

# GENDER POLARIZATION AMONG SOUTH KOREAN YOUTH: DETERMINANTS, CONSCRIPTION, AND COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM SWEDEN

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*Gender polarization among young South Koreans has become one of the most significant social and political dynamics of the past decade. Young men and women are increasingly viewed as separate, and often opposing, groups. Although frequently framed as a cultural or ideological divide, the tensions are often rooted in structural pressures and institutional arrangements. Employment insecurity, soaring housing costs, and male-only mandatory military service generate grievances that are often expressed in zero-sum terms. Online discourse further amplifies identity-based antagonism and grievance narratives. Despite different historical and security contexts, comparative insights from Sweden suggests possible institutional responses. Sweden treats gender equality as a matter of institutional design, embedding shared responsibility through gender mainstreaming and gender-neutral conscription. Examining such approaches highlights how incentive structures, institutional trust, and shared social duties can shape gender relations and help mitigate polarization.*

## **Introduction: Gender Polarization in Contemporary South Korea**

South Korea has long been characterized by relatively rigid gender role structures, shaped by traditional social norms, rapid industrialization, and a developmental model that centered on the male breadwinner model. Although the country

has experienced dramatic social and economic transformation over the past several decades, these gendered expectations have proven somewhat resilient, particularly in relation to work, family, and societal norms. In recent years, however, gender polarization, defined as the widening divergence in attitudes, grievances, and political preferences

between women and men, has emerged as one of the most visible and contentious social dynamics, especially among younger generations.<sup>1</sup>

This polarization is notable not only for its intensity but also for its form. Young women and men are increasingly viewed as separate, and often opposing, social groups, rather than as members of a shared generational cohort facing common challenges. Public discourse frequently employs terms such as “idaenam” (men in their twenties) and “idaenyeo” (women in their twenties), reflecting the perception that gender identity has become a primary axis of social and political division.<sup>2</sup> These divisions manifest through perceptions of group threat, mutual distrust, grievance-based narratives, and zero-sum thinking, in which gains for one group are perceived as losses for the other.<sup>3</sup>

This development is particularly striking given

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earlier scholarship suggesting that younger generations tend to be more supportive of democratic values and gender equality than their older counterparts.<sup>4</sup> While such patterns were beginning to become visible in South Korea, recent trends suggest a sharp reversal, as studies increasingly show young men expressing opposition to gender equality measures and skepticism toward institutions associated with women’s rights.<sup>5</sup>

Elite rhetoric, debates over the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, and voting patterns in the 2022 presidential election highlighted this divide, with 59 percent of young men compared to only 34 percent of young women supporting former President Yoon.<sup>6</sup>

These divisions were also evident in voting patterns in the 2025 snap election, with young men disproportionately supporting a candidate from one of the two conservative political parties (74.1 percent) while young women showed stronger support for the candidate from the main progressive party (58.1 percent).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, survey data indicates that the ideological gap between young women and men in South Korea exceeds that found in many other advanced democracies.<sup>8</sup>

## **Structural Drivers of Gender Polarization**

The emergence of gender polarization cannot be attributed to a single cause. Rather, it reflects the interaction of economic, political, and cultural forces that have reshaped the life chances of younger generations.

### *Economic Insecurity*

One of the most significant structural drivers is economic insecurity, now a foundational force behind South Korea’s gender polarization.<sup>9</sup> Despite high educational attainment, with college enrollment exceeding 70 percent of young adults,<sup>10</sup> labor market opportunities for young Koreans

are increasingly constrained because degrees have become baseline credentials rather than gateways to stable employment.

Additionally, labor market bifurcation exacerbates competition. While permanent positions remain limited, temporary, non-regular, and precarious jobs have expanded significantly. According to Statistics Korea, four out of ten young workers are employed in irregular jobs.<sup>11</sup> Many young adults experience delayed labor market entry, underemployment, or precarious contracts that fail to provide stable income or career progression. As a result, support for gender equality and policies aimed at supporting women or other marginalized groups is often framed as zero-sum by young men.<sup>12</sup> Programs promoting female employment, leadership quotas, or parental leave are sometimes interpreted as diverting scarce opportunities from men, reinforcing perceptions of group threat.

### *Housing Scarcity*

Housing scarcity further compounds economic frustration. Seoul's skyrocketing housing prices have led to a housing crisis that has forced young Koreans to rely on family support, spend most of their earnings on monthly rent, or borrow money for high-deposit jeonse contracts.<sup>13</sup> High-profile jeonse fraud cases, fluctuating interest rates, and skyrocketing rent prices amplify perceptions of inequity and reinforce narratives of generational and gendered disadvantage. This housing insecurity also intersects with gender. While both young women and men encounter discrimination in the housing market, young men may experience particularly acute anxiety regarding career advancement and the expectation of homeownership, which are traditionally tied to male responsibility and social status. This intersection of economic and cultural pressures contributes to zero-sum interpretations of structural scarcity.

### *Persistent Gender Inequality*

While economic insecurity affects both men and

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women, structural gender inequality creates distinct pressures for young women. South Korea continues to have the largest gender wage gap among OECD countries, at nearly 30 percent, and women remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles.<sup>14</sup> Workplace discrimination, career interruptions due to caregiving, and social expectations continue to constrain women's opportunities. These structural inequalities also interact with male economic pressures. Young men, already delayed in career and income progression, perceive structural initiatives for women as unfair. As such, policies designed to address inequality, such as quotas or parental leave, are often reframed as advantages that exacerbate scarcity, fueling grievance politics.

### *Digital Media and Grievance Mobilization*

Digital media platforms further amplify gender-based grievances as algorithm-driven feeds reward highly emotional and polarizing content, increasing visibility for identity-based antagonism. Radical communities like Ilbe propagate misogynistic narratives while feminist forums like Womad and Megalia counter these narratives often using the “mirroring” method.<sup>15</sup> In these communities, viral hashtags, memes, comments, and online campaigns translate structural frustrations into identity-based conflict, linking online activism and offline

mobilization. Additionally, social media reinforces echo chambers, where exposure to ideologically homogeneous content fosters confirmation bias and amplifies zero-sum perceptions. This environment makes compromise and collaborative problem-solving less likely, leading young men and women to interpret social and economic frustrations as inter-gender competition rather than shared societal challenges.

## **Mandatory Conscription and Gendered Citizenship**

### *Economic and Career Costs*

Among the various structural drivers, male-only conscription in South Korea remains one of the most enduring and polarizing institutions affecting young men. Introduced in its modern form during the Korean War and institutionalized in subsequent decades, conscription requires nearly all able-bodied men to serve between 18 and 21 months. Women may volunteer but are not subject to mandatory service, and as of 2024, they make up 10.8 percent of the military.<sup>16</sup> For able-bodied young men, this represents a direct interruption to education and career trajectories, including delayed career progression, lost networking opportunities, and reduced early employment stability, which can exacerbate economic anxiety.

Additionally, military service is often perceived as undercompensated relative to its demands and as requiring significant personal sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> While basic allowances have increased over the past decade, most conscripts still report that compensation is insufficient.

### *Psychological and Social Strain*

Conscription in South Korea also carries substantial psychological and social costs, as military life is highly regimented, hierarchical, and isolating. Despite improvements over the years, young soldiers continue to report stress related to limited autonomy, strict disciplinary structures, and

separation from civilian social networks. Moreover, military service is often framed as a rite of passage and a key marker of male citizenship, reinforcing societal expectations of male responsibility and duty. As a result, failure to complete service or exemptions, even for health, family, or academic reasons, can attract social scrutiny.

### *Symbolic Citizenship and Political Mobilization*

The symbolic weight of conscription has made it a flashpoint in debates over gender equality, as men are seen as bearing mandatory civic obligations while women remain largely exempt. This asymmetry fuels resentment, especially when combined with gender equality policies perceived as benefiting women. Some young men interpret these policies as advantages secured without equivalent sacrifice or recognition. Additionally, political actors and online communities have amplified these grievances, frequently invoking conscription as a benchmark of fairness and civic duty. Backlash against proposals to extend conscription to women further reveals how deeply military service is embedded in narratives of gendered justice and perceived equity.

In many respects, the burdens of military service in South Korea are amplified socially, economically, and symbolically, making it harder to frame service in positive or incentive-based terms. This dynamic weakens perceptions of fairness and civic value and serves as a significant driver of grievance, contributing to deepening gender polarization.

## **A Comparative Perspective: The Case of Sweden**

While no system is without flaws, Sweden remains among the world's leading countries in gender equality, ranking sixth globally in the 2025 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report and first in the EU Gender Equality Index.<sup>18</sup> These outcomes reflect, in large part, sustained structural efforts to embed gender equality through gender

mainstreaming, gender-neutral conscription, and military incentives.

### *Gender Mainstreaming*

Sweden has long integrated gender equality into the institutional framework of governance. Since 1994, gender mainstreaming initiatives have systematically embedded gender perspectives in policy evaluation, budgeting, and program design across sectors.<sup>19</sup> This approach shifted responsibility from individuals to institutions, framing gender equality as a structural rather than ideological objective.

Since then, Sweden has integrated gender considerations into education, labor market policy, welfare programs, and defense. Ministries, multiple levels of government, and independent agencies systematically assess the gender impact of policy decisions, making equality measures routine and procedural rather than symbolic or reactive.<sup>20</sup> They also regularly consult civil society organizations during the policymaking process.<sup>21</sup> This institutional embedding reduces the likelihood that gender equality is framed as a moral contest or zero-sum competition.

### *Gender-Neutral Selective Conscription*

Sweden reinstated conscription in 2017 after suspending it in 2010, redesigning the system as gender-neutral and selective. Men and women are equally eligible, but only a portion of each cohort is called to serve based on aptitude, motivation, and defense needs.

Additionally, military service is framed not as punishment or lost time, but as a form of civic contribution that provides leadership training, technical skills, and vocational opportunities. The armed forces are also presented as an integral part of society rather than a separate or marginalized institution, reinforcing their legitimacy and public trust. As a result, the system attracts a substantial

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number of volunteers, reducing the perception of service as an unfair or exclusively burdensome obligation.

### *Military Incentives*

Incentives are designed to encourage broad and diverse participation. Conscripts receive vocational certifications, leadership development, and structured post-service support for higher education and employment, helping frame service as an investment in future careers rather than an interruption. Women, in particular, have access to roles aligned with technical, intelligence, and cyber expertise, emphasizing aptitude and specialization over gender and helping maximize overall talent utilization.

Public messaging further reinforces inclusivity: high-profile figures have taken part in military training, signaling strong institutional backing and

normalizing female participation. For example, Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden has regularly undergone army, navy, and air force training, underscoring the legitimacy and civic value of service.<sup>22</sup>

While the Swedish case is not without challenges and limitations, it nevertheless demonstrates how structural gender mainstreaming, combined with compensation, incentives, and tangible post-service benefits, can enhance public recognition and foster more positive perceptions of military service. At the same time, shared obligations and a universal civic framing help mitigate perceptions of inequity and reduce zero-sum understandings of gender relations.

#### *Relevance for South Korea*

Certain aspects of the Swedish model cannot, and arguably should not, be directly transplanted into the South Korean context due to substantial institutional and societal differences. For instance,

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selective conscription would be challenging to implement under South Korea's current force structure, security conditions, and demographic decline. Nevertheless, certain principles could be adapted to the Korean context. For example, embedding gender equality into institutional design could help reduce zero-sum thinking, while framing military service as a civic contribution supported by skill-based assignments may normalize service as an opportunity rather than a sacrifice.

Additionally, greater public visibility and symbolic participation by political and social leaders could also strengthen institutional legitimacy. Together, these measures could help reduce polarization by better aligning obligations and benefits across genders and reframing service as shared civic participation rather than punitive duty.

### **Policy Recommendations for South Korea**

In addition to the principles mentioned above, there are some Korean-specific elements to consider.

#### *Structural Interventions*

Economic and housing insecurity underlie much of South Korea's gender polarization, particularly among young men. Policies that stabilize employment, expand permanent positions, and reduce reliance on precarious contracts are therefore essential to alleviating the structural pressures that drive grievance-based politics. Additionally, housing policies that expand the supply of affordable homes, stabilize housing prices, and provide targeted support for first-time buyers are equally important.

#### *Institutional Interventions*

Institutional reforms are also necessary to embed fairness within governance and civic institutions. Applying gender mainstreaming across policy sectors by systematically assessing how policies affect men and women differently may contribute to

more balanced outcomes. This approach could also reduce the tendency to frame gender-related policies as zero-sum contests by situating responsibility within institutions rather than individuals.

Military service reform represents a particularly important area for intervention. Although selective conscription similar to the Swedish model is unlikely, enhancing compensation, expanding vocational training opportunities, and establishing structured reintegration programs could strengthen perceptions of fairness and institutional legitimacy. Combined with increased incentives and expanded leadership opportunities for women in the military, such reforms could increase female participation while reducing perceptions that men shoulder disproportionate burdens while women receive unearned advantages, thereby reinforcing the principle of shared civic responsibility.

### *Cultural and Civic Interventions*

For reforms to succeed, they must be supported by social acceptance and evolving norms. Cultural initiatives are therefore critical for sustaining structural change. Civic education that emphasizes shared responsibility and the collective benefits of equality can help reshape narratives around gender and civic duty, while media literacy programs are essential countering misinformation and grievance-driven discourse online. Public campaigns and intergenerational dialogue may further reduce hostility and foster empathy between young men and women. Over time, such efforts can weaken zero-sum thinking and strengthen trust in civic institutions and democratic processes.

### *Integrated Approach*

The interplay between structural scarcity, institutional design, and cultural attitudes underscores the need for an integrated policy approach. Isolated measures, such as expanding women's workplace protections without addressing economic insecurity or conscription inequities, may

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unintentionally exacerbate polarization. Effective policy thus requires simultaneous attention to material opportunity, equitable institutional design, and cultural narratives of shared responsibility. Aligning these domains is essential for fostering social cohesion, reducing grievance-based politics, and creating conditions in which gender equality initiatives are perceived as legitimate and beneficial to all citizens.

### **Conclusion**

Gender polarization among young South Koreans stems from intertwined economic, institutional, and cultural pressures. Employment scarcity, housing insecurity, competitive labor markets, radical online communities, and polarizing political rhetoric have fostered zero-sum perceptions between young men and women, while the structure of male-only conscription further intensifies these divisions.

Despite differing historical and security contexts, Sweden's experience underscores the importance of institutional design in mitigating such tensions. By embedding gender equality into policymaking, adopting gender-neutral conscription, and aligning civic obligations with tangible benefits, Sweden has

reduced perceptions of unfairness and strengthened institutional trust.

For South Korea, addressing polarization will require coordinated structural reform, including improving labor and housing stability, alongside institutional redesign and cultural initiatives. Conscription reform, such as enhanced incentives and efforts to reshape perceptions of military service through evolving norms and elite participation, could further recalibrate gender relations. Without intervention, polarization risks weakening social cohesion and democratic resilience; with comprehensive reform, it can instead become an opportunity to reinforce shared responsibility and more inclusive governance.

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