

## BOMI SO

[Prologue]

May 2018, I still remember the historical moment in Ireland: the repeal of the eighth amendment which previously denied the state the right to legislate access to abortion. Many activists, feminists, and women all over the world celebrated the day of decriminalizing abortion in Ireland. At the centre of this movement, there was a migrant Asian woman - Savita Halappanavar. She had lost her life in hospital when a lifesaving abortion was refused by the hospital management. This migrant woman's tragic story encouraged and fueled the referendum movement in Ireland. While being a witness to this progress in women's rights in Ireland, I couldn't stop thinking about this migrant woman, and how her death brought us to social change in Irish society.

May 2016, two years before I observed this historical moment in Ireland, another tragic story involving a woman's death encouraged and fueled a feminist movement in South Korea. A Korean woman was killed in a public toilet in the 'Gangnam district'. The murderer randomly selected his target, but he purposely selected a woman. This devastating story is called the 'Gangnam Station femicide'. While people globally associate Gangnam with PSY's famous song 'Gangnam style', women in South Korea associate this district with a place of sorrow and grief. This tragic story encouraged many young women in Korea to open up discourse about feminism.

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These two tragic stories affect my life deeply and they make me reflect on my life as a woman, as a South Korean, and as a migrant. I was born in South Korea, and, in my early 20s, I relocated at Ireland. I grew up in South Korea where sexism is deeply rooted in everyday life. During my childhood, female foeticide was still common, and as a result, at school, my class always had fewer girls than boys. It is also a county where only 19% of politicians are women.

When I moved to Ireland, I faced another hardship related to my gender and ethnicity. I have been often treated as the 'lucky girl' who met a white Irishman. People tend to ask 'what does my husband do? Is he Irish?' but they barely asks about my career or degree. This is the conversation experience of many Asian women. A common stereotype that people get from the TV is represented by the statement, 'my neighbour who is a housewife came from Asia'. Since relocating to Ireland, inappropriate comments, cat whistling and minor sexual intimidation are always following me, online and offline. As a young woman, these experiences are even more difficult in some senses. There are many episodes in my life that add to this particular 'experience' but my experience is not personal, it is not about a few 'unlucky incidents' that happened to me. There are countless episodes in other Asian women's lives across Ireland and all over the world. After the 2021 shooting in Atlanta, US, where six Asian women were shot dead by a man who claimed Asian women trigger his sex addiction, I learned that scholars call this viewing of Asian women as 'hyper sexualisation'.

Some people may question, then, why I am still living in here despite all of that hardship? My answer is simple. I look forward, not behind. I do not look for the reason as to 'why' I want to stay, rather I seek for 'how' I am going to live here from now on. This is what I've learned from my grandmother and mother who first experienced the Korean War, then the post-conflict time and dictatorship throughout their lifetime. Now my grandmother has passed away, but 'Covid-19' is another chapter of experience for my mum. Like my mother and grandmother, the majority of Korean women in their generation lived in the most dynamic and challenging times. Those historical events seem like chapter titles from a history book, but these events have all happened within 70 years, throughout their life. The dictatorship had just ended when I was 1 year old. However, despite those challenging

times, my mother and grandmother studied, worked, and dreamed of a better life for their family and for their kids. Their lives teach me about resilience, positive mindset, and about being a strong woman who looks into the future and doing better for herself.

In Ireland, on the other hand, there are also women who inspired me and supported me to learn how to live for tomorrow. My mother-in-law, Donna, and her life, teach me how you can confidently stand on your own feet. She is a strong Derry woman who grew up in middle of conflict in Northern Ireland. In some ways, she seems like one of the characters in 'Derry Girls', strong but always looking to have some craic. However, she is also an admirable woman who always looked after neighbours, friends, and others in her community, throughout the post-conflict time in Derry. From her life, I've learned a lot about how to stay strong, regardless of the vulnerability that my gender and colour bring. I've learned the importance of laughing with loved ones, keeping a sense of humour. Her life proved to me how valuable it is not to lose my dignity and to laugh when I am going through the most difficult challenges in my life. I also know that there are many women on the island of Ireland who have been through hardship but did not lose the craic in their daily lives. Looking up to both Korean and Irish women helps me to stay strong and stay with joy.

While I have been exploring all my hardships as an Asian woman, I started looking around and seeing people around me. I opened my eyes and saw others. This moment brought me to understand other people's hardship. I am a minority woman but at the same time, I recognise my privilege in some other aspects. It makes me think about how I could be an ally and support others in community to make our together life better. My university teacher told me that many feminist and human rights activists define this feeling as 'Solidarity'. Using my background, I started to be a community leader. I support the Asian community, and the North Korean refugees' resettlement in Ireland. I am also a part of a network of migrant women, as we work to be a support to each other. Beyond looking forward, I start looking around. I have learned that "Together, it makes us better and makes me happier".