

Gangnam (South Korea): When Women Beat Back Hate Crimes

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Gangnam is a place that captures the various facets of Korea's social class issue and where a woman was murdered demonstrating that a person could be murdered simply for "being a woman."

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After Psy's "Gangnam Style," Gangnam may no longer be such a foreign place to those abroad. To Koreans, "Gangnam" is a place created by those grown wealthy through real estate. It calls forth images of ambition, vanity, and luxury. Yet, reality is more complicated: Gangnam is also a way station for those displaced from its center and into its outskirts as they make their way to work and school in Seoul: a place that captures the various facets of Korea's social class issue. It was in this Gangnam where a woman was murdered demonstrating that a person could be murdered simply for "being a woman." It epitomized gendered violence. Amidst Gangnam's many minorities, the murder summoned forth the "woman" minority.

Murder Driven by Mental Illness or Hatred of Women?

On May 17, in a co-ed bathroom of a bar near Gangnam Station, a woman was stabbed to death by a male stranger. The man later testified that "it was because women ignored me." He responded that he had entered the bathroom with the intention of "killing a woman entering the bathroom." Furthermore, before the murder took place, 6 men had come in and out, as he waited for a "woman" to enter the bathroom. This should be enough to designate this a hate crime against women. As news of the incident quickly spread through the internet, the wave of remembrance started. Women, in particular, felt that it could have been them. At someone's suggestion, people began placing sticky notes with tributes in Gangnam Station. The immediate response was a clear indicator of society's discrimination against women through indiscriminate violence. Nonetheless, the police and a part of the media are emphasizing it was a random murder committed by a mentally ill person with schizophrenia. In other words, the crime was neither planned nor did it target a particular gender. Is this true? Are mentally-ill individuals cut off from the rest of society?

"Trench coat men" that expose themselves to others are also to some degree mentally ill. Nonetheless, they are not simply beings sexually aroused by the reactions of others to their exposed sexual organs. To get the response they desire, they go to a specific place with a specific target in mind to expose themselves. Their actions are evolving. They not only wait in front of a Girls' High

School, they also actively seek out places with women and children via car; they use social networking sites to grab people's attention. Perpetrators of crimes choose their targets and in their own way devise a plan. Those targeted are usually the physically vulnerable and those the perpetrator deems obedient or less likely to resist. No matter how clearly a criminal is manifesting the symptoms of their mental illness, his/her actions do not take place in a vacuum. Sociologists indicate that due to the effects of his mental illness, the perpetrator was immersed in his own paranoia and believed that those that'd harmed him were women. Thus, the thought that he needed to kill women dominated his mind. Isn't this proof that the crime was motivated by hatred against women? Even mental health experts diagnose that "there is no statistical correlation between schizophrenia and murder, and the fact that he had attacked a woman after letting several men come and go cannot simply be explained away by mental illness."

When Faced with Violence, Do Not Submit, But Confront, Remember, and Resist

What we need to focus on right now, is how people are looking at this incident. Why must this incident be seen as a hate crime against women? What is the context? We can glean the answer from the posts left at Gangnam station:

"You are me." "A man that accepted being ignored and looked down by others, would not by a woman." "The 17th at 1 o'clock, I am alive by sheer chance." "It's okay to walk at night. If you don't want to, you can say no. Above all, it's not your fault." "Don't tell your daughter to not walk late at night." "I fear this society: I will still be a 'woman' tomorrow but if I die it won't be strange at all." "Why do we teach, 'Don't be a victim' instead of 'Don't be a perpetrator'?" "It is not a fight between man and woman. Let's build a society where women need not fear." "In a hate crime against women, the last sacrificial lamb are men. Let's stop hatred against women." "I will remember your death."

Those that came to pay their respects knew well that this was not simply an individual issue but a societal one. Faced with gender violence, women from various ages and societal backgrounds came together, joined by being "a woman" and in those notes left our society the tasks it must figure out. These voices recorded on paper and on the screen are part of women's history.

Thus, the Gangnam Station murder takes on further meaning. When faced with violence, rather than shrink back, fall into victimhood, and submit, women have begun to confront it, to seek out its place, to remember the victim, and even raise our voices. This wave of remembrance and empathy countered those that insist that calling it a hate crime is a stretch, that attempt to dismiss the murder, and turn it into an issue pitting man and woman against each other.

Misogyny and Misandry, Comparable Concepts?

Not everyone views the murder as a hate crime against women. They refute it by saying misogyny is bad but so is misandry. But are misogyny and misandry phenomena of the same weight? The greatest problem in Korean society is the fact that people don't quite understand what is meant by misogyny (in fact, translating the word misogyny evokes its male version, misandry, thus the popular term used in its stead translates into woman hating.) Hatred of women, the disabled, the sexual minorities, migrant workers, is just one form of discrimination against society's weak. It is the language of the strong. Nonetheless, the intellectual framework that "now is a female dominated time," that "there's no more gender discrimination," that "men are also the victims of violence" makes invisible the relations of power between genders. Without an understanding of gender

discrimination, it is futile to want others to understand or empathize the damage done to women by violence and discrimination.

Surviving in a Sexist Society

Nonetheless, many women know that violence doesn't happen to one particular person. We are also aware that we are more vulnerable to violence than men. In a gender discriminating society, violence against women is a common occurrence. Its common occurrence, deprives us, deprives women of freedom.

When we see a woman, drunk, stumbling late at night, or a man trailing a girl who is simply enjoying herself, unaware we fear the worst. We feel compelled to tell her, "Be careful." But is that the solution? "Being careful" with bated breath doesn't rid us of the dangers lurking in society.

What does it mean to survive in a sexist society? To be life's protagonist, one cannot simply put my survival to chance. The cycle of patriarchy will be severed not through silence or by quietly resolving the problem - as this male centered society demands - but by raising our voices, bequeathing history, remembering, and awakening our fury.

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[Note: The viewpoint expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the International Strategy Center.]

P.S.

* International Strategy Center. June 29, 2016:

<http://iscenter.or.kr/english/2016/06/29/when-women-beat-back-hate-crimes/>