

A Silent Message From My Wardrobe

Riun Jo



‘Why do you deny yourself the pleasure of fashion?’ When I heard this question, I didn’t know how to answer. I am in the fashion department. As a maker, I prefer to explore and challenge myself. However, as a wearer, I prefer to wear a basic style with a calming color. The question might be the wrong one to me because I don’t deny myself the pleasure of fashion. Simply put, I am not interested in dressing up myself. In my early twenties, I had an interest in wearing nice clothes for about 2 years. I used to spend quite some money on clothes, put on makeup and do my hair nicely. My life back then was different from my current life. The reason for dolling myself up originated from the fear of looking ugly to other people. I was chasing the narrow definition of beauty that dominates South Korean society and got obsessed with looking better and prettier than my real appearance. However, as time passes, I realized that spending too much time on how I look was destroying my ego.



South Korean women protest against sexism and hidden camera pornography on August 4, 2018 in Seoul, South Korea

While growing up in Korea, I witnessed and experienced sexual discrimination but I was not able to explain why I felt upset under such circumstances due to the lack of knowledge about feminism. Then, on 17 May 2016, a murder was committed in the center of Seoul. The killer stabbed to death an unspecified woman he had never met before and later claimed that he did so out of his hatred for women as they had ignored and humiliated him all his life. This particular murder case became a symbol of Korean misogyny and played a crucial role in the rise of feminism in Korea. And that is when I first learned about feminism profoundly. As a part of the feminism movement in Korea, ‘escape the corset’ became a big trend. ‘Escape the corset’ is the fight against unrealistic beauty standards that calls on women who spend hours dolling up themselves. Some women cut their hair to stop wasting time ironing their hair every morning. Some of them throw out all the colorful cosmetics they have and instead commit to only using basic skincare items. Some of them change their wardrobe by removing all ‘girly’ or ‘feminine’ clothes and filling them with comfortable clothes. It might sound radical but this movement intrigued me. I wanted to try and see how I would feel by doing ‘escape the corset’.



A photo of me wearing skinny pants in 2016



A photo of me after discarding skinny pants in 2018

As a first step, I stopped wearing skinny pants. Almost every day I wore skinny pants even if my legs were falling asleep. It was because I wanted to look taller by exposing my legs. Also many people used to say my legs are looking nice. That is why I enjoyed wearing skinny or short pants very often. Come to think of it now, I had a ridiculous obsession with skinny pants. I thought my legs would stand out the more I wore skinny pants. Even though I couldn't digest well after eating food, I wore skinny pants. Even though the blood circulation was not working well so that some marks were left on my legs after taking them off, I always wore skinny pants. For me, the skinny pants were a corset. In Korean society, women's skinny pants were considered as a basic fashion item for quite some time.



The popular K-pop group Girls' Generation released a song 'Gee' in 2009

In 2009, one of the most popular K-pop girl groups released a hit song and wore colorful skinny pants for their performance. Since then, the skinny pants boom began. Due to the characteristics of the skinny pants that reveal the leg lines, women's beautiful leg lines were the important beauty standard, and competition to create more beautiful legs was overheated. Then, from 2015, wide pants became a trend in Korea and I was able to find more options to buy pants in the market. I started wearing wide pants naturally because wide pants looked chicer and more comfortable. After encountering 'escape the corset' and deciding to discard all my skinny pants, I no longer needed to feel the pressure of tiny skinny pants that strangled my legs and care about the beauty of leg lines.



A photo of me wearing no bra in 2019

Secondly, I started to not wear a brassiere. In the beginning, it was quite easy to do because it was winter season so that I wore several tops and my nipples were barely shown. I didn't feel uncomfortable at first. It was heavenly. Breathing in/out and digesting food became so much easier. I felt less tired even after having a long and exhausting day, compared to when I wore a bra on my breasts. When summer came, I hesitated, but I had some friends who went out braless. I was encouraged by them and that was the moment I got bolder. When I first came to the Netherlands in the summer of 2016, I was shocked to learn that quite some women did not wear bras. It was new for me because I had a stereotype that it is a natural thing that a woman should always wear a bra when she goes out. Then, as part of South Korean women's growing resistance against the constraint society placed on them, the braless movement emerged.

Last February, MBC, a major broadcasting company in Korea, aired a program called 'Series M'. The theme of the first episode was 'Should I wear a brassiere?'. As test subjects, men spent a day wearing bras while women spend a day braless. After their experience, men who wore bras all day said that if they were women, they would have lived braless. They also responded that they did not digest well throughout the experiment, were annoyed whenever the bra straps came down and felt uncomfortable with marks on their shoulders and sides due to the pressure of bras. I was surprised at the reactions. I realized that I was tamed by the discomfort of wearing an uncomfortable underwear for about 15 years. On the other hand, the reactions of female subjects who spent a day braless were all positive. The female MBC announcer, who was one of the subjects, uploaded her braless experience on Instagram. But surprisingly, her post became controversial. Some people replied with comments saying her experience is disturbing, rude, selfish, and provocative while the male MBC announcer who wore a bra did not get a single bad comment from the public.



Kim Jung-hyun, a male MBC announcer, is wearing a bra for the experiment



Kim Jung-hyun announcer is wearing a bra in the left while Im Hyun-ju, the female announcer in the middle is broadcasting without wearing a bra

Afterward, I was able to go to school with no makeup. Sometimes, I felt embarrassed to show my bare face to others but it was convenient. When I wore some makeup, I had to check my face in the mirror several times a day to fix it. But after having no makeup, all I needed to do was to apply lip balm on my dry lips and hand cream on my dry hands. Giving up lip-makeup was the most difficult part because I always thought I look sick if my lips are not red. Also, my skin is not the best so I needed to encourage myself more often. 2010 to 2016 was the time when I was most interested in makeup. There was also a culture of collecting color cosmetics enthusiastically along with the saying, “There is no same color under the sky.” and sharing information about cosmetics became easier and faster through YouTube or blogs. Many cosmetics made a great hit just because they promoted ‘guys like this eyeshadow and lipstick’. Embarrassingly, this kind of promotion worked. I deluded myself into thinking that it was my satisfaction to stick to makeup. But the truth was, it was because I cared too much about how people see me. I wanted to be a prettier, charming and loved one, so I was obsessed with my appearance. I was not able to be happy because every time I look in the mirror, I was insecure about my complexion.



A photo of me putting makeup on in 2016



A photo of me working at school without makeup in 2019

I am not claiming that 'escape the corset' is the ultimate way to be a feminist. I am saying that experiencing 'escape the corset' changed not only my appearance but also my attitude towards life. After reducing the amount of time looking in the mirror, I earned more time to focus on things more important than being pretty.



*South Korean foreign minister,
Kang Kyung-wha*



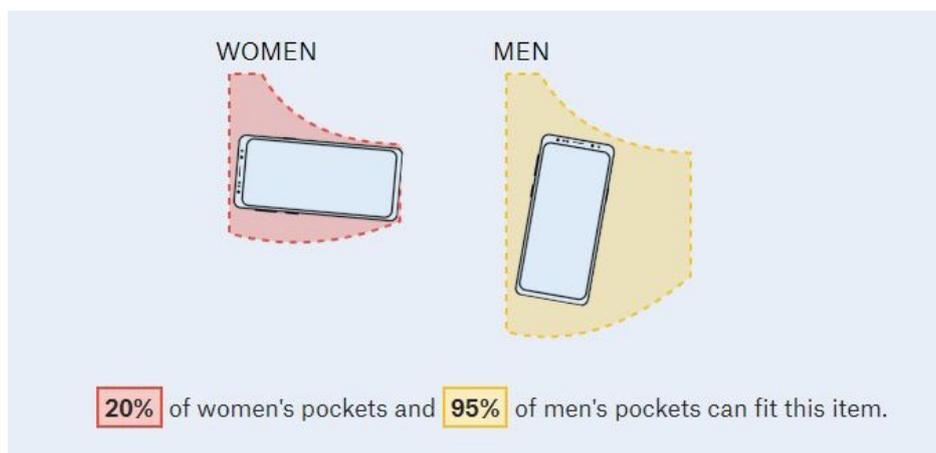
*South Korean member of the National Assembly,
Park Ju-min*

It also changed my view of women who I am envious of. When I was obsessed with my appearance, I used to envy beautiful celebrities on TV only because of their beautiful face and perfect body shape. However, after having this experience, successful and professional women became my idols. And thus, it also affected the blueprint of my future life. From then on, I started to be interested in suits. In my opinion, a suit shows gender equality, professionalism, intellectuality, and diligence.



YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/19AyG3WkAqQ>

Although the suit looks like a gender-equal garment, it could not be free from gender discrimination. While researching the suit, I found a video on the YouTube channel which is becoming popular among feminists. The video explained that the process of creating women's and men's wear in Korea begins with discrimination. In the video, Kim Soo-jung, CEO of Fuse Seoul -a Korean gender-neutral fashion brand- shared her experiences. When she asked the factory to make women's clothing, the factory refused to put pockets in women's clothing. It demanded additional charges for pockets in women's clothing while pockets in men's clothing were basic. Even the quality of the fabric and the method of sewing are different in women's and men's clothing. When ordering from the men wear factory, the production process takes at least a week to 15 days while women wear is completed in just two days. I could see how severe the difference in detail and quality is between women's and men's. Even before I make a choice, women's clothing on the market was made to be uncomfortable and in an unfair way.



As a result of comparing the pocket size of 20 famous American jeans brands, only 20% of women's jeans were able to accommodate Galaxy S9

In particular, it is necessary to focus on the presence or absence of a pocket. It has already been pointed out in many articles that gender discrimination determines whether or not a pocket is attached. Men's clothing tends to have capacious, visible pockets while women's clothing tends to have small or fake pockets. Women have been complaining about the inadequacy of the lack of

pockets in their clothes for more than a century. “One supremacy there is in men’s clothing... its adaptation to pockets.” Charlotte P. Gilman wrote for the New York Times in 1905. She continues, “Women have from time to time carried bags, sometimes sewn in, sometimes tied on, sometimes brandished in the hand, but a bag is not a pocket.”



This was the common scene I could see on news programs at the Korea’s three major terrestrial broadcasters, KBS, MBC and SBS

Intelligent male and female announcers in a suit conduct the news on television. Even in this simple scene, gender discrimination exists subtly. From a long time ago, it was regarded as natural that a middle-aged male reporter and a young female announcer sat side by side to host the news in Korea. Female announcers were mainly judged by their appearance, and it was common for them to act as a facilitator of male anchors because of the gender discrimination that a woman is treated as a flower of the broadcast.



A woman on the left side of the picture is Lee So-jung anchor

Then, in November 2019, KBS, Korea's leading terrestrial broadcaster, selected a woman as the main anchor for the first time. It was Lee So-jung, who joined KBS as a reporter in 2003. She received a lot of calls from other reporters and was surprised at the news as soon as the announcement was made. “In a job interview with another company, I said ‘when I get older, I want to be an anchor like male reporters.’ Then an executive said, ‘Who wants an older woman as an anchor?’ I still vividly remember that moment.” She recalled her experience.



Yoo Aeri announcer hosted the news with glasses in September 29, 2017

There was a female middle-aged anchor who ran the news before her. It was Yoo Aeri announcer

who took charge of fronting the news temporarily due to the massive strike by labor unions at KBS in September 2017. She was a veteran who joined KBS in 1981 and worked for over 30 years. Although she took over in the aftermath of the strike, the middle-aged female anchor with glasses was favorably received for her stable hosting with a sense of trust and breaking the stereotype that female anchors should be young.



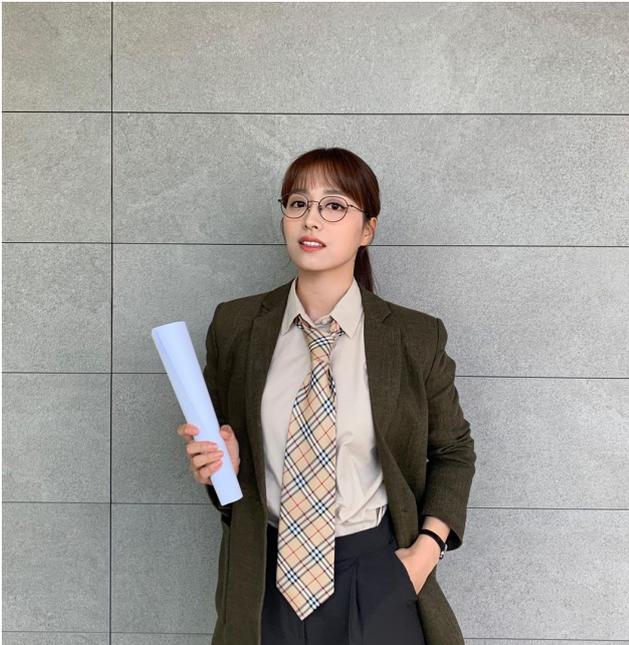
Im Hyun-ju, news presenter of local broadcaster MBC, appeared wearing glasses on a news program in April 12, 2018

In addition to Yoo Aeri announcer, Im Hyun-ju, an announcer who participated in the ‘No bra day’ challenge mentioned above, became a hot topic by appearing on a morning news program with glasses in April 2018. She was the first to have done so on an official news program as its regular newscaster, in the history of all live news programs on Korea’s three major broadcasting channels. In an interview, she said, “While there is no regulation to limit female newscasters from wearing glasses, most female newscasters shared they feel the social pressure to look ‘fancy’ and ‘flawlessly beautiful’. This, in turn, has created a mutual agreement among the female newscasters not to wear glasses, since no one else wears them.” Most recently, she started wearing a men’s suit with a necktie in a nod to the 2008 biographical film *Colette*, which stars Keira Knightly as a feministic French novelist.



Keira Knightly in the film Colette, 2008

She borrowed her father's necktie in the beginning, then started buying her own. After being labeled as a feminist, she drew criticism of her behavior as inappropriate and was accused of seeking attention. However, she stated that "I am not so vulnerable to negative comments. What is important is my mind, not what other people think." As I watched her in a suit with a dazzling smile, I felt a strange joy. In my opinion, what she is doing is a message that she would not accept the femininity that society demands of her.



Im Hyun-ju's daily look with neckties posted on her Instagram account @anna_hyunju

South Korea ranked 115th out of 149 countries in terms of the gender gap between men and women, according to a 2018 report from the World Economic Forum. It also had the highest gender pay disparity among all OECD countries. Only 3.6% of executives in the top 500 South Korean companies and 19% of National Assembly members are women. During a new year's press conference in January 2019, South Korean President Moon Jae-in described the country's gender gap as "our shameful reality."

From a young age in South Korea, women are bombarded with adverts telling them they need to be beautiful. But awareness of feminism is growing at a rapid pace. The past few years have seen South Korean women increasingly posting photos and videos of themselves with the #escapethecorset hashtag. 'Escape the corset' movement is about more than going without make-up and wearing gender-neutral fashion. It is about women in this deeply conservative country finding the freedom to express themselves.