

# The Feminist Role of Haenyeos of Jeju Island: Survival and Empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of the Haenyeos, the women divers of Jeju Island, South Korea, in their employment of feminism. Historically, Haenyeos redefined gender roles by becoming household providers out of the need to survive. Then they created cooperatives to defend their rights, later using those structures to lead resistance against Japanese colonial exploitation. These actions challenged both patriarchal and colonial structures, positioning them as early leaders of feminist change. In the present, Haenyeos embody ecofeminist principles through sustainable harvesting and communal democracy and persist despite declining population of their community and environmental threats, framing their work as both survival and a prideful responsibility. Based on extensive secondary literature review and semi-structured in-depth interviews with Haenyeos, this paper argues that their impact is based on economic empowerment, political resistance, and ecological activism, all grounded in a mindset of resilience and unity. The Haenyeos hence portray a value that remains vital for feminism in South Korea and for global discussions of gender and sustainability.

## KEYWORDS

Haenyeos, Jeju, Climate Change, Japanese Occupation, Resistance

## INTRODUCTION

Haenyeos are women divers from diverse parts of Jeju Island, South Korea who harvest abalone, conch, sea urchins, and seaweed by hand, diving without breathing equipment up to ten meters for up to two minutes at a time (“Culture of Jeju Haenyeo (women divers)”). Girls begin training in childhood and progress through ranks within their local groups, ranging from hagun (novice) to junggun (intermediate) and sanggun (expert) based on skill and experience. They dive for up to seven hours a day in cold waters, using only fins, masks, and weighted belts (Jeuland). Each diver belongs to a jamsuhoe (local cooperative) that manages fishing rights, enforces ecological restrictions, and allocates profits collectively (“Culture of Jeju Haenyeo (women divers)”). Before each dive, traditionally, Haenyeos perform rituals to honour the sea goddess Jamsugut, reflecting the spiritual dimensions of their practice (Jeuland).

Currently, Haenyeos are being threatened by demographic and environmental challenges. Rising ocean temperatures, shifting tidal patterns, and increased pollution have significantly altered the marine ecosystems that they rely on (Preston, 2017). Their traditional knowledge systems are adaptive, but the rapid pace of globalization and environmental change is hard to keep up with. Adding to these threats is the fact that the Haenyeo population is aging. South Korea’s economic development trajectory has driven younger generations towards urban industries like manufacturing and service sectors, leading to a dramatic decline in the number of new youth joining the Haenyeo community (Preston, 2017). Today, most Haenyeos are over the age of 60 (Malabonga, 2018), with younger women increasingly seeking employment in other prominent industries in Jeju such as resorts and car rental offices rather than pursuing diving (Choe, 2014). This threat is so large that now their contributions and existence risk fading completely.

While there is growing academic and cultural interest in Haenyeos, most existing studies focus on individual aspects of their identity. While these perspectives are valuable, they fail to examine how these roles connect to create a unified image of who the Haenyeos are. In other words, there is a lack of research that considers the overarching identity of the Haenyeos: asking how and why their economic, political, and ecological practices collectively function as feminist movements. This gap prevents a full understanding of the Haenyeos not just as cultural heritage, but as living actors whose multidimensional roles hold relevance in modern discussions of feminism.

This paper therefore asks the following question: **how and why did the everyday practices of Haenyeos function as feminist action across factors such as economic survival, colonial resistance, and ecological leadership?** To answer this question, this study utilizes primary data of interviews with current Haenyeos and uses existing literature to contextualize their lived experiences. The paper proceeds by first outlining the methods of the research, then examining historical gender restructuring, colonial resistance, and modern ecofeminism.

Ultimately, this study seeks to fill this gap by demonstrating the multidimensional role Haenyeos play in the feminist movement in South Korea. Their lives reveal a type of feminism that emerges through resilience in the face of physical and mental hardship, overcome through collective leadership that has sustained their communities over generations. By diving into the sea, they have essentially stepped outside the boundaries drawn by traditional gender expectations. Instead they chose to embody an alternative vision of what it means to be a woman that is defined not only by the need for survival, but also by leadership and care for people and nature. Hence, the question is answered by stating that both historically and currently, the Haenyeos embody feminism through their daily actions of diving and existing as representatives of female leadership, as well as their historical role of resisting historically challenging eras.

## METHODS

This study utilizes semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person in Wimiri, Jeju Island, South Korea, alongside participant observation and secondary literature. As a resident of Jeju, I have had direct access to the Haenyeo community, which allowed for repeated, in-person interactions. At the same time, this personal position meant careful attention to such trust and ethical engagement, particularly given the physical risks and cultural significance of the work. Through observation of their daily routines and conversations, I gained insight into the physical demands of their work, the environmental risks they face, and the cultural significance of their profession. Interviews focused on how climate change has affected their catch patterns and economic stability, as seen in the published article (Lee and Joo, 2022). With this background knowledge, this research supplemented secondary research to further enhance my understanding of the Haenyeos, drawing from previous research and investigations. Rather than diving only into their ecological significance, this paper explores the comprehensive identity and leadership they took on throughout history. Hence, this research is guided by an interest in understanding what role the Haenyeos had in the feminist movement of South Korea using the Haenyeos as a case study for broader patterns of adaptation among marginalized or indigenous communities.

Participant	Pathway into Haenyeos work	Family Background	Years diving	Marital Status
A	Intergenerational	Mother and grandmother were Haenyeos	60+	Married with children and grandchildren
B	Intergenerational	Mother was a Haenyeo	60+	Married with children and grandchildren
C	Haenyeo School	No family lineage	Around 25	Married with children
D	Interest/experience in freediving	No family lineage	Around 20	Married (no children)

With a combination of a comprehensive review of the literature already published and first hand interviews with the Haenyeos, this paper accomplishes its goal through both research and first hand data collection. Utilizing the connections explained above, the interviews were pursued in an ethical manner, following the rules and guidelines of the Cambridge Center for International Research. A total of 4 interviewees were interviewed in Korean, the interviews being conducted in person at the Haenyeo house in Wimiri, Jeju, South Korea. Consent for the content of the interview as well as recording for the purpose of creating an accurate translation and analysis was achieved verbally during the interviews. A small compensation of food and drinks were provided to the interviewees during the interview as a token of gratitude. Participants were selected through accessibility and willingness to participate, aiming to reflect both generational continuity and differing pathways into the profession. Hence, the interviewees varied in age, family background, and entry route into the Haenyeo profession, including both intergenerational inheritance and formal Haenyeo school training. With a total of 22 sources referenced with 5 being Korean, the analysis is comprehensive not only from its consultation of both primary and secondary sources but also in combining perspectives from different backgrounds. Still, limitations of this study include the small sample size and the localized nature of the interviews, restricting broader generalization but allow for depth and consistency.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Haenyeos' role in restructuring of gender relations through time

In the context of South Korea's feminist movement, the Haenyeos stand as early challengers to patriarchal norms. While the records do not clearly show when women divers (Haenyeos) first emerged, there are records stating the existence of Haenyeos even before the Three Kingdom Period of Korea, hence dating their history at least to the 18 BC ("The Mothers of the Sea: Jeju Haenyeo"). However, their emergence as key economic providers was much later, catalyzed by industrial development on the mainland. During this period, many men were led to migrate from Jeju to factory jobs, leaving women to provide for their families (Pak, 2015). Diving therefore became a prominent women occupation out of necessity. In a society where women's economic roles were historically limited, Haenyeos defied conventions by earning independent incomes. This consequently enabled investments in education, improved household conditions, and granted women unprecedented autonomy (Preston, 2017). Their significance within feminist history lies in how they redefined gender roles, demonstrating that women could uphold not only their families' economic needs but also local communities through their labour.

Interviews with present-day Haenyeos reveal that this identity was often inherited across generations. "My mother and my grandmother were all Haenyeos, hence it seemed natural for me to become one," one diver explained, illustrating how the profession was both a lineage and a duty. Another similarly said, "Initially I didn't want to be a Haenyeo but as I didn't have much other choice, I just did as it felt easiest. I had been following my mother out to sea since I was young so it was easy." While these statements communicate being a Haenyeo as a choice from survival or comfort, elaborations on their motivations show otherwise. In further discussions, some Haenyeos shared that they "felt the responsibility to continue this legacy of women leadership" and that they often felt emotions of pride in being a woman when watching their mothers or grandmothers go out to sea. These statements show how feminist leadership among Haenyeos did not emerge from formal movements or political campaigns but through the embodied continuation of their mothers' work. By entering the sea alongside their elders, daughters internalized a model of resilience, self-reliance, and collective responsibility that defied patriarchal expectations. Even the diver who came through Haenyeo school rather than family ties faced difficulty "trying to fit in as most of these people had connections that went back centuries." However, this particular interviewee explained her motivation to go on as being derived from inspiration and admiration for the power of the Haenyeos, saying "I continued trying despite difficulties and feeling lonely because I wanted to be a strong mother and women role model for my daughter", communicating her deeper motivations. This reveals that the Haenyeo identity cannot be simplified into a single motivational factor such as necessity. It is clear through these interviews that while circumstances made it challenging or even demotivating for one to become a Haenyeo, the idea of inspiring others while simultaneously being inspired by the predecessors communicates such a strong lineage of

Haenyeos. Such resilience and desire to inspire others is a clear sign of feminism, depicting women breaking barriers and continuing such traditions through generations.

As Kang (2016) notes, the impact of Haenyeo's leadership role of pioneering a women dominated industry later led to even larger activism. Haenyeos organized community wide aid for vulnerable members, supported the education of younger generations, and hence provided an example of women-led economic stability. Such actions led them to earn recognition not only within Jeju but also on a global scale, seen in the UNESCO's 2016 designation of the Jeju Haenyeo culture as Intangible Cultural Heritage. While many senior divers once dismissed their own contributions as mere manual labour, the campaign for recognition reframed their identity as pioneers of women leadership

Yet, the interviews underscore that their feminist identity was forged against persistent patriarchal doubts. One of the woman recalled, "When I first decided to be a Haenyeo and enrolled in Haenyeo school, a lot of people didn't agree with me, telling me that I would come back eventually. They view it as a job with high risk but little return." Another added that even her mother discouraged her: "My mother, who was a Haenyeo, advised me not to take on this job because of how dangerous it is. She had seen too many accidents to allow her precious daughter to do it." In these stories, we see how generational pride for their Haenyeo identity also coexisted with fear. The very women who embodied feminist defiance were worried that their daughters would suffer the same injuries and burdens. Resistance also came from within marriages. "My husband used to tell me to give up on the work because of how physically tiring it was compared to how much we make," one said, before asserting, "Still, this job was more than a job for me. It was something that gave me pride and also fun despite being so difficult." Another woman added, "It isn't easy to be distrusted by others and undermined. But it also inspires us to do that much better to prove them wrong." These testimonies strengthen the understanding we have of Haenyeo's feminism: it is not only about redefining women's labour roles but also about constantly negotiating the worth of their identities and roles in the face of skepticism. It communicates the strength these women hold in the way they transform negative stereotypes and comments into fuel, a true embodiment of feminism.

A significant feature of such unconventional practices by the Haenyeos was supported by their unity and understanding of the need to collaborate. The Haenyeos work in groups, generally based on their geographical location. These groups have been maintained for years, with the Haenyeos passing their legacy on to the coming generations, mainly their children. In these groups, a clear democracy is performed. Specifically, Bulteok (hearth) democracy (불턱 민주주의) is performed where all members of the community get to vote on the matter discussed (Kim, 2023). The Haenyeos also generally have a gathering location called The House of Haenyeos (해녀의 집) or Bulteok (불턱) in more traditional language where they prepare themselves before diving and enjoy each others' company after the day of work ("불턱 [Bulteok]"). The Bulteok, a communal space where divers prepare for and recover from dives, is both a physical and symbolic center of their democratic culture. Geseok (게석) is also a noteworthy tradition that the Haenyeos take part in. It is where they share their collected goods from the day and distribute it within themselves, to counteract the difference in collection based on skill, age, or many other factors (Baek, 2016). This egalitarian approach is combined with environmental regulations such as Geumchae (금채, bans on harvesting during set periods) and Gaetdakgi (갯닦기, cleaning the rocks to promote seaweed growth), demonstrates how economic equity and ecological care are intertwined for the Haenyeos (Kim, 2023). What these demonstrate about the culture or ideology of the Haenyeos is that they value unity and an environment where everyone succeeds together. This approach to their work is an important aspect of Haenyeo's feminist work: being able to recognize other's hardships and sharing that burden together.

Adding on to the feminism depicted by their unification and strong communal support, there are also actions that demonstrate their unified front against external challenges. In the 1920s, the Haenyeos had formed a labour union, to protect their own rights ("The Mothers of the Sea: Jeju Haenyeo"). Before such establishment, Haenyeos were often subjected to exploitation such as the forced sharing of collected seafood with government parties. Hence, in an effort to not only protect themselves but all Haenyeos to come, they established such means of resistance. Lee and Myong (2018) emphasize that during the colonial era, these unions and communal decision-making bodies transformed the Haenyeos into independent economic agents in a period when women's work was

still undervalued across Korea. Although this union became misused and further manipulated after the Japanese occupation, it still serves as an example of the women's bravery and strength in protecting their legacy. Even at the time, newspaper articles were not shy in recognizing the Haenyeo's economic role, saying how women of Jeju worked a physically intensive job as much as men not only in Jeju but also compared to those in the mainland (Jin, 2019). The fact that these women, which by the Confucian norms of being restricted to housewives and blind followers to their husbands, took on such leadership and solidity demonstrates their feminism extensively.

### **Resistance throughout the Japanese occupation**

Continuing on, the Haenyeos also played a significant role in Korea's resistive movements against Japanese colonial rule. During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945), many parts of Korea were disturbed and forcibly removed, including the most basic aspects such as language to names (Johnson). The Haenyeos, unable to escape from such reality, faced exploitation under colonial fishing policies that were designed to benefit Japanese economic interests over the locals like the Haenyeos. The Japanese authorities implemented licensing systems that granted exclusive fishing rights to Japanese companies, hence depriving Haenyeos of access to their traditional fishing grounds. These policies unsurprisingly reduced the Haenyeos' incomes drastically. Adding on, it also forced Haenyeos to sell their catches to Japanese-controlled distribution networks at unfairly low prices. Not only that but the Japanese also imposed heavy taxes and fees on their activities ("잠녀(해녀)투쟁 [Resistance by the Jamnyeo(Haenyeo)"). Korean middlemen working under Japanese authorities often further deepened the issue for the Haenyeos by imposing additional illegal fines ("Proposal for Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems [GIAHS]: Jeju Haenyeo Fishery").

Due to such hardships, the Haenyeos decided to resist. The most prominent from their resistance was the Haenyeo Anti-Japanese Protest of 1932, also known as the Jeju Haenyeo Uprising (해녀 항일운동). An important catalyst for this movement was the corruption of the fisheries association which, under Japanese control, imposed excessive tribute based fees and restricted diving areas, prioritizing Japanese boats over Haenyeos ("Proposal for Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems [GIAHS]: Jeju Haenyeo Fishery"). As Song (2024) elaborates, Haenyeos in Jongdal-ri and Hado-ri secretly held meetings to organize a collective response to these injustices, despite the surveillance efforts by the colonial police. Across late 1931 to late 1932, approximately 17,000 women across 230 rallies gathered to present formal demands for the removal of corrupt officials, abolition of exploitative taxes, and restoration of traditional fishing rights (Shaikh, 2024). Their resistance rapidly spread across eastern Jeju, including Haenyeos, farmers, and merchants, marking it as one of the largest women-led anti colonial uprisings in Korean history (Hwang, 2024). Lee and Myong (2018) document that this protest, involving approximately 17,000 women over three months, was rooted in the same Bulteok-based communal structures that sustained their economic life. The Maeilshinbo recorded instances where divers voted collectively to petition for reduced fishing ground fees, showing that their political organization mirrored their democratic workplace governance (Park, 2025). According to Hwang (2024), the movement's strength was in its organizational structure rooted in Haenyeo communalism, including their Bulteok-based decision-making systems and mutual aid traditions elaborated in the previous section. Haenyeos conducted demonstrations strategically, taking actions such as occupying fisheries offices and submitting petitions. This revealed that the Haenyeos not only had a sophisticated understanding of the colonial governance structures at the time but also a strong spirit of resistance against injustice, demonstrating a strong feminist approach (Hwang, 2024).

In response, the Japanese authorities dispatched police and military forces to suppress the protests. Over 100 Haenyeos and community leaders were arrested, many subjected to brutal interrogations and imprisonment (Shaikh, 2024). Despite such violent efforts to oppress the Haenyeos, the movement achieved partial success: some oppressive policies were temporarily suspended, and the Haenyeos' mobilization planted a fire in broader anti-colonial consciousness across Jeju and mainland Korea ("Proposal for Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems [GIAHS]: Jeju Haenyeo Fishery"). Unlike many other movements of resistance towards the Japanese that were male-dominated, the Haenyeo uprising demonstrated that not only women but women of rural backgrounds were not passive victims but active agents for liberation ("Proposal for Globally Important

Agricultural Heritage Systems [GIAHS]: Jeju Haenyeo Fishery”). Their activism challenged not only the colonial imperialism of the time but also the deeply rooted gender norms of Confucian society which confined women to domestic roles (Hwang, 2024). Hence, the Haenyeo protest is historically significant as it redefined Korean feminist resistance.

In conclusion, the protest by the Haenyeos embodies a connection between struggle and the desire for economic rights and justice as well as national sovereignty. The Haenyeos’ demands hence aimed to gain not only fair economic treatment but also the recognition of their and their country’s dignity (Hwang, 2024). Their actions set a significant precedent for the women’s movements to come in Korea by showcasing the power of women-led collective action. Even today, the legacy of the Haenyeo Anti-Japanese Protest is commemorated through museums and annual ceremonies, honouring their bravery and leadership (Shaikh, 2024). Their example remains as a testament to how the feminism of these pioneering women created a model of leadership grounded in justice and communal resilience.

### Modern day ecological activism

As divers, the Haenyeos acquire intimate knowledge of the ocean, witnessing firsthand environmental degradation such as the decline in marine species (“Haenyeo Voices: Harmonising Traditional Knowledge with Ecological Monitoring on Jeju Island Reefs”). In response, they collaboratively develop sustainable harvesting practices, demonstrating their clear desire for environmental prosperity, not just economic gain. Kim (2023) adds that such measures are collectively enforced, ensuring community-wide compliance. Haenyeos are hence beyond the realm of traditional feminism and now are ecofeminists. Ecofeminism, a term pioneered by Françoise d'Eaubonne, is rooted in the belief that women have a distinct capacity to liberate and protect nature, grounded in their historically gendered roles of nurturing and interacting with the environment (Ranc, 2022). It advocates for harmonizing with nature rather than dominating it, and for dismantling hierarchies to foster enduring mutual respect (Malabonga, 2018). This reflects what Kim (2023) calls the “horizontal hierarchy” of Haenyeo society, where knowledge, resources, and responsibilities are shared equitably. Park (2025) notes that modern environmental scholars have been increasingly citing Haenyeos as a case study in climate resilience. Their blending of traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation goals makes them a well suited model for sustainable coastal resource management. This demonstrates that the Haenyeo’s activism continues to expand beyond economic survival into the realm of global environmental discussions, proving that their feminism is now expanded to the realm of ecological justice. Hence, especially in our status quo where environmental challenges are heightening day by day, it is important to study their methods and learn their legacy to be able to continue such efforts of conservation and survival for the future.

The research by Yoo (2014) communicate that the Haenyeos’ work with marine weeds (잡초) is critical to understand their environmental management. Haenyeos harvest various types of seaweed, including miyeok (미역, *Undaria pinnatifida*) and tot (톳, *Hizikia fusiforme*), both types of marine weed playing a vital role in maintaining the health of coastal ecosystems as they provide habitats for younger fish and also plays a role in stabilizing marine biodiversity. Hence, the Haenyeos avoid overharvesting by leaving the roots of the harvested seaweeds intact, allowing regrowth and ensuring sustainable yields in the seasons to come. This practice is rooted in generations of observation and practice. It demonstrates their understanding of the marine weeds as renewable resources to be protected rather than simple products for exploitation. Furthermore, Haenyeos often clean the seaweed beds of invasive species and excessive sediment while harvesting, performing another ecological maintenance function that supports the marine ecosystem (Yoo, 2014). This approach clearly connects the Haenyeos with broader ecofeminist frameworks, seen by the way they interact with nature not to exploit and use but to be part of a community in which humans belong and bear the responsibility of their actions.

Furthermore, Shaikh (2024) elaborates that the Haenyeos’ environmental leadership is beyond seaweed management but actually employs a deeper philosophy towards marine ecosystems. Their diving practices embody the principle of taking only what is needed to ensure that future generations of both humans and marine

life can continue to thrive. A practice that communicates such philosophy is their seasonal and species-based restrictions. These rules are grounded in collective agreements within their Bulteok communities. For example, specific periods are designated for resting certain diving grounds, allowing marine populations to regenerate. This reflects a form of community-based resource governance that is similar to modern day marine protection policies, aiming to prevent what is commonly known as the ‘tragedy of the commons’.

The interviews bring immediacy to this ecofeminist identity. Divers explained that “the weather patterns have changed a lot, leading to major difficulties in our scheduling,” while others noted, “Due to changes in the sea temperature, we have to dive deeper into the water than before to capture the same things. It’s difficult when the knowledge you have is no longer the same.” These reflections highlight that ecological change destabilizes even their traditional knowledge systems, forcing them to constantly relearn and adapt. What once were predictable factors like seasonal currents and migration patterns of species have become uncertain. This uncertainty is an existential threat as it undermines the knowledge base that allowed the Haenyeos to survive for centuries. Pollution intensifies this challenge. “One risk that the Haenyeos face from the pollution is being stuck on ropes or nets,” one diver explained, “these things are very difficult to see underwater and so if we get caught, we might drown as we push the limits of our breath even without being caught back through external means.” Unlike abstract environmental data, these testimonies underscore how pollution becomes entangled with their bodily vulnerability. They reveal that being a Haenyeo means to experience climate change and pollution as threats pressing against their very own bodies with every dive.

In the face of such fundamental threats, the Haenyeos activism supports not only their own but a society wide purpose. “We first hand try to not leave behind anything whether it is during work or after. We also pick up pieces of trash when we see them underwater.” Another described how “younger Haenyeos who are more interested and skilled in scuba diving go into the water with such gear to pick up trash.” These initiatives reflect a continuation from being knowledgeable: the older generation relies on ritualized practices that may be of restraint, while the younger generation adopts technological tools to meet and adapt to new challenges. Another Haenyeo added that “[the Haenyeos] recognize that these actions will not only help our work but also may potentially relieve this global ecological struggle at least a little bit. This motivates us to pick up more trash, diving one more time or holding our breath a little longer to make the planet a little greener” The interviews therefore reveal that Haenyeo’s ecofeminism can not be seen as a static tradition but more as a dynamic skill that requires flexible adaptation, blending intergenerational knowledge with technology. This blending strengthens the claim that Haenyeos represent not only cultural heritage but also a living model for climate resilience. Adding on, the recognition of the society wide threat from pollution and climate change communicates that these women are performing a public service by cleaning up the underwater environment, using their special skills for a positive, sustainable goal, hence making themselves a clear feminist identity.

In sum, the Haenyeos’ relationship with the marine environment and their clear stance in support of environmental protection demonstrate that their contributions to feminism extend beyond economic productivity. They embody a model of ecofeminism grounded in sustainability and a clear understanding and respect for ecological limits.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research demonstrate that the Haenyeos’ role in South Korea’s feminist movement is multifaceted. It is clear that their role extends beyond economic empowerment to encompass leadership, community, and ecological awareness. Historically, their transition into primary providers of their households during periods of male migration to the mainland redefined the gender expectations at the time, creating a precedent for women’s economic autonomy and ability. The interviews reinforce this by revealing how many Haenyeos entered the profession through intergenerational transmission and communicating such inheritance of both pride and burden. Adding on, the interviews also highlight the persistence of patriarchal resistance, with some Haenyeos recalling discouragement from family members and partners due to the job’s physical risks and

perceived low returns. Still, all of the Haenyeos continue on despite such skepticism because of a strong desire to be a role model for their children, citing their precursors and the admiration they had once felt for their leadership.

The Haenyeos' role in resisting Japanese colonial rule also marks an important chapter in their feminist legacy. The 1932 Anti-Japanese Protest showed that these women were active in one of Korea's largest women-led uprisings. Using the same communal structures that they created shaped their diving, they organized and demanded change against colonial exploitation. Their activism linked the fight for fair economic treatment with the wider struggle for national sovereignty. Remembering this history is vital because it shows that the Haenyeos' feminism was not only about labour or survival but was also about collective courage in the face of injustice and oppression. Their defiance during colonial rule hence connects directly to their modern image as symbols of resilience and feminism, illustrating their strength and resilience at times of social change.

Through the Haenyeos' environmental activism paired with their leadership in the restructuring of gender relations and in times of social change, it is possible to frame their ideology and actions as ecofeminists. Their sustainable harvesting methods, seaweed bed maintenance, and seasonal restrictions demonstrate a commitment rooted in history dedicated to ecological preservation. The interviews add a sense of urgency to these observations, with divers reporting tangible impacts of climate change from direct observations from underwater, such as altered weather patterns, deeper diving requirements due to warming waters, and heightened risks from underwater trash. Their knowledgeable actions including trash retrieval during dives and the use of scuba gear by younger members for cleanup illustrate an adaptive environmental perspective that merges traditional ecological knowledge with modern technology.

The interviews also bring forward a shared concern for the future. The demographic decline driven by aging populations and a lack of youth participation signals that the Haenyeos will soon become extinct. The interviewees also agree. "Because the number of Haenyeos are decreasing rapidly, it seems unlikely that this tradition will continue," one diver said, "still, we are glad that this interest from people like [the younger generation] is being facilitated in a way that at least if we are gone, we won't be forgotten." This demonstrates an approach that is able to look both backwards and forwards. On the one hand, it demonstrates that they acknowledge demographic decline and the structural forces drawing younger generations away from the sea. On the other hand, it recognizes the advancements in remembrance of the Haenyeos as a form of continuity, even if their physical tradition may die. Their role in the feminist movement may therefore shift from direct participation to symbolic guidance, shaping future discussions of gender and sustainability.

Taken all together, these layers of history, activism, and ecological responsibility reveal why the Haenyeos must be understood as feminist figures. Their lives show that feminism does not always take shape through formal organizations or explicit political actions, but can emerge through daily practices of survival and the resistance that follows. By providing for their households, challenging colonial exploitation, sustaining democratic communal systems, and adapting to ecological crises, the Haenyeos opened a space for women's leadership in the societal context where such authority was rarely acknowledged as a position for women. Their feminism is therefore live in both the water and land, with the choices that they make protecting both people and nature. Conclusively, Haenyeos demonstrate feminism through not only their bare act of existing and emerging through challenging conditions, but also their active resistance throughout history.

What makes the Haenyeos particularly powerful as feminist icons is the way they embody continuity. Most of the Haenyeos interviewed are daughters learning from mothers, who also learned to resist through their mothers in watching their resistance towards structures of exploitation, and all those before who started the whole legacy by stepping out of their houses and becoming an economical provider. This intergenerational resilience not only disrupts patriarchal expectations but also offers a model of leadership grounded in continuity. On the same note, it can be said that Haenyeos' story is not confined to Jeju or to the sea. It communicates a lesson that can serve a global resonance: that empowerment grows where women refuse limitation, build together, and pass on the strength of their legacy, a clear feminist approach.



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