

Women's Clothing and Social Participation

Lee Seunghee

Associate Prof. Dept of Clothing & Textiles, Sookmyung Womens' Univ.

Abstract

The purposes of this study were to examine the relationships between women's social status, social participation, freedom, and clothing, and the manner in which women's clothing affected women's freedom and social participation through the centuries. The stimuli for the study were six images that were used to ask about women's perception of clothing and their social participation. The analysis of the study was used to provide descriptive statistics, frequencies, and Independent sample t-test. The study participants were 268 female college students from a central university in Korea. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 33 years, with a mean age of 20.93. Ninety-seven percent of the participants said they usually or always were influenced emotionally, psychologically and in terms of external factors by what they wear. Approximately 60% of the women answered that women were limited to social participation by what they wear. These study results indicated that clothing for women did not just function to cover the body, but was also used as a tool to restrict women's behavior, social role, gender discrimination, and social participation.

Key Words : social participation, gender role, role of clothing

I. Introduction

"How women's clothing adapted to or reflected the political or social climate in the society" was the starting point for this research. Laura Bush, the ex-first lady in the U.S. made the above statement in a radio address that

focused on two key issues: the restrictions of women's education and the restrictions on dress. The development of clothing primarily facilitated women's entrance into sports and physical education.

⁺ This Research was supported by the Sookmyung Women's University Research Grants 1-1203-0268.

Corresponding author: Lee Seunghee, Tel: +82-2-710-9857, Fax: +82-2-2077-7324
E-mail: leeseu1@sm.ac.kr

Women commonly face special barriers to entry into the labor market. Labor markets are typically segregated by gender, even when their qualifications are similar¹⁾.

Clothing itself has many meaningful representations for not only covering the body but also representing different cultural symbols or political status. According to the literature, women were most often depicted in feminine roles and dress²⁾. Research has also indicated that dress is linked to gender symbols and that roles and gender differences in dress are used in the social construction of gender and gender roles. Individuals use dress both to discern the sex of others and to differentiate themselves publicly from those of the other sex³⁾⁴⁾⁵⁾.

Men's clothing has typically been looser and women's more body conforming⁵⁾. This reveals the universal cultural assumption that men "should" look different to women; that being a woman means being as much unlike a man as possible. Women have most frequently been depicted in feminine dress or with a feminine appearance and in hedonic roles, and these distinctions between male and female dress, appearance, and roles seem to have become less salient over time⁶⁾.

Every culture has a different mindset, national costume, and degree of women's rights and freedom. From CoCo Channel to the Burqa in runway shows, many Haute couture designers have created and introduced new clothing fashions for women. Fashion changes all the time and reflects the social norm and cultures. Historically, development of women's clothing reflects the changing the role of women's social role and gender differences in society.

Clothing is one of Marslow's essential human needs along with food and housing. In many cultures, women acted passively in male-

centered societies. In some cultures, women even have an invisible status. Women are not allowed in official meetings, because women are not generous and naïve⁷⁾.

1. Conceptual Foundation, Purpose, and Research Questions

Clothing is called a second skin. However, inequalities remain with women's clothing being used as a tool to prohibit social participation and education. According to Wolf, advertisers have historically manipulated the images of the women they have featured to serve their own economic needs, which is highlighted by the advertisers' tendency to distort the female image for financial purposes.

Femininity is shaped by these norms, customs, and fashions⁸⁾. Dressing according to gender is more than complementary role playing: power relations are inextricably involved⁹⁾. Paloetti and Kidwell¹⁰⁾ have questioned why it is more acceptable for women to copy men's clothing than for men to adopt women's clothing. Thus, this study addresses the question of how to reduce the restrictions imposed by clothing on women's socially participation and education.

Although many studies have examined women's issues, few have researched the relationships between women's social participation, freedom, and clothing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between women's social status, social participation, including education, and employment, freedom, and clothing, and the manner in which women's clothing affected women's freedom and social participation through the centuries. The following research questions were guided this study.

- 1) Is there a relationship between women's clothing and social participation?
- 2) Do women affect by what they wear?
- 3) What clothing restricts women's social participation?

II. Theoretical Background

1. Women and Clothing

Dress is a component of male and female gender roles, or those behaviors that are culturally defined as appropriate for either men or women¹¹⁾. Taylor¹²⁾ has indicated that differences in gender roles were much more pronounced in the period directly following the Second World War than they were the late 1960s during the women's movements. Similarly, the dress of men and women was highly divergent in the years immediately following WWII, but much less so during the years of the women's movement. These findings indicated that the gender orientation of men's and women's dress has historically mirrored that of their roles. For instance, when women's roles have been more masculine, their dress has been more masculine.

Group norms pertaining to women's dress are really prescriptions for behavior considered appropriate to the gender role and proposed an argument that may help to explain why the women in the advertisements analyzed were shown in predominantly and unrealistically feminine dress and roles⁸⁾¹³⁾. A feminist perspective challenges the existing balance of power, addressing social inequalities associated with class, race, and sexuality, as well as gender. Viewing gender as a fluid concept allows scholars studying clothing and appearance to understand gender relations as

more than men and women dressing their parts.

Yves Saint Laurent created his first tuxedo for women in 1966. Women's adoption of trousers represents an important readjustment of the definition of femininity. Transgressive challenges to this balance of power and to the borders of gendered appearance are often met with severe consequences: a male in a skirt, however, unless he is a bagpiper, pope, prince, or priest, risks direct violent assault against his ambiguously signifying border body⁹⁾¹⁴⁾.

2. Women and the Workforce

Since the Industrial Revolution, our clothes have always been made by the underprivileged, the young, and uneducated women who are desperate for work¹⁵⁾. Especially, young, single women from rural areas were likely to be hired due to their cheap wages and docile temperament. Nevertheless, sweatshops in Asia had the opposite effect of empowering women. Such jobs do not require specialized skills which made it easier for women to intermittently leave their jobs to care for their families. And traditionally, making clothing is perceived as women's work. Today more than 80% of all textile industry and garment workers in the world are women¹⁶⁾. As these jobs don't need workers physical strength, male workers have no natural advantage in these jobs.

3. Women and Higher Education

Cosbey et al.¹⁷⁾ looked for evidence of increasing heterogeneity in women's clothing styles during a period of increasing ambivalence regarding women's roles in society. Women's opportunities for higher education expanded considerably in the later decades of the nineteenth century 18), and this became an

important impetus for change. Not only did higher education itself draw women out of the home, but it also enabled them to pursue employment in the professions in lieu of marital domesticity, the two being viewed as incompatible at the time¹⁸⁾¹⁹⁾. Women's sphere broadened during the late Victorian and Edwardian Eras through the expansion of higher education for women, the increase in the number of women working in the professions, the women's club and settlement house movements, the development of social work, and the fight for women's suffrage¹⁷⁾.

The change in women's social roles that took place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides a suitable context in which to examine changing clothing fashions for evidence of increasing heterogeneity¹⁷⁾.

4. Religion and Women's Clothing

Tie-symbols are expressions of support, or association, with a particular idea, cause, predicament, or person, and wearing one announces sympathy with a group, a political idea, or a public persona²⁰⁾. Groups and aggregates desiring, protesting, or rejecting a political agenda may signify their sentiments in their dress.

Male doctors are not allowed to give a thorough physical exam to female patients, who had to wear the full burqa at all times and women are forbidden to go out without their full length burqa to wear make up or high-heeled shoes, to go outside without a male escort²¹⁾. The burqa is a veil and covering from head-to-toe with a mesh grid over the eyes. One of the problems is that the heavy cloth covering can induce panic, claustrophobia and headaches²¹⁾. According to Mohanty²²⁾, during the Iranian revolution in 1979 in middle-class

Iranian women veiled themselves as a symbol of protest against western cultural colonization or as a means of expressing their solidarity with working-class women.

5. The Corset and the Ideal Shape

From the 16th century to the modern society, the corset has been modified over the centuries according to women's clothing and the social norms for women in society. Especially, young women of the upper classes would be corseted from around puberty onward, but they gradually began to sculpt the development of the body into the ideal shape. So their lungs and rib cages were not encouraged to develop into their natural shape.

Some fashionable Victorian and Edwardian women would reserve the tightest lacing and stiffest corsets for formal occasions, such as a ball²³⁾. They might faint on such occasions if they exerted themselves. Before the 1910s, corsets had no stretch and were made to fit very tightly in order to shape the body to conform to the ideal silhouette of the era.

III. Methods

Five images were used as stimuli for the study to ask about women's perception of clothing and their social participation.

1. Sample Selection

In the study, four photographs and one drawing were used for the questionnaire. Those images were selected to represent and reflect clothing as a symbol of women's status, norm, and cultural differences in society.

2. Visual Analysis and Verbal Instruments

Based on the review of the literature, the researcher developed a visual analysis instrument with the sample pictures. The samples were composed of four pictures and a drawing. A Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) was used.

From a pilot test conducted prior to the data collection, the questionnaires were edited and the content was confirmed. To simplify the understanding, the five figures were given the following short names: Gone with the wind, Corset, Tuxedo, Burka, and White blouse and skirt for Figs. 1-5, respectively.

There were verbal questionnaires and one open-end question regarding women's social participation and clothing. A Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) was used for the verbal questionnaires.

The study participants were 268 female college students from a central university in

Seoul, Korea. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 33 years, with a mean age of 20.93 (SD = 2.381). The questionnaires were completed in the university classrooms. The participants' monthly clothing expenditure was less than \$222 for approximately 59%, between \$200 and \$400 for 29%, and over \$400 for 11%.



<Figure 1> Gone with the wind



<Figure 2> The Corset



<Figure 3> Tuxedo



<Figure 4> Burka



<Figure 5> White blouse and skirt

3. Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 14.0 for windows was used to provide descriptive statistics, frequencies, and Independent sample t-test. The open-end questionnaires were analyzed for the study.

IV. Results and Discussion

1. Clothing and social participation.

Descriptive statistics were used for the data

analysis for women's clothing and social participation.

As shown in Table 1, 87.7% of the participants answered that Burka was the most limited clothing for social participation usually or always, followed by 84.3% for Corset, and 80.2% for Gone with the wind. Approximately 85% of the participants answered never or almost never for White blouse and skirt being the less limited clothing for social participation, followed by 80% of the pants suit in Tuxedo.

<Table 1> Five visual images and limitation of social participation

	Never	Almost	never	Sometimes	Usually Always
Fig 1 (Gone with the wind)	1.1%	3.4%	15.3%	51.5%	28.7%
Fig 2 (The Corset)	0.7%	3.7%	11.2%	46.6%	37.7%
Fig 3 (Tuxedo)	35.2%	44.6%	16.9%	2.2%	1.1%
Fig 4 (Hijab)	1.5%	3.0%	7.9%	27%	60.7%
Fig 5 (White blouse and skirt)	50.2%	34.5%	10.9%	3.4%	1.1%

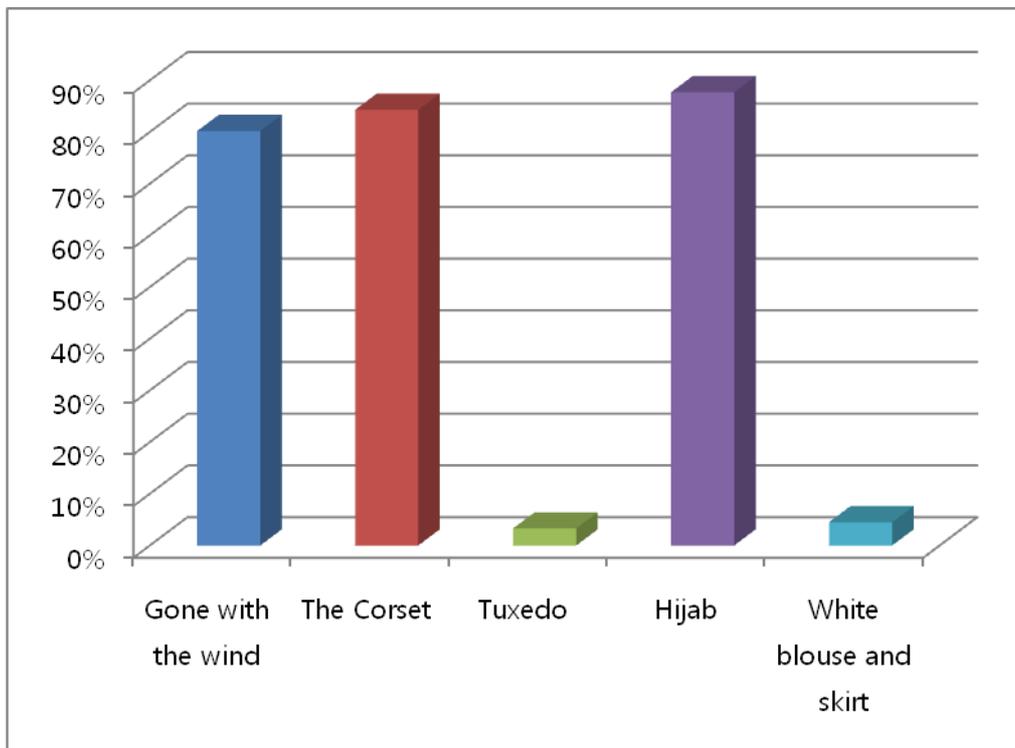
To limit the bias the each picture, asking the participants to order of all the Five visual images degree of restricted clothing for job and social participation. Fifty-two percent of the participants chose Burka as #1 for restriction followed by 40% of layering cloth, 44% corset, and 38% of wind. The pants and white blouse and skirt were chosen as the least restriction clothing for job and social participation.

As shown in Table 1, 87.7% of the participants answered that Burka was the most limited clothing for social participation usually or always, followed by 84.3% for Corset, and 80.2% for Gone with the wind. Approximately 85% of the participants answered never or almost never for White blouse and skirt being the less limited clothing for social participation, followed by 80% of the pants suit in Tuxedo.

To limit the bias the each picture, asking the participants to order of all the Five visual images degree of restricted clothing for job and social participation. Fifty-two percent of the participants chose Burka as #1 for restriction followed by 40% of layering cloth, 44% corset, and 38% of wind. The pants and white blouse and skirt were chosen as the least restriction clothing for job and social participation.

Fig. 6 shows that the women's perceptions of the clothing and the restrictions of social participation using scale usually and always. Tuxedo shows that the least restricted clothing of women's social participation followed by the White blouse and skirt.

As shown in Table 2, the mean of Burka was 4.42, followed by Corset (4.17), Gone with the wind (4.03), Tuxedo (1.90), and White blouse



<Figure 6> Clothing and Restriction of Social Participation

<Table 2> Means of the Visual Image Scores

Visual Images	Mean (n=268)	Std.Deviation	χ^2
Fig 1 (Gone with the wind)	4.03	.823	230.955***
Fig 2 (The Corset)	4.17	.8244	232.560***
Fig 3 (Tuxedo)	1.90	.839	202.419***
Fig 4 (Burka)	4.42	.874	331.296***
Fig 5 (White blouse and skirt)	1.17	.874	245.191***

Note. Significant p values are noted by: *** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$

<Table 3> Women’s Clothing and Social Participation

	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Usually	Always
-Clothing is related to women’s social participation.	0.8%	1.9%	11.7%	64.3%	21.4%
-Women were influenced by what they wear emotionally, psychologically, and in terms of external factors by what they wear.	0%	1.1%	0.7%	37.7%	59.3%
-Women have been limited to social participation by what they wear.	1.5%	11.7%	28.9%	48.1%	9.8%
-Modern society is not limited to women’s social participation by clothing.	0.8%	30.1%	33.1%	27.8%	8.3%

and skirt (1.71).

2. Women affect by what they wear

As shown in Table 3, 85.7% of the participants answered usually or always regarding clothing related to women’s social participation. Ninety-seven percent said they were usually or always influenced emotionally, psychologically, and in terms of external factors by what they wore. Approximately 60% of the women answered that women were limited to social participation by what they wear. Approximately one-third (30.9%) answered that their social participation in modern society was limited by clothing but about one-third (36.1%) answered that it was not.

As shown in Table 4, the mean of clothing related to women’s social participation was 4.04, the mean of women who were influenced by what they wear emotionally, psychologically, and in terms of external factors was 4.59, and the mean of women whose social participation has been limited by what they wear was 3.53. The mean of women whose social participation was not limited in modern society by clothing was 3.13.

3. What clothing restricts women’s social participation.

An open-end questionnaire was used to ask the women about what clothing restricts their social participation. Their answers to the open-

<Table 4> Mean Scores for 4 Verbal questionnaires (N=266)

	Mean	D
-Clothing is related to women's social participation.	4.04	0.689
-Women were influenced emotionally, psychologically, and in terms of external factors by what they wear.	4.58	0.580
-Women have been limited to social participation by what they wear.	3.53	0.878
-Modern society is not limited to women's social participation by clothing.	3.13	0.963

end questionnaire were as follows.

-In our society, a woman who is too dressy is regarded as unprofessional in work. A woman who wears too revealing clothing is regarded as incompetent and inappropriate in work.

-Clothing is tuned to male tastes or suppresses body freedom excessively, thus depressing women.

-When formal dress, including skirt is preferred.

-The clothing that highlights the female bodyline and femininity seems to restrict female social participation.

-People's attitude toward women wearing mini-skirts.

-Too revealing clothing upsets men as well as women in social life.

-Too gaudy clothing, which arouses criticism among female clothes and draws excessive attention from male colleagues.

-Short mini-skirt may highlight female sexual beauty and neglect female ability.

-Sexy clothing, such as min-skirt or DeCollete, seems to restrict female participation in social life and promotion in position

-The fixed idea of considering femininity-highlighting clothing beautiful

-The complementary underwear such as a corset makes body beautiful, but enhances bodily exhaustion and prevents the active participation in social life.

-Prejudice that women have to be ladylike.

-Prejudice or fixed idea that women should be tidily and beautifully dressed or wear high heels in their workplaces.

V. Implications and Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationships between women's social status, social participation, freedom, and clothing. The study participants were 268 female college students from a central university in Seoul, Korea.

Burka was the most limited clothing for women's social participation. This finding was supported by a woman who worked as a nurse and who stated that she had two jobs: managing the burqa and treating the patient. The culture of the burqa was not the worst of women's troubles, but it was one of the most public displays of society's desire for women to disappear²⁴⁾²⁵⁾.

One woman was refused to entry to a swimming pool because of head-to-toe swimsuit was unhygienic²⁶⁾. However, she claimed that the ban is discriminatory. Mr. Sarkozy, President of France, said that the problem of the burqa is not a religious problem. It is a problem of liberty and the dignity of women. It is a sign of

servitude and degradation. Therefore, those statements about burqa or hijab indicated that the clothing had an intense relationship with social participation for women.

One of the study findings was that women felt that their social participation was limited by what they wear. However, in recent modern society the rate of the response was almost equal regarding whether or not social participation was limited by women's clothing.

From this study, clothing for women did not just cover the body, but was also used as a tool to restrict women's behavior, social role, gender discrimination, and social participation. The restriction of social participation induced further restrictions of education and financial independence for women. These two restrictions degraded the empowerment of women and the education for their children. In addition, as fewer women work outside the home and fewer hold positions in government, they are less likely to exchange information and overcome collective action problems, less likely to mobilize politically and to lobby for expanded right, and less likely to gain representation in government²⁷⁾. The lobbying strength of the women's movement and the growing number of women in government has led to a series of landmark reforms. These included the Gender Equality Employment Act (1987), revisions to the family laws (1989), the Mother-Child Welfare Act (1989), the Framework Act on Women's Development (1995), and a bill stipulating that political parties must set aside for women at least 30% of their national constituency seats²⁸⁾²⁹⁾.

The present study results indicate that clothing for women has meaningful language for social participation and education. The development of clothing primarily facilitated women's entrance into sports and physical education³⁰⁾. Clothing is

not just a complexity of fabric, design, and patterns, but rather society's expectations of what a woman should look like and thus reinforce male dominance in society³¹⁾. It reflects the social role, norm, status, and the exuberance, the gloom, even the chaos of the moment for women.

This paper has explored how those things are manipulated in a women's life. The women's movement is not overly concerned with the more superficial aspect of clothing or beauty or fashion trends. The more important question is whether women are participating fully in the lives of our communities³²⁾.

The study limitation was the use of only four pictures and one drawing to define the women's social participation and clothing. Another limitation was the restriction of the participants to those of Asian race. Therefore, there was no range of different cultural background based on race and religion.

Nevertheless, the present study is one of the few to explore clothing and women's role for society. Future study is needed on the cross cultural aspects of the cultural difference of women's social participation, freedom, and clothing.

Reference

- 1) Anker, R. (1997). Theories of occupational segregation by sex: An overview. *International Labour Review*, 136 (Autumn): pp.315-339.
- 2) Paff, J. L., & Lakner, H. B. (1997). Dress and the female gender role in magazine advertisements of 1950-1994: a content analysis. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 26(1), pp.29-59.
- 3) Cahill, S. E. (1989). Fashioning males and

- females: Appearance management and the social reproduction of gender. *Symbolic Interaction*, 12 (2), pp.281–298.
- 4) Stone, G. (1962). Appearance and the self. In A. M. Rose (Ed.), *Human behavior and social processes: An international approach* (pp.86–118). New York: Houghton Mifflin.
 - 5) Workman, J. E., & Johnson, K.K.P. (1993). Cultural aesthetics and the social construction of gender. In S. J. Lennon & L. D. Burns (Eds.), *Social science aspects of dress: New directions* (ITAA Special Pub. No 5, pp.93–110). Monument, CO: International Textiles and Apparel Association.
 - 6) Damhorst, M. L. (1991). Gender and appearance in daily comic strips. *Dress*, 18, pp.59–67.
 - 7) Yutaka, I. (1993). Bulkyoyesungkwaneui barun ehae (A right Buddhist understanding on women). In Korean Womans Buddhist Association (ED.), *Bulkyo Yosungr* (pp.51–63). Seoul: Bulkyo-Sidae.
 - 8) Arthur, L. B. (1999). Dress and the social construction of gender in two sororities. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 17(2), pp.84–93.
 - 9) Michelman, S., & Kaiser, S. (2000). Feminist Issues in Textiles and Clothing Research: Working Through with the contradictions. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 18(3), pp.121–127.
 - 10) Paloetti, J., & Kidwell, C. (1989). *Men and women: Dressing the part*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
 - 11) Ruble, D., & Ruble, T. (1982). Sex stereotypes. In A. Miller (Ed.), *In the eye of the beholder: Contemporary issues in stereotyping* (pp.188–251). New York: Praeger.
 - 12) Taylor, G. R. (1970). *Sex in history*. New York: Vanguard
 - 13) Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth*. New York: Doubleday.
 - 14) Timmerman, K. (2009). *Where am I wearing?* John Wiley & Sons, Inc. New Jersey. p.54.
 - 15) World Bank. (2001). *Engendering Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 - 16) Cosby, S., Damhorst, M. L., & Farrell-Beck, J. (2003). Diversity of daytime clothing styles as a reflection of women's social role ambivalence from 1873 through 1912. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 21(3), pp.101–119.
 - 17) Harris, B. J. (1978). *Beyond her sphere: Women and the professions in American history*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
 - 18) Gordon, L. D. (1987). The Gibson girl goes to college: Popular culture and women's higher education in the Progressive Era, 1890–1920. *American Quarterly*, 39(2), pp.211–230.
 - 19) Rubinstein, R. P. (1995). *Dress codes*. (pp. 206). Westview Press
 - 20) Tell, C. (2002). The women of Afghanistan. *Social Education* 66(1), pp.8–12.
 - 21) Mohanty, C. T. (1991). Cartographies of struggle: third world women and the politics of feminism. In *Third World women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, 1–47. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
 - 22) History of the Corset retrieved on May 15, 2009 http://www.google.co.kr/imgres?imgurl=http://laracorsets.com/images/Corset_History_Images/1890s_corset_graphic.gif&imgrefurl=http://laracorsets.com/History_of_the_corset_001
 - 23) Kristof, N. D., & Wudunn, S. (2009 August 22–23). The women's crusade. *International Herald Tribune*, p.4.

- 24) Tavernise, S. (2009 September 24). New wardrobe brings freedom to women in swat. International Herald Tribune, p.4.
- 25) wimmer barred over head-to-toe suit (2009 Aug 14). International Herald Tribune, p.5
- 26) Ross, M. (February, 2008). Oil, Islam, and Women. *American Political Science Review* 102(1), pp.107-123.
- 27) Park, K. A. (1993). Women and Development: The Case of South Korea. *Comparative Politics*, 25 (January), pp.127-145.
- 28) Yoon, B. L. (2003). Gender politics in South Korea: putting women on the political map. In *Confrontation and Innovation on the Korean Peninsula*, ed. K.E. Institute. Washington DC: Korea Economic Institute.
- 29) Warner, P. C. (2000). Feminism and Costume History: Synthesis and Reintegration. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 18(3), pp.185-189.
- 30) Blair, K. (1994). Selling the self: women and the feminine seduction of advertising. *Women and Language*, 17(1), pp.20-25.
- 31) Warner, J. (2009, December 5-6). Feminism at middle age. International Herald Tribune, p.6.
- 32) Figure 1. <http://blog.daum.net/ellvis/26>
- 33) Figure 2. <http://vagabondsister.blogspot.com/2010/08/corset-it-holds-figure-erect.html>
- 34) Figure 3. <http://blog.naver.com/PostView.nhn?blogId=yuchi81&logNo=150129250424&redirect=Dlog&widgetTypeCall=true>
- 35) Figure 4. http://cafe.naver.com/aefit.cafe?iframe_url=/ArticleRead.nhn%3Farticleid=1276&
- 36) Figure 5. <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=103&oid=111&aid=0000147637>

Received Jan. 13, 2012

Revised (Feb. 13, 2012)

Accepted Feb. 20, 2012