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Recycling European Narratives in South Korea's 'Refugee Crisis': Islamophobia, #MeToo, and Yemeni Refugees on Jeju Island

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Abstract

2018 was a politically tempestuous time for South Korea as a little over 500, mostly male, Yemeni asylum-seekers landed on Korea's Jeju Island. Their unexpected arrival caught Korean society, already in the midst of its own #MeToo wave off guard, resulting in a wave of pro- and anti-refugee demonstrations across the country. Fueled by real and fake news about refugee illegal activities in Europe, anti-refugee backlash in Korea took an Islamophobic and feminist tone. Based on digital ethnography, this article presents observations from online voices – refugees, feminists, and media actors – expressed through Naver News and Naver Cafes to assess the ways in which Korea's refugee crisis was represented in local and global anti-refugee and Islamophobic narratives, aimed in particular at Muslim men. This research highlights the impact of European narratives on Korean society and raises questions over how Korean society can create a wider, inclusive digital democracy.

Keywords

feminism – Islamophobia – Korean society – Muslims – racism – Yemeni refugees

1 Introduction

This article offers critical reflections on the intersections between Islamophobia, anti-refugee sentiments, and feminist solidarities in contemporary South Korean society within the context of widespread anti-refugee and #MeToo demonstrations held in the summer of 2018. To this end, this article explores the following research questions. First, what are the connections between the anti-refugee and women's movement in Korean society? Second, what is the relationship between Korea and Europe in the context of refugee representation online? Third, what does Korea's response to the refugee crisis tell us about current race-gender dynamics in Korean society?

To address these research questions, this article examines digital voices: refugee, radical feminist, media, and right-wing discourse expressed in Naver News and Naver Cafés to assess the ways in which Korea's refugee crisis was represented in local and global anti-refugee and Islamophobic narratives, particularly those directed at Muslim men. In doing so, this research offers several novel insights. First, the geographic focus on South Korea contributes an important set of considerations around the inter-play between anti-refugee sentiments, feminism, and Islamophobia in a relatively under-researched context. Second, this research highlights the impact of neo-colonial European narratives on Korean society and raises questions over how it can create a wider, inclusive digital democracy.

Internet-based technologies enable discussion between people at opposite ends of the planet and yet also fragment political discourse (Papacharissi 2002). Further, Papacharissi argues that the internet and its related technologies have created new public spaces for politically orientated conversations, which creates a framework for our exploration of online discourses about Yemeni refugees, women's concerns, #MeToo, and Islamophobic exclusion in South Korea's main communication outlets, Naver News and Naver Cafés. Unlike platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, which are popular in Western settings (Fuchs 2015), South Korea uses advanced digital platforms, which are particularly suited for smartphone use, including Naver, Kakao (previously Daum), and Zum (Jin 2017). Naver has considerable dominance in the South Korean market and is recognized as the most popular internet portal in Korea since it was launched in 1999 (Park et al. 2007). Its share of Korea's search engine market is 83.7 percent, followed by Daum (13.65%), Zum (1.05%) and Google (0.9%) (Jin 2017).

The main drivers of public communication related to politics with the potential to stimulate transnational discourses are conflicts and crises

(Karatzogianni 2006). Amplifying this position further, Karatzogianni argues that online media can magnify the formation of border-transcending communication, and the internet has played a fundamental role in this process. They form part of the essential framework for this research, as shown in the different conversations, postings, and news stories that created a transnational 'web sphere' (Schneider & Foot 2006) between East and West in terms of the formation, propagation, debate, fact checking, and public opinion on refugees and, more pertinently, anti-refugee discourse in the South Korean context. The internet functions as a tool for producing and sharing political information as well as space for the materialization of expansive contexts (Nguyen 2016). This article demonstrates that individuals in one specific Naver Café engaged with transnationally sourced fake and biased news, mostly from European sources, highlighting the impact of neo-colonial narratives on the ways in which 500 Yemeni male Muslim refugee arrivals were received, framed, and eventually produced through Islamophobic discourses aimed at curtailing their human rights, based in part on alarmist concerns about the safety of Korean women.

2 2018, a Summer of Discontent: Korea's 'Refugee Crisis' and the Ongoing Battle for Women's Rights through #MeToo

2.1 *Arriving in Korean Territory*

In the summer of 2018, approximately 500 Yemeni, mostly male, asylum seekers found a pathway for legal entry to one of the few East Asian signatories to the Geneva Convention, South Korea, where they could apply for asylum and refugee status (Foreign Policy 2018, Sheikh 2019).

This group of Yemeni asylum seekers travelled to Korea in a last-ditch attempt to find safety in the region, as many were already in nearby Malaysia, a Muslim-majority Asian country that granted them tourist visas with no right to work or settle. As Malaysia is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention, it was impossible for Yemenis to apply for asylum, and they were forced to leave, seeking alternative routes to safety. In a fortunate coincidence, Korea wanted to capitalize on the popularity of its cultural products across Southeast Asia (also known as the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*) and open up direct flights between Malaysia and Jeju Island, a special zone where the majority of people in the world can enter Korean territory visa-free. This opened up a small and legal window for Yemenis who could afford to purchase airplane tickets and enter the only nearby country in the region that would accept their passports and process asylum applications in line with the Convention.

2.2 *Unexpected Alliances and Hostile Reactions to Yemeni Refugees*

After they arrived, the Yemenis were caught off-guard by their hostile reception, starting with local Jeju Islanders and rapidly extending to the rest of the country, as a powerful anti-refugee movement took root and spread across Korea. One of the central driving forces behind this backlash was a call to protect Korean women from potential violence by Muslim men. The notion that Muslim men are prone to terrorism, sexual violence, crime, and delinquency is not limited to the Korean context, which has a long history of such fears, rooted in Western, Orientalist conceptions of Muslim men (see Abu-Lughod 2003; Baker et al. 2013; Dwyer et al. 2008; Hopkins 2009; Said 1981). Many of these negative stereotypes were repeated in media coverage of the European refugee crisis in 2015, when approximately 1.5 million Syrian and other asylum seekers went to Europe in search of safety and shelter (Walker & Gajjala 2016). The issue of Muslim men as potential or actual sex criminals was reported widely in European media, in particular some inflammatory incidents in Germany and Sweden. Many cases were later discovered to be fake or distorted (Spiegel International 2018), but by then the stories had already circulated around the world, including Korea, where they helped to facilitate negative framings of Muslim men, especially those who were refugees, with significant consequences for these Yemeni refugees (Park 2018).

Young women in Korea expressed the highest levels of fear and concern about their safety in relation to the arrival of male Muslim refugees in the country. As highlighted in previous scholarship and supported by the results of the present study, the arrival of this group reinforced violent stereotypes that depict Muslim men as potential sex offenders, terrorists, and criminals, based on real and fake news circulating online (Park 2018). This imagined risk propelled some young Korean women to define themselves as 'feminist', and they allied with anti-refugee activists to build an unlikely coalition of resistance (Choi & Park 2020). Popular hashtags included 'Rapefugees', 'Secure Safety Rights for Jeju Women', and 'Refugees Threaten Women' further conflating women's concerns and anti-refugee rhetoric in Korean online spaces. These alliances served as a catalyst within local feminist circles, leading to animated discussions about the meaning of 'feminist', about feminism 'without borders', and what it means to be hospitable (Kim et al. 2019). Furthermore, the schism between radical and traditional feminists that emerged because of opposing views on the Yemeni refugee issue was also highlighted in data by Hankook researchers (Jeong and Lee 2021), suggesting that although the radical feminist perspective was a highly represented and a vocal part of the anti-refugee discourse, these radical views do not full represent the spectrum of feminist thought in Korea.

To contextualise the Korean case further, it is important to understand the wider political and social climate at this particular moment. Before the anti-refugee movement, several earlier protests had been held, demanding better protection for women, especially against sexual violence, eventually giving rise to an indigenous #MeToo/#WithYou movement. #MeToo in Korea is not something new. It has roots in a much longer, ongoing battle against patriarchal norms and sexual violence arguably ignited by Kim Hak-soon's brave testimony in August 1991, about her experience with sexual slavery due to the Japanese military. After 50 years of silence, Kim was the first former 'comfort woman' to testify about her horrific experiences (Hasunuma & Shin 2019). Her courage and determination opened the door for other women to speak out (Allen 2005), with contemporary battles against sexual violence, including protests against the practice of *molka*, calls to legalize abortion, and #MeToo.¹

In Korea, #MeToo was sparked by a televised interview of Prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun, an influential woman who revealed that she had suffered sexual abuse in the workplace at the hands of a senior colleague and even faced demotion after attempting to make a formal complaint. Seo stated that this experience had encouraged her to take the abuser to court, and, even more powerfully, she reminded Korean women that they were not to blame for their own abuse by such men.

This extraordinary case touched the hearts of many Korean women, and they began to pour out into the streets to protest and once again to call for real change. Against this backdrop, the unexpected arrival of 500 Muslim asylum seekers, mostly male and from a little-known country with an unfamiliar religion, sparked another round of fear in some feminist quarters. These groups quickly galvanized support for their anti-refugee stance, finding support in alliances with far-right Christian and anti-multiculturalist groups. It is important to support the battle for women's rights, echoing the voices of several pro-refugee feminist scholars in the field. At the same time, it is a matter of grave concern that many Korean feminists expressed fear about women's safety, in particular the risk of sexual violence posed specifically by Muslim men based on fake and biased news, spreading this message online and in the street (Park 2018).

In light of this, several feminist scholars and activists in Korea came together to illustrate the content of this fake news, which broadly claimed that Yemenis were from a Muslim country that allowed the rape and abuse of women (Kim 2019). This claim led Jeju locals to use online Naver cafés to question whether

1 *Molka* are secret cameras hidden in public toilets, hotel rooms, and changing rooms at stores, which film women in intimate situations and upload content for sale on the internet.

their daughters could be raised safely among such men. They also spread fake news about Yemeni Muslim practices, such as the allegation that they used female genital mutilation (FGM) as a form of sexual violence. Thereafter, FGM was highlighted as a major issue, becoming a source of Korean disdain toward Yemeni asylum seekers (Young 2019), along with fears of other sexual crimes, such as rape, and a belief that cultural differences between Korean and Muslim societies are irreconcilable. With tensions running high, mounting rage over sexual violence against women that was already prevalent in Korean society was extended to these Yemeni arrivals because they were Muslim *men*, blurring the line between the need to protect women and refugee rights and, ironically, using the language of #MeToo to persecute asylum seekers based on their gender.

Korea's anti-refugee movement was composed of a wide coalition of voices, most prominently feminists (concerned about male-perpetrated violence against Korean women and those who were in favour of receiving refugees), right-wing and right-wing Christian groups (concerned about the spread of Islam in Korea through these asylum seekers), and anti-multiculturalists, who hold long-standing grievances over immigration, globalization, and the presence of Muslims in Korea, in firm opposition of its imminent multicultural future. Korea's rejection of refugees is rooted at least in part in existing anti-multicultural discourse mostly found in online forums, including membership-based cafés, highlighting the unexpected solidarity that emerged among these groups as something that needs to be explored in analyzing the anti-refugee movement in Korea (Jun 2019, 2020). This collective opposition to Yemeni refugees was heavily based on ill-informed assumptions about Muslims and Islam, fake and biased news, especially from Europe, and outright Islamophobic sentiments circulated and discussed online.

In sum, as the government failed to mobilize a swift response, new Yemeni arrivals who were desperately seeking safety in Korea found themselves sleeping on the street or crammed in hotel rooms, struggling for food and basic necessities, and quickly running out of resources while simultaneously embroiled in public debates about sexual violence, terrorism, and women's safety in an unfamiliar society.

In the language of feminism and women's protection, Yemeni asylum seekers were painted as Others to be feared. The backlash took on a specific Islamophobic and feminist shape based on Orientalist tropes that framed these men not only as potential terrorists and sex criminals but also as coming from a culture perceived as incompatible with Korean society. This backlash was channelled through online activism across social media platforms, including

Twitter and Naver, women-related fears captured in the trending hashtag Secure Safety Rights for Jeju Women (제주도여성안전권보장하라). Reams of fake and biased news were posted, discussed, and translated from original English-language sources into Korean as it spread across Naver Café forums (one of which is discussed in detail later) and shared through the Naver News portal. Another source of anti-refugee digital activism was fake and negative news about the way that Europe managed its Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. The circulation of these stories led to the development of peculiar protest slogans, such as 'We don't want to be like Europe' and 'Kick out fake refugees', at the same time as issues of Korean women's safety were being raised.

On the surface, these negative responses are noteworthy, given that Korea has short historical memories of its interactions with Muslims and has no record of Muslim-perpetrated violence in its contemporary history. Moreover, Korea depends on wealthy Muslim-majority countries for oil supplies, construction contracts, trade, and other economic activity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021). These 500 Yemeni asylum seekers were not the first Muslim refugees to settle in South Korea, though it has one of the lowest rates in the world of refugee acceptance: in 2018, its rate was approximately 3.2 percent, resulting in 2,903 successful applications, and in 2019 this number increased to 3,215 (Macrotrends 2020). Other waves of refugees from Yemen and Syria have settled in Korea without facing this type of violent nationwide opposition. This reaction indicates the profound impact of news, whether genuine or fake, that is spread, unquestioned, and permitted to shape negative perceptions that feed into global discourses filled with Islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiments, particularly online.

3 Methodology

3.1 *Overview of Methods*

This multi-layered ethnography is built with digital ethnographic methods. The primary online field site was Naver, Korea's media giant. The ways in which refugee and women's issues were discussed in Naver Cafés and represented on Naver News (a news aggregator) have some subtle differences, so before offering deeper observational insights into one specific group on Naver Café, Refugee Countermeasures National Action, I first explore general differences between the two discourses. Using this type of approach enabled me to access spaces – particularly right-wing, Korean-language discourse – in the digital sphere that would otherwise have been inaccessible to a non-Korean, Muslim

female researcher of colour. Although the collection of online news stories does not involve any access issues, full access to the Naver Café under investigation here is restricted to registered members, who must be screened by Café administrators and are often asked to make a financial or offline contribution to the movement (e.g. by attending meetings or organizing street rallies). Naturally, this meant that being a non-Korean, British-Pakistani Muslim, who uses Korean as a third language created several barriers to obtaining full access. So, it became necessary to consider the ethical issues and compromises involved in my method of data collection, which inevitably required some covert observations.

Covert research is clearly distinct from deceptive research, with the former defined as research that is not fully disclosed to the target. However, deceptive research is understood as when researchers actively misrepresent themselves or their actions to those whom they are observing, often risking a breach of trust, privacy, and rights (Spicker 2011). Part of my research is 'covert' in the sense of observing posts on an online forum where all discussions are publicly visible by choice and participants use pseudonymous screen names. I believe this is analogous to researchers who are standing near people in public and observing their behaviour, such as motorists who are checking their mobile phones (Walker et al. 2006). Taking care to differentiate between content behind a password-protected wall – a 'zone of protected activity' (Faden & Beauchamp 1986) – and what was freely accessible without passwords or registration, I limited my data collection strictly to open postings that were publicly available. The issue of covert online data collection is a source of debate among internet researchers (see also Herrera 1999; Homan 1991), but I believe this approach strikes a balance between data collection, anonymity, consent, and ethical research standards while protecting myself in the field through limited, one-way interaction.

After collecting a representative sample, I then translated the posts from Korean into English or located and used the original English-language versions of news articles that were circulating and discussed in the café. This layered approach to the digital field enabled me to offer insights into the conversations taking place about feminism, refugees, and Muslims in Korea in the summer of 2018.

As displayed in Figure 1, this approach revealed the different priorities in online discourse around refugees and women's issues even though, overall, the two discussions focused on many of the same issues.

This way of working enabled insights into communities, public opinion, and debates that are often absent from wider, global discussions on refugee issues, which are usually dominated by European and American contexts.

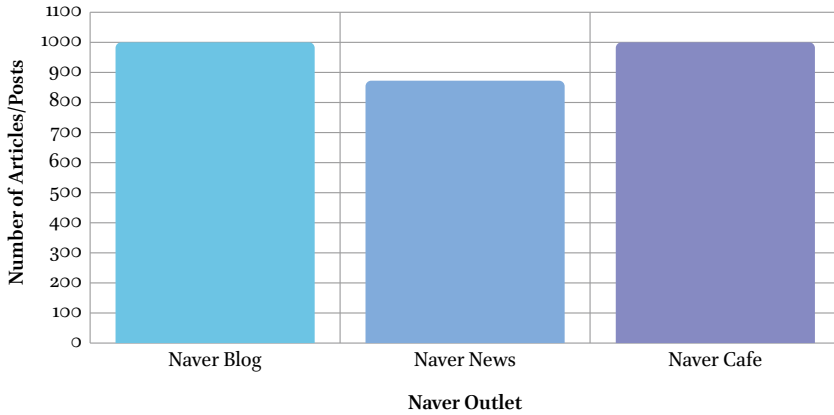


FIGURE 1 Coverage of Korea's 'Refugee Crisis' 2018–2019 according to Naver outlet

4 The Fieldwork

4.1 Data Mining Naver Using Textom

Naver offers a wide range of digital lifestyle services as well as access to news and media. In general, it is divided into Naver News, Naver Blogs, and Naver Cafés, with the latter functioning as online discussion forums. It is widely acknowledged as one of the most popular blogging sites in Korea (Jia et al. 2014; Park & Thelwall 2008). The internet has allowed the formation of virtual communities, particularly forums and chatrooms as well as the ability to engage with them despite differences across time and space (Dicks 2005). As Table 1 shows, based on a maximum 1,000 available pieces of data sampled randomly with data-mining software called Textom, Naver Cafés produced slightly more content related to refugee issues than the mainstream media portal, Naver News, revealing the weight of public opinion shared through forums.

Because of the significance of Naver in Korea, Naver Cafés are an important digital space, influencing public opinion and helping to shape the overall anti-refugee movement. I used Textom, an online data collection application designed for the Korean market that can handle Korean-language content and can specifically crawl spaces such as Naver. It returns a maximum of 1,000 pieces of available data per search term. I created my initial dataset based on keywords and terms most frequently used in news articles and café posts about the Yemeni refugee crisis in 2018–2019, taking particular note of any trending hashtags.²

² Most of the online data was collected in Korean, translated into English by the author where necessary.

TABLE 1 Research keyword searches

English	Korean	No. of café search results	No. of news articles
Refugee Problem	난민문제	1,000	911
Jeju Refugees	제주도난민	1,000	872
Yemen Refugees	예멘난민	1,000	789
Secure Safety Rights for Jeju Women	제주도여성안전권보장하라	1	6
Missing Jeju Women	제주도여성실종사건	215	359
Jeju Women	제주도여성	1,000	950
Islam Refugees	이슬람난민	1,000	957
Muslim Refugees	무슬림 난민	1,000	969
Fake Refugees	가짜난민	1,000	883

As expected, data mining across all available Naver Cafés resulted in several influential forums involved in the shaping of online discourse about refugees and women. For a focused and in-depth investigation, based on this initial finding, I selected one café, ‘Refugee Countermeasures National Action’ for observation, based not only on their online activities but also on their powerful offline presence, as café members organized offline, anti-refugee demonstrations, street rallies as well as creating hateful online content. This café’s discourse had real-life consequences for Yemeni asylum seekers, as discussed below.

4.2 Data Analysis

My findings were analyzed using a two-pronged approach. Based on word frequencies, I used Textom to source data, outlining the top 20–35 word pairs across Naver News and Naver Cafés in 2018 related to refugee and women’s issues. Next, I used the qualitative software package Nvivo 12 to code and organize my digital observations of the group Refugee Countermeasures National Action on Naver Café. Employing thematic analysis, which highlighted relationships and themes between various collected discourses, paired well with the word frequency data yielded from Textom. This complex analytical process enabled me to present a vivid and nuanced picture of Korean society’s reactions to the arrival of 500 Yemeni asylum seekers fleeing war and terror using various modes of digital representation.

5 Exploring the Data

As referred to in the section above on methodology, the data were collected through mining and digital observations to explore the links between online discourse and realities on the ground to communicate the relationship between Korea's #MeToo movement, Islamophobic opposition to Yemeni refugees, and the influence of European narratives on Korea's refugee discourse. This enables the presentation of a comprehensive account of the various narratives and sources of information that generated strong opposition to the arrival of Yemeni refugees in Korea.

As expected, the text-mining exercise returned a significant amount of data for Naver News and Naver Cafés. Making sense of it required organizing the results into word pairs for these two searches, and then the top 30 words used most often in relation to my other keyword searches were recorded. This approach facilitated cutting across the data to map out the actual foundations of anti-refugee discourse in the Korean context, offering insights into the core concerns and the formation of a broad overview of events that took place online. It also paves the way for the next step of analysis: understanding the inner workings of the Refugee Countermeasures group, chosen as an influential and representative sample of the discourse found across Naver News and Naver Cafés. The next section offers reflections on the connections between the datasets, revealing the essential sources and components of anti-refugee discourse specifically targeted at Yemeni refugees in 2018 and how it was channelled through a range of concerns, particularly violence against women and Islamophobic sentiments.

6 Mapping out Anti-Yemeni Refugee Discourse in Korea

6.1 *Word Frequency: Naver News 2018*

The data yielded from Naver News highlights important components of anti-refugee discourse online. Tables 2 and 3 list the top 20–35 word pairs corresponding to specific events that took place in Korea, which formed part of the anti-refugee movement or reflect links between Korean and European anti-refugee discourses.

First, the word pair 'fake/refugees' is used as an indication of the debates that took place over the motives behind the arrival of Yemeni refugees in Korea, questioning whether they were truly refugees or migrants seeking economic opportunities. These assumptions and accusations were also levied at

refugees who went to European territories en masse in 2015, when the media framed many of the new arrivals as ‘migrants’ or ‘economic migrants’ (Walker & Gajjala 2016).

TABLE 2 Word frequency results for Naver News

	Word pairs (English)		Word pairs (Korean)		Frequency
1	Yemen	Refugees	예멘	난민	305
2	Fake	Refugees	가짜	난민	282
3	Sojourn	Permission	체류	허가	256
4	Refugee	Acknowledgement	난민	인정	232
5	Refugee Law	Abolish	난민법	폐지	219
6	Refugee	Problem	난민	문제	200
7	Jeju	Refugees	제주	예멘	178
8	Blue House	National Petition	청와대	국민청원	156
9	Refugee	Acceptance	난민	수용	127
10	Refugee	Application	난민	신청	134
11	Visa-Free	Entry	무사증	입국	125
12	Seoul	Jongnoro	서울	종로구	112
13	Jeju Refugees	Refugee Application	제주예멘	난민신청	88
14	Refugee	Crime	난민	범죄	88
15	By Refugee law	Visa Free	따른난민법	무사증	87
16	Refugee	Against	난민반	대	87
17	Visa-Free	Jeju	무사증	제도	87
18	Merkel	President	메르켈	총리	85
19	Christian	Conversion	기독교	개종	84
20	Refugee Application	Abolish	난민신청허	폐지	82
21	Refugee Law	Amendment	난민법	개정	81
22	Refugee	National Action	난민대책	국민행동	80
	Countermeasures				
23	Missing	Event	실종	사건	79
24	Enter Country	Refugee Application	입국	난민신청허	78
		Permit			
25	Constitutional	Petition	개헌	청원	74
26	Jeju Island	Yemen	제주도	예멘	71
27	National Petition	Notice board	국민청원	게시판	68
28	Jeju Island	Abolish	제도	폐지	65
29	Refugee Acceptance	Against	난민수	반대	63
30	Simple	Disapproval	단순	불인정	61

TABLE 2 Word frequency results for Naver News (cont.)

	Word pairs (English)		Word pairs (Korean)		Frequency
31	Visa-Free	Abolish	무사증	폐지	60
32	Missing	Women in Their Thirties	실종	30대여	57
33	Oppose	Rally	반대	집회	56
34	Muslim	Refugees	무슬림	난민	55

Second, Korea was the only country that signed the Geneva Convention in the region, that was accessible to Yemeni passport-holders, and much of the Korean news coverage was about ‘acknowledging’ Yemeni arrivals as formal refugees. Heated debates took place over repealing the ‘refugee law’ – or, in other words, withdrawing Korea from the Geneva Convention, despite its incredibly low rate of refugee acceptance. Concerns over permission to enter Korean territories through the visa-waiver programme designed to boost tourism on Jeju Island, fake refugees, and the risk of violence aimed in particular at women eventually led to a national petition submitted to the Blue House with the highest number of signatures demanding strong action on a domestic online petition to date. This is also an important indicator of the discourse as it relates to #MeToo issues and concerns over violence against women.

Third, the word pair ‘Seoul/Jongnoro’ refers to the locations of anti-refugee street demonstrations in the summer of 2018, many led by young people, especially women, holding up placards that demanded safety for Koreans and that ‘fake’ refugees ‘go home’ (Park 2018).

The links between Korea and Europe in terms of anti-refugee discourse are further highlighted by the word pair ‘Merkel/President’. Online discussions debated the risks of the German chancellor’s decision to open the country’s border to refugees and the potential implications of such a decision in the Korean context. Fake and distorted news about incidents of mass sexual violence that took place in Cologne in 2015, and the perception that the overall rise in sexual crime rates in Germany was due to male Muslim refugees (Boulila & Carri 2017), inspired many online activists in Korea to spread the anti-refugee and anti-multicultural slogan ‘we don’t want to be like Europe’. In addition to the warnings against ‘Muslim invasions’ or a ‘clash of civilizations’ echoed by extreme right-wing activists and supremacists based in Europe (Boulila & Carri 2017), a key concern reflected in Korean online discourse, especially propagated by right-wing Christian groups, was the fear that Yemenis would

attempt to convert Koreans to Islam and that they would introduce Islam into the wider society by stealth through applications for asylum.

Lastly, 'Missing/Event' along with 'Missing/Women in Their Thirties' refers to several cases of women on Jeju Island who vanished, with locals initially holding Yemeni refugees responsible for their disappearance and, in some cases, even their death. As discussed below, this fake news became a hugely influential component of anti-refugee discourse that also made use of the language of #MeToo to push back against the arrival of Yemenis in Korea.

6.2 *Word Frequency: Naver Cafés 2018*

The results of the same search across Naver Cafés demonstrates that priorities in the discourse were organized differently from what was portrayed in the news. By homing in on these differences within Naver Café, we can observe how refugee discourse was linked to existing and long-standing concerns about implementing anti-discrimination laws in Korea, along with the inaccurate perception that Yemeni refugees were illegal sojourners. On the surface, these two issues might appear wholly disconnected. However, right-wing and conservative actors in Korea have a long history of opposition to the prospect of passing laws that outlaw racism and discrimination based on sex, gender, religion, and disability. In particular, these groups (including Refugee Countermeasures) perceive anti-discrimination laws as favourable to foreigners and multicultural families. Therefore, the link between this ongoing debate and the word pair 'illegal/sojourn' can be understood as opposition to any attempts to curtail criticism levelled at immigrants – this time Yemeni refugees.

TABLE 3 Word frequency results for Naver Cafes

	Word pairs (English)		Word pairs (original Korean)		Frequency
1	Illegal	Sojourn	불법체류	무사증	480
2	Anti-Discrimination Law	Illegal Sojourn	차별금지법	불법체류	479
3	Refugee Problem	Europe Situation	난민문제	유럽사태	453
4	Muslim	Refugee Problem	무슬림	난민문제	426
5	Yemen	Refugee	예멘	난민	227
6	Refugee	Problem	난민	문제	173
7	Islam	Refugee	이슬람	난민	159
8	Refugee	Opposition	난민반대	대	158
9	Jeju Island	Refugee	제주도	난민	128
10	Fake	Refugee	가짜	난민	107
11	Visa-Free	Entry	무사증	입국	99

TABLE 3 Word frequency results for Naver Cafes (cont.)

Word pairs (English)			Word pairs (original Korean)		Frequency
12	Follow Refugee Law	Visa-Free	따른난민법	무사증	86
13	Refugee Application	Abolish	난민신청허	폐지	84
		Permission			
14	Entered	Applicants	입국	난민신청허	76
15	Refugee Acceptance	Oppose	난민수	반대	74
16	Refugee	Acceptance	난민	수용	71
17	Refugee Law	Abolish	난민법	폐지	68
18	Refugee	Opposition	난민	반대	67
19	Opposition	Petition	반대	청원	60
20	Jeju Island	Refugee Problem	제주도	난민문제	55
21	Refugee	Applicants	난민	신청	50
22	Jeju	Yemen	제주	예멘	46
23	Refugee	Acknowledgement	난민	인정	37
24	Refugee	Jeju Island	난민	제주도	36
25	Refugees	Islam	난민	이슬람	34
26	Opposition	Rally	반대	집회	31
27	Jeju Island	Illegal Refugees	제주도	불법난민신	30
				청문	
28	Visa-Free	Abolish	무사증	폐지	30
29	Citizens	Safety	국민	안전	27
30	Refugee	Crime	난민	범죄	26
31	Islam	Muslim	이슬람	무슬림	25

The word pair ‘refugee problem/Europe situation’ is important because it points to the ways in which coverage of the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe influenced Korean opinion, especially within Naver Café discussion spaces. Negative coverage and fake and distorted news about refugees in Europe played a consistent and vital role in shaping Korean reactions to Yemeni refugees, with the local narrative quickly describing the arrival of 500 Yemenis as a domestic ‘refugee crisis’. Within these café forum spaces Islamophobia, anti-multiculturalist attitudes, and racism played out, as shown by the word pairs ‘Muslim/refugee problem’, ‘Yemen/refugee’, ‘Islam/refugee’, and ‘refugee/opposition’. Many Naver Cafés were also spaces where members organized offline activities, such anti-refugee street demonstrations, which were more impactful in their attempts to build opposition based on Islamophobic perceptions than Naver News.

This data exploration provides an overview of the essential components, events, narratives, and concerns expressed through Naver News and Naver Cafés. At first glance, it might appear that the concerns expressed in the two spaces are largely the same; however, the way in which the issues have been prioritized is very different, with Naver News stories largely connected to the arrival, processing, and evaluation of refugees – including concerns over the legitimacy of their refugee status and calls for withdrawal from the Geneva Convention. However, mapping out the broad discourse across Naver Cafés prioritizes the shape and roots of its opposition: organizing anti-refugee rallies in the streets, petitions, calling for the abolition of refugee laws in Korea, drawing on stories from European handling of refugees, and expressing concerns over the arrival of Muslims in the country. The data sets the frame for understanding how these broad concerns play out in the prominent group in Naver Café, called Refugee Countermeasures National Action, in my observations illustrating the relationship between Korea and Europe vis-à-vis refugee representation.

6.3 *Online Observations: Refugee Countermeasures National Action*

The Refugee Countermeasures National Action site was initiated on 21 June 2018 and, at the time of writing, consisted of 7,624 members and 41,833 posts and had a total of 2,014,619 visitors.³ It uses the following phrases to describe itself – ‘Nationalism comes first! Nationals first, not people! Fake refugees/illegal refugees! Anti-discrimination law’ – and lists the following keywords as its main search terms: ‘anti-refugee, refugees, refugee crime, Yemeni refugees, anti-discrimination law, Islam, multicultural, illegal residents, foreigners, and refugee countermeasures’, which outline this forum’s main catalogue of concerns.

It is a highly ranked online café, reflecting the popularity of its general anti-foreigner discourse and, specifically, its deep concern over the arrival of Yemeni refugees in Korea.⁴ Although it requires membership to comment and read many posts inside the café, the café describes itself as ‘public’, with many of its newsletters, links, and postings freely available without the need to register. The café sends a clear message to politicians through ten demands published on its introduction page, including strong border protection, keeping foreign labour out of Korea to stop them from driving down wages and jobs for Koreans, punishing and expelling ‘fake’ refugees and illegal immigrants, and

3 As of 28 June 2020, 7:46 PM. It also goes by the name the People’s First National Action.

4 For more information about how Naver Cafés are ranked, see <https://section.cafe.naver.com/cafe-home/cafes/rankings-introduction/>, accessed 28 June 2020.



FIGURE 2 Refugee Countermeasures National Action Homepage

calls on politicians to abolish the ‘refugee law’. Other demands revolve around abolishing international marriage agencies and eroding the rights of long-term foreign residents in Korea.⁵ It also shares information about its anti-refugee and anti-foreigner activities, such as organizing offline demonstrations, articles, and organizing offline meetings and rallies as well as creating hateful social media content. The café is organized around its main political apprehensions, spanning a wide range of issues, such as fine dust, North Korea, multiculturalism, illegal immigrants, China, LGBTQI issues, and, most importantly for our discussion, the café has a comprehensive section on Islam and Muslims. This section is categorized into Anti-Islam Evidence, Islamic Articles, Islamic Video, Islamic Information, Islamic Terrorism/Crime, Islamic Supporters, and Muslim Support Policy. Much of the content about Yemenis, Muslims, and refugees are filed both here and under ‘Refugees/Defectors’ in the sections called Evidence Data for Anti-Refugees/Defectors or Refugee/North Korean Defector Articles. Figure 2 (above) illustrates the Café’s homepage.

Significantly, the café is a resource for fake and biased news against refugees, Muslims, and other vulnerable social minorities. It is a space where members share news without fact checking and spread disinformation. It reposts and shares news articles from European sources and leans heavily on articles that portray refugees in a negative light in the European context to justify its own anti-refugee positions. To illustrate, under the café’s sections on ‘Islam Terror and Crime’ and ‘Refugees’ are reams of news stories tagged ‘Voice of Europe’ (approximately 740/750 public articles generated in 2018–2019), sharing articles and translated articles from European sources about refugees committing rapes and ISIS-related acts of terrorism. Germany and Sweden, in particular, caught café members’ attention, as they shared several news stories related to Swedish women who were allegedly raped by Syrian and Afghan

5 For the full list of demands, see Café website: https://cafe.naver.com/refugeeout?iframe_url=/MyCafeIntro.nhn%3Fclubid=29453879/, accessed 28 June 2020.

refugees. A keyword search for 'Sweden' across the café returned 197–200 articles published in 2018–2019 and 298–300 for 'Germany' for the same period.

Table 4 lists a sample of articles/content obtained from a search on the keyword 'Europe', illustrating the use of migrants, immigrants, and refugees in European contexts as a basis for shaping anti-refugee sentiments in the Korean context.

Next, a simple keyword search on 'Yemeni' yields hundreds of negative posts and articles, some 449–450 open access articles posted in 2018–2019. A supplementary search on 'Refugee' returned 4000 articles, with 3950 open access articles published in 2018–2019.

In terms of the content, Yemeni refugee issues were strongly connected to women's protection through articles and posts on alleged cases of refugee-perpetrated rapes. My search yielded 100 articles related to the keyword 'rape', of which 99 were posted in 2018–2019. To illustrate some of the content in greater detail, in one post, members suggested that the media were biased towards Yemeni refugees rather than Korean women, especially when Korean

TABLE 4 "Europe" keyword search results

Post ID	Post title	Date
45218	Voice of Europe: A refugee boy who came to Sweden to avoid rape of the same sex was accused of assault	27 November 2018
44145	Syrian refugee accused of raping a 3-yr old boy in Greece	17 November 2018
41478	Refugees who killed and raped a teenage girl in Rome	26 October 2018
41365	16-yr old girl raped, suspect, illegal refugees	25 October 2018
41364	Illegal refugees raped a 16-yr old girl	25 October 2018
41358	Rome, 16-yr old girl raped, suspect, illegal refugees	25 October 2018
40459	Displaced in rape substance	19 October 2018
31346	The daughter of a top European executive raped by an Afghan Muslim refugee	23 August 2018
24075	Watching a mass rape video, a refugee named Povia	2 August 2018
19924	Interpretation of Overseas Articles: Swedish rape & refugees/political correctness	25 July 2018
17230	French refugees flock to rape women	21 July 2018

women were alleged victims of refugee-perpetrated sexual violence. Another post questioned whether Yemenis were preparing for civil war in Korea, raising concerns about 'Shia terrorists' within their ranks. Several posts described Yemenis as drug abusers, as some asylum seekers were found to have traces of *khat* in their bloodstream when they underwent drug testing as part of the refugee application screening process. Although the *khat* had been consumed before they arrived in Korea and although *khat* is legal in Yemen, stories of drug abuse by refugees incited fear and rage amongst café members.

Interestingly, like many other right-wing and white supremacist outlets around the world, the café staunchly claims that it is not racist. Instead, it pushes the narrative that everyday Koreans are subject to 'reverse discrimination' because foreign labourers are driving down wages, forcing Koreans to compete for jobs and because multicultural families formed through 'international marriages', particularly between immigrant women and Korean men, receive 'preferential treatment'. In general, the café takes a negative view of foreigners. However, its opposition to refugees is strongly based on 'cultural differences', signifying another layer of racism 'without racism' as found across global far-right discourses. These sentiments are captured in a post shared in the café by 'The Liberal Economist', Jinwoo Park, which later went viral across other SNS platforms:

The most unfortunate thing for those who argue against refugees online and offline is that they often make claims based on fake news.... The presence of a 'will to live together' should be the basis for deciding whether to accept refugees. Accepting refugees means granting them the right to be 'people of the Republic of Korea'. While the 'right as a human' is inherently guaranteed, the 'right as a citizen' is guaranteed based on the country's constitution and law. In that case, refugees who want to become citizens of the Republic of Korea should show a strong will to 'share the values of the Republic of Korea's founding of a free-market economy and free democracy and fulfil the obligations granted by the state in due process and justification'. By solidifying this great principle, we can effectively explain why we raise our voice against Muslim refugees. Unlike Christianity, which has long been separated from the politics of modern free nations, Islam still functions as a political system of modern Arab countries. Terrorism based on religious beliefs is almost 100% Muslim. Leftists cite several clauses of the Quran, the Islamic scripture, to emphasize that Islam is a 'religious religion of peace', but the Quran clearly shows that Muhammad's deeds have moved from the Mecca era of peace and tolerance to the Medina era of violence and politics. There

is a stark difference from Christianity, which has transitioned from the Old Testament of Violence and Politics to the New Testament of Peace and Tolerance. Therefore, it can be concluded that the public's suspicion that Muslim refugees will not be able to share the founding value of the Republic of Korea is extremely reasonable, and that acceptance of Muslim refugees should be extremely strict.⁶

Another post written in the form of an opinion blog is important for our discussion:

We are not afraid of Yemenis who come to Jeju, but of their culture. After all, it is a cultural invasion, and it is a war. But you feel sorry for them? Did we kill them? We will end up dead because of them! Several European countries have already proved it. It is time to think about the country and its people.... We must banish Yemenis and Muslims. 50 % of Muslims who believe in Islam refer to Islam as a religion of peace. But if you believe in it 100%, you become ISIS (Islamic extremist).

These posts sum up much of the discourse about refugee issues in South Korea, especially as expressed on the Refugee Countermeasures Café: fears about Muslims, 'Islamic' terrorism, rape/violence against women, and the economy. As highlighted by fact checkers at Seoul National University (2018a, 2018b) it is also broadly reflective of three influential pieces of fake news that stirred up significant hatred for Yemeni refugees: 1. That the government was giving substantial financial support to refugee applicants; 2. That the crime rate will rise because of Muslim refugees; and 3. That Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island could get jobs easily whereas Koreans were unsupported by the government. Gender also played a huge role in shaping negative perceptions of Yemenis, with many Koreans questioning why their government should support having 'strong, healthy' men settle in their country. Another important dynamic in the Korean anti-refugee discourse in 2018 was the appearance of protest slogans: 'Not racist, we want safety!' along with 'we don't want to be like Europe', reflecting this discourse of 'cultural differences' (Balibar 1991).

Protestors and café members consistently called on the government to put Koreans first, especially prioritizing the rights of Korean women and workers ahead of refugees. This was reflected in my analysis of the group Refugee Countermeasures National Action, as they continuously cried 'Citizens, first!' or even 'Natives, first!' – a slogan that also appears on the homepage.

⁶ <https://cafe.naver.com/refugeeout/19773/>, accessed 3 July 2020.

It is true that the Korean government took the unusual step of granting Yemenis the right to work whilst awaiting processing. This measure aimed to ease social and financial burdens placed on Jeju residents, non-governmental organizations, and the asylum seekers, many of whom were reduced to living on the streets, as no facilities were put in place to meet their basic needs for food and shelter when they first arrived on the Island. However, these Yemenis faced severe restrictions on the type of work they were allowed to do, with permission limited to farming, fishing, and similar jobs requiring hard labour to filling exist worker shortages. These industries are already staffed by low-paid migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, as Koreans tend to shun this type of work. Fake news about these types of 'financial benefits' for Yemeni asylum seekers started to circulate, adding further fuel to the outpouring of rage. Furthermore, it was erroneously said that refugees received financial support of KRW 1.38 million per month per person, an amount usually available to a Korean family of five or more. However, fact checkers at JBTC News (2019) later confirmed this as fake news.

As indicated earlier, debates on whether Yemenis were 'fake' or 'real' refugees stormed across the café, focusing on the fact that the majority of arrivals were young male Muslims. Many of these young men escaped forced conscription in Yemen before eventually making the long journey to Korea. Focused on discrimination based on age, gender, and religion, the anti-refugee discourse framed these Yemenis as fake refugees seeking employment opportunities in Korea. A report by Hani (2018) revealed the level of hatred for Muslims, particularly Yemeni refugees, as they unearthed several blogs and other online content that framed them as violent and dangerous people capable of raping the daughters and daughters-in-law and killing the sons of local residents.

These accusations and negative framing of refugees, particularly male Muslim refugees are not unique to Korean society and are connected to a long-standing, existing global discourse. The discourse on the anti-refugee movement aimed at Syrian refugees who went to Europe in 2015 stressed that the refugees were male, actively reducing the visibility and voices of refugee women. As suggested by Walker and Gajjala (2016), the heightened visibility of men versus women gives a wider message that women have been abandoned, affirming that Muslim men are violent in various ways and that Muslim women need to be rescued from oppression. Furthermore, the images of male refugees, who are well dressed, well spoken, and skilled, with some able to afford basic necessities, do not fit the existing images of what a refugee should look like in the Western and, by extension, the Korean imagination. Walker and Gajjala (2016: 180) remind us that challenging the masculinity of Arab men is based on historical, colonial framing that is 'simultaneously effeminate and

threatening to women’. As shown in the next section, these tropes are perpetuated through misrepresentation in online spaces.

7 ‘Secure Safety Rights for Jeju Women’/‘Save Jeju Women’

As mentioned earlier, the trending hashtags ‘Secure Safety Rights for Jeju Women’ and ‘Save Jeju Women’ were important indicators of online discourse, expressing fears over the presence of male Muslim refugees in Korea.



FIGURE 3
'Jeju's Missing Women' viral post reported in (Hani 2018)

The post shown in Figure 3 was reported in Hani (2018) after going viral online with the tagline ‘Six women missing for a month after receiving refugee status from Jeju Island’. Presenting a chilling timeline of the deaths of six women who were reported as missing on Jeju Island, the original poster blamed Yemeni refugees, holding them responsible as murderers.

The post circulated widely online, especially as the original author added the caption: ‘Jeju Island is really dangerous. If you stay still, not only Jeju Island but the whole of Korea will be eaten by people disguised as refugees’ (Hani 2018).

However, a police investigation revealed that, in fact, the number of missing women was five, of which three had died of illness or drowning. The police further confirmed that there were no signs of sexual violence and that the other two cases of ‘murder’ were fabricated stories. Furthermore, to stem the flow of misinformation online, the Jeju Police released a statement to clarify that the viral post linking these incidents to Yemeni refugees was fake. Immediately afterwards, fact checkers confirmed that Jeju’s Yemeni refugees were not connected to these tragic deaths (KBS 2018; SNU 2018).

The real-life case of the ‘Missing Jeju Women’ played an essential role in the ‘protect women’ discourse as their disappearances and even killings were wrongfully attributed to Yemeni arrivals, stirring up considerable hatred, to the point that people took to the streets to voice their anger on the mainland in Seoul (Shoji, Amnesty International 2018). The demonstrations and overall backlash were based on the flawed perception that Muslim men are prone to sexual violence, with some of these assumptions rooted in fake and negative

news about refugee sex crimes in Europe. Fake news from Sweden truly captivated many Korean activists; the unsubstantiated statistic stated that a 1400 percent increase in sexual assaults was due to an influx of Muslim refugees was especially influential. This became a serious source of fear and was investigated by JBTC News fact checkers (Oh 2018). It was determined to be fake – a statistic propagated by a right-wing, US-based think tank. Unfortunately, despite numerous factchecks, the damage had already been done, as this 'statistic' as well as news of sexual violence in Germany were widely discussed and circulated in Korean online circles, including Refugee Countermeasures Café, spreading fear and hatred towards Yemeni refugees.

The data presented so far present a bird's-eye view of the key connections between women-related concerns and refugee issues. Delving deeper into their theoretical connections, it seems clear that a key driver of anti-refugee discourse, particularly against Yemeni refugees, was based on neo-colonial, Orientalist tropes propagated by an extremely well-organized and powerful Protestant far-right movement. According to Nami Kim (2016: 122), 'the chief proponent who breeds Islamophobia in South Korea is the Protestant Right'. Kim's assertion that Islamophobic narratives are constructed on a neo-colonial foundation in which Korean women need to be rescued from violent Muslim men and Islam is extremely valuable for our discussion. In relation to this, anti-multicultural discourse, such as the sentiments expressed by Refugee Countermeasures National Action, has continuously formed a sense of right-wing anxiety around migrant workers as potential sex offenders who pose a great risk to Korean women (Jun 2020). Jun further suggests that these anxieties, built up over time, were activated at the time of the Yemeni refugee crisis in 2018. This situation enabled Korean women's bodies to be used as way to emphasize patriarchal norms: that women were oppressed, needing to be saved from yet another foreign, male threat, and that this time the foreign other, Yemeni refugees, were potential oppressors. Jun's work gives this position further legitimacy as she points out that feminist groups, including online 'mum café' members, protested against the refugees based on claims of safety. Essentially, Islamophobia shaped by this anti-refugee discourse sheds light on several interconnected social issues in South Korean society: racism, discrimination, gender issues, and ethnonationalism. It is also a driving factor in producing gendered Islamophobic narratives reflected in hubs of anti-refugee activism with the hashtag/slogans 'Secure Safety Rights for Jeju Women' and 'Jeju Missing Women', which brings us to a discussion about co-opting feminist discourse for nefarious ends. Ferree (2006: 13) asks us to think about 'how and when feminist principles become co-opted in the national interest of either liberal modernist states or religious fundamentalism' Nami Kim (2016) elaborates on this within the Protestant far-right movement, saying that misogyny,

sexism, patriarchy, and gendered violence are attributed to Islam but absolve Christianity of these behaviours.

Taking a different approach, Kim Bo-Myung (2019) questions the depth of feminist understanding within Korean society when feminist language is co-opted to shape Islamophobic discourse, framing Muslim men as violent and the Korean state as the protector of women. In relation to this, Ryu Jinhee (2019) signals that the calls to 'Save Korean Women' from Muslim men replays imperialist narratives of white men saving women from brown men. Unlike in the past, this situation plays out in postcolonial Korea, where people of colour are calling for the expulsion of Yemenis based on the same colonialist principles, echoed in the sources of fake news, and reliance on experiences in the European context when it came to handling refugees in 2015.

8 Conclusion

This article analyzes digital data through text mining and digital ethnography to offer insights into the connections between anti-refugee discourse, feminist discourse ignited by the recent MeToo movement in Korea, and the impact of neocolonial narratives mostly from European sources. As highlighted by Nguyen (2016), building an understanding of how conflicts over sensitive issues are discussed and debated online is useful for clarifying the underlying causes of the discourse. In this research, it shows the ways in which two discourses – protecting refugees and women's rights, which are ordinarily expected to be on the 'same side' – were positioned against each other, depending on horrific stories of rape and violence and distorted facts about refugees and migrants in European contexts, particularly in 2015. In this way, we can see how online media can transform public discourses through information shared across borders and cultures, even when it has little relevance to the receiving public, and supports Nguyen's view that web spheres are always transnational or global.

By making these critical connections between the production and distribution of anti-refugee discourse particularly through 'feminist' concerns, my work is not intended to criticize the vital work of women who seek to dismantle patriarchy and its systems. Rather, my work explores the tensions between calling for one set of rights whilst curtailing another, based on fears caused by the digital spread of fake news, anti-refugee sentiments, and global narratives of Islamophobia that are aimed in particular at Muslim men. Because of the absence of a significant history of Muslim-perpetrated violence towards Korean women, these fears need to be unpacked to reveal the core of South Korea's issues with refugees. Therefore, this article demonstrates the impact of European narratives: negative and fake news about refugees,

Orientalist tropes and imperialist 'save women' discourses in digital and offline spaces, and South Korean reactions to its own 'refugee crisis' in 2018, focusing on how the anti-refugee discourse was founded on concerns for women's safety.

These online discourses differed across platforms whilst engaging with similar issues of Islamophobia, terrorism, economy, fake refugees, and fears of sexual violence as channelled through European sources quoted by Refugee Countermeasures National Action and fake news stories circulated online. The results from my data-mining exercise are enriched by ethnographic observations, revealing the real 'crisis' at the heart of Korea's reaction to the arrival of Yemeni refugees: a series of disconnections between desires for recognition as a global power, struggles with the rapid diversity growing in its population, and the power of right-wing Christian and anti-multicultural groups as they built solidarity with parts of the Korean feminist movement, propagating widespread anti-refugee sentiments with real-life consequences for Yemenis who arrived on Jeju Island.

Finally, the circulation of fake news undoubtedly is actively used and re-used to further anti-refugee and Islamophobic positions. Economic concerns expressed through 'fake versus real' refugee debates, fears about sexual violence, and a discourse of cultural differences based on the treatment of women vociferously expressed in protests led by Refugee Countermeasures National Action, and similar right-wing groups indicate that Korea's refugee situation became a crisis not because of the number of people arriving but because it became a microcosm of Korea's existing social woes. The Yemeni 'refugee crisis' reveals that Korea as a society is deeply at odds with itself, and one of the key theatres of conflict was the Yemeni refugee issue that played out in the digital sphere.

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