

Far from a Fairy Tale: Struggles of Working Women in Korean Dramas

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Abstract

This study explores the portrayal of working women in South Korean television dramas. Over the past few decades, the popularity of Korean dramas has risen dramatically around the globe, coinciding with a surge in labour force participation among South Korean women. Past studies have examined the characterization of Korean drama heroines as passive love interests versus assertive career women; this paper seeks to investigate how Korean dramas represent the challenges faced by women in the workforce, and how these portrayals align with social issues in South Korea. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine eight popular Korean dramas that focus on female characters' professional lives, and the obstacles that working women encountered in each show were coded into several overarching themes. News articles on gender dynamics in South Korea's labour force were also analyzed, as were Reddit discussions among Korean drama fans regarding the relevant issues. It was found that working women in Korean dramas face barriers to professional advancement, misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, and trade-offs between their career and family life. Such representations reflect the experiences of working women in South Korea, raising awareness of these issues and thus supporting social change; this highlights the importance of representing the authentic experiences of women and other marginalized groups in the media.

Keywords: Korean dramas, media, society, women, career

Introduction

This study examines the representation of working women in South Korean television dramas, or K-dramas. These are extremely popular, not only in South Korea, but around the globe. In one 2020 survey, approximately 33% of respondents worldwide said that K-dramas are widely popular or known in their country (Waldeck, 2021). As such a well-loved media source, K-dramas seem to have a powerful influence on viewers' perceptions. They can reflect social norms, thus providing a window into the current state of Korean society; however, they also have the potential to establish new norms, serving as a catalyst for change.

As the global popularity of K-dramas has surged over the past several decades (Chan & Xueli, 2011; Han, 2019), labour force participation among South Korean women has also increased dramatically. This trend has been particularly noticeable among the upper-middle class (Cho, 2004). As of 2019, women's employment rate had risen to 51.6%, from 46.1% in 1990; however, the employment rate among men remained 19% higher (OCED, 2021). Other serious barriers persist as well. Less than 10% of the South Korean workforce in 2019 consisted of female managers, senior officials and legislators, and women earned one-third less than men on average (Jeong, 2020). Over the years, significant interplay has occurred between these forces: the position of women in Korean society (especially in the workforce) has affected the portrayal of K-drama heroines, and vice versa.

This paper reviews past studies' findings on the characterization of women in K-dramas—and in turn, how these depictions have helped to reshape gender roles in Korean society. Using qualitative data analysis, it then examines how K-dramas represent the challenges faced by women once they join the workforce, and how this relates to social phenomena in South Korea.

Literature Review

A number of previous studies have noted that the increased labour force activity among Korean women has fuelled a rise in assertive, career-driven leading ladies in K-dramas (Cho, 2004; Jin & Jeong, 2010; Kim, 2008). Rather than focusing solely on marriage, housework and childcare, these heroines pursue economic independence and professional fulfillment; they refuse to submit to patriarchal authority, and some even self-identify as feminists. Such representations of women have generated significant debate over women's role in South Korean society, with early media controversy over these dramas' "loose morals" evolving into admiration for their progressive characterizations (Kim, 2008). Indeed, Jin & Jeong (2010) found that, when Korean college students frequently watched dramas featuring career women, they were more likely to perceive having fewer children in married life as the norm.

Conversely, other research emphasizes the continued pervasiveness of the "Cinderella" trope in K-dramas (Chan & Xueli, 2011; Espiritu, 2011; Han, 2019). Such stories portray heroines who are lifted out of poverty, not by pursuing career goals and economic self-sufficiency, but through the support of a wealthy, dashing love interest. This trend seems to run contrary to the increased emancipation of 21st-century Korean women; however, these studies focus mainly on the romantic, escapist appeal of this trope for female viewers—particularly foreign K-drama fans—rather than its implications for Korean society. Indeed, Chan & Xueli (2011) found that viewers in Singapore frequently acknowledged such storylines as "mass-produced fantasies" (p. 296), recognizing that they fail to reflect the reality of life in South Korea.

Lee & Park (2014) ultimately conclude that workforce demographic trends in K-dramas from 2003 to 2012 largely paralleled those in South Korean social statistics. Despite the aforementioned rise in career-oriented heroines, men's employment rate in K-dramas remained

27% above women's overall; for married men and women, this gap was even wider. Male characters were also more likely to hold jobs that offered power, prestige and financial security, while women tended to occupy more "artistic" and traditionally feminine positions.

Although past studies have investigated the dichotomy between K-drama protagonists characterized as passive "damsels in distress" versus those portrayed as active professionals, there has been little scholarly analysis of K-drama heroines' experiences once they join the labour force. Deciding to search for a job is only the first step—women must then handle the everyday struggles that their work environment presents. If a society aims to help women thrive in their careers, thus bolstering its own economic growth (UN Women, 2018), it must recognize these obstacles and support women in overcoming them. Therefore, this study seeks to address the question: how do K-dramas represent the challenges faced by working women, and how does this align with social issues in South Korea?

Methodology

To explore the portrayal of working women in K-dramas, data triangulation and qualitative analysis were employed. First of all, eight popular K-dramas from the past five years were examined (Bae, 2016; "Crash Landing," 2019–2020; Hwang, 2019; Lee, 2017; Moon et al., 2017; "Run On," 2020–2021; Yoon, 2019). In order to focus particularly on the current struggles of working women, only dramas that take place in a contemporary setting, and devote considerable attention to female characters' professional lives, were selected. Content analysis was then used to identify the challenges that working women faced in each show; these obstacles were coded into several overarching themes.

Subsequently, seven articles from the past three years were analyzed, all of which focused on the challenges that women in the South Korean labour force typically experience (Jeong, 2019; Jeong, 2020; Maybin, 2018; McCurry & Kim, 2021; Schuman, 2019; “South Korean Women,” 2020; “The President,” 2019). These were collected from widely-read newspapers and online news sites, such as the Economist, the Wall Street Journal and the BBC. Content analysis of these articles provided insight on whether the previously identified themes were supported by real-world evidence—in other words, whether actual working women in South Korea face the same types of challenges as K-drama heroines.

Finally, eight Reddit discussions from the r/KDRAMA and r/kdramarecommends forums were examined (aliasamandawho, 2021; haircombsnightmare, 2020; koalainglasses, 2020; leftoverpannicrums, 2020; thinkingbell955, 2021; usernamesarestupid, 2020; Villeneuve_, 2020; Watchnextnow, 2020). In these posts, fans expressed their thoughts on the obstacles faced by the protagonists of these eight shows, as well as the general representation of working women in K-dramas. Content analysis of these sources revealed how viewers interpreted these dramas’ subject matter, as well as fans’ perspectives on the relevant social issues.

Findings

Analysis of these data show that the challenges faced by working women in K-dramas generally fall under three main themes: barriers to professional advancement, misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, and trade-offs between their career and family life. Such representations not only reflect social phenomena in Korea, but also resonate strongly with fans, generating discussion and raising awareness of the issues represented.

First of all, in seven of these eight K-dramas, women struggled with barriers to advancement in their careers. In many cases, heroines were passed over for job opportunities due to their lack of connections: they did not come from wealthy families, attend prestigious universities or know the “right people.” This is a significant problem in South Korea, where nepotism and inequality have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years; indeed, almost two-thirds of South Koreans under age 30 see their prospects of social advancement as dim (“The President,” 2019). Moreover, several protagonists felt pressured to compromise their principles in order to advance their careers—and suffered professional consequences when they refused. Such situations often involved disagreements with more experienced colleagues, or objections to questionable ethical practices within their companies. Viewers on Reddit also seemed to perceive this phenomenon as an issue, with one commenting that in South Korea, “You are expected to say “how high” when [a superior says] “jump”” (leftoverpaninicrums, 2020). Additionally, one drama, *Romance is a Bonus Book* (Hwang, 2019), focused heavily on hiring discrimination against stay-at-home mothers who attempt to return to the workforce. This topic generated particular shock and sympathy on Reddit, with viewers describing the drama’s portrayal of its heroine’s struggles as “heartbreaking” and a “superb questioning” of biased hiring practices (thinkingbell955, 2021).

Furthermore, in six out of eight dramas, working women were forced to cope with misogynistic attitudes and behaviours. These frequently took the form of conservative social expectations: many protagonists faced pressure from their families to prioritize marriage and domestic life over their career goals. Although South Korean women are resisting such expectations more and more, they remain pervasive. In dual-income families, for instance, women typically spend over three hours daily on housework and childcare, while men only dedicate 30 minutes to these tasks (“South Korean Women,” 2020). On Reddit, many fans also

empathized with the heroines' experiences. One viewer commented, "I have seen so many girls' lives [impacted by these pressures] ... in my country, that is still the situation with most of the families and it pains me that I cannot change it" (usernamearestupid, 2020). Moreover, many K-drama protagonists had to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace, ranging from distasteful comments to physical assault. In addition, when they attempted to stand up against this abuse, their careers often suffered—some were even fired or demoted. South Korea's #MeToo movement has generated enormous backlash against such behaviour in recent years, as countless working women have reported similar experiences. However, sexual harassment remains a serious issue in the country. One advertising professional remarked that "the discrimination and depreciation women feel in the workplace is so natural, like air" (Jeong, 2020); many fans on Reddit expressed a similar sentiment.

Finally, in five of these eight dramas, women felt compelled to make trade-offs between their personal and professional lives. A number of protagonists had devoted themselves entirely to their careers, sacrificing other aspects of their lives in the process; for example, one heroine's motto was, "You can sleep when you die" ("Crash Landing," 2019–2020). In hindsight, these women often expressed regret for the experiences and relationships they had missed out on. Due to the pressures of work, some even neglected their well-being, ultimately becoming hospitalized from stress or struggling with their mental health. In contrast, other women in these dramas had given up their careers to care for their families; they also expressed regret, feeling that they had lost a vital piece of their identities. On Reddit, a number of viewers expressed admiration for heroines who ultimately achieved a balance between these two extremes. For instance, one fan remarked that the protagonists of *Search: WWW* initially seem "[not to] care about anything but their work ... [but slowly reveal] other aspects" of their lives and interests (koalainglasses, 2020).

This tension is all too real in South Korea; as an entrepreneur commented, “There’s this notion of a superwoman who can perfectly juggle family and work life ... but now there’s also a notion that women can handle too much” (Schuman, 2019). In fact, a growing movement of young women have sworn off marriage altogether, fearing that it would limit their careers.

Conclusion

Overall, the K-dramas examined in this study offered a thoughtful, in-depth representation of working women’s struggles; these challenges include obstacles to career development, sexism that manifests in both blatant and subtle ways, and trade-offs associated with work-life balance. Moreover, the widespread popularity of K-dramas enables them to spark debate. They can not only empower women who have encountered such challenges to speak out, but also educate viewers who lack this firsthand experience. As such, they create a “feedback loop:” by portraying the obstacles currently faced by South Korean women in the labour force, they contribute to a collective effort to confront these issues.

These findings support those of past research, particularly Lee & Park’s (2014) assertion that workforce trends shown in K-dramas do, in fact, reflect South Korean social phenomena. This study’s conclusions also align with those of Jin & Jeong (2010) and Kim (2008), in terms of illuminating the potential of K-dramas to influence viewers’ perceptions of social norms.

This paper was somewhat limited by the researcher’s inability to read the Korean language. Most of the articles analyzed came from American and British news organizations; Korean-language publications would likely interpret the relevant social issues differently, although the extent of this discrepancy is unknown. As well, Korean-language social media discussions might have offered broader insight into the perspectives of working women in South Korea. The Reddit

posts used in this study only represented the viewpoints of English-language forum participants, many of whom were likely foreign K-drama fans. Future research could further investigate this study's research question through analysis of Korean-language sources.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of representing the authentic experiences and perspectives of women and other marginalized groups in the media. Television has a unique ability to provide viewers with glimpses into the lives of characters entirely unlike themselves—or to allow them to see their own lives reflected on-screen. When this power is leveraged, it can transform into a force for social progress, with the potential to promote change more subtly and pervasively (and even more effectively) than direct campaigns or protests might. Interestingly, all eight K-dramas examined by this study had women as their lead screenwriters; in fact, almost 90% of Korean screenwriters are female (MacDonald, 2019). Future studies could also explore whether K-dramas developed by women offer more genuine portrayals of women's experiences.

(2180 words)

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