

Challenging Patriarchy: The Resource Mobilization of 4B Movement in South Korea

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Abstract

The 4B movement emerged in South Korea in 2019 as a response to the dominance of patriarchal culture in various aspects of South Korean society. 4B as part of feminism carries 4 main values, namely *bihon* (refusal of marriage), *bichulsan* (refusal of childbirth), *biyona* (refusal of romance), and *bisekseu* (refusal of sexual relationships). These values symbolize the rejection of patriarchal domination and reappoint the degree and role of women in the social, political, and economic life of South Korea. This research discusses how the 4B movement mobilizes its resources to achieve its goals in opposing patriarchal domination in South Korea. Using Bob Edwards and John D. McCarthy's theoretical framework of social movement resources and mobilization, resources consist of moral resources (such as public opinion and support from allies), cultural resources (such as shared values and beliefs), social-organizational resources (such as networks and coalitions), human resources (such as skilled volunteers and leaders), and material resources (such as funding and equipment), the movement was able to achieve significant impact. These resources can be applied using 4 mechanisms, namely aggregation (gathering resources from various sources), self-production (generating resources internally), co-optation/takeover (gaining control over resources belonging to others), and patronage (gaining support from external donors). The findings of this study show that the 4B movement can achieve significant goals by effectively mobilizing diverse resources and using appropriate resource access mechanisms. The 4B movement serves as a model for other social justice movements that want to challenge dominant power structures and create a more just society.

Keywords: 4B movement, patriarchy, South Korea, resource mobilization, social justice

1. Introduction

Misogynistic views in South Korea have been around for a long time, precisely since the Joseon Dynasty (1). In that era, Confucian ideas began to develop in society and have had an impact until now. One of the Confucian ideas related to misogynistic views in South Korean society is the view that purity at home is something good to achieve in a family. Moreover, purity is then directly related to the value of women at home, and purity is the highest value that women can have. When the world entered the 20th century, many Korean women began to pursue higher education. However, for South Korean society in general, these women are considered unattractive because they do not adhere to the "Joseon-ness" and perfect femininity as desired by society (1).

The transformation of the South Korean government system into a democracy in 1987 certainly brought something new to the life of society in South Korea (2). Although ideas about misogyny and patriarchy are still deeply rooted in society, the development of civil society and social movements in South Korea did not stop at the topic of women. Along with the democratization process in 1987, the feminist movement also experienced development among activists in South Korea. In fact, it has now reached the third generation in the feminist movement. One of the key momentums that made this movement even more widespread, some sources say that this is a feminist reboot, was the murder incident in a public toilet located in Seoul by a man. The victim was a young woman who was considered to have ignored the man so she was killed (3). This incident prompted the Gangnam Station Post-it Note protest in 2016. One indicator in seeing the third generation in the feminist movement in South Korea is its target which targets

the micro-power of patriarchal order (2). This is what can also be seen in the 4B Movements, where the Movement targets something micro and is directly related to the patriarchal system that is running in South Korea itself.

The 4B movement in South Korea represents a radical feminist departure from traditional gender roles, marked by rejecting marriage, childbirth, romance, and heterosexual relationships. Recent studies indicate this movement as part of a larger backlash against the country's patriarchal expectations, with young women increasingly pushing back against social pressures to marry and bear children (4,5). This resistance reflects broader feminist activism in Korea, which has gained visibility through digital media platforms, further mobilized by related movements like #iamafeminist on Twitter and #MeToo (6,7).

Picture 1. South Korean Women Attend 4B Movement Protest.



Source: Feminist (8).

Studies emphasize that the 4B movement's focus on self-help and autonomy, especially in economic terms, enables participants to envision a feminist future outside patriarchal structures, positioning it as a form of neoliberal feminism that still resists mainstream cultural expectations (9). Unlike other feminist movements that emphasize policy change, the 4B movement's radical rejection of traditional family roles serves as both a cultural and economic critique, particularly of South Korea's recent pro-natalist policies (10).

This article contributes a novel analysis by exploring how the 4B movement mobilizes diverse resources—moral, cultural, and digital—to sustain its goals. By examining the 4B's approach, especially its digital mobilization strategies, this study aims to fill a gap in understanding how decentralized feminist movements in East Asia can reshape traditional societal structures through resource mobilization and feminist separatism, providing new insights into the evolving feminist landscape in South Korea.

This article is grounded in Edwards and McCarthy's resource mobilization framework, focusing on two essential components: social movement resources and resource access mechanisms. Together, these concepts elaborate how movements mobilize critical assets to challenge and resist dominant power structures within society.

Social movement resources consist of moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material assets, each contributing uniquely to movement sustainability and impact. *Moral resources*, including legitimacy and public endorsement, elevate a movement's credibility by aligning it with broadly recognized societal values, though these resources may be retracted if societal alignment shifts (11).

Cultural resources, which encompass shared beliefs, values, and specialized tactical knowledge, provide movements with a reservoir of adaptable strategies and knowledge, empowering them to mobilize independently and reinforce internal cohesion (p. 126). *Social-organizational resources* are networks and organizational frameworks that facilitate collaboration and resource sharing, allowing movements to mobilize effectively by leveraging existing social structures or forming new ones specific to movement goals (11).

Human resources include the skills, time, and leadership capabilities of individuals within the movement. Effective leadership, in particular, plays a pivotal role in mobilization by guiding strategy and coordinating resources, making human resources foundational for movement efficacy (11). *Material resources*, such as financial assets, physical spaces, and supplies, are essential for sustaining movement operations, and their fungibility provides flexibility, allowing movements to adapt to changing needs and conditions (11).

Resource access mechanisms—aggregation, self-production, co-optation/appropriation, and patronage—are the pathways through which movements gain and sustain their resources. *Aggregation* is the process of gathering dispersed resources from individuals or groups, converting this support into a collective resource base, such as public endorsements or small financial contributions (11). *Self-production* involves generating resources within the movement, including creating cultural symbols, training members, and developing grassroots funding efforts. This mechanism bolsters the movement’s ideological autonomy and internal solidarity (11).

Co-optation and appropriation allow movements to access resources held by other entities; co-optation typically involves collaboration, while appropriation is more subtle, enabling movements to leverage pre-existing networks or resources without direct ownership (11). *Patronage*, the provision of external support from sources like foundations or philanthropists, significantly enhances resource availability. However, this support may come with influence over movement goals or activities, introducing potential constraints (11).

The relationship between resource types and access mechanisms is effectively illustrated in *Table 1. Means of Social Movement and SMO Resource Access and Resource Types*, mapping how the mechanisms of aggregation, self-production, co-optation/appropriation, and patronage provide varied pathways for acquiring moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material resources. This framework offers a comprehensive view of how social movements can utilize diverse resources through flexible access routes to achieve mobilization, resist established power structures, and advocate for societal change (11).

Table 1. Means of Social Movement and SMO Resource Access and Resource Types.

<i>Means of Access</i>	<i>Moral</i>	<i>Cultural</i>	<i>Resource Types Social-Organizational</i>	<i>Human</i>	<i>Material</i>
Aggregation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lists of endorsers • Recruiting celebrity endorsers • Advisory committee members on letterhead • Soliciting statements of support for specific projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social movement schools movement mentoring orgs. • Movement initiated summits and workshops where groups come together to share advice, information, strategy • Working groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building networks • Forming coalitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting constituents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member contributions • Emily’s list • Individual donations from non-members
Self-Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral authority from the effective use of non-violence (e.g., King, Gandhi) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas • Frames • Tactical repertoires • Music • History 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Founding SMOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising and socializing children, • Issue/movement oriented summer camps • Training • Movement Mentors • Women’s, Environmental, or Black studies programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grassroots fund raising events • Creating items for sale at events (T-shirts, posters, CDs, coffee mugs, etc.)

Co-optation/ Appropriation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allying yourself with a well-respected group Hiring grassroots supporters to lobby officeholders Company unions Listing links to prominent, well respected groups on your webpage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing links on your webpage to materials produced by someone else Links to someone else's webpage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruiting local affiliates from existing organizations Gaining access to congregations for solicitation mesomobilization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Networked recruitment Acquiring a mailing list Organizational members Bloc recruitment Drawing on members of coalition partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office space Buses
Patronage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A widely respected person or organization recognizing a group or activist in order to call positive attention to their work Human rights awards Nobel Pax Prize An audience with the Pope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excellence awards aimed at competence or effectiveness Accreditation of fiscal procedures to enhance confidence of supporters and donors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being loaned the mailing lists and telephone lists of sympathetic individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing staff Providing technical assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start-up grants Large donations Foundation grants Government grants Service contracts Corporate sponsorship

Source: Edwards & McCarthy (11).

2. Method

This qualitative study utilizes library research to examine the 4B movement in South Korea. Guided by UNESCO's *Guidelines for Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education and Research*, the use of Generative AI in this research adheres to ethical and academic integrity standards (12). Researchers are required to have a well-rounded understanding of their subject and to hone skills in information verification, including accurately identifying sources and avoiding non-existent citations. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia adopted these guidelines in October 2024, emphasizing rigor in methodological approaches. ChatGPT was employed to assist with tasks such as paraphrasing, language translation, and organizing findings for the literature review. AI support was restricted to language processing and ensuring clarity and efficiency in data handling, consistent with these guidelines (13).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Resources of 4B Movement

3.1.1. Moral Resources

Moral Resources arise from the existence of legitimacy, solidarity support and perhaps celebrity involvement in it. In a social movement, legitimacy is important because if the idea is only floating without being recognized by the community, there may be no similarity of views between activists and the targeted community. In the process, the legitimacy gained by the 4B Movements emerged when the South Korean government announced that their country in 2024 experienced the lowest fertility rate (14). However, according to the author, there are still not many moral resources obtained by the 4B Movements in South Korea itself; In fact, lately there have been a lot of statements related to the 4B Movements from the people of the United States after Donald Trump won the presidential election for the second time.

3.1.2 Cultural Resources

Cultural resources are obtained from how a movement has the basis of beliefs, values and can be applied into a deliberate tactic. Cultural resources themselves are a fairly important aspect in a Movement; It can be said that this is the life of the Movement. This is also directly related to how a movement can encourage tactics to match the resources they have. In the 4B Movements, the cultural resources shown are the attitude of the women who follow the 4B Movements by doing the exact opposite of the usual conditions: going out without make-up and cutting their hair very short (3). As Edwards & McCharty writes,

the emphasis on cultural resources is one of the collective identities obtained from this movement. Young Korean feminists also seen as entity who actively challenge patriarchy (4). Women in this movement do things by themselves. They see self-help as the way to resolve the problem of keeping women in an economically precarious and dependent position (4).

3.1.3. Social-organizational, Human and Material Resources

In terms of social-organizational resources, 4B Movements is one of the social movements that has a tendency towards swarming and un-leader in its structure. This is also directly related to those who mostly echo their activities anonymously on internet forums (3). Almost the same as social-organizational resources, human resources and material resources also tend not to be found in 4B Movements. Human resources, for example, are related to leadership skills so that they are able to provide the right strategy for mobilization. Many members or followers of 4B themselves keep their identities secret; there is a story of a female member of 4B, with a short haircut, being verbally humiliated by the owner of a restaurant she visited. This condition may have encouraged them to choose anonymity. However, members of 4B Movements have reached around 50,000 people (15). For material resources, many of those who participate in the 4B Movements are still in their 20s, so they do not yet have stable jobs to support this Movement on their own (4).

3.2. Mechanisms of 4B Movement

3.2.1. Aggregation

Aggregation is a mechanism carried out by individuals related to action, then it can be done in groups. 4B Movements began with protests carried out online via the Twitter platform in the period 2017-2018 (16). Although on average they choose to use anonymous identities, the collective identity and ideas brought by this Movement are not difficult to do. Of course, this is related to domestic conditions in South Korea which are no longer safe for women. In succession, cases of gender-based violence have occurred such as murder in public toilets and molkas. The solidarity of women in the 4B Movements certainly does not need to be doubted. Without any coercive instructions; surely, because this is a social movement, those who feel part of 4B take collective actions that reflect the 4B they are working on.

3.2.2 Self Production

Self-production involves the ability of the Movement to utilize the resources it has. Then, from these resources a collective activity is formed. Almost the same as aggregation, self-production also emphasizes the collective products produced by the Movement, such as repertoire, campaigns and so on. In 4B Movements, although the resources that can be obtained tend to be limited to moral and cultural, self-production is not impossible. By using a collective identity, the identity of rejection listed in 4B is a picture of self-production that has been successfully carried out.

3.2.3 Co-optation and Appropriation

Co-optation/appropriation is a form of collaboration with other entities. This mechanism encourages assistance from social movements or perhaps NGOs that have the same goals. In 4B Movements, it might be more appropriate if there was co-optation with movements that occurred before or after. Especially movements related to third wave feminism in South Korea. These movements include Escape the Corset in 2016, #MeToo Movement in 2017 (3). These movements provide leverage related to the goals that 4B Movements themselves want to achieve.

3.2.4 Patronage

Patronage is a mechanism that involves support from a stronger external party. The tendency of patronage is in philanthropists or even the government itself. In the process, patronage seems to encourage the Movement to adjust to the sponsor. In the 4B Movements, the author sees that the

patronage mechanism is not carried out. This is related to the position of the 4B Movements which is very contrary to the dynamics in South Korea itself. In fact, Lee Junseok, the leader of the People Power Party, said that radical feminism is as toxic as terrorism. Lee's statement refers to the 4B Movements which are seen as very radical and extreme in fighting the patriarchal culture that has existed in South Korea since the Joseon Dynasty (17).

3.3 Means of Social Movement: 4B Movements

Referring to table (1), it can be seen how 4B Movements can then carry out a more appropriate strategy with the resources they have. Of the 20 possible strategies or steps that can be used, according to the author there are at least 6 possibilities that can be developed by 4B Movements as a social movement in South Korea.

3.3.1. Aggregation–Moral Resources

In the strategies that can appear in this section, the author sees that the main strength of 4B Movements is the strong solidarity of women who see that the condition of this world is no longer safe for them. In general, 4B Movements has created an online community to create a massive idea that they want. In order to be more targeted, obviously recruiting celebrities for endorsements would be more appropriate. This tactic will also align with efforts to establish a strong public presence through posts or flyers distributed to gain support from the public or other movements/entities.

3.3.2. Aggregation-Cultural Resources

This strategy will emphasize communities that can be formed sustainably and targeted. If we look at the movements that have been carried out, the basis is almost always online communities such as Twitter and KakaoTalk as a medium to connect them. Some may be able to form groups, but not regularly like working groups or mentoring. As conveyed by Sussman, when he met one of the activists, there was actually a group that discussed ideas and had the same identity. However, it would be more focused if they formed mentoring for sharing and making their collective identity more inclusive.

3.3.3. Self-Production–Moral Resources

This strategy tends to choose figures that are in accordance with the moral authority that they want to show. Of course, choosing figures to be role models is not just choosing so that it becomes a backlash. In line with the aggregation mechanism, choosing celebrities who are in line with feminist ideas will provide a lot of help related to the strategies and tactics that the 4B Movements want to take.

3.3.4. Self-Production–Cultural Resources

Similar to the strategy mentioned above, cultural resources, which are often shaped through processes, can be effectively utilized through symbols and collective identities. If the 4B movement continues to operate online, the creation of pamphlets, posts, or forums that are regularly updated and adhere to principles of non-violence can significantly contribute to achieving the goals of this movement. Furthermore, offline activities conducted under principles of non-violence will further accelerate the achievement of these goals.

3.3.5. Co-optation–Moral Resources

The use of company unions can be considered to mobilize previously formed ideas. If using online media, of course linking links to each other on each board will be very effective in spreading ideas or goals that a movement wants to achieve. 4B Movements itself has succeeded in getting a place in the national feminist Movement, that is the opportunity that can be taken to create collaboration. Moreover, their goals are almost the same. It remains the ability of 4B Movements to network with grass-roots or perhaps fellow social movements to lobby the government.

3.3.6. Co-optation—Cultural Resources

Similar to moral resources, utilizing cultural resources involves leveraging a collective identity that has been developed collaboratively. This collective identity can then be disseminated through partners or organizations that share the same goals as the 4B movement. For example, the identity and resources of the Me Too movement can be used as a tool to advance their objectives. Additionally, emphasizing openness allows individuals or groups who may not fully align with the 4B movement to still contribute input or create an impact. This approach can provide significant leverage for the 4B movement.

4. Conclusion

The 4B movement in South Korea mobilizes resources to challenge patriarchal norms by rejecting traditional roles of marriage, childbirth, romance, and heterosexual relationships. Leveraging Edwards and McCarthy's framework, the study highlights the movement's effective use of moral resources (such as public legitimacy) and cultural resources (shared feminist ideals) to form a collective identity. Despite limited human and material resources, participants utilize online platforms for anonymous mobilization, gaining support among young Korean women.

The study demonstrates that decentralized feminist movements can gain traction even with limited traditional resources by employing digital tools and shared cultural narratives. The 4B movement's approach illustrates how online activism can foster solidarity and mobilize women toward autonomy, providing insights for similar movements across East Asia. This movement even got more searched and inspired many new followers from the US after Trump won the election.

The main limitation of the movement is its limited access to stable human and financial resources, as many members are young and financially dependent. This lack of resources restricts the movement's operational sustainability and reduces its capacity to engage in larger societal or policy-level changes. Additionally, the movement's radical stance may alienate potential allies, limiting its broader societal impact. Korean society is still highly sensitive and resistant to the 'new norms' of the 4B Movement; therefore, many participants keep their identities anonymous. Therefore, the mobilization of social-organizational resources remains difficult to achieve.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of the 4B movement on South Korean gender dynamics and the potential for policy influence. Studies could examine how other feminist movements might replicate the 4B model of digital mobilization and resource use, particularly in contexts with limited support structures. Additionally, exploring potential alliances with local and international feminist organizations could offer insights into sustaining resource-poor movements. Further research is needed to investigate the movement's impact on societal views toward gender roles, as well as its adaptability and influence beyond South Korea's borders.

5. Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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