



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW,
GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNICATION
(IJLGC)
www.ijlgc.com



WOMEN'S WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION IN KIM JIYOUNG: BORN IN 1982 NOVEL

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 30.06.2025

Revised date: 17.07.2025

Accepted date: 04.08.2025

Published date: 11.09.2025

To cite this document:

Wan Adlan, W. H. I., & Osman, N. (2025). Women's Workplace Discrimination in Kim Jiyoung: Born In 1982 Novel. *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 10 (41), 351-363.

DOI: 10.35631/IJLGC.1041023

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Abstract:

The presence of women in the workforce does not automatically liken to equal treatment or opportunities, as deep-seated biases and discriminatory practices continued to hinder equality. Women voices and other marginalised groups, such as people of colour and disabled people are often being overlooked as they struggle in professional settings to gain social justice and equality. Thus, it is pertinent to raise awareness about gender inequality, power dynamics, and women's experiences in organisational workplaces. Using *Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982* by Cho Nam-Joo, a novel that has received international recognition for its close depiction of women's daily struggles in South Korea, the study examined gender oppression, demonstrating how cultural expectations and institutional practices restrict opportunities for women and support gender inequalities. The purpose of the study is to examine women's discriminations experienced by the main character, Kim Jiyoung, and other women in the novel and highlighting the urgency of examining the issue through a scholarly lens to address the gender differences that persists in present professional environments. A content analysis was applied to comprehensively explore the gender discrimination themes in the novel. The finding revealed that women discriminations at workplace were illustrated in ten (10) themes based on key feminist principles. The study indicated that workplace policies and cultures often fail to support women, particularly those balancing professional and caregiving responsibilities. The study called for implementation of gender-inclusive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, equitable pay structures, and mentorship programs, to create a more supportive and equitable work environment.

Keywords:

Content Analysis, Feminist Principles, Gender Inequality, Workplace, *Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982*

Introduction

Women have been involved in the workforce for more than six decades; however organisational structures still have embedded patriarchal structure that strengthen gender hierarchies (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Women stay under-represented in leadership roles and wages between the two genders remain at a substantial gap; inclusivity for women in the workplace does not eliminate the biased view and treatment women often goes through (Hodgins et al., 2022; Kräfft, 2022; Padavic et al., 2019). One of the countries that display this phenomenon vividly is South Korea. Its long hour work culture limits childcare provision and deeply rooted Confucian beliefs burden women with dual burden (Kim et al., 2018). This restricts the career progression of women, as an employee and a caregiver, alongside reinforcing wage gap (Sabitkyzy, 2023).

Kim Jiyoung: Born in 1982 novel by Kim Nam-Joo highlights these institutional tensions within a single life's story. Through the main protagonist's experience working in a marketing firm, the novel portrays everyday sexism: microaggression, delayed promotions and subtle prejudice for motherhood that echo empirical studies of Korean workplace and their treatment towards working women (Wang, 2024). The novel's international success, which gained a film adaption in 2019, attests to its resonance as both cultural artefact and feminist case study (Bae, 2024; Park, 2020).

The novel has received praise by scholars for exposing systemic sexism (Feng & Talif, 2021; Hussein, 2023), yet most study analysis treat the novel holistically or focus on psychological consequences without scrutinising the organisational mechanisms at the workplace. Studies such as those by Arofah and Mustofa (2022) read the narratives in its entirety, while Hastuti and colleagues (2024) highlighted on mental-health impacts on women who experienced similar situations. Consequently, there is a gap in support within the organisational workplace and the persistent patriarchal powers that remain unsupported. To address this gap, the present article integrates Kanter's (1977) seminal insights on gender and organisational workplace with Meagher (2019) contemporary feminist theory to examine the novel's workplace discriminations as representative of broader gender dynamics discussion.

The objectives of the study are; (1) to identify the number of scenarios within the novel where contemporary feminist principles are depicted or challenged in the context of organisational workplace and 2) to examine women workplace discriminations' portrayal in the novel. By mapping narrative evidence onto feminist organisational theory, the study clarifies the everyday mechanisms that normalise discrimination, and the points at which they can be resisted, offering actionable insights for scholars, policymakers and HR professionals committed to building equitable workplaces. Literature often reflects values, beliefs, and social problems of the time it was written, thus, insights into how issues such as racism, sexism, or prejudices could be revealed and portrayed.

Literature Review

There are four topics that will be discussed in the literature review.

Women Discriminations in Workplace

Global efforts have been done to improve equality in organisational workplace, but gender discrimination remains deeply ingrained. Numerous studies have demonstrated the persistence of disparities between men and women in professional environments, including wage gaps,

underrepresentation in leadership roles, and limited access to opportunities (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Bertrand et al., 2010; Turesky & Warner, 2020). The gender pay gap has been a pressing issue, with women earning far less than men despite doing equivalent work (Toczek et al., 2021). Reportedly by Elise Gould (2024), women are paid an estimated 22% less than men on average in 2023. This is a result of occupational segregation in which women's work is devalued, degrading societal norms, and gender discrimination. Similarly, the "glass ceiling" effect prevents many women from advancing not executive roles, despite having the qualifications (Abbas et al., 2021). As a result, there is an imbalance in leadership representation, where women would remain a minority in top levels of organisational structures.

Gender bias is the preferential treatment against individuals based on their gender and affects women in the workplace in promotion decisions, performance evaluations, and job assignments. Women are frequently perceived less competent or less committed than men, particularly in high-pressure or leadership roles (Ryan, 2022). Additionally, there is a tendency for women to face occupational segregation, whereupon women are to be given roles concentrating with caregiving or administrative support. These roles are often undervalued and offer limited career progression opportunities (Holbrow, 2022). Patterns like these sustain stereotypes and diminish access to meaningful career development for women. Moreover, the lack of women in leadership roles decreases junior female employees of mentorship and representation, which further hinders progression and belonging in the workplace (Shava & Chasokela, 2020; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982 and Previous Studies

Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982, written by Cho Nam-Joo, was published in 2016 and offers a insightful portrayal of the challenges South Korean women faces due to systemic gender inequality. The narrative centres the life of Kim Jiyoung, a woman whose psychological breakdown is portrayed through dissociative behaviour. Kim Jiyoung impersonated various women in her life, including her mother and deceased friend where she relived their thoughts and moments facing gender discrimination. These episodes symbolise her internalisation of other women's struggles and her own inability to escape the oppressive societal structures. The structure of the novel follows through four major phases of Kim Jiyoung's life: childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and marriage, each of which exposing the subtle and overt ways patriarchal norms influence her life and identity.

Jiyoung was made aware of her lower status in comparison to her brother from an early age. This reflects generational patriarchy within the family where the sons are perceived more favourably than daughters. During her adolescence, she experienced sexual harassment and was implicitly held responsible for it, reinforcing society's tendency to control and silence women. These early experiences cultivate her compliance and inner strength, which continue to influence her interactions as an adult. When Jiyoung entered the workforce, she is frequently overlooked for promotions in favour of male colleagues despite her comparable qualifications. Her experiences are met with apathy from management, underscoring how women's issues are often dismissed or minimized in professional settings (Chung et al., 2021).

Once Jiyoung gets married, the pressure of gender expectations increases. She resigns from her job to take care of her child, a choice influenced more by societal norms than personal preference. Although her husband is understanding, he still upholds traditional values by urging

her to focus on motherhood rather than her aspirations. This shift results in a diminished sense of self and leads to her eventual mental health crisis, illustrating how deeply ingrained societal roles can undermine women's independence and well-being. The novel distinctly associates the decline in mental health with ongoing instances of gender-based discrimination (Istiqamah & Abdullah, 2022).

Through Jiyoung's narrative, Cho examines not only the overt forms of sexism but also the subtle, often unrecognized pressures that women endure throughout various stages of life. The character acts as a medium for a more extensive commentary on how institutions, families, and cultural standards perpetuate a system that disadvantages women. As Muştak (2023) observes, Jiyoung's encounters highlight the pressing need for systemic reform and improved protection for women in both home and work environments. The novel's worldwide significance lies in its capacity to reveal how personal challenges are influenced by structural inequalities, rendering it a compelling feminist work relevant beyond the context of South Korea.

The following table illustrates previous studies that have highlighted the novel's significance in the literary world.

Table 1: Previous Studies

Author (s)	Title	The Study
Lestari and Baruna (2023)	Patriarchy behind <i>Kim Ji-young, born 1982</i> : a biographical approach.	Used descriptive-content analysis to the structures of the patriarchal culture experienced by Kim Ji-Young and their impacts on her life.
Lahsen et al. (2023)	The role of gender inequality in the overeducation and life satisfaction relationship: an empirical analysis using panel data from Korea.	Highlighted that Cho Nam-Joo used Kim Ji-Young as a symbolic representation of all South Korean women, better educated but underutilised.
Hussein (2023)	Discriminatory gender roles and the objectification of women in Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982.	Analysed the book from a feminist perspective, the study shed light on the oppressive gender roles and patriarchal misogyny in South Korea
Arofah and Mustofa (2022).	Symbolic violence against women in Cho Nam Joo's <i>Kim Ji Young born 1982</i> .	Explored symbolic violence in the novel, concluding that patriarchy and covert violence are tools used by dominant groups to maintain power and social hierarchy.
Yang (2021)	Possession by devil: women's alternative language; a feminist reading of <i>Kim Ji-young, born 1982</i>	Analysed the "possession by the devil" motif as a symbol for women's imprisonment and madness under the patriarchal system.
Andini et al. (2022)	Patriarchy behind <i>Kim Ji-Young, born 1982</i> : a biographical approach	Mentioned workplace discrimination faced by Kim Ji-young but mainly focused on the

		overall patriarchal structure shaping her life.
Hastuti et al. (2024)	Radical Feminism Analysis in the novel <i>Kim Ji Young, born 1982</i> .	Applied a radical feminist perspective to examine societal limitations in the novel and their effects on women’s mental health and well-being; noted the lack of focus on organisational workplace impacts.

The studies show that there is limited research focusing specifically on organisational contexts in the novel and their relationship to contemporary feminist theories. The gap in these studies highlights the importance of analysing workplace dynamics in the novel to understand broader issues of gender inequality.

Kanter’s Men and Women of the Corporation

Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s seminal work *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977) remains to be essential in analysing structural gender inequality. Her concept of "tokenism" describes how women, as a minority in predominantly male settings, experience heightened scrutiny, isolation, and pressure regarding their performance. She also pointed out that workplace systems perpetuate conventional gender roles, such as the assumption that women should hold secretarial positions or serve as supportive "corporate wives" outside the official organisational hierarchy. Women in senior organisational roles often had to modify their behaviours and exhibit both masculine and feminine traits that align with their roles to demonstrate their value in the position, a necessary step to counteract the stereotypical views and gain acceptance from the organisational leadership (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). Such practices entrench inequality and perpetuate gender norms that constrain women's professional identities and career opportunities (Kleinert et al., 2023).

Meagher’s Feminist Principles

Contemporary feminist theory has evolved from the original feminist framework and is examined through its development from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century. According to Meagher (2019), contemporary feminist theory encompasses advocating not only for women's rights but also for individuals of diverse races, religions, and various socio-economic backgrounds. Michelle Meagher’s (2019) exploration of contemporary feminism outlines ten key principles: gender roles, gender stereotyping, microaggressions, systemic institutional bias, equal pay, career advancement, feminist empowerment, resistance, patriarchal norms, and support systems, which serve as the analytical framework for this dissertation. These principles are detailed in table 2.

Table 2: Contemporary Feminist Principles

Principles	Description
Gender Roles	Instances where traditional gender roles and expectations are portrayed or challenged.
Gender Stereotyping	Situations where characters are subjected to stereotypes based on their gender.
Microaggressions	Subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory comments or behaviours directed at women.

Systemic Institutional Bias	Structural and institutional practices that disadvantage women
Equal Pay and Compensation	Issues related to gender pay gap and unequal financial compensation for the same roles.
Career Progression	Barriers to career advancement faced by women due to gender biases.
Feminist Empowerment	Moments where feminist principles and empowerment are depicted or advocated.
Resistance	Acts of resistance against patriarchal structures and gender discrimination.
Patriarchal Norms	Instances where societal or cultural patriarchal norms are depicted.
Support Systems	Depictions of support systems that help counteract workplace discrimination

Source: Meagher (2019)

Methodology

The current study adopted a content analysis as an approach to studying the novel. It allows researchers to uncover patterns, themes, biases, and meanings. This method requires categorising the text into easily understandable content groups, which are then examined to gain insight into the context surrounding contemporary feminist theory and gender dynamics in the workplace. This content analysis design is ideal for the study as it provides a comprehensive exploration of gender discrimination themes in the novel (Priya, 2021). By focusing on the chosen text, the researcher can extract and categorise relevant data which can elaborate on broader surveys or experimental studies (Naeem et al., 2023).

The study used purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling strategy used in research in which the researcher picks participants or materials based on certain criteria. The workplace scenarios in *Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982* were chosen for as source of data. Not only the main protagonist's related scenarios were picked, but also the scenarios of other women involved in workplace discriminations to add as further evidence.

The data collection involved identifying relevant excerpts from *Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982*. The novel spans approximately 192 pages, with key sections related to Jiyoung's workplace experiences extracted for their thematic alignment with the research focus. The selection process was directed by specific areas: only passages illustrating workplace gender dynamics, such as systemic institutional bias, microaggression, equal pay gap, and gender roles were taken. A coding scheme were created to categorize the data into topics or concepts which were related to Meagher's feminist principles. Each principle was labelled with a code (e.g., GDR for Gender Roles), along with the description, page and paragraph number. It allowed for efficient cross-referencing between the novel's scenarios and the corresponding feminist principles. A few are illustrated in the following table.

Table 3: Coding Scheme

Code	Principles	Description	Page / Paragraph number
GDR	Gender Roles	Instances where traditional gender roles and expectations are portrayed or challenged.	Page 55, paragraph 2 Page 62, paragraph 5
GSD	Gender Stereotyping	Situations where characters are subjected to stereotypes based on their gender.	Page 59, paragraph 1
MGR	Microaggressions	Subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory comments or behaviours directed at women	Page 47, paragraph 1 Page 50, paragraph 5
EGP	Equal Pay and Compensation	Issues related to gender pay gap and unequal financial compensation for the same roles.	Page 48, paragraph 6 Page 63, paragraph 2
FEM	Feminist Empowerment	Moments where feminist principles and empowerment are depicted or advocated.	Page 56, paragraph 5

For the data analysis, the themes that are related to contemporary feminism principles in the organisational workplace were identified. Then they were arranged based on the frequency of workplace discrimination. To achieve the first research objective, the data were categorized quantitatively to measure the occurrence of various emerging themes embedded in the novel. Subsequently, a few selected data were analysed through Kanter's (1977) *Men and Women in Corporation* lenses to achieve the second research objective. A study by Holbrow (2022) also used Kanter's theoretical framework on the role of women in the corporation along with the gender dynamics at play.

Findings and Discussion

The first research objective is to identify the number of scenarios within the novel where contemporary feminist principles are depicted or challenged in the context of organisational workplace. The identified key principles were derived from Michelle Meagher's chapter on contemporary feminist theory.

Table 2: Principles and Frequency of Occurrence

Contemporary Feminist Theory Principles	Frequency
Systemic Institutional Bias	8
Gender Roles	2
Unequal Pay Gap	2
Microaggressions	2
Patriarchal Norms	2
Gender Stereotyping	2
Career Progression	1
Feminist Empowerment	1
Resistance	1
Support System	1

The table illustrates the frequency of each principles' occurrence in the novel. The most prominent principle is systemic institutional bias, which occurred eight times, indicates that this principle is the main focus in the novel. This suggests that the narrative heavily addresses

the pervasive and often invisible biases embedded within workplace organisations. Principles such as gender roles, unequal pay gap, microaggressions, patriarchal norms, and gender stereotyping appear twice. This shows that these issues are also significant but receive less attention compared to systemic institutional bias. These principles on the whole stress the various ways in which societal norms and practices lead to gender inequality, even though they are not as dominant in the novel. Principles like career progression, feminist empowerment, resistance, and support system occur only once, which shows that they are a major central point in the novel. This distribution of principles offers insight into the novel's emphasis on structural and institutional issues over individual experiences or empowerment narratives.

The second research objective is to examine women workplace discriminations' portrayal in the novel. The portrayals were explained through concepts of workplace dynamic as laid out in Kanter's *Men and Women in Cooperation* (1977). Five of them will be highlighted further below.

Systemic Institutional Bias

From the collected data, it can be seen that there is a recruitment bias against women where male students are recommended for job opportunities through informal recruitment channels, while female students are excluded;

“According to Hyejin, business management departments sometimes get unofficial recruitment requests either through the department office itself or individual professors, but only male students are recommended. The process was kept so carefully under the radar that it was difficult to ascertain exactly who was recommended to which company for what reason and if the college recommended only male students or if the company asked specifically for men” (page 47, paragraph 6).

According to Kanter (1977), the systemic bias found present in the novel aligns with the concept of structural determinants of behaviour in organisations. This phenomenon often reinforces patriarchal norms and is deeply rooted in organisation cultures, policies, and power dynamics. As a result, it is difficult for women to progress or be treated as equal to their male counterparts (Ridzuan et al., 2024).

Gender Roles

Women in organisations are often placed in such roles to the perception that they are naturally suited for them (Kanter, 1977). Thus, limiting their ability to participate in more meaningful, career-advancing tasks. This type of role encapsulation traps women in subordinate positions, reinforcing their lower status and hindering their career progression. This can be seen in the following excerpt;

Jiyoung made everyone in her team coffee every morning according to each member's taste, set the table every time they went out to eat, went around with a notepad and took everyone's request when they had to order in takeaways, and cleared their dishes when they were done (page 55, paragraph 2).

This scenario reflects role encapsulation where Jiyoung's role in the office has been reduced to stereotypically feminine tasks such as caregiving and hospitality. From Kanter's handbook, gender roles are said to be deeply rooted in societal norms and expectations. Men and women

are often assigned tasks, responsibilities, and career paths based on their gender. However, Kanter argues that gender roles in the workplace are not inherent but are structurally imposed by systems that favour men in power. The system confines women by making them feel powerless, denying opportunities, and imposing social roles that limit their achievement and reinforce women's subordinate status (Narayan, 2023).

Unequal Pay Gap

In the novel, Jiyoung discovered the unequal gender pay gap when she learned that her male colleagues are paid more from the beginning, even though they were hired at the same time as her;

She also learned that the guys were paid better from the very start, but that information stirred very little in Jiyoung, who'd filled the day's quota of shock and disappointment (page 63, paragraph 2).

This served as an example of opportunity and role encapsulation concepts drawn by Kanter. He suggested that in many organisations, women are offered lower starting salaries because of gendered assumptions about their competence and long-term career commitment. Women like Jiyoung are often given roles perceived as less valuable, which is reflected in the discrepancy of their pay. The fact that Jiyoung's male colleagues received higher salaries from the beginning illustrated how opportunity denial can operate at the earliest stages of women's careers. These disparities are not merely the result of individual bias but are embedded within the structural processes of organisations, where men are automatically seen as more deserving of higher pay (Kanter, 1977).

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are described as subtle, discriminatory comments or behaviours directed at individuals based on their gender, race, or other marginalised identity (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). In the workplace, gender-based microaggressions are common and serve to support gender hierarchies, making women feel inferior.

"Companies find smart women taxing. Like now—you're being very taxing, you know?" (page 47, paragraph 1).

The discriminatory comments from Jiyoung's colleague are a scenario where microaggression takes place in the novel. He commented "Smart women are taxing," implying that women who display intelligence or assertiveness are a burden, reinforcing the expectation that women should be compliant or supportive. Kanter reveals that women in male-dominated workplaces are often over-scrutinised due to their viability as tokens, and any deviation from gendered expectations is met with resistance in the form of microaggressions. In this case, Jiyoung's competence is framed as a problem, not an asset, which discourages her from asserting herself and reinforced her marginalised status.

Patriarchal Norms

The novel portrays patriarchal norms in the form of workplace task assignments where, at the time newly appointed, Jiyoung is assigned to a routine task of analysing news articles and creating reports;

It was the team newbie's responsibility to go through news articles each morning, find everything related to the company's marketing clients, do a simple analysis and turn in a report (page 55, paragraph 2).

These tasks are often considered a lower-status, administrative duty that are not within Jiyoung's job scope. She was assigned the job just because she was a new worker in the company. This reflects patriarchal norms in the workplace, where women are expected to take on less visible, lower-impact tasks, while men are more likely to be given assignments that could help advance their careers. The responsibility assigned to the team's new colleague, if applied to Jiyoung, aligns with the cultural reinforcement of gender roles. Patriarchal workplace cultures often assign women the role of information gatherer or administrative work, which represent traditional caregiving and support roles expected of women at home. This puts women into lower-status roles, which reinforces structural discrimination in the workplace (Kanter, 1977). This scenario mirrors the way patriarchal norms operate to reinforce gendered partitions of labour within organisations.

The findings highlighted the novel's role in exposing workplace injustices while reinforcing the ongoing challenges faced by women in professional settings. The study confirmed that the novel serves as both a reflection and critique of systemic gender discrimination in the workplace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has achieved the two research objectives. The analysis of the portrayal of women in *Kim Jiyoung: Born 1982* proved that women's experience in the workplace is shaped by the principles and norms that perpetuate discrimination and limit opportunities for career advancement. The study adopted Michelle Meagher's (2019) contemporary feminist theory and Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) *Men and Women in Corporation* as the framework. They proved to be a reliable source to examine the ill-treatment of women in organisational workplace. The novel shows how women are frequently treated unequally in the workplace, facing challenges such as biased hiring practices and lack of support for career growth. Despite their efforts and capabilities, women like Kim Jiyoung often struggle to gain recognition for their work due to gender stereotypes, societal pressure and traditional caregiving roles. The study contributed to a broader feminist discourse by demonstrating how literature can serve as a tool for reflecting and addressing real-world issues of gender discriminations in the workplace. Indirectly, it called for implementation of gender-inclusive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, equitable pay structures, and mentorship programs, to create a more supportive and equitable work environment. It is recommended that future studies focus on other intersecting identities, such as race, class, and sexuality and how they influence women's experiences. It would provide a more inclusive understanding of the problems faced by marginalised groups in workplace settings.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge and extended special gratitude to Universiti Teknologi MARA for providing research moral support.

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