

Korean-American female pastors push back against patriarchy

By **Deepa Bharath**
The Associated Press

When the Rev. Kyunglim Shin Lee was ordained in 1988, it angered her in-laws for contravening long-held Korean cultural values subordinating women's roles in society. Even her husband, a pastor, told her he understood intellectually "but his heart couldn't accept it."

Those reactions broke Lee's heart — and steeled her resolve. Today she is vice president for international relations at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.; has travelled to 60 countries as the seminary's ambassador; and once served as interim lead pastor at a Korean-American church for 11 months. Along the journey, she visualized herself as a speeding train.

"People would either have to get in for the ride, or step out of the way," she said. "Once I became convinced that god can use me, no one or nothing could stop me."

Lee's success story is rare in the realm of Korean-American churches, where women are seldom seen in the pulpits. In a time when women make up about 20% of Protestant pastors in the United States, Korean-American female pastors still struggle to gain acceptance in their home churches and often end up assuming leadership roles elsewhere.

Women like Lee who have broken barriers in these spaces remain pessimistic about the pace of change and are concerned by the resilience of patriarchal attitudes even among second- and third-generation Korean Americans. More representation on church elder boards and in the pulpit is needed to promote equality and provide role models for younger women considering ministry, they say, but bringing about such a cultural shift has proved a formidable challenge.

Gender equality in Korean-American churches lags well behind congregations in South Korea, according to the Rev. Young Lee Hertig, executive director of Innovative Space for Asian-American Christianity, which supports Asian-American women in ministry. There are more female lead pastors in South Korea, she said, "because culture changes faster when it is mainstream."

"Korean-American churches are the most patriarchal among Asian-American



PATRIARCHY PUSHBACK. The Rev. Kyunglim Shin Lee, vice president for international relations at the Wesley Theological Seminary, poses for a portrait on March 10, 2022 in the chapel of the seminary in Washington. When Lee was ordained in 1988, it angered her in-laws for contravening long-held Korean cultural values subordinating women's roles in society. Even her husband, a pastor, told her he understood intellectually "but his heart couldn't accept it." (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, File)

"That was very encouraging. Change doesn't happen overnight. You have to create pathways and pipelines."

Soo Ji Alvarez is in a similar situation. After growing up in a conservative Korean immigrant church in Vancouver, British Columbia, that had no female pastors, today she is lead pastor of The Avenue Church, a multiethnic Free Baptist congregation in Riverside, California.

The move away from her home church was not intentional but happened organically, she said, and she embraces her pastoral position as a role model.

"It's a big deal for me (as a woman of Korean descent) to lead a congregation," she said. "I hope I can help pave the way for others so they know it's possible. Ministry should be like any other career — your ethnicity or gender should not affect your chances."

As for the pastors' male counterparts in Korean-American churches, Kim, for one, expressed anger that so many stay silent on the issue: "They feel like fighting social justice issues shouldn't be the church's business. But to me it is god's work. It's important, necessary work."

But Lee, whose ordination was objectionable to her family, said it pleases her to see some male pastors welcome women to the pulpit — as her husband eventually did.

The Rev. John Park, who leads Numa Church in Buena Park, California, is one male pastor who embraces such allyship. He called on men to consciously work to empower women, citing scripture in the words of the Apostle Paul: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

"The Bible is clear on the issue of equality," Park said. "But this is an internal battle in our community. We're fighting our own past."

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churches. ... Things should have changed by now, but they haven't," Hertig said.

Male dominance in traditional Korean society has roots in Confucianism from centuries ago, when women were subject to the authority of their husbands and fathers and in many ways barred from participating in public life. Many immigrants from Korea still hold such notions, and churches especially have been slow to embrace equality, said Grace Ji-Sun Kim, a theology professor at the Earlham School of Religion in Indiana.

"It's hard for Korean women to be ministers because they are expected to be obedient to men," she said. "It's difficult for (Korean) men to listen to a woman who is preaching because this idea of superiority is embedded in their psyche."

The Rev. Janette Ok, an associate professor specializing in the New Testament at Fuller Seminary and pastor at Ekko Church, a nondenominational congregation in Fullerton, California, agreed that "representation matters."

She was fortunate to have a role model while growing up in the 1980s in Detroit, where she saw a Korean woman leading her church's English-language service every Sunday — but at the time didn't grasp how exceptional that was.

"I watched her give sacraments, give the benediction. I still have this image of her in a pastoral robe and stole," Ok said. "Without her example, I would've never imagined I could become a pastor."

That woman was the Rev. Mary Paik. Now retired and living in Hawai'i, Paik said she was only hired as a last resort

because the male applicants' English wasn't good enough. She received a "lot of strange looks" as an unmarried, 30-year-old female pastor.

Male church elders were patronizing and treated her like a daughter, while some of the younger men flirted with her or refused to acknowledge her. Many of the older women seemed to find her presence inconceivable.

"But some younger women were standing up a little straighter because I was there," Paik said. "They felt good about it."

She has seen some progress. When the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) started a group in 1991 for female Korean-American clergy in the denomination, there were just 18. Today there are 150.

"When I started this, I was alone," Paik said. "Now there are other women who talk to each other, share their struggles with one another. As long as we do it together, it's bearable. And we do it not because it's easy or hard, but because it's a calling."

But Ok said that while there are more of them in ministry now, most end up serving in mainline or multiethnic congregations rather than Korean-American churches.

"There is this sense that I love my home church and I don't want to abandon my home community," she said. "But they don't affirm me as a leader. It's heartbreaking."

Ok's own church is largely Asian American, but not specifically Korean. Several years ago she served as interim lead pastor for nine months.

"I was afraid people would leave because I'm a woman, but they didn't," she said.

Alexander Wang returns to runway after sexual assault claims

By **Jonathan Landrum Jr.**
AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES — After taking a break amid sexual assault allegations, fashion designer Alexander Wang's comeback to the runway was greeted with adoration during his highly anticipated show in Los Angeles.

Some shouted "This is amazing!" and "I love it!" while others cheered on Wang's 50-look collection for his "Fortune City" runway show that celebrated Asian-American culture in the historic Chinatown area.

Wang held his first show since 2019, just before several people accused him of sexual assault and drugging male and transgender models.

Wang initially denied the allegations — which first came in late 2020 — calling them "baseless." Last year, he said in a statement that he disagreed with some of the accuser's details adding he would "set a better example" as a public figure. A lawyer for the alleged victims later said Wang had met the accusers, saying, "We acknowledge Mr. Wang's apology and we are moving forward."

The accusations tarnished Wang's brand, but did not fully cripple it —



especially in China. He still dressed popular figures like Rihanna and Julia Fox while releasing a recent campaign with Lucy Liu. His brand is still being carried in some major retailers.

The evening event had the support of 800 invitees who lined up to enter Wang's show, where a red floodlight covered the Central Plaza area. It was a splashy event with stars like Kimora Lee Simmons and Lisa Rinna sitting in the front row while others such as rappers Gunna and Coi

Leray, actor Harry Hamlin, K-pop singer CL, and model Behtai Prinsloo-Levine watched the 15-minute show.

Wang incorporated models with different ethnic backgrounds and sizes — including a pregnant Adriana Lima who received most of the applause for prancing down the runway with her exposed baby bump. The models sported a variety of pieces with shades of indigo and brown, denim and leather coats, red velour sweat suit, heavy wools shrunken into bike

"FORTUNE CITY." Models walk the runway at fashion designer Alexander Wang's "Fortune City" runway show and party celebrating Asian-American culture, on April 19, 2022, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello)

shorts, crop tops, and oversized wool coats.

Once the show finished, Wang ran onto the stage with a big smile, waved at attendees — who were mostly dressed in all black — before he darted backstage. The show closed out with a heavy dose of red-colored confetti cascading over everyone, creating a party atmosphere — especially for those who attended the Asian night party that featured a market with local food vendors.

In the market, Wang had cameras following him the whole time. He had numerous people who greeted him with handshakes, hugs, and lauded him for his work.

