

WEBTOONS AND THE SPIRIT OF THEIR TIME: READER RESPONSES TO WORKING MOTHERHOOD IN *MISAENG*¹

Eva Vučkovič, *PhD student*
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Abstract

This article offers analysis of reader comments on selected episodes of the Yoon Tae-ho's webtoon *Misaeng* (2012–2013, first season) that focus on the story of a working mother, Seon. By examining both, best comments and a sample of regular comments, the study explores how readers understood work–family conflict and gender inequality at a specific historical moment, before the rise of large-scale feminist activism in South Korea. The findings show that readers expressed strong emotional reactions, particularly feelings of guilt, moral pressure, and frustration toward unequal domestic expectations placed on working women. Although some comments offered structural critiques of workplace culture, most focused on individual responsibility, especially maternal sacrifice. A smaller group of readers presented resistant views that questioned traditional gender roles. The study argues that webtoon comment sections capture readers' social attitudes and concerns as they existed at the time of publication. In this way, *Misaeng* functions as a cultural record of the early 2010s, revealing how gender issues were experienced and interpreted before they became central to public debate.

Keywords: *webtoon, Misaeng, reader response, work-family conflict, gender inequality.*

¹ This work was supported by the **Seed** Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2022-INC-2250001).

Introduction

The term *webtoon* is a Korean coined word formed from “website” and “cartoon”, and it refers to comics published online. Webtoons first appeared in Korea in the late 1990s or early 2000s alongside the development of digital technologies. Today, they are an established form of popular culture that extends beyond Korea and is part of the Korean Wave. Webtoons are multi-semiotic texts, meaning that language is their main mode of communication, but it is combined with other semiotic elements such as images and sound. Like newspapers and magazines, webtoons combine text with visual content. However, in webtoons, text and images are more closely integrated. Text is often embedded directly into the image rather than separated as captions. In some cases, text represents sound effects through onomatopoeia, while in others, meaning depends on visual context, such as facial expressions or body language that convey sarcasm or emotion.

With the development of digital platforms, webtoons have added features such as background music, sound effects, and interactive elements like vibration effects to enhance the reading experience. Like printed comics, webtoons belong to the category of sequential art. Eisner [1985: 8] defines comics as “a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols” that form a visual language with its own “grammar of sequential art.” This means that linguistic and visual elements are organized into sequences to create a coherent narrative. Although comics are usually divided into separate panels, these panels are contextually connected and should be analysed in terms of narrative flow.

This approach is especially useful for webtoons, which differ structurally from traditional comics. Advances in online platforms, internet speed, and mobile devices have allowed creators to experiment with new storytelling formats. Webtoons are designed for digital reading and are usually consumed through vertical or horizontal scrolling on mobile devices. Continuous scrolling often blurs the boundaries between panels, making it difficult to identify clear divisions. As a result, spatial and temporal flow becomes more flexible, and meaning emerges through the interaction of images and text across the scrolling sequence rather than within fixed frames. The narrative structure of webtoons is therefore adapted to online consumption, creating a new mode of storytelling that reflects the possibilities of the digital environment.

Due to the digital environment and easy access to online platforms, rapid production and rapid consumption are key characteristics of webtoons. Unlike films or television series, which require significant time and financial resources, a webtoon episode can be produced and published within hours. This allows creators to respond quickly to social issues, natural disasters, and political events. In addition, most webtoon platforms allow readers to interact through comments and ratings. This creates direct

communication between creators and readers, as well as among readers themselves. Readers are therefore not only consumers but also active participants in shaping a webtoon's development. Their engagement can increase the visibility of lesser-known works, support amateur artists, and sometimes influence storylines. When creators respond to feedback and encourage interaction, loyal fan communities often emerge.

Webtoons should therefore be understood as a living cultural form that combines narrative, visual art, and social interaction. They continuously evolve in response to social change and technological development. Unlike traditional printed comics, which offered little access to reader reactions, webtoons exist in an interactive digital space where each episode receives immediate feedback. Readers play an important role in meaning-making, and webtoons provide valuable material for studying contemporary reader behaviour, social emotions, and cultural trends. Furthermore, many webtoons deal with social issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and workplace or school bullying, often criticizing structural problems in Korean society. According to Ryu [2021], social media and webtoons provide spaces where marginalized individuals can share their experiences, express hopes for social change, and receive empathy from readers. Webtoons therefore function not only as entertainment but also as a medium that raises social awareness and shapes public discourse in certain period of time.

This article examines gender conflict in Korean society through the first season of Yoon Tae-ho's webtoon *Misaeng* [Yoon 2012–2013], a cultural text that reflects social attitudes of the early 2010s. In the mid-2010s, public debate increasingly focused on women's roles, marriage, careers, and Korea's low birth rate, often leading to criticism of women in everyday discourse. Because webtoons respond to contemporary social concerns, *Misaeng* offers insight into how such issues were represented and received just before gender conflict became more visible. The study focuses on the portrayal of a working mother and analyses reader comments to examine how audiences at the time perceived the challenges faced by working women. These responses provide a snapshot of public attitudes during this period and help contextualize later developments in Korea's gender conflict discourse.

1. Position of a woman in Korean society

This section provides an overview of the position of women in Korean society before the early 2010s. Such a discussion is essential for understanding readers' responses in the comment section of *Misaeng*, as it sheds light on the traditional roles assigned to women and the factors that rendered these roles increasingly problematic.

The roots of the patriarchal system that still exists in Korea today can be traced back to the late Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), when Neo-Confucian ideas began to spread across the Korean Peninsula. After the fall of the Goryeo dynasty, the Joseon

dynasty (1392–1910) was established, and Korean society underwent major changes due to the growing influence of Neo-Confucianism. This ideology emphasized social harmony through five key relationships: ruler and subject (based on justice), father and son (based on parental authority), husband and wife (based on division of roles), elder and younger brothers (based on birth order), and friends (based on loyalty) [Deuchler 1977: 2].

Within this system, each person was expected to have a fixed position and role in society. In the family, the wife was considered formally equal to the husband, but her responsibilities were clearly defined. These included caring for the household and managing family affairs. In the 15th century, Queen Sohye wrote a book titled *Naehun*, which had a strong influence on Korean society. The book was often given to newly married women as a guide for proper behaviour within the family and the home [Deuchler 2003: 149]. For example, the introduction states:

Although a wife is equal to her husband, a husband is a wife's heaven. She must respect and serve him as she served her father, she must be humble and speak softly, she must not worship him falsely, she must only know obedience and she should not oppose it. [Queen Sohye 2011: 155]

In this social structure, the husband was responsible for public and external matters, while the wife focused on the household and childcare. This division allowed the husband to devote himself fully to his duties outside the home. Sons were especially valued because they inherited the family property and continued the family line. As a result, families often felt strong pressure to produce at least one male heir.

The patriarchal system began to weaken to some extent with the emergence of women's movements in the early 20th century. At that time, Korea was under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), and women's movements were closely connected to independence movements. After liberation and the end of World War II, a civil war broke out between North and South Korea. This was followed by a period of authoritarian rule under Park Chung-hee (박정희) and later under Chun Doo-hwan (전두환). Their governments focused on economic development and industrial growth while suppressing political opposition.

During the 1970s and 1980s, several labour and student protests took place, and these gradually developed into movements for women's rights. In 1983, the Women's Society for Justice and Equality (여성평우회) was established, with a focus on the working conditions of women and issues of gender equality. Around the same time, professors of sociology and anthropology founded the group Alternative Culture (또하나의문화). Through lectures, publications, and public events, the group aimed to raise awareness of gender inequality [Jung 2014: 10]. In the late 1980s, several smaller organizations joined together to form the Korean Women's Association

United (한국여성단체연합). Its main members included labour activists, women's rights activists, and intellectuals [ibid.: 14].

The women's movement gained greater recognition during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung (김대중, 1998–2003) and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun (노무현, 2003–2007). Their administrations were often described as “women-friendly governments” because they supported women's rights and related legal reforms. One of the most important reforms was the abolition of the *hojuje* (호주제), the family headship system that legally defined the father as the head of the household. This system originated during the Joseon dynasty but became more firmly established during the Japanese occupation, when Japan introduced a family system based on male-line inheritance [Kim & Kim 2014: 66–68].

The *hojuje* system caused several social problems. When a family did not have a son, responsibility was often placed on the woman, and this contributed to the abortion of female foetuses. The system also created difficulties in international marriages. If the husband was a foreign national, the child inherited his citizenship even when born in Korea. Single mothers faced legal disadvantages as well, since the father was officially recognized as the child's guardian. The system was declared unconstitutional in 2005 and was fully abolished in 2008.

Support for women's movements decreased under the administration of President Lee Myung-bak (이명박). This period marked the end of the so-called “women-friendly government”. Financial support for women's organizations was reduced, and their public influence declined in the years that followed.

2. Webtoon *Misaeng*

This article examines the webtoon *Misaeng*, created by Yoon Tae-ho and published on the *Daum* portal, later known as Kakao Webtoon. The first season was released from January 2012 to July 2013. The second season began in November 2015 and was completed in February 2024. The webtoon achieved great popularity and, according to the platform, has accumulated approximately 1.28 billion views.

The first season, in particular, is recognized as one of the most successful webtoons of the early 2010s. Due to its popularity, a television drama adaptation was produced in Korea in 2014. In addition, the story was adapted into a Japanese drama titled *Hope: Kitai Zero no Shinnyu Shain* (HOPE~期待ゼロの新入社員~), released in 2016, and a Chinese drama titled *The Ordinary Glory* (平凡的荣耀), which aired in 2020.

3.1. *Misaeng* storyline

Webtoon *Misaeng* is set in a large Korean trading company, One International, and follows the story of Jang Geu-rae (장그래), an intern hired through personal

connections. Before entering the company, Jang aspired to become a professional *baduk* player and trained from a young age. However, after failing to obtain professional status, he abandoned this career path.

Jang comes from a disadvantaged social background. His father is deceased, and he lives with his elderly mother, who has limited ability to work. As the main financial provider, Jang must support both himself and his mother. Because he devoted most of his youth to *baduk*, he could not complete higher education and lacks formal qualifications. At the suggestion of his former mentor, he applies for an internship at *One International*, passes the presentation test, and receives a two-year contract.

The title *Misaeng* (未生), meaning “an incomplete life”, originates from the *baduk* term *misaengma* (미생마), which refers to a group of stones whose survival on the board has not yet been determined. These stones remain in an unstable state, neither secure nor fully threatened. This concept serves as a metaphor for individuals in modern society. The author presents the characters as players on a *baduk* board, where daily life resembles an ongoing game shaped by uncertainty and competition.

In this context, all characters exist in a state of *misaeng*. As a contract worker, Jang occupies a particularly precarious position, facing constant job insecurity and limited opportunities for advancement. The narrative also reveals that even senior executives are vulnerable to dismissal if they make critical mistakes. Through these portrayals, *Misaeng* depicts the struggles of company workers within a rigid hierarchical corporate system.

3.2. The representation of working motherhood in *Misaeng*

Yoon Tae-ho constructs the narrative of *Misaeng* through a range of characters, each representing a different social group in Korean society of the early 2010s. Jang Geu-rae reflects the situation of contract workers, Manager Oh Sang-sik (오상식 과장) represents a leader who prioritizes moral values over personal promotion, and Jang Baek-gi (장백기) embodies the struggles of a “perfect” new employee with strong academic and professional qualifications. Han Seok-yul (한석울), whose father is a factory worker, represents those familiar with the realities of industrial labour.

Female characters appear rarely in the webtoon, suggesting the limited presence of women in corporate workplaces at the time. Social expectations often encouraged women to leave their jobs after childbirth. One notable exception is Deputy Department Head Seon (선 차장), a female manager at *One International*. Introduced in episode 21, Seon appears in only a small number of episodes. However, episodes 21, 22, and 121–123 focus specifically on her experiences as a working mother.

Seon is portrayed as a serious, professional, and hardworking employee who has earned respect within the company. At the same time, she is the mother of a young

daughter, Somi, who attends kindergarten. Seon struggles to balance her demanding work responsibilities with childcare. Her husband is also employed, and their family faces difficulties due to long working hours and the lack of time for parenting. In episodes 21 and 22, Seon argues with her husband because he is unable to pick up their daughter from kindergarten by 6 p.m. due to work obligations. Seon herself is also unable to leave the office on time. As a result, two interns, Jang Geu-rae and An Yeongi, offer to pick up Somi. Although Seon is initially hesitant to involve colleagues in her private life, she has no alternative.

At the kindergarten, Jang and An meet other children who are still waiting for their parents to arrive after work. The small number of such children suggests that dual-income families were not common, reflecting broader social patterns in Korea at the time. The interns stay with the children until their parents arrive. Seon arrives last, after dark, when Somi has already fallen asleep.

The next scene takes place in Seon's home, where she and her husband are doing housework together. Seon is folding laundry, while her husband is washing the dishes. During this moment, Seon finds a drawing made by their daughter. In the picture, her husband is shown sleeping on the sofa, and Seon is drawn without a face. This image suggests emotional distance within the family. Both parents realize that they spend too little time with their daughter, which may explain why Somi could not clearly represent them in her drawing.

The following morning, Seon takes Somi to kindergarten. On the way, she receives a phone call from work and leaves in a hurry. Somi tries to bow to her mother to say goodbye, but Seon has already rushed away. After noticing that she did not properly say goodbye, Seon realizes her mistake. She pauses the call, returns to her daughter, and greets her. This moment highlights Seon's awareness that her work-focused lifestyle has caused her to neglect her daughter's emotional needs.

Seon's family story reappears approximately 100 episodes later, in episode 121. At home, Seon and her husband discuss his possible promotion. Seon is again doing housework, while her husband is sitting on the sofa reading. He asks her to quit her job and focus on raising their daughter. Seon explains that leaving her job would be emotionally difficult, as she has worked hard for over a decade, and that it would also cause financial problems for the family. The discussion turns into a conflict, and her husband leaves the room, while Seon continues the housework alone.

After her husband is promoted, he repeats his request for Seon to quit her job. He also makes her feel guilty by suggesting that she is not properly raising their daughter. Seon becomes increasingly frustrated because her husband does not understand the importance of her work or her personal fulfilment. In the end, she decides to continue working. She believes that being a busy but satisfied mother is better than becoming an unhappy mother who has given up her career.

3. Comments section analysis

Episodes 22 and 121, which focus on Seon's story, were among the ten most commented episodes of the first season. Episode 22 ranked ninth with 1,376 comments, while episode 121 ranked fifth with 1,481 comments (data collected on 6 July 2025). However, episode 121 was particularly notable for its unusually high number of *best comments* (Figure 1). It received 694 best comments, which is exceptional compared to the overall average of 62.8 best comments per episode.

Although episodes 122 and 123, which also centre on Seon's story, did not rank among the fifteen most commented episodes, their number of best comments was also higher than in other episodes. Episode 122 received 1129 comments and 201 best comments, while episode 123 received in total 838 comments and among those, 190 were marked as best comments. These figures indicate that Seon's storyline generated a strong response, even when the total number of comments was relatively lower.

Best comments are important because they reflect active reader interaction. Readers do not only post comments but also read, like, dislike, and reply to other users' responses. This indicates that episode 121 generated particularly strong engagement, with readers actively exchanging opinions and personal reflections. Best comments are also usually longer than general comments and often include personal experiences and testimonies.

For this analysis, a sample of all best comments and a randomly selected 10% sample of regular comments posted under episodes 22 and 121 were examined. The aim was to understand how readers interpreted the storyline of Deputy Department Head Seon and why the story of a working mother attracted such strong attention.

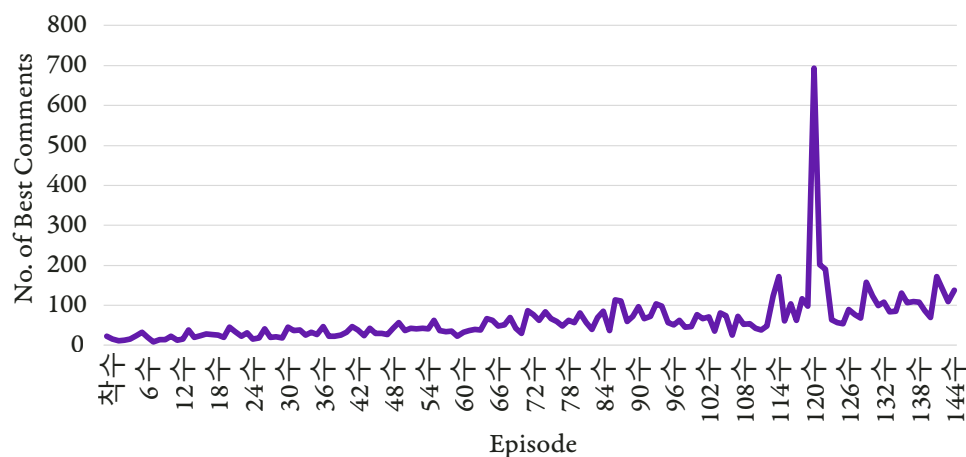


Figure 1. Number of Best Comments, *Misaeng*, Season 1

In episode 22, many readers focused on the children of working parents. Commenters either shared their own experiences of balancing work and childcare with limited time or reflected on their childhoods in dual-income households. In contrast, comments on episode 121 shifted toward discussions of working mothers, parental roles, and gender inequality. The main themes included expressions of guilt, withdrawal from work, criticism of men, criticism of the social system, and resistance to traditional gender expectations. Relevant comment excerpts are presented at the beginning of each thematic section.

3.1. Guilt

- *"Tears are welling up in my eyes. My child is now a high school freshman. She is very used to dual-income couples. [...] Now, she is used to preparing and buying meals by herself because her parents are always late. [...] My wife must be very heartbroken, because she is our only daughter."*
- *"Ah.. I'm looking at your work on the subway. My hands are shaking a little bit as I write comments. I wonder if my children feel the same way? I'm so sorry.."*
- *"Ah! I'm crying. I'm crying because of the hardships of working parents and the guilt I feel toward my children!"*
- *"[...] My beloved daughter!!! I'm sorry I couldn't play with you more."*
- *"Instead of trying to comfort my daughter who was crying and saying she didn't want to go to daycare, I threatened her to leave her home alone [...] She's only three years old now... As a mother, I'm so sorry."*

Guilt appears as the most dominant emotional response in the comment section of episode 22. Readers do not remain distant observers of the story. Instead, they strongly identify with the narrative and relate it to their own parenting experiences. The episode functions as a mirror through which readers reflect on their everyday practices as parents, especially in relation to time spent with their children. This indicates a high level of identification with the character of Deputy Department Head Seon.

Importantly, guilt is expressed mainly in relation to motherhood. Although the story presents a dual-income household, readers rarely assign responsibility equally to both parents. Emotional absence is instead interpreted as a personal moral failure of the mother. This pattern suggests that in Korean society, working women continue to be judged according to emotional expectations that are not significantly altered by their participation in paid labour. While employment is socially accepted, guilt operates as a mechanism of self-discipline, encouraging women to monitor their own behaviour and internalize responsibility for family care.

3.2. Withdrawal from work

- *"In the end, I quit my job. Because I'm a woman, because I'm a mother... because my child is more precious."*
- *"I quit my job [...] I still haven't been able to buy my own house, but I don't regret it."*
- *"I wish I had the guts to quit and take care of my child's emotional needs."*
- *"I quit my job, stay home, do housework, and raise my children. After a few years, my husband might do the same. I have to prepare for retirement now. My children are all grown up and don't need my mother's care as much.. "*
- *"...when I gave up a more career-advancing job and moved to a place with strict, on-time commuting hours, my mother-in-law said, 'I was worried that you'd only chase your own ambitions and put the kids second... but this is a relief.' Because of Misaeng, on this rainy day, tears are falling inside my heart, too."*

Withdrawal from paid work appears in the comments as a morally accepted solution to work–family conflict. Following feelings of guilt, quitting a job is often presented as a natural and appropriate response for working women. Some readers describe leaving employment not as a personal loss, but as a confirmation of proper priorities, emphasizing childcare and moral responsibility toward children.

This does not suggest that Korean society openly discourages women from working. Instead, it creates emotional conditions in which continued employment becomes difficult, while withdrawal from work is socially understandable and even praised. The narrative of quitting therefore reveals an indirect form of discouragement. Women's participation in the labour market is weakened not through formal restrictions, but through moral expectations and emotional pressure.

3.3. Critique of men and gendered division of labour

- *"Housework isn't about helping, it's about sharing. [...] I hope there are no people who think that the man is helping."*
- *"Does the woman raise the child alone? Sigh... Even though they both work, only the woman does the cleaning, laundry, and childcare... Husbands, you don't help with housework, it's your job as well."*
- *"If the wife earned more money and told the husband to quit his job... how would the husband feel?"*
- *"The saying that you need your mom more than your dad is a cowardly excuse."*
- *"My mom quit her job to raise me like this. [...] When I got a bit older and my mom tried to go back to work, my dad stopped her, saying it would be embarrassing for him if his wife worked."*

Comments under episode 121 show a clear shift toward explicit criticism of men and gendered domestic norms. Readers question the idea that men “help” with housework, pointing out that this language use hides unequal divisions of labour. These responses reflect growing awareness that women’s participation in paid work does not reduce their domestic responsibilities, while men’s roles remain largely unchanged.

The comments express frustration with a social structure in which women take on multiple roles, such as worker, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, while men are rarely expected to redefine their responsibilities within the family. In this context, women are discouraged from expecting fairness in the sharing of care and household labour.

3.4. Structural critique

- *“Neither mom nor dad did anything wrong. The problem is the excessive workload that prevents mom and dad from seeing their children, the useless company dinner culture, and the social atmosphere where working on weekends is considered a virtue.”*
- *“Low birth rate? Isn’t that obvious? [...] If you have three kids, you’re either stupid or rich.”*
- *“...Some people say that women’s rights are higher these days... It may vary from person to person, but it’s true that women are inferior when it comes to careers, childcare, and housework. I wish the Ministry of Gender Equality would stop worrying about useless things and just eliminate this kind of inequality.”*
- *“...What mothers need is not ‘bonus points for moms’, nor a few tens of thousands of won per child. What we want is for Korea’s corporate culture to change – a culture where we can’t even take maternity leave until our bellies are about to burst, where we have to return to work without proper postpartum recovery, and where we are forced to work overtime even while worrying about our children. We want a life with evenings. A life with family.”*

Although less common than emotional or interpersonal critiques, structural commentary plays an important role in shifting responsibility away from individual families. These comments focus on workplace culture, labour hierarchies, and economic insecurity rather than personal choices. They represent a negotiated reading that challenges purely moral interpretations of the narrative.

However, the limited number of such comments is significant. Most readers rely on individualized explanations, such as guilt, sacrifice, or quitting work. This suggests that structural critique exists but is not dominant. This imbalance reflects a broader social condition in Korea, where long working hours and rigid corporate norms are widely experienced but are less often identified as legitimate sources of

responsibility. As a result, working women continue to carry the emotional burden of structural constraints.

3.5. Resistance and reinterpretation

- *"I didn't need a 'mother' back then. I needed an 'adult' to take care of me."*
- *"I'm a 20-something daughter who is used to working parents. [...] I leave this message to my parents [...] there's nothing for you to be sorry about. You are the parents I am most proud of in the world."*
- *"I am a private academy instructor [...] My wife is an elementary school teacher, so she works in the morning, and I take care of childcare... And in the afternoon, I work and my wife takes care of childcare [...] Work life is much more enjoyable than childcare."*
- *"...I want to have a child, a family, but if my husband is like that and is an indifferent person to the family, it would be much easier for me to adopt and raise the child alone."*
- *"I won't encourage my daughter to get married."*
- *"Seeing her [a working-mum coworker] live like that for a month... I called off the marriage... I don't think I could live like that."*

The final thematic cluster reflects moments of resistance, in which readers reinterpret dominant social norms instead of accepting them. Adult children from dual-income households offer alternative narratives that turn childhood loneliness into feelings of gratitude. In doing so, they challenge the idea that maternal guilt is unavoidable. Other comments question marriage, childbirth, and traditional family structures more broadly, showing a refusal to accept these arrangements as natural or necessary.

These responses can be understood as oppositional or transformative readings. Readers use the webtoon as a resource to imagine alternative ways of living. Although such comments do not dominate the discussion, their presence suggests that Korean society is not unified in its evaluation of working women. Rather, it is a contested space in which traditional expectations exist alongside emerging challenges and new interpretations.

Across these five themes, reader responses to the *Misaeng* episodes show that working women in Korean society hold a deeply ambivalent position. They are economically necessary and increasingly visible, yet they remain emotionally judged and structurally constrained. Society neither clearly encourages nor discourages women's employment. Instead, it allows paid work while maintaining caregiving expectations that make long-term participation difficult.

Women respond to these pressures through guilt, self-discipline, withdrawal, critique, and, in some cases, resistance. The comment sections function as a shared

interpretive space in which these coping strategies are expressed, supported, and debated. In this way, webtoon reception provides insight into how social norms related to work, gender, and family were both reinforced and questioned within everyday digital culture in the early 2010s.

4. The rise of feminist discourse

Misaeng was published in 2012–2013, just before the major rise of the contemporary feminist movement in Korea, which began around 2015. This period marked the start of broader public discussion of women's issues and an intensification of gender-related conflicts. In 2015, a controversial incident drew national attention when an 18-year-old boy, rumoured to be joining ISIS, posted the message "I hate feminists" on social media before disappearing [Bak 2016]. Shortly afterward, columnist Kim Tae-hoon published an article in *Grazia magazine* (Issue 48, 2 February 2015) titled "Stupid feminism is more dangerous than ISIS" [Seo & Choi 2020: 380]. This statement triggered strong online reactions. In response, the hashtag *#IAmAFeminist* (#나는페미니스트입니다) spread widely as a form of solidarity and resistance. This moment gave feminist discourse greater public visibility in Korea [ibid.].

Around the same time, the online community *Megalia* emerged in 2015 on the *MERS Gallery* of the *DC Inside* forum. Female users reacted against misogynistic attacks on women during the MERS outbreak, particularly the blaming of female patients. They created a separate space called *Megalia*, combining MERS with a reference to the feminist novel *Egalia's Daughters*. The platform aimed to claim an online space for women, promote gender equality, and expose everyday misogyny. Users employed a strategy known as mirroring, which repeated sexist language while reversing gender roles in order to highlight discriminatory speech and provoke reflection among male users [Song et al. 2024: 51–52].

Public engagement with feminism in South Korea intensified after the 2016 Gangnam Station murder, when a man killed a woman and stated that he did so because she was a woman. The case led to nationwide protests. Many women expressed fear for their safety by leaving messages and sticky notes near the station, often using the phrase *#Survived* (#살아남았다) [Park, Park, & Lee 2016]. At the same time, online debates became more hostile. For example, at Korea University, a KakaoTalk group created to report misogynistic comments was quickly taken over by anti-feminist hate speech and was eventually shut down [KBS News 2018].

Feminist discussions were further strengthened through cultural works. Cho Nam-joo's novel *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* (2016) depicted a woman's lifelong experience of gender discrimination, especially in relation to work and motherhood. Although the novel became a bestseller, it also caused public backlash. For example,

the K-pop singer Irene from the band *Red Velvet* faced online harassment after stating that she had read the book [Lee 2018]. Similarly, the webtoon *Myeoneuragi* (2017–2018) portrayed the unequal expectations placed on daughters-in-law in Korean families. It gained wide popularity, with more than 410 000 followers, and its printed version sold over 20 000 copies [Jung 2018].

From 2017 onward, public attention increasingly focused on digital sex crimes, including hidden-camera filming and online sexual exploitation. The *#MeToo movement* organized protests using slogans such as “I am not your porn” (난 너의 야동이 아니야), demanding stronger protection for women [Bak 2018]. High-profile cases, such as the *Burning Sun scandal* involving Seungri and Jung Joon-young, exposed widespread abuse and illegal filming in the entertainment industry. The later *Nth Room Case* revealed a large Telegram network that exploited and blackmailed women and minors, with at least 103 victims identified [Kim 2020].

Together, these events brought national attention to misogyny, digital sexual violence, and gender inequality. They also strengthened feminist movements’ demands for social and legal change in South Korea.

Conclusion

This study aimed to show that the comment sections of the webtoon *Misaeng* function as important spaces for social reflection. Because the webtoon was published in 2012–2013, the comments provide a snapshot of how readers understood and experienced social issues at that specific historical moment. The analysis of *Misaeng* and its comment sections demonstrates that readers were particularly sensitive to certain topics, especially gender inequality, as represented through the story of the working mother Seon. This sensitivity appeared even before the rise of large-scale feminist activism in the following years.

When later developments in Korean society are considered, including the intensification of gender conflicts that have not yet reached a clear resolution, it becomes evident that webtoons can serve as meaningful spaces for social debate. Even before some social issues became widely discussed in public discourse, readers already responded strongly to themes connected to their everyday lives and personal concerns. In this sense, *Misaeng* can be understood as a cultural portrayal of its time.

Therefore, webtoons should not be analysed only as forms of popular culture or literary production. They can also offer valuable insight into Korean society, especially when examined together with their comment sections. These comments reveal readers’ sincere thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences. In this way, *Misaeng* functions not only as entertainment, but also as a platform for collective emotional processing and social critique, as well as a meaningful record of the social atmosphere of the early 2010s.

Sources

- Bak, J. 박지윤. (2018). [Inmul360] Nan neoui yadongi aniya dijiteolseongbeomjoe, kkeutkkaji jjonneunda [인물360] 난 너의 야동이 아니야' 디지털성범죄, 끝까지 쫓는다. *Hangukilbo* 한국일보. Available: <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201805241262737766> (viewed 23.12.2025).
- Bak, S. 박선영. (2016). #Naneun peminiseuteuda tteugeoun barami bunda “#나는 페미니스트다” 뜨거운 바람이 분다. *Hangukilbo* 한국일보. Available: <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201603050440017099> (viewed 23.12.2025).
- Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac: Poorhouse Press.
- Deuchler, M. (1977). The Tradition: Woman during the Yi Dynasty. In: S. Mattielli (ed.). *Virtues in Conflict: Tradition and the Korean Woman Today*. Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, pp. 1–47.
- Deuchler, M. (2003). Propagating Female Virtues in Choson Korea. In: D. Ko, J. Kim Haboush, J. R. Piggott (eds.). *Woman and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea and Japan*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 142–169.
- Jung, H. (2018). [INTERVIEW] Let's keep talking about feminism: Webcomic artist spotlights women in family. *The Korea Times*. Available: <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/books/20181116/interview-lets-keep-talking-about-feminism-webcomic-artist-spotlights-women-in-family> (viewed 23.12.2025).
- Jung, K. (2014). *Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Women's Movement Against Sexual Violence*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Lee, C. (2018). Feminist novel becomes center of controversy in South Korea. *The Korea Herald*. Available: <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180327000799> (viewed 23.12.2025).
- KBS News. (2018). Gangnam Murder / KBS뉴스 (News). *YouTube*. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YM46NUjRKHY> (viewed 23.12.2025).
- Kim, S. and Kim, K. (2014). *The Korean Women's Movement and the State: Bargaining for Change*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Kim, S. (2020). Ruling party, gov't push for abolishing statute of limitations for child sex crime. *Yonhap News Agency*. Available: <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200406002200315> (viewed 23.12.2025).
- Park, S., Park, S. and Lee, J. (2016). Gangnam murderer says he killed “because women have always ignored me.” *Hankyoreh*. Available: https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/744756.html (viewed 23.12.2025).
- Ryu, Y. 류유희. (2021). SNS weptuneso geuryeojineun sahoejeok yakjaui seutoritellinge gwanhan yeongu SNS웹툰에서 그려지는 사회적 약자의 스토리텔링에 관한 연구 [A Study on the Storytelling of the Socially Disadvantaged Described by Webtoons in SNS]. *Aenimeisyeonyeongu* 애니메이션연구, No. 17 (3), pp. 100–112.
- Queen Sohye 소혜왕후 昭惠王后. (2011). *Naehun* 내훈 內訓. Paju: Hangilsa.

- Seo, J. and Choi, S. (2020). Introduction. *Journal of Asian Sociology*, No. 49 (4), pp. 371–398.
- Song, J., Cho, M., Cho, H. and Kim, A. (2024). Intermedial Feminism: Megalia and Kangnam Station Exit 10. In: J. Song, M. Cho (eds.). *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*. University of Michigan Press, pp. 46–65.
- Yoon, T. 윤태호. (2012–2013). Misaeng 미생. *Kakao Webtoon* 카카오페툰. Available: <https://webtoon.kakao.com/content/%EB%AF%B8%EC%83%9D/818> (viewed 23.12.2025).