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SECURING MANHOOD, SECURITISING WOMEN: FRAGILE MASCULINITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUTH KOREA

ERKEKLİĞİN GÜVENCESİ, KADINLARIN GÜVENLİKLEŞTİRİLMESİ: GÜNEY KORE ÖRNEĞİNDE KIRILGAN ERKEKLİK[*]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the securitisation of women in South Korea through the lens of fragile masculinity, thus intervening in ongoing debates on the gendered production of both security and insecurity. It explores how anxieties rooted in economic precarity and military insecurity shape the framing of women as security threats, in both political discourse and policy practice. Methodologically, this study adopts an interpretive process tracing framework, to examine how fragile masculinity is expressed and embedded within South Korea's

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political and institutional dynamics. The analysis is informed by the factor of ontological security, particularly concepts of anxiety and insecurity. The findings demonstrate that anxieties nourished by economic and military insecurities do not remain limited to everyday social or gender practices, but are institutionalised through state policies and political arenas that contribute to the systematic securitisation of women. This research contributes to the fields of gender and security studies, and offers insights into the layered and relational dynamics through which gender security is produced and governed, by defining and analysing the relationship between fragile masculinity and gendered securitisation.

Keywords: Fragile Masculinity, Ontological Security, Securitisation, Gender Security, South Korea.

ÖZ

Bu makale, Güney Kore bağlamında kadınların güvenlikleştirilmesini kırılgan erkeklik çerçevesinde ele alarak güvenliğin ve güvensizliğin toplumsal cinsiyetli üretimine ilişkin literatüre katkı sunmaktadır. Çalışma, ekonomik ve askerî güvensizlikten beslenen kaygıların, kadınların siyasal söylemde ve kamu politikalarında birer güvenlik tehdidi olarak inşa edilmesinde nasıl bir rol oynadığını incelemektedir. Yöntemsel olarak yorumlayıcı süreç takibi temelli bir vaka yaklaşımını benimseyen çalışma, kırılgan erkekliğin Güney Kore'nin siyasal ve kurumsal dinamikleri içinde nasıl ifade edildiğini ve nasıl yerleştiğini incelemektedir. Analiz ise ontolojik güvenlik yaklaşımı temelinde, özellikle kaygı ve güvensizlik kavramları üzerinden şekillendirilmektedir. Bulgular ile ortaya konulduğu üzere ekonomik ve askerî güvensizliklerin yarattığı kaygılar yalnızca gündelik toplumsal ve toplumsal cinsiyet pratikleriyle sınırlı kalmamakta ve bu kaygılar, devlet politikaları ve siyasal alan aracılığıyla kurumsallaşarak kadınların sistematik biçimde güvenlikleştirilmesine zemin hazırlamaktadır. Yürütülen çalışma kırılgan erkeklik ile toplumsal cinsiyetli güvenlikleştirme arasındaki ilişkiyi görünür kılarak toplumsal cinsiyet ve güvenlik çalışmaları literatürüne katkıda bulunmakta ve toplumsal cinsiyet güvenliğinin nasıl

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üretildiğine ve yönetildiğine ilişkin katmanlı dinamiklere dair önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kırılgan Erkeklik, Ontolojik Güvenlik, Güvenlikleştirme, Cinsiyet Güvenliği, Güney Kore.

INTRODUCTION

Asian countries, which have strengthened their international position particularly in the field of technology, tend to lag behind other countries in terms of women's rights and employment (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, 2025; for other examples see Zhao and Şahin Temel, 2025). This problem has a multilayered nature that cannot be explained solely by cultural factors and ideological preferences. In this context, it is evident that gender is intertwined with the prevailing circumstances of social and institutional structures (Szoltysek et al., 2026). This intertwining becomes even more apparent in times of heightened military threat, deepening economic uncertainty, and global instability. In such periods, state policies towards women clearly intersect with security discourse (Yuval-Davis, 1993; see also Cabesaz, 2022). This situation leads to the problematisation of women's presence in the public sphere and the labour market, and their right to speak up about their bodies and their social roles, through the discourses of national security, demographic sustainability, and social order (Hudson, 2009). But the question is, "How does fragile masculinity mediate the relationship between external threats and the securitisation of women?"

The article aims to provide an explanation that goes beyond classical approaches to the question of security. While restrictive and othering policies towards women are traditionally mostly addressed through the lens of religion, culture or authoritarian tendencies, this study focuses on the transformative effect of external threats and economic insecurity on the phenomenon of gender. In this regard, the article argues that military and economic insecurity create a situation of disruptive existential anxiety in terms of collective identities, masculinity norms, and state-society relations.

The article's main argument is that external and economic threats create a fear of loss of power in relation to masculine identity, and that there are attempts both for this fear to be appeased through the securitisation of women and instrumentalised for political purposes. Hegemonic masculinity, defined through its protective and provider roles, becomes particularly vulnerable in the face of loss of social status and economic crises. This vulnerability is confronted by constructing women's rights and demands as a threat to national security. In this context, feminist movements, women's participation in the workforce, and

demands for gender equality are reframed not as social demands but as security issues.

This study brings together the ontological security literature and the fragile masculinity literature. While the perspective of ontological security emphasises that states and collective actors need to protect not only their physical existence but also their identity continuity, the fragile masculinity literature reveals that the apparent need to protect masculinity, an identity that must be constantly reproduced, is what creates anxiety. When these two approaches are considered in tandem, it becomes clearer why military and economic insecurities are particularly compensated for through consideration of women's rights.

Securitisation theory is used to link these two contexts. The theoretical framework is elaborated through the case of South Korea. In this country, where the perception of military threats originating from North Korea has become persistent, and the country has had to contend with economic fragilities while adapting to the neoliberal order, anti-feminist movements have gained strength and become increasingly mobilised in recent years. In this context, this article analyses how anti-feminist discourses and policies targeting women in South Korea are legitimised through the language of security. This analysis approaches the securitisation of women not as an individual response or in terms of populist rhetoric, but as a structural ontological security strategy entangled with the crisis of masculinity and reproduced through state discourses and institutional practices.

This article makes three key contributions to the literature. Firstly, it departs from approaches within security studies which often focus on state centric security debates, by placing the concept of fragile masculinity at the centre of the analysis. By assuming that masculinity is a fragile status that must be constantly reinforced, it reveals how the anxiety generated by military and economic threats to masculine identity is transformed into political discourse and a means of mobilisation. Secondly, the study conceptualises the securitisation of women as a systematic compensatory mechanism and political strategy fuelled by fragile masculinity. The framing of women's visibility in the public and economic spheres and gender equality policies as a security threat is addressed as a conscious and repeated political practice aimed at managing and directing the crisis of masculinity in this context. Thus, the article offers a gender-based perspective to the securitisation literature. Thirdly, by focusing on the case of South Korea, the article demonstrates that the dynamics of fragile masculinity and securitisation are not unique to authoritarian regimes or exceptional contexts. It shows how, even in a developed democracy, women can be constructed as the internal enemies of national security under conditions of military and economic insecurity.

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The research adopts an interpretive process tracing method, based on quasi-secondary data produced during the period between 2015 and 2024. This period encompasses a process in which youth unemployment deepened, economic insecurity increased, and gender conflicts became more visible in political discourse in South Korea. The dataset includes documents and statements by government officials on labour market reforms, gender policies, and compulsory military service; national and international media reports addressing male youth unemployment, anti-feminism, and military service debates, think tank and civil society reports, and academic studies focusing on gender, militarism, and masculinity. These sources were selected to enable the simultaneous analysis of both state level discourse and masculinity-based narratives of victimhood circulating in the social sphere.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Why do states facing external threats turn inward to restrict women's rights? This study argues that military and economic insecurities do not simply generate fear of external enemies—they produce a deeper, existential anxiety that destabilises masculine identity. When men can no longer fulfil culturally expected roles as protectors and providers, the resulting crisis of masculinity finds resolution through the construction of women as threats to national security and social order. This framework explains how external vulnerabilities translate into domestic gender politics, connecting the anxieties of individual men to the securitising rhetoric of political elites.

Ontological Security and Anxiety

The concept of ontological security, originally developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991), refers to the need for actors to experience a stable sense of self and identity through time. Giddens defines ontological security as possessing, at the level of practical consciousness, answers to fundamental existential questions that allow individuals to maintain a coherent biographical narrative. When this narrative is disrupted, actors experience profound anxiety that motivates efforts to restore stability and continuity.

International Relations scholars have adapted this framework in order to understand state behaviour and collective identity dynamics. Jennifer Mitzen (2006) introduced ontological security to IR theory, arguing that states seek not only physical security but also security of the self. According to Mitzen, ontological security is achieved through routinised relationships with significant others, and actors become deeply attached to these relationships, even when they are conflictual. This insight helps explain why states may perpetuate seemingly irrational conflicts: the routines of conflict itself provide ontological security by maintaining stable identity narratives.

Crucially, ontological security scholarship distinguishes between fear and anxiety. While fear is directed at specific, identifiable threats, anxiety is a more diffuse condition arising from uncertainty about one's identity and place in the world (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020; Krickel-Choi, 2022). Brent Steele (2008; also see Ubulof, 2014) elaborates that anxiety "consumes all social agents" and motivates them to secure their sense of being through social action. This distinction is essential for our framework: external threats such as military aggression or economic crisis generate not merely fear of material harm but existential anxiety about collective identity and self-continuity.

Catarina Kinnvall (2004) demonstrates how globalisation-induced ontological insecurity drives individuals and groups to seek reaffirmation of identity through collective attachments. She argues that nationalism and religion function as powerful "identity-signifiers" in times of rapid change and uncertain futures, providing stable anchors for threatened selves. Extending this logic, we propose that in contexts where national identity is structured around masculine norms, threats to ontological security will manifest as threats to masculine identity, triggering gendered compensatory responses.

Fragile Masculinity: From Individual Psychology to Collective Politics

Political psychology research has established that masculinity operates as a precarious social status that must be continuously earned and defended. Vandello and others (2008) demonstrate through experimental studies that manhood, unlike womanhood, is viewed as "a precarious state requiring continual social proof and validation." Their research shows that when men receive feedback suggesting they possess feminine traits, they experience heightened anxiety and engage in compensatory behaviours, including physical aggression. This "precarious manhood" thesis has been replicated across cultural contexts, suggesting structural rather than culturally specific dynamics (Vandello and Bosson, 2012).

Building on this foundation, DiMuccio and Knowles (2020) conceptualize "fragile masculinity" as the anxiety felt by men who believe they are failing to meet cultural standards of manhood. They demonstrate that this fragility motivates compensatory attitudes and behaviours designed to restore threatened masculine status. Crucially, their research extends these dynamics into the political realm, showing that men experiencing masculine insecurity display increased support for aggressive policies, and politicians who signal strength and toughness. DiMuccio and Knowles (2021) further establish that precarious manhood predicts support for what they term "political aggression"—policies emphasising dominance, risk-taking, and forceful responses to perceived threats.

These individual-level dynamics connect to broader patterns of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995, 2005) denotes hegemonic masculinity as the

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configuration of gender practice that legitimises patriarchy and guarantees the dominant position of men. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed set of traits but a relational and historically contingent practice that must be continuously reproduced. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasise that hegemonic masculinity operates on multiple levels— local, regional, and global —and involves ongoing struggles among different masculinities for dominance. When the conditions supporting hegemonic masculinity are destabilised, men experience collective anxiety about their status, and engage in efforts to restore masculine dominance.

External Threats as Triggers of Masculine Anxiety

Our framework identifies two categories of external threat that trigger masculine anxiety: military insecurity and economic insecurity. Both threaten core pillars of masculine identity in societies where manhood is defined through the concepts of protection, provision, and strength.

Military threats challenge masculine identity by exposing the limits of men's capacity to fulfill protective roles. When a nation faces persistent military danger, the masculine imperative to "protect" the nation, family, and women in particular, becomes simultaneously heightened and frustrated. This creates what ontological security scholars identify as a "critical situation" (Steele, 2008; Ejdus, 2018)—a moment when taken-for-granted routines are disrupted and fundamental questions about identity become salient. The inability to neutralise external military threats generates diffuse anxiety that attaches to masculine self-conception.

Economic insecurity similarly threatens masculine identity, by undermining men's status as providers and breadwinners. Research demonstrates that adherence to masculinity norms strongly predicts men's responses to economic strain, with economically threatened men showing increased support for authoritarian leadership and aggressive policies (Matavelli et al., 2025). Economic crisis thus functions not merely as material deprivation but as an assault on masculine identity, generating the kind of existential anxiety that motivates compensatory responses. Studies of far-right populism confirm that economic dislocation disproportionately affecting traditional male employment has been linked to gendered backlash politics (Broz et al., 2021; Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

The Securitisation of Women as Compensatory Response

We propose that the securitisation of women represents a compensatory response to anxiety-inducing external threats. When military and economic insecurities destabilise masculine identity, political actors frame certain activities of women —particularly feminist movements, women's workforce participation, and reproductive autonomy— as threats to national security and social order. This

discursive move serves multiple functions, in seeking to restore masculine ontological security.

First, securitising women provides a manageable target for anxieties that cannot be effectively directed at external threats. While military adversaries and global economic forces remain beyond men's control, domestic gender relations appear more amenable to intervention. By constructing women's advancement as a threat, political actors redirect diffuse anxiety towards a specific, actionable objective. This follows the logic of what Kinnvall (2004) calls the "abject-other" — the construction of an internal enemy onto which threatening aspects of identity can be projected.

Second, restrictions on women's autonomy function as symbolic reassertions of masculine control and authority. Research on threats to masculinity demonstrates that men respond to challenges by emphasising stereotypically masculine traits and behaviours, including dominance over women (Dahl et al., 2015). At the collective level, policies restricting women's roles represent a reassertion of the patriarchal order that masculine identity depends upon. By "protecting" the nation from feminism, low birth rates, or women's workforce participation, male political actors demonstrate precisely the protective capacity that external threats have called into question.

Third, blaming women for indicators of national decline provides a narrative that preserves masculine self-esteem, while explaining collective difficulties. Rather than acknowledging failures in masculine provision or protection, discourse attributing national problems to feminism, declining birth rates, or women's rejection of traditional roles maintains a coherent masculine identity narrative. This corresponds to biographical narrative continuity as essential to ontological security (Rumelili and Togay, 2024), the securitisation of women allowing the continuation of a narrative in which masculine failure is seen as impossible.

From Individual Anxiety to Political Mobilisation

The connection between individual masculine anxiety and collective political mobilisation operates through elite discourse and institutional channels. Political leaders experiencing or perceiving masculine threats among their constituencies have incentives to articulate narratives that channel anxiety towards manageable targets. Anti-feminist and anti-women rhetoric serve as what Kinnvall (2004) describes as an "identity-signifier"—a discursive resource that provides stability and coherence to threatened identities.

This process is not merely top-down manipulation but reflects genuine resonance between elite discourse and popular anxiety. Men experiencing fragile

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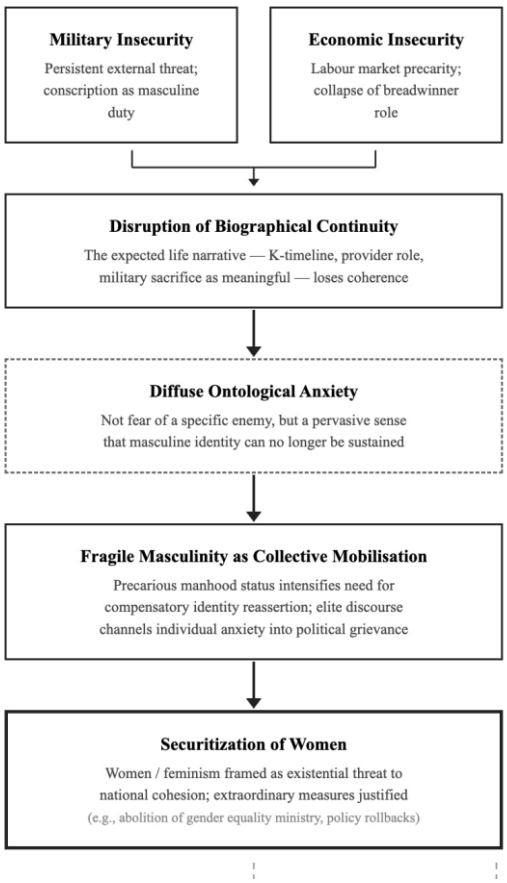
masculinity are psychologically predisposed to accept narratives framing women as threats, and to support politicians who signal masculine strength through aggressive stances. DiMuccio and Knowles (2021) demonstrate that regional levels of masculine anxiety, measured through Google search patterns, correlate with support for candidates emphasising strength and toughness. Elite securitisation of women thus both responds to and amplifies pre-existing gendered anxieties in the population.

The framework we have developed, as shown in Figure 1, suggests that the securitisation of women in contexts of external threat neither constitutes an irrational backlash nor cynical political manipulation alone. Rather, it represents a structured response to ontological insecurity, operating through gendered identity dynamics. Understanding this mechanism requires attention to both the psychological foundations of fragile masculinity and the political processes through which individual anxieties become collective policy. In the following sections, we apply this framework to examine how military insecurity from the threat carried by North Korea, and the incidence of economic crisis have generated gendered securitisation dynamics in South Korea.

Figure.1: Theoretical Mechanism: From External Threat to the Securitisation of Women



2. METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this article employs interpretive process tracing (IPT) to examine how fragile masculinity is articulated and translated into political discourse and institutional practice in South Korea. In this framework, particular attention is paid to how gendered insecurities are activated within specific contexts and gradually elevated into state-level narratives that frame women as objects of security concern. Following Norman (2015), interpretive process tracing (IPT) is used here to explain specific outcomes, while taking seriously the role of meaning, norms, and identities in shaping causal processes. IPT sees them as integral to how causal mechanisms operate. In this sense, it brings interpretive sensitivity directly into causal analysis. It reconstructs the sequence of events that lead to an outcome, but does so through what can be described as a form of constrained immersion. IPT works retrospectively through tracing processes that have already unfolded, often through texts, narratives, and archival material. Methodologically, IPT moves between inductive and deductive reasoning. As familiarity with the case deepens, patterns and mechanisms become clearer, and allow the researcher to refine explanations and assess alternative theoretical accounts. This iterative process gradually sharpens the analysis, making the causal pathways more precise, while also clarifying the relevant contrast space. A key strength of IPT lies in its ability to capture identities as relational and situational. Identities are not fixed; they are activated in specific interactions and contexts, and these moments of activation can shape both individual and collective action. IPT helps explain how social dynamics translate into political outcomes by tracing when and how such identities, roles, and practices become salient. Finally, IPT broadens the range of mechanisms typically considered in political analysis. As a methodology, it is well suited to uncovering mechanisms driven by habit, norms, and understandings. These processes are crucial for explaining how collective self-understandings emerge, when they become politically relevant, and how they shape preferences, strategies, and action (Norman, 2015: 4-6). The empirical analysis draws on presidential speeches and public statements as key situations where such processes become visible. Given the nature of archival practices in South Korea, access to these materials is mediated by administrative change: as presidential terms shift, official digital repositories are often restructured, rendering earlier records unevenly accessible. For this reason, the study relies on quasi-primary sources, preserved through major national and international media outlets, which systematically reproduce and archive presidential rhetoric. Importantly, policy documents are not treated as central sources in this analysis. This is a deliberate methodological choice rather than a limitation, as the discourse of former President Yoon Seok-Yeol operated on two distinct registers: formal policy language and electoral rhetoric, where the latter provides a more direct entry point into the articulation of gendered anxieties and their political mobilisation. Policy

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texts tend to formalise and stabilise discourse, often omitting or neutralising the affective and contested dimensions that are central to this study. Electoral rhetoric, by contrast, captures these dynamics more explicitly. The absence of or limited accessibility to certain policy documents therefore does not constitute a gap in the data, but reflects a theoretically informed prioritisation of those sources most relevant to tracing the mechanisms under investigation.

The empirical dataset comprises a combination of primary, quasi-primary, and secondary sources. Primary materials include a limited number of SNS posts, interviews, and speeches. Quasi-primary sources—such as media-reported statements and interviews with political actors and male voters—offer access to original discourse. Secondary sources consist of news reports, opinion pieces, and analytical articles. All materials were selected and categorized based on their relevance to representations of masculinity and insecurity; a detailed overview is provided in Appendix A. Interpreted through the lens of ontological security, this approach allows the analysis to connect specific narrative moments within presidential discourse to broader patterns of insecurity. In doing so, it demonstrates how fragile masculinity is not only expressed at the discursive level but also embedded in processes that contribute to the securitisation of women. Ultimately, the study shows how everyday articulations of gendered anxiety are translated into state-level practices, linking micro-level narratives to macro-level dynamics of gendered securitisation.

3. CONTEXTUALISING FRAGILE MASCULINITY IN SOUTH KOREA

In this section, South Korea is examined as a revealing case for understanding fragile masculinity, through the pressures of economic and military insecurity. Masculinity has traditionally been tied to two expectations for many men in South Korea that are both normalised and emotionally loaded: securing stable employment and completing compulsory military service (Moon, 2005b: 65; Lee and Parpart, 2018). However, these expectations sit uneasily, and do not match with social and economic realities. Prolonged youth unemployment, precarious work situations, and shrinking opportunities for upward mobility have made economic self-sufficiency increasingly difficult to achieve; while mandatory military service continues to demand sacrifice, without offering the social recognition it once guaranteed. As a result, many men experience masculinity, not as a secure identity but as a continuous test that they fear failing. This tension between what masculinity promises and what structural conditions allow, makes manhood fragile rather than stable. By bracketing economic precarity and military insecurity together, the South Korean case highlights how masculine anxiety is produced, lived, and sometimes redirected into defensive responses, and it offers critical insight into the contemporary gendered dynamics of insecurity.

From Provider to Precarity: Economic Insecurity and Fragile Masculinity

Gender inequality is not accidental, but continuously reproduced through economic systems, institutions, and everyday social arrangements. Macroeconomic changes since the 1980s have deepened these inequalities. Policies associated with neoliberal globalisation, especially promoted and supported by international financial institutions, reshaped labour markets and welfare systems in gendered ways. Structural Adjustment Policies are characterised by three interconnected biases: deflationary measures that displace women from informal and service-sector work; a male breadwinner logic that privileges men's paid labour while rendering women's unpaid care work invisible; and commodification through privatisation that shifts care responsibilities back into households and intensifies women's unpaid labour. From the 1990s, gender and poverty gained greater attention in development debates, influenced by feminist scholarship, and the failures of earlier models. However, institutions like the IMF and World Bank approached gender instrumentally as promoting equality, mainly in situations when it supports market stability. The United Nations has a research and advocacy-based approach, but it has failed to challenge the capitalist structures that generate inequality. Finally, gendered power relations also shape men's lives, especially in postcolonial contexts marked by poverty, violence, and labour insecurity (Tezcek, 2021: 184-186).

According to Matlak (2014), gender identities do not develop independently of economic life; conversely, they are produced through it. In many societies, masculinity has long been organised around the expectations of economic provision. Paid work, financial security, and the ability to materially support others, continue to operate as powerful benchmarks through which men are evaluated by society and by themselves. Even as alternative masculinities gain visibility, economic success remains a key source of social recognition, personal confidence, and relational legitimacy for men. When economic stability is eroded, these gendered expectations are thrown into question. Periods of unemployment, precarity, or financial decline do more than disrupt livelihoods. They unsettle the very narratives through which masculinity is affirmed. The loss of income undermines the symbolic status attached to being a provider, turning economic crises into deeply personal and psychologically damaging experiences. These dynamics extend into intimate and family life. Decisions about marriage and long-term commitment are often shaped by perceptions of economic preparedness through which financial capacity is closely associated with masculine desirability and responsibility. As a result, economic uncertainty reshapes private relationships, by postponing, redefining, or even discouraging marriage altogether. In this way, economic instability reverberates beyond the labour market, reconfiguring gender identities and the rhythms of everyday life.

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Work has never been just work for men, but employment has carried a moral and symbolic weight, operating as proof of usefulness, responsibility, and masculine adulthood. Because masculinity has long been measured through economic contribution, the loss of a job often destabilises more than just income, as it unsettles how men locate themselves within family, relationships, and society at large. Unemployment, in this sense, becomes a lingering pressure on identity, rather than a temporary interruption in a career path. This pressure has intensified under contemporary economic conditions. The waves of recession have erased the spaces where masculine worth repeatedly found affirmation. Yet the expectation to be the provider has not entirely disappeared. Instead, men are asked to live up to standards that the labour market itself cannot support. Studies show that this mismatch carries distinct gendered consequences. Men without work tend to feel harsher social judgment than women in similar situations, as they interpret unemployment more as a personal failure than a result of a structural condition. Even men who remain employed often imagine potential job loss as a threat to their masculine legitimacy, suggesting that the fear of status erosion extends beyond actual unemployment. These perceptions are not symbolic: they are strongly linked to emotional distress, including elevated anxiety, depressive symptoms, and a declining sense of self-worth. Unemployment cannot be understood only in economic terms. It operates as a gendered strain that exposes how deeply mental well-being is tied to cultural expectations of masculinity (Vandello and Bosson, 2012: 5-6).

According to Ray (2021; 319-320) all men do not experience unemployment in the same way. Men navigate economic exclusion through a range of strategies that may reinforce patriarchal power, redirect it into new domains, or quietly transform it. One response is to find compensation through power. When economic provision is no longer available as a source of masculine identity, some men attempt to recover a sense of authority by exerting greater control over others. This can take the form of increased dominance or violence towards women, or the targeting of groups blamed for job loss or economic decline. In these cases, masculinity is no longer expressed through productive work but through coercion and exclusion, turning economic marginalisation into intensified forms of patriarchal power. A closely related response shifts this search for authority into other social arenas. Men excluded from stable employment may seek influence through politics or religion, aligning themselves with institutions that offer recognition and symbolic status, even when material rewards are limited. Not all men, however, respond by trying to preserve their dominance. A smaller but meaningful group moves in a different direction, rethinking masculinity itself. These men place greater value on responsibility rather than authority, through supporting women's economic activities, sharing domestic work, or taking caregiving roles. In doing so, masculinity is redefined around care, commitment,

and cooperation (Pineda, 2000; Qayum and Ray, 2010). For many men, responses are quieter, and shaped by waiting rather than action. Ethnographic research describes two such patterns as "hanging out" and "hanging on." "Hanging out" refers to unemployed men spending extended time in public spaces, socialising with peers, exchanging stories, and holding onto imagined futures of success or mobility. However, these activities can also make public spaces feel less welcoming or safe for women (Jeffrey, 2010; Ralph, 2008). "Hanging on" by contrast, captures a mode of endurance. Men in this group respond to economic insecurity by trying to adapt through submitting to new labour opportunities in service or informal work.

Masculinity in South Korea has been historically constructed around economic provision, stable employment, and the capacity to fulfill the breadwinner role. Within this context, economic insecurity undermines masculinity not only materially but symbolically, as manhood operates as a precarious status that must be continuously achieved and maintained. Labour-market precarity, youth unemployment, and irregular work conditions transform structural economic instability into individualised experiences of masculine inadequacy. The erosion of economic stability destabilises men's social recognition, self-worth, and legitimacy in relation to marriage and family formation. As a result, economic precarity in South Korea functions as a gendered crisis that reshapes masculine identity, postpones commitments, and reinforces the conditional nature of manhood. In South Korea too, economic precarity and unemployment often intensify men's sense of insecurity and threatened masculine status, feelings that are frequently redirected towards women rather than towards the structural conditions actually producing the economic instability. In this context, resentment towards women's economic visibility and gender-equality demands can emerge as a way of making sense of blocked opportunities. Misogyny takes shape as a gendered reaction to precarious manhood, in which economic frustration is displaced onto women instead of being articulated as structural critique. At the same time, these dynamics point to a further stage in the causal process. Economic precarity generates what can be understood as diffuse ontological anxiety (Step 2 of Figure 1); a pervasive sense that masculine identity can no longer be securely sustained. This reflects a generalised instability in self-understanding rather than a specific fear. Crucially, this anxiety does not remain individual but becomes collectively articulated as fragile masculinity. In this next step (Step 3 of Figure 1), personal insecurities are transformed into shared political grievances, often redirected towards women rather than the structural sources of economic instability. In this way, fragile masculinity functions as a mechanism that channels diffuse ontological anxiety into gendered political claims.

These dynamics are empirically visible in South Korea's competitive employment sector, where the economic strain felt by the younger generation has

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become increasingly apparent. Data indicates that the younger section of the population is struggling to access a stable job market. In particular, the dramatic rise in unemployment and underemployment rates has fuelled public perceptions that the government of the time have failed to provide a sustainable future for young Korean men (Kwon, 2019; Stallard, 2022; Goodman, 2022).

The narrative of "prosperity in exchange for labour", which dominated Korea's economic development process between the 1970s and the 1990s, no longer holds for the younger generation, according to the current data (Kwon, 2019). Both public discourse and research emphasise the fact that young men are experiencing growing anxiety about meeting the need to finance socially expected living standards, amid a highly competitive environment in the job market and economic stagnation, alongside rising housing prices (Kwon, 2019; Stallard, 2022; Kim, 2025; Gunia, 2022). As a result, young Korean men perceive themselves as "falling behind" in both economic, social and cultural contexts (Kwon, 2019; Stallard, 2022; Goodman 2022).

One of the phenomena used when defining this sense of "falling behind" is the social expectation system known as the "K-timeline", conceptualised by Ann Hee Je (Kim, 2025). This concept argues that the definition of masculinity in South Korea is shaped by a rigid and temporally framed life trajectory. According to this cultural phenomenon, Korean men are expected to complete certain stages, such as education, military service, finding a job, marriage and having children, in a specific order and "on time" (Kim, 2025; Jung, Bendeich and Escritt, 2025). It can be seen that this life schedule is framed as a social norm, regardless of individual preferences, and is associated with the Korean definition of masculinity. In this context, "masculinity" is not viewed as an innate biological trait; rather, it is understood as a performative domain that is constantly tested within a cycle of repetitive labour, examination, success, and failure (Kim, 2025).

In light of the data, the process of entering the labour market appears to be a central point in this evaluation of masculinity (Kim, 2025). Accordingly, financial independence and stability are frequently cited as key criteria in narratives about masculinity that define Korean men's perception of "being a real man" (Kim, 2025). Failure to achieve these goals has been found to create an identity crisis, and is associated with a perceived threat to their legitimacy. Consequently, any temporal deviation in this domain will result in being labelled "a failed man" (Kim, 2025). This sense of disappointment will lead to the perception of policies aimed at increasing female employment as a threat (Kim, 2025; Kwon, 2019; Jung, Bendeich and Escritt, 2025; CNA Insider, 2023; Asian Boss, 2021). Indeed, it appears that policies announced in November 2017 that aimed to increase female representation in the public and private sectors were framed by young men as regulations that undermined the principle of merit (Kwon, 2019; Asian Boss,

2021). These statements are linked to a broader perception among Korean men that policies developed to ensure gender equality create a competitive disadvantage for them. Similarly, it is observed that the increase in women's participation in the workforce is perceived by Korean men in their twenties as the reason for their individual failure. Thus, the economic crisis, fundamentally stemming from structural problems, has evolved into a conflict between the sexes (Jung, Bendeich and Escritt, 2025; Goodman 2022; Kim, 2025; CNA Insider, 2023).

Conscription as Masculine Proof and Catalyst of Military Insecurity

According to Tapscott (2018: 121-122), hegemonic masculinity conceptualises gender as a field of struggle, in which one dominant form of masculinity is constructed as normative and superior, while other masculinities such as fragile masculinities are marginalised. This hierarchy among men legitimises unequal power relations, by presenting masculine dominance as natural, and reinforcing broader structures of domination. The state sustains these hierarchies both directly through discipline and norm-setting and indirectly through embedding masculine ideals within key institutions such as the economy and the military. Militarised masculinity constitutes an intensified expression of hegemonic masculinity. It relies on a binary opposition between the man in uniform and a feminised civilian sphere, by positioning military masculinity as both dominant and protective. Militarised masculinity functions as a powerful ideological tool that promotes nationalism, and encourages men to accept risk and sacrifice for the state, by equating manhood with warriorhood. While hegemonic masculinity organises hierarchies among men, militarised masculinity extends this logic, as it privileges military masculinity over all civilian forms, and it narrows the range of legitimate masculine identities. Nevertheless, hegemonic and militarised masculinities are never totalising. As Cornwall and Lindisfarne argue, dominant masculinities do not fully eliminate subordinate forms, but instead spaces of resistance persist in which alternative masculinities are articulated and sustained, allowing challenges to hegemonic gender orders (Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994: 5, as cited in Tapscott, 2018: 133).

Masculinity is usually constructed through military service, so that participation in the army is accepted as a key marker of ideal manhood. This relation reinforces both men’s willingness to engage in combat, and the broader legitimacy of male social dominance, as the military is widely perceived as a masculine institution rooted in male dominance and cultural norms. Traits such as strength, aggression, courage, discipline, emotional restraint, and heterosexuality are defined as signs of real masculinity, and requirements for effective soldiering within this framework. However, this alignment is not uncontested, especially when state or social demands for military service exceed

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individual capacity, and therefore refusing to serve can pose as political significance. Such refusal disrupts the assumed natural connection between masculinity, militarism, and nationalism, revealing these relationships as contingent, contested, and open to resistance (Perez and Sasson-Levy, 2015: 465, 484).

Military service provides men with access to symbolic and material resources that are widely recognised as markers of masculine legitimacy. Military culture systematically values emotional restraint, physical endurance, heterosexual behaviour, self-discipline, aggression, autonomy, and a willingness to accept risk, which are classified as traits that are identified in the literature as central to military masculinity and aligned with Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity (Higate, 2002, 2007; Higate and Hopton, 2005; Hockey, 2002; Padilla and Riege Laner, 2002; Regan de Bere, 2003; Siebold, 2001; Connell, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2005 as cited in Hinojosa, 2010: 180; Albayrak-Dönmez, 2024: 64). However, military service does not produce masculinity as a fixed identity. Notwithstanding, it offers the conditions under which hegemonic masculinity can be claimed. Through institutionalised income, physical training, and disciplined bodies, the military makes certain masculine resources available, but gender identities are continuously constructed through social interaction rather than acquired through institutional membership (Goffman, 1959; West and Zimmerman, 1987, as cited in Hinojosa, 2010: 180). This process is inherently paradoxical, due to military participation enhancing men's capacity to assert their hegemonic masculinity, yet it simultaneously subjects them to rigid hierarchies that limit autonomy and reinforce subordination. As a result, hegemonic masculinity within the military operates primarily through symbolic power. However symbolic distinctions between soldiers and civilians, and across ranks create recurring opportunities to enact dominance, which allows hegemonic masculine identities to be performed, rehearsed, and sustained (Hinojosa, 2010: 192).

As Chung (2024: 347) argues, South Korea provides an important case of the relationship between masculinity and military service. The introduction of universal male conscription in 1949 led to the understanding of military service as a prerequisite for fulfilling a man's social role, especially under the shadow of enduring security tensions with North Korea (Kwon, 2001; Moon, 2002; Moon, 2005a). During the post-Korean War period, national defence and compulsory service were treated as social foundations. This treatment was reinforced during military-backed authoritarian rule through labour-market advantages that connected veteran status to masculine authority and economic citizenship (Moon, 2005a). This apparent consensus began to weaken in the 1990s, amid democratisation, globalisation, and neoliberal restructuring that reshaped dominant masculine ideals towards individual achievement, self-management, emotional reflexivity, and body care (Moon, 2005b; Abelmann et al., 2009;

Ainslie, 2017; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Frank, 2014; Weber, 2014; Louie, 2012; Song, 2016, as cited in Chung, 2024). As the age of compulsory military service overlaps with key stages of education and career formation, many young men came to view military service as a disruptive waste of the prime of their lives, particularly in an increasingly globalised and competitive environment (Moon, 2005b; Song, 2015; Kwon and Roy, 2007). Despite these shifts, the symbolic link between military service and hegemonic masculinity remains largely intact. Completing the term of military service continues to function as a signifier of normal manhood and social legitimacy, while exemption from it often carries stigma and hurts the already fragile masculine identity (Moon, 2005b; Song, 2015). Militarised masculine norms also persist in organisational contexts, where veterans are commonly perceived as more disciplined and committed than non-veterans, including women and those who complete alternative civilian service, typically in prisons and detention centres (Lee et al., 2019). Overall, this demonstrates that even under neoliberal conditions, military service remains a key mechanism through which hegemonic masculinity is performed and evaluated in South Korean society (Chung, 2024: 349-351).

These dynamics also point to a further stage in the causal process. As the fulfilment of military service becomes less likely to secure masculine recognition under neoliberal conditions, this gives rise to a more diffuse form of ontological anxiety that contributes to a persistent sense that traditional markers of manhood no longer guarantee social legitimacy (Step 2 of Figure 1). This anxiety does not just remain individual; it is collectively expressed as fragile masculinity (Step 3 of Figure 1), through which personal insecurities take the form of shared political grievances. In this process, frustrations surrounding military service are often redirected towards women rather than towards the structural changes that have unsettled the military–masculinity link, channelling diffuse anxiety into gendered political claims.

While military service functions as a mechanism through which hegemonic masculinity is institutionalised, it is also discursively used by Korean men to construct a narrative of victimhood. The anxiety stemming from economic insecurity, combined with the length of compulsory military service, reinforces this widespread discourse among young men (Kim, 2024; Rashid, 2025; Kim, 2025; Jung, Bendeich and Escritt, 2025; Stallard, 2022; Kwon, 2019; CNA Insider, 2023; Asian Boss, 2021). Military service is not merely a policy aimed at state security in South Korea; it also functions as a social mechanism through which masculinity is institutionally constructed. The fact that this obligation extends over such a long period –eighteen months– is interpreted by men as an "interruption" in their careers and personal development (Kwon, 2019; Kim, 2025; CNA Insider, 2023). The argument that men "waste" this time by fulfilling their military obligations while their women peers use the time to improve themselves and enter

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the job market, is frequently repeated by the anti-feminist groups. (Kim, 2024; Rashid, 2025; Kim, 2025; Stallard, 2022; CNA Insider, 2023). In this context, the period of compulsory military service fuels young men's economic worries, and reinforces the idea that they experience "reverse discrimination", due to the corresponding rights granted to their female peers (Chica-Morales, 2022; Kim, 2025; Shin, 2022). After the abolition of thse military service bonus system, many young men felt like "the social cost" that they paid by fulfilling their military duties was being disregarded (Until 1999, those who had finished their military service received additional marks in government exams. This system was later abolished because it was found to be discriminatory and was seen as inconsistent with the principle of equality) (Kim, 2025; Rashid, 2025; Kim, 2024). Likewise, quota systems aimed at boosting women's representation in both the public and private sector are often mentioned as examples of men facing "reverse discrimination" in the country (Kim, 2024; Rashid, 2025; Kim, 2025; Asian Boss, 2021; CNA Insider, 2023).

The data show that young Korean men tend to describe military service as "unfair" (Kim, 2024; Rashid, 2025; Kim, 2025). They frame this experience not just as an individual hardship, but as a narrative of collective victimhood. In this regard, statements such as "True equality would mean women serving in the military too.", and "Women are using this time for improving themselves" are mentioned by young men (Kim, 2025; Asian Boss, 2021).

Another significant finding is that during Yoon Suk Yeol's administration, the emphasis on militarism and the experience of conflict was supported via state sponsored celebrations and official rhetoric (Kim, 2024). This approach played a crucial role, not only in the security discourse of Yoon's administration but also in the definition of masculinity. The Armed Forces Day event held at Gwanghwamun Square on 1st October 2024 is a notable example of this phenomenon (Kim, 2024). According to this example, militarism is often positioned at the core of security policy, within the public sphere, and the construction of political legitimacy. At this ceremony, where the latest weapon systems in the arsenal were publicly displayed, the government reinforced its rhetoric of "peace through strength" by illustrating it visually (Kim, 2024). Via this demonstration, Yoon's government highlighted its self-proclaimed comprehensive capacity to address both internal and external threats (Kim, 2024). The large scale of the event, along with its declaration as an official holiday, demonstrates the fact that militarism is closely intertwined with everyday life (Kim, 2024). In this regard, the ceremony serves as a symbolic reminder of the militarist order's role in South Korea.

This militarist order and gender inequality mutually reinforce each other (Kim, 2024). Although the South Korean Constitution assigns the duty of

protecting the nation to all of its citizens, the Military Service Act only covers men. This arrangement fosters a gendered understanding of citizenship, by defining masculinity through the guise of compulsory military service (Kim, 2024). At this point, data show that military service is seen as an unavoidable obligation for young men (Kim, 2024). Those who do not fulfil their military service obligations are labelled as "deficient" and "abnormal" (Kim, 2024). This labelling has been influential in the development of this perception. Within this discursive setting, young Korean men frame women's exemption from military service, particularly with their "failure" to contribute through a lack of childbearing, as grounds for questioning the principle of equal citizenship (Kim, 2024). Thus, women's care work, along with their overall economic contribution, is rendered invisible, while the national security narrative is restricted to military service.

In South Korea, feminist demands have gained strength in the public sphere since 2015 (Kim, 2024; Kwon, 2019; Çelik, 2020: 519). The increased mobility of young women has made the sexist nature of the militarist order visible. The #MeToo movement, the protests following the Gangnam Station murder, and the protests against anti-abortion laws have brought women's presence and demands to the public eye (Kim, 2024; Kwon, 2019; Chica-Morales, 2022). However, it can be seen that some conservative politicians have securitised these demands, in order to mobilise the anger of young men. In this context, it is noteworthy that the debate on "military service for women" is widely circulated during electioneering periods (Kim, 2024). Consequently, militarism in South Korea is not merely a defence practice developed against external threats; it is a phenomenon that reproduces the understanding of gender inequality through military service. This securitising language, constructed through the distinction between "us" and "the enemy", creates fertile ground for generating internal enemies, with a slight shift in discourse (Kim, 2024).

This discursive reconfiguration must also be understood in generational terms. Although gender inequality in South Korea has a long and deep-rooted history, the current generation's gender-based attitudes are markedly different from their fathers' patriarchal protectiveness and adherence to traditional gender roles (Park, 2021; Kwon, 2019). According to the data, in the traditional system, men position themselves as authority figures, dominating women, whereas antithetically Korean men in their twenties see themselves as victims of feminism (Park, 2021; Kwon, 2019). This transformation demonstrates that masculinity has been reconstructed as a threatened identity, by spotlighting its former position of power. In this context, anti-feminism among young Korean men emerges as a reactive and identity-based stance (Park, 2021). Taken together, the emerging form of misogyny is grounded in the perception that masculinity is under threat. This perception securitises women and women's rights as both an economic and a status-based enemy, thereby paving the way for gender-based hostility.

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The published survey data (Park, 2021) clearly shows the quantitative extent of this hostility. A total of 58.6 % of men in their twenties stated that they opposed feminism, while 25.9 % indicated that their opposition was at the highest level. The belief patterns of this 25.9% group point to a misogynistic and male-centred worldview (Park, 2021). The entire group claimed that discrimination against men today is more intense than that against women; the majority did not associate the fact of women receiving lower wages with gender discrimination. They explained this situation instead as a lack of individual effort (Park, 2025). This approach reframes gender inequality from a structural issue into an individual one. Young men's perception of their female peers as a "threat" is legitimised via discourses of merit and meritocracy (Park, 2021; Kang, 2026). The assumption that gender equality has already been achieved, combined with the belief that women now actually occupy an advantageous position, helps to construct men's belief in their relative loss of status as an absolute injustice. This domain, in which men perceive themselves as disadvantaged, produces a political consciousness that positions feminism as a direct target. In this regard, factors such as career interruptions stemming from childcare, and institutional discrimination, are systematically obscured. The formation of misogyny as a political identity is also reflected in political preferences (Chica-Morales, 2022; Pasquini, 2022; Rashid, 2025; Stallard, 2022; Kwon, 2019; Goodman, 2022). A substantial majority of the group accused the Moon administration of "being too close to feminism", due to their policies on women's representation (Park, 2021).

Park Min Young's role in Yoon Suk Yeol's election campaign reveals how the discontent of young men in Korea has been incorporated into a voter-focused strategy (Bicker, 2022). This strategy, conducted through social media, points to the process of transforming men's concerns into anti-feminist language (Bicker, 2022). By bringing "men's rights" movements into the political arena, Yoon Suk Yeol provided an ideological framework for Korean men's economic concerns, and their belief that they are treated unfairly (Bicker, 2022; Chica-Morales, 2022; Pasquini, 2022; Shin, 2022; Gunia, 2022; Goodman, 2022; VICE News, 2023). These movements have thus taken the form of political mobilisation (Stallard, 2022; Gunia, 2022).

Yoon's targeting of young male voters in his election campaign should not be interpreted merely as a pragmatic strategy aimed at leveraging voter behaviour. This strategy has enabled anti-feminist discourse to gain political legitimacy. Consequently, the anger of young men has become a resource that can be mobilised by political actors (Bicker, 2022; Chica-Morales, 2022; Pasquini, 2022; Shin, 2022; Gunia, 2022; Goodman, 2022; Stallard, 2022). This situation has resulted in feminism being redefined as a political threat rather than a normative struggle for rights (VICE News, 2023). Yoon's discourse on feminism and Korean women reveals that he follows a populist and polarising line. In the early stages of

his election campaign, he described himself as a "feminist", presenting this as a form of "humanism" (Lee and Kim, 2022). However, this statement was soon dismissed by party spokespeople as an "administrative error" and retracted (Lee and Kim, 2022; Pasquini, 2022; Lee, n.d; archived version).

Subsequently, Yoon rejected the existence of structural inequalities, framing gender-related issues as problems occurring "from person to person", and stressing the need to avoid "categorising problems according to gender"(Korea Times, 2022a; Lee, 2022; Gunia, 2022; Lee and Kim, 2022; Park Song I, 2023; National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, 2022; Ko, 2022; Lee Min Jae, 2022; Kwak, 2022; Kang, 2022; Equality Women,2025). Thus, through this discourse, the necessity for state-led gender policies is placed under scrutiny. By adopting this approach, Yoon frames institutional measures designed to address structural gender inequality as not only unnecessary but also potentially harmful (Lee and Kim, 2022; Lee, 2022). The withdrawal of this discourse, in turn, reveals that feminism is framed as a concept which is politically risky and to be avoided, within Yoon's political stance. Yoon stated, "The priority for achieving national unity is to serve the public properly by selecting talented individuals and to provide fair regional development opportunities so that every region can achieve balanced development (Jang and Kim, 2022). "I do not believe that gender quotas will contribute to development across the country." (Jang and Kim, 2022). He further noted that he did not plan to implement gender quotas when forming his cabinet (Jang and Kim, 2022). These statements also illustrate his cautious approach. This political stance, which especially rejects structural gender discrimination, gained an institutional dimension with his election pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) (Yoon Suk Yeol, 2022; VICE News, 2023; Yonhap News, as cited in The Korea Times, 2022b; Kim, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Gunia, 2022; Chica-Morales, 2022; Lee Hae, 2022; Jang and Kim, 2022; Lee and Kim, 2022; Delhaye, 2022; Jo, 2022; Lee, 2022; Korea Times, 2024; Pasquini, 2022; Goodman, 2022; Shin, 2022; Korea Times, 2022a; Park Song I, 2023).

Yoon justified this promise on three main grounds: the ministry's tendency to make young Korean men feel like "potential sex offenders", its policies of "focusing solely on eliminating discrimination against women", and the fact that the ministry had now "historically completed its mandate" (Jang and Kim, 2022; Lee, 2022; Gunia, 2022; Chica- Morales, 2022; The Korea Times, 2024). Yoon's criticisms of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family demonstrate that he framed gender equality as a narrow policy area specific to women. His claim that the ministry focused solely on the inequalities experienced by women suggest a rhetorical strategy that assumes men are subject to reverse discrimination. The statement that the ministry had now completed its purpose reveals that Yoon disregarded the continuing gender inequality in the country and coded women's

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demands for equality as a quest for privileges (Delhaye, 2022). His interpretation of demands for gender equality as a sense of entitlement is also evident in his economic policies. During a debate with other presidential candidates, Yoon was criticised by his rival for suggesting that the budget allocated to address gender equality issues could instead be used for border security (Jo, 2022). Indeed, after becoming president, he took steps that confirmed these views. The data show that, following his inauguration, the budget for gender equality policies was cut (Park Joonyi, 2023; Park Song I, 2023). Although the government announced that the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's total budget for the following year had increased by 9.4 % (147.58 billion KRW), it was observed that the budget allocated to gender equality policies had in fact been reduced by 2.5 % (to 6,196 billion KRW) (Park Joonyi, 2023). According to the Detailed Breakdown of the Women's Policies Office 2024 Budget Proposal, 11 of the 19 projects carried out by the Women's Policy Office had been cut. The ministry cited "rearranging priorities" as the reason for this cut (Park Joonyi, 2023).

Yoon's rhetoric and actions narrow the concept of security to one of just military capacity. In this context, policies promoting gender equality are dismissed as "luxury" and "unnecessary" expenditures. As a result, the link between masculinity, security and soldiering is reinforced. Consequently, it is evident that economic insecurity, the narrative of male victimhood, and problems stemming from the system itself in South Korea have been reframed by political actors through a gendered lens. The gender issue is taken out of the political sphere and transformed into a populist, securitising narrative centred on male victimhood. And this narrative reframes the gender issue from a problem requiring a solution into an arena of conflict that is used for political mobilisation.

4. CONCLUSION

This article set out to answer a critical question: how does fragile masculinity mediate the relationship between external threats and the securitisation of women? Through an examination of the South Korean case, this study has demonstrated that the securitisation of women cannot be adequately explained through cultural factors or authoritarian tendencies alone. At the same time, it emerges as a structured compensatory response to the existential anxieties generated by military and economic insecurity—anxieties that operate through the mechanism of fragile masculinity.

The concept of fragile masculinity has proven central to an understanding of this dynamic. As the theoretical framework has established, masculinity is not a fixed identity but rather a precarious status that must be continuously earned and defended. The findings confirm that when economic precarity and persistent military threats destabilise the conditions under which masculine identity is

reproduced—through provider roles, breadwinner status, and the protective functions institutionalised in compulsory military service—young men experience not merely material hardship but a profound crisis of identity. The K-timeline, with its rigid temporal expectations for education, military service, employment, and marriage, renders this fragility particularly acute in the South Korean context. When men perceive themselves as failing to meet these benchmarks, the anxiety generated by fragile masculinity seeks resolution through compensatory responses.

This study has demonstrated that the securitisation of women functions precisely as such a compensatory mechanism. Rather than directing frustration towards the structural conditions producing the basic economic and military insecurity, young Korean men redirect their anxieties towards women. Feminist movements, women's workforce participation, and gender equality policies are consequently reframed not as legitimate social demands but as threats to masculine status and national security. The discourse of "reverse discrimination" and male victimhood observed in the findings reflects the psychological dynamics of fragile masculinity: the need to restore threatened masculine identity by constructing women as the source of men's diminished status.

The analysis has further shown how political actors have mobilised this fragile masculinity for electoral purposes. President Yoon Suk Yeol's campaign and subsequent policies—proposing the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, cutting gender equality budgets, and denying the existence of structural discrimination—demonstrate how elite discourse channels the anxieties of fragile masculinity into institutionalised policy. This is not merely top-down manipulation; it reflects genuine resonance between political rhetoric and the identity-based grievances of young men experiencing threats to their masculinity.

By bringing together the ontological security theory and the fragile masculinity literature through the lens of securitisation, this study makes three key contributions. First, it places fragile masculinity at the centre of security analysis, revealing how the anxiety generated by external threats within masculine identity transforms into political discourse and mobilisation. Second, it conceptualises the securitisation of women as a systematic compensatory mechanism—a conscious and repeated political practice, aimed at managing the crisis of masculinity. Third, by focusing on South Korea, a developed democracy, this article demonstrates that these dynamics are not confined to authoritarian contexts, but can emerge wherever military and economic insecurities intersect with the precarious nature of masculine identity.

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Ultimately, this study underscores that the securitisation of women represents neither irrational backlash nor mere political manipulation. It is a structured response to ontological insecurity operating through fragile masculinity—one that transforms women from citizens with legitimate rights into internal enemies of national security. Understanding this mechanism is essential for developing effective responses to the growing global phenomenon of anti-feminist politics, and the erosion of gender equality.

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APPENDIX A

Category	**Type**	**Source**	**Number**	**Description**
SNS posts, direct interviews and speeches	Primary	Facebook, online platform (Youtube)	7	Direct statements by actors
Quoted statements and interviews	Quasi-primary	News outlets (Yonhap, Korea Times etc.)	25	Direct quotations from political actors and voters mediated through news (Mostly Yoon Suk Yeol's and his cabinet's)
News articles, Opinion/editorial pieces	Secondary	Various outlets, Newspapers	7	Analytical and interpretive texts, Civil society advocacy statements