged critically with the issue. While little scholarly attention has been given to oppositional frames beyond the childbirth-based maternal argument, prognostic equality frames have also been largely neglected. Meanwhile, recent developments in public debate, particularly backlash from feminists in response to the government's attempts to reinstate compensatory measures for conscripted men, as well as the controversy over the "childbirth bonus points" suggested by a DP lawmaker, suggest that maternal framing might no longer hold significant relevance (Go, 2025). In fact, when reporting increasing positive attitudes among young women toward female conscription, Shin (2025) interpreted these views as evidence of women's willingness to serve in the military as a step toward achieving gender equality.

3. Methodology

The primary methodology for this research was qualitative, feminist relational discourse analysis (FRDA) of semi-structured interviews with 12 self-identified feminists. While the interviews provided an opportunity to explore in-depth how feminist individuals understood and interpreted the conscription discourse, FRDA, drawn from Thompson et al.'s (2017) analytical framework, helped trace how participants positioned their voices within different discursive framings to make sense of their lived experiences.

Data collection took place as a part of a larger study conducted to fulfill a graduate thesis requirement during the author's final semester of master's studies, in accordance with the university's institutional review board rules. The study was officially approved by the Institutional Review Board of Korea University on January 1st, 2025 (approval no. KUIRB-2025-0043-01). As the main goal was to speak with individuals who had prior engagement with the conscription discourse, participants were recruited through non-probability sampling, which involved directly reaching out to individuals who publicly expressed opinions on the topic in academic research, opinion articles, or news pieces, as well as through the author's personal network of feminist activists. The first recruitment stage was followed by a snowball sampling phase, during which earlier participants introduced the study to others who expressed interest. All respondents provided written informed consent prior to participation in the interviews.

Final list of interviewees included researchers affiliated with academic institutions, feminist activists formally involved in non-governmental organizations, university students, freelancers, and individuals without formal employment who were active in feminist, peace, labour, and youth movements. All 12

participants explicitly self-identified as feminists and engaged with the movement in various ways through academic scholarship, feminist organizations, protests, public education efforts, or more discrete forms of online and offline discourse. Although most were based in Seoul, the group spanned multiple generations as well as range of gender identities, as detailed in Table I. To protect confidentiality, all responses were anonymized with pseudonyms, and unisex names were deliberately chosen to avoid misgendering.

Respondent	Gender	Occupation	Location	Age group
Subin	Male	Youth community organizer	Seoul	20s
Naru	Non-binary	University student activist	Gyeonggi	20s
Seol	Genderqueer	Queer-feminist activist	Seoul	30s
Hansol	Male	Male feminist activist, educator	Seoul	30s
Minji	Female	Peace activist	Gyeonggi	30s
Haneul	Non-binary	Labour activist	Seoul	30s
Ms. Kang	Female	Politician	Seoul	30s
Prof. Min	Female	Professor	Gangwon	40s
Prof. Park	Female	Professor	Seoul	40s
Prof. Lee	Female	Professor	Seoul	40s
Prof. Jeon	Female	Professor	Seoul	50s
Ms. Moon	Female	Women's rights group staff (former)	Daegu	50s

Table I. Interview Participant Information

Almost all interviews, except one, were conducted entirely in Korean, and all were recorded and transcribed with participants' informed consent. After the responses were anonymized, thematic analysis was applied to categorize the interviews into key themes aligned with relevant framing concepts. The FRDA framework was then used to identify personal narratives, revealing contrasting or layered voices that highlighted the complexity of participants' responses.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1. Diagnosing the problem: situating conscription discourse within Korea's legacy of militarized masculinity and feminist counter framing

When asked to identify the main problems related to Korea's conscription system, nearly half of the respondents situated the military within the country's broader historical trajectory, viewing conscription as a largely unquestioned and normalized aspect of masculinized citizenship. This historical framing, in line with Moon's (2005) analysis of militarized modernity, highlighted decades of anti-communist propaganda that instilled a persistent, internalized fear of invasion from external enemies, including North Korea. While Korea's divided state and the collective perception of vulnerability to outsiders were regarded as the main factors used to justify the continued existence of conscription, most participants identified the dominance of male victimhood and reverse discrimination narratives as significant problems in the public discourse.

Importantly, none of the interviewees dismissed the difficulties faced by conscripted men when

criticizing male victimhood narratives. Several respondents described the male-only conscription policy as a form of structural violence, criticizing the state for disregarding men's individual rights by requiring nearly all to serve indiscriminately. While acknowledging male-only conscription as unfair and sympathizing with conscripted men, participants echoed the widespread view of military service as a significant disruption in young people's lives.

At the same time, feminist participants criticized the way men's frustration with conscription often manifested as misogyny, distinguishing their stance from anti-feminists by redirecting blame away from women. In this sense, participants' diagnostic framing functioned as oppositional counterarguments to anti-feminist narratives. Essentially rejecting the anti-feminist framing of male-only conscription as reverse gender discrimination, nearly all respondents identified the weaponization of the conscription issue by anti-feminists as a major problem. They described conscription not as a topic raised out of genuine concern for equality, but rather as a convenient hot-button issue used to frame men as victims of reverse discrimination. Accordingly, the persistence of male-only conscription created ideal conditions for men to embrace anti-feminist views, as their shared trauma bonding in the military often became a source of resentment toward women. Because nearly all Korean men had direct experience with the military, conscription functioned as a political tool and a potential emotional rallying point for the anti-feminist countermovement. Advocacy for female conscription was thus dismissed as merely a symbolic, emotionally charged argument that anti-feminists deployed to justify discrimination against women.

Participants placed responsibility for the exploitation of the conscription issue not only on anti-feminist movement actors, but also on the state and political figures who repeatedly instrumentalized the debate to gain electoral support. While interpretations differed on the exact direction of causality between conscription debates and the broader gender conflict discourse, respondents generally regarded the two as interconnected. One feminist scholar who had studied the history of the conscription discourse argued that although the original issue was about the relationship between male citizens and the government, the failure to confront the state directly during the bonus points controversy redirected men's collective frustration toward women and reframed the discourse from a gender conflict narrative. Furthermore, participants criticized the state for knowingly contributing to the gender conflict framing and argued that portraying conscription debates as fights between men and women helped maintain the status quo by diverting attention away from institutional responsibility and toward individual blame. The government's repeated reliance on the vague concept of "social consensus" was criticized as a deliberate evasion tactic used to delay action on politically sensitive issues, including female conscription. According to most participants, the government had little genuine interest in tackling the structural problems of the conscription system. The politician most frequently mentioned during the interviews was Lee Jun-Seok, whom participants viewed as a pivotal figure in reframing conscription within a gender conflict narrative to appeal to young male voters. The political benefits of the gender conflict framing for both deflecting responsibility for reform and mobilizing young male voters were seen as central reasons why public debates remained narrowly constrained by binary arguments focused almost exclusively on female conscription.

In opposition to anti-feminist framing of conscription as reverse discrimination against men, feminist participants argued that the system ultimately discriminated against women by continuing to position them as the weaker sex. This perspective was particularly evident in the respondents' rejection of maternal framing. In fact, all of them strongly opposed the childbirth argument, challenging previous

claims that equating childbirth with conscription remains a mainstream feminist stance in Korea. Instead, participants viewed maternal framing as a conservative position rooted in misogynistic logic and more commonly associated with older generations.

Furthermore, although some acknowledged the gradual erosion of traditional gender roles, participants continued to stress the enduring legacy of militarized masculinity, pointing to male-only conscription as a key factor contributing to Korea's persistent gender gap. Interviewees questioned the claim that military service no longer offered men any advantages, pointing instead to material gains such as bonus payments, pension contributions, and wage substitutes that continue to enhance men's employment prospects after discharge. One feminist scholar noted a shift in public discourse around compensation, observing that many people, including feminists who once firmly opposed compensatory measures, now support such policies. Attributing this shift to the growing narrative of male victimization, the scholar argued that, as a result, the government has become bolder in expanding benefits for conscripted men in recent years. For example, the Military Service Credit, which increases conscripted men's eligibility for old-age benefits and pension amounts, was recently expanded to double the additionally credited subscription period toward the National Pension system, soon to grant male conscripts a full extra year (NPS On Air, 2025). In addition to material compensation, participants emphasized the formative nature of conscription, viewing it as an essential period in the development of citizenship. For example, one male feminist referred to his own experiences as a conscripted soldier, describing military service as instrumental in helping him develop essential survival skills, including disaster-response skills. Overall, conscription was viewed as a structured experience that helped young men learn civic responsibility, acquire organizational and networking skills, and participate in forms of solidarity rarely found elsewhere in modern capitalist society. Respondents argued that while most men benefit from this structured environment, women are excluded from similar opportunities to build basic organizational skills and to learn how to navigate hierarchical institutions.

4.2. Feminist prognoses on conscription: from equality and oppositional frames to pacifist critiques and alternative reimaginations beyond the military

When moving on to proposed solutions, feminist participants acknowledged the growing popularity of equality framing among women, which presented female conscription as a potential tool to dismantle entrenched gender structures. Despite notable advances in Korean women's social standing, the military remains one of the few state institutions exclusively dominated by men. Since conscription has long been perceived as a pathway to full citizenship, the social exclusion experienced by women has become a major grievance. Some participants argued that extending conscription to women could broaden critical discussions on military practices and national security issues, topics from which women have historically been left out. Similar to earlier feminist advocates of female conscription like Lee-Kim (2003), some participants within this study also viewed women's inclusion in the military in significant numbers was as a way to accelerate reform, as it would be easier for women to build collective resistance against discriminatory treatment than if they remained a small minority.

At the same time, participants often interpreted women's support for female conscription not as a genuine belief that it would lead to gender equality, but as a strategic response to widespread anti-feminist arguments. In this context, women's advocacy for female conscription was understood less within the equality framing and more as an oppositional counterargument designed to neutralize one

of the most commonly weaponized anti-feminist grievances. Most respondents suggested that young women were increasingly less likely to reject female conscription calls because they had grown tired of hearing men repeatedly raise the issue during discussions on unrelated topics. However, this interpretation, which understands support for female conscription among young women less as the product of thoughtful civic deliberation and more as a defensive concession to silence anti-feminist backlash, raises important questions about the nature of such support. Additionally, framing support for female conscription as oppositional complicates the scholarly definition of oppositional frames as purely diagnostic. While Hewitt (2007) argues that diagnostic frames stop at problem identification, interviewees' interpretations suggest that oppositional frames can also contain prognostic elements when responding to opponents' claims. In this case, Korean women's advocacy for female conscription, which is prognostic in nature, functions as a strategy to neutralize men's conscription-related grievances and counter anti-feminist claims about reverse discrimination, thereby still aligning with the logic of oppositional framing.

Importantly, although participants acknowledged some potential benefits of female conscription, they typically framed their comments in response to hypothetical "what if" scenarios rather than voicing strong personal advocacy for the policy. Even among those who supported the idea of female conscription, there was unanimous agreement that it should not be implemented before comprehensive military reform. When weighing the pros and cons, responses citing disadvantages outnumbered potential advantages. Challenging the claim that female conscription could help dismantle patriarchal structures, several respondents argued that including women in the military was more likely to legitimize its hierarchical, male-dominated foundations. From this perspective, simply adding women to a deeply gendered and discriminatory system would not resolve the underlying issues but instead force women to fight for gender equality within an institution that was never designed to accommodate them, ultimately adding to their burdens rather than alleviating them. The most frequently cited concerns in this regard related to sexual violence and the deeply ingrained stigma faced by female soldiers.

Many participants worried that the problem of sexual violence would only intensify if women were conscripted in large numbers without systemic measures to protect them from predatory behavior. Furthermore, nearly all of them believed that female conscription would fail to decrease gender conflicts in Korean society. Referring to entrenched biases within the military that make it extremely difficult for women to access leadership roles, participants cautioned that even if women joined men in conscription in hopes of achieving equality, their efforts would likely go unrewarded or ignored. Some even argued that male resentment could further intensify, as men might begin to view high-performing female soldiers as benefiting from special treatment or facing lower standards. Conversely, if women failed to perform at the same standards as their male peers, their shortcomings could be used to reinforce stereotypes that women are inherently unsuited for military service, thereby justifying their continued exclusion from male-dominated fields. Importantly, feminist concerns about women's underperformance in the military did not reflect a maternal framing that assumed women were inherently weaker than men. Instead, participants highlighted the structural and logistical obstacles that undermined women's equal participation in the military, including the bio-essential standards of physical examinations, the inadequacy of living quarters that failed to ensure privacy and safety for conscripts, and military equipment and practices designed exclusively around normative male bodies. Notably, these critiques often came from queer gender non-confirming participants, who reframed the issue through the lens of body politics and argued that the practical challenges faced by women and

other non-male bodies did not reflect inherent physical limitations, but rather revealed how the military institution knowingly produced such constraints.

Some respondents, particularly those involved in peace activism, offered a pacifist framing, raising concerns about the risk of intensified militarism and the deeper entrenchment of military values in civic life. For instance, one feminist scholar claimed that military service was a key reason why young men tended to be more conservative than young women. Extending conscription to women, she suggested, would likely result in women adopting similarly conservative views through the internalization of the military's rigid discipline and authoritarian values.

Overall, participants' prognostic framing often involved a critical reimagining of the conscription system as a whole, grounded in calls for expanded public discussions. Building on their previous diagnostic framing, which problematized the current framing of public debates focusing on anti-feminist male victimhood narratives, participants advocated for reframing the discourse to include structural and philosophical questions about militarism. Stressing the importance of addressing Korea's unresolved historical issues, interviewees called for expanding conversations through evidence-based research, inclusive academic dialogue, and unbiased media coverage. Some older respondents identified the military's lack of transparency and openness as a major barrier to meaningful public engagement, urging the government to incorporate the perspectives of civic groups, including human rights and peace activists, to counterbalance dominant militaristic narratives.

Participants engaged in peace activism maintained a pacifist framing, questioning the very necessity of conscription and encouraging more active resistance to the military. While most others also agreed that the complete abolition of conscription represented the ideal long-term goal, prevailing sociopolitical constraints related to national security issues led them to consider alternative approaches. Notably, only two participants supported an immediate transition to a voluntary service model. In contrast, more than half preferred to maintain mandatory service, criticizing voluntary models for their potential to intensify class inequalities. Among those who favored a gender-neutral universal conscription, many envisioned a model that extended beyond military service. Such respondents proposed broadening the concept of conscription to include other forms of civic and community service, while simultaneously redefining the notion of national security to allow individuals to contribute in ways aligned with their respective capabilities and circumstances.

4.3. Reclaiming the narrative: feminist motivations for continued engagement

A central motive behind participants' push for more active feminist engagement in conscription debates was to reclaim the discourse from being reduced to gender conflict. Even when respondents did not expect female conscription to be implemented in the near future, they worried about the issue's further instrumentalization by right-wing politicians. Recognizing the demographic pressures of low birth rates and shrinking military manpower, participants expressed concern that, without a deliberate peace-oriented approach, military reform discussions would remain superficial and regress into binary arguments about drafting women, potentially producing policy changes rooted in anti-feminist and misogynistic logic.

Overall, reflections on gender polarization within this study validated the growing perception that communication with the "other" is felt increasingly distant in the current climate of gender conflict. Younger participants, in particular, worried that the Korean society was already too divided to engage in

genuine dialogue, pointing to their everyday interactions with same-aged peers. At the same time, they resisted the notion that young men were inherently unreachable, warning that disengagement risked hardening boundaries and reinforcing an "us versus them" divide that could further polarize young men and women. Many called for spaces where young men could reflect on both the burdens and unique experiences tied to military service, stressing the need to create opportunities for them to share personal narratives as individuals navigating a system that also disadvantaged men in distinct ways. One male community organizer, who expressed concern about a growing tendency within activist circles to disengage from young men altogether, described his own struggle between acknowledging the difficulty of engagement and recognizing the risks of abandoning it. By insisting on the need for more discussion about constructive engagement strategies, participants highlighted a key dilemma for feminist activism not only in Korea but globally: whether to prioritize self-protection from hostile interactions or to take the risk of dialogue in hopes of shifting attitudes.

4.4. Contextualizing diverse feminist voices: how lived experiences shape engagement

The research findings mirrored Benford and Snow's (2000) notion of contestation within social movements, which highlights the susceptibility of collective action frames to internal disagreements. Feminist participants in this study employed different justifications to frame their perspectives on conscription and, at times, voiced disagreements or criticisms of fellow feminists. For instance, one feminist scholar recalled emerging divisions within the movement following the abolition of the bonus points, between those who supported female conscription and those who advocated for the complete abolition of the military. She argued that such internal tensions contributed to the lack of sustained conversation on conscription, as feminists sought to avoid deepening rifts within the movement.

Overall, however, participants rejected the notion that feminists were inherently disinterested in conscription-related issues. Beyond the common perception of conscription as a "men's issue" and therefore outside the jurisdiction of feminist activists, most of whom are women in Korea, respondents emphasized that the real barrier was backlash associated with engagement. In this context, I utilized the FRDA framework to understand how feminist engagements with conscription were shaped through the relationship between individuals and broader social structures. Drawing on personal experiences, participants recalled a wide range of reactions when discussing military-related issues, both from strangers and acquaintances, including family members and activist colleagues. Several cited experiences of anti-feminist backlash, with strangers online responding to their public statement with hostility, as well as negative reactions from known acquaintances, such as male friends. Even participants who initially received supportive feedback from friends or family expressed disappointment that their efforts failed to spark broader conversations. The reported lack of further engagement contributed to a sense of frustration among many feminists, making them more reluctant to revisit conscription as a subject of inquiry. As a result, they often redirected their focus toward issues more likely to gain rapid visibility and produce tangible outcomes, such as gender-based violence. Moreover, the perception of conscription debates as primarily anti-feminist arguments led many feminists to avoid the topic altogether, as they feared that engagement could inadvertently align them with anti-feminist rhetoric. Those reporting backlash emphasized that conscription was widely perceived as a "men's issue" not only by feminists but also by the broader public. In this context, feminist perspectives, already stigmatized in Korea, were often ignored, particularly when addressing socially sensitive topics like military service. For instance, participants recounted being dismissed with comments such as, "You haven't even served, so you don't know what you're talking about". Even the

male respondent who had completed his military service reported being invalidated in online discussions, with strangers assuming he was female because of his feminist identity.

The FRDA framework's focus on relationality also illuminated how feminists positioned their voices within the conscription discourse and how their lived experiences shaped divergent perspectives. By tracing participants' personal voices through their direct engagement with the conscription discourse, the interviews revealed a range of contextual factors that shaped how different individuals approached the issue. For example, when discussing their encounters with anti-feminist backlash, participants who worked as professors suggested that their professional authority influenced how their opinions were received by others, often shielding them from more hostile reactions. Gender also emerged as a key factor in the complexity of feminist narratives, particularly for gender nonconforming individuals. Queer participants critically reflected on how the military continued to operate within rigid gender binaries, excluding those who did not conform to traditional male and female categories. They highlighted the inadequacies of such binaries, underscoring how the system further marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals. Moreover, participants who were born with a male gender marker argued that their legal gender status granted them a certain degree of legitimacy when speaking publicly about conscription. These participants not only believed their voices carried more weight in discourse but also felt a responsibility to speak publicly about conscription, since many women felt discouraged from doing so.

Beyond demographic characteristics, direct encounters with the military institution and close proximity to conscription realities also shaped participants' engagement in public discourse. For example, older female participants frequently cited their sons' conscription experiences as turning points in their understanding of the system, recounting how their awareness of the military's shortcomings deepened after hearing about their sons' firsthand experiences. Similarly, professional work with military structures and with young men further informed participants' perspectives. One male participant, who provided gender-sensitive training to conscripts, described his ongoing engagements with young men. He argued that these exchanges allowed him to better understand young men's frustrations, as well as to confront misinformation and facilitate more nuanced discussions. Overall, participants who reported maintaining close relationships with young men, whether through familial ties or professional work, were the most likely to advocate for continued engagement with this demographic.

Altogether, participants' reflections when talking about why it was challenging to engage with the conscription discourse revealed how deeply embedded the logistics of militarized modernity remains in Korean society. While some interviewees acknowledged that the hegemonic model of militarized masculinity had weakened in recent years, their responses also demonstrated how its residual forms have become internalized, thus rendering the military institution mostly resistant to critique. In this context, feminists especially face various limitations when attempting to address conscription-related issues. While participants' responses partly supported the argument that conscription is seen as a 'men's issue', they also showed that this view is not limited to young digital feminists, nor does it wholly explain the limited feminist engagement with the topic. Even when feminists recognize conscription as a serious issue requiring attention, they often encounter criticism suggesting that military service is not their place to speak on, especially if they have not served in the military themselves. Participants' experiences of backlash, from both progressive, feminist spaces, as well as the broader public and anti-feminists, help explain why feminist engagement with conscription has not persisted over time. Many have chosen to continue the conversation in more informal or discreet ways, indicating that even

those who are publicly active in the feminist movement regard military-related issues as particularly sensitive discussion topics. The interviews further illustrated that feminist engagement with conscription is not shaped by gender identity alone, but by a constellation of contextual factors, including professional status, personal encounters with the military, activist histories and proximity to conscripted individuals. These layered and context-specific narratives challenge binary framings that dominate public discussions and show how feminist thought evolves relationally, informed by both structural positioning and interpersonal realities.

5. Conclusions

By adopting a framing approach from social movement literature, this study examined how feminist actors position themselves within public debates on Korea's male-only conscription policy. Drawing on Benford and Snow's core framing tasks and interviews with 12 feminist-identifying individuals engaged in academic, activist, and everyday contexts, the findings challenge dominant portrayals of feminists as indifferent to military issues. Participants acknowledged the burdens conscription places on young men but situated the system within Korea's militarized modernity, where military service functions as a masculine rite of passage. They rejected anti-feminist claims that male-only conscription constitutes reverse discrimination, instead tracing it to a misogynistic logic that casts women as dependents in need of male protection. Conscription was framed as both a structural barrier to gender equality and a political tool mobilized to fuel male resentment and marginalize feminist voices. Contrary to assumptions that feminists rely on maternalist arguments equating childbirth with military service, participants uniformly rejected such framing. Although survey data indicate rising support for female conscription among young women, respondents interpreted this partly as a strategic counter to anti-feminist rhetoric. While many favored long-term gender-neutral universal service or demilitarization, they opposed the immediate inclusion of women without institutional reform, warning it could exacerbate existing inequalities. Finally, the study highlights internal diversity within the Korean feminist movement. Perspectives varied by gender identity, professional background, and personal ties to military service, underscoring how backlash, polarization, and intersecting identities shape feminist engagement in the conscription debate.

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