



SOUTH KOREA

Feminists'

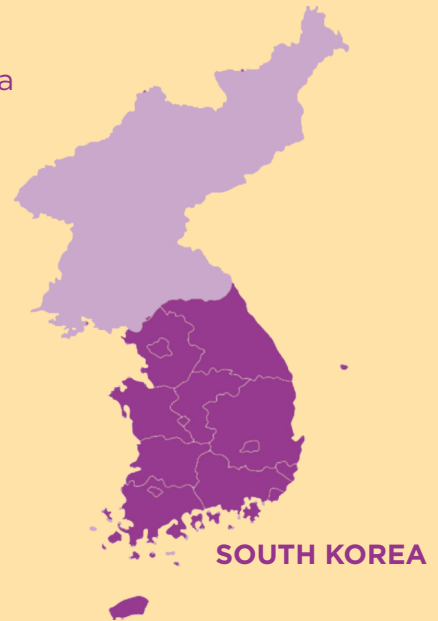
Womaniifesto

for Women's Human Rights



Pervasive Gender Inequality in South Korea

Over the past six decades, South Korea has boomed into a cultural and technological powerhouse. Today, it is counted among the top economies of the world, growing 800 times from USD 2 billion in 1961 to USD 1.6 trillion in 2019.¹ Moreover, 91.7 per cent of legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been put in place in the country.² Despite these achievements, South Korean women continue to struggle against rampant sexual harassment and misogyny in public life. Deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes and norms seek to keep women across the country locked into gender-based stereotypes and roles at work and in private life.³



Recent estimates suggest that more than 70 per cent of women between the age groups of 25 and 34 are active in the country's workforce.⁴ Yet, South Korea ranks the lowest in the Glass Ceiling Index that evaluates the correlation of women's higher education attainment and the number of women in managerial positions as well as in parliament (in addition to other indicators of workplace equality for women).⁵ On average, women in South Korea earn two-thirds of the salary of a man.⁶ Women and girls aged 15 and over spend 14 per cent of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, as compared to 4.4 per cent by men.⁷ These statistics illustrate that women in South Korea continue to face several structural barriers to their entry into better segments of work as well as advancements in position and pay.

The adverse conditions for women in South Korea's labour market is made worse by a ubiquitous culture of sexism that pervades the political and public spheres of the country. Only 19 per cent of seats in parliament are held by women,⁸ well below the global average of about 25 per cent.⁹ While the share of female ministers reached over 33 per cent in 2020,¹⁰ this has not translated into meaningful power sharing with women or acceptance of feminist voices and agendas in political spaces. The country's rigid two-party system

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2021, Oct 25). *Gender equality: Korea has come a long way, but there is more work to do*. <https://www.oecd.org/country/korea/thematic-focus/gender-equality-korea-has-come-a-long-way-but-there-is-more-work-to-do-8bb81613/>

² UN Women. (n.d). *Republic of Korea*. Asia. <https://data.unwomen.org/country/republic-of-korea>

³ Mackenzie. J. (2022, Dec 14). *As South Korea abolishes its gender ministry, women fight back*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63905490>

⁴ The Economist. (2020, April 8). *South Korean women are fighting to be heard*. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/04/08/south-korean-women-are-fighting-to-be-heard?gclid=CjwKCAjwrJ-hBhB7EiwAuyBVXX0hOPRMbvDtkouDaHeLtuqcE15mMhP6JLRU7haORZxKS1y_elqQ0xoCPa8QAvD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds

⁵ The Economist. (2020, March 4). *Iceland leads the way to women's equality in the workplace*. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/03/04/iceland-leads-the-way-to-womens-equality-in-the-workplace>

⁶ The Economist. (2020, April 8). *South Korean women are fighting to be heard*. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/04/08/south-korean-women-are-fighting-to-be-heard?gclid=CjwKCAjwrJ-hBhB7EiwAuyBVXX0hOPRMbvDtkouDaHeLtuqcE15mMhP6JLRU7haORZxKS1y_elqQ0xoCPa8QAvD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds

⁷ UN Women. (n.d). *Republic of Korea*. Asia. <https://data.unwomen.org/country/republic-of-korea>

⁸ UN Women. (n.d). *Republic of Korea*. Asia. <https://data.unwomen.org/country/republic-of-korea>

⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2019). *Women in national parliaments*. <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

¹⁰ OECD. (2021, Oct 25). *Gender equality: Korea has come a long way, but there is more work to do*. <https://www.oecd.org/country/korea/thematic-focus/gender-equality-korea-has-come-a-long-way-but-there-is-more-work-to-do-8bb81613/>

is dominated by men who are unconcerned or even hostile to women's issues and voices. South Korea's #MeToo movement exposed the underlying misogyny and sexual violence that is common in its political circles and its society. In 2020, several high-level local officials were exposed for inflicting Gender Based Violence (GBV), including the Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon, who was earlier hailed as a women's rights champion.¹¹ Moreover, South Korea's booming tech industry has contributed to the rise of digital sex crimes. It has made public spaces highly unsafe for women, who are often secretly filmed by tiny hidden cameras in toilets or while using changing rooms. Digital sex crimes have gone up by 82 per cent since 2020, and 11,568 cases were reported in 2021 alone.¹²

Until recently, South Korea's laws on sexual violence outrightly violated women's human rights. For instance, until as recently as 2020, laws in South Korea assumed that minors were willing and consenting participants in digital sex crimes if they received any benefit such as payment. Thus, instead of being protected by law, women and even minors risked being punished and sentenced to juvenile centres for reporting instances of sexual violence against them.¹³ After some high-profile cases and nation-wide protests led by women, laws such as the Act on the Punishment of Sexual Crimes and Protection of Victims (1994), have been tightened.¹⁴ The government also revised the Sex Crimes Act (2010) that bans filming and distribution of non-consensual images or videos as a crime. The Act was broadened in 2020 to include possession, purchase, storage and/or watching images captured non-consensually as a crime.¹⁵ Moreover, in 2019, women's struggle against the ban on abortion made gains when the national government announced a draft legislation providing partial abortion rights to women.¹⁶

While the above-mentioned legal developments are useful, they remain inadequate to deal with the severity of the problem. Weak sentencing, poor policing, and a widespread attitude of disdain towards feminist voices and agendas, continue to thwart South Korea's progress towards gender equality. Instead of promoting and supporting the feminist movement of the country, the President of South Korea, Yoon Suk-yeol, has scrapped the government's gender quotas and is now trying to abolish the Gender Equality Ministry, which supports women and survivors of sexual assault.¹⁷ There is an outpouring of resistance against these decisions by feminists in South Korea, with over 800 organisations challenging these moves. Despite a hostile state, the feminist movement in the country continues to claim space and organise around key moments and issues affecting women.¹⁸ Thanks to women's activism, the claim to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family was not included in the revision of the Government Organization Act, 1948¹⁹ in February this year, and is currently stopped.²⁰ However, the stance of the present

¹¹ Human Rights Watch. (n.d). *South Korea*. Events of 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/south-korea>

¹² Mackenzie. J. (2022, Dec 14). *As South Korea abolishes its gender ministry, women fight back*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63905490>

¹³ Seo, Y, Hollingsworth. J. (2021, January 16). *South Korea is cracking down on digital sex crimes. Has it done enough*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/15/asia/south-korea-telegram-digital-sex-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>

¹⁴ UN Women. (n.d). *Global database on violence against women*. <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/republic-of-korea/1994/act-on-the-punishment-of-sexual-violence-and-protection-of-victims>

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch. (2021). *My life is not your porn. Digital sex crimes in South Korea*. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/06/southkorea0621_web_1_0.pdf

¹⁶ Barr. H. (2020. Oct 12). *South Korea partially recognizes reproductive rights*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/12/south-korea-partially-recognizes-reproductive-rights>

¹⁷ Mackenzie. J. (2022, Dec 14). *As South Korea abolishes its gender ministry, women fight back*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63905490>

¹⁸ Haas B. (2018, Oct 26). *Escape the corset: South Korean women rebel against strict beauty standards*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/26/escape-the-corset-south-korean-women-rebel-against-strict-beauty-standards>

¹⁹ KLRI. (n.d). *Government organisation act*. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/kor_service/lawView.do?hseq=54820&lang=ENG

²⁰ Min-Joo K. (2023, May 11). *[One year of the Yoon government, where is gender equality] 'Abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family', now it's time to seek a change in direction*. Women's Newspaper. <http://www.womennews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=235682>

government has not changed, and since it is unknown when there will be another attempt, the capacity of the women's movement must be prepared for this and other upcoming challenges. For instance, the 4B feminist movement is enabling women in the country to reject patriarchal relations by refusing heterosexual marriage, childbirth, romance and sexual acts. South Korea's first feminist party, Women's Party, is also raising the hopes of women across the country for a more substantive representation in decision-making spaces.

'The change I want is for more people to recognise that Gender-Based Violence and discrimination are not natural and irreversible. We can raise our voices, be true to ourselves and live safely, without being subjected to discrimination and violence. To get to a world like this, we must stand in solidarity with those who are subjected to any type of systemic discrimination' – Younghee Lee,* participant of Womanifesto process.



**Name changed to maintain anonymity*

Womanifesto Journey



Photo: Femi school participants in one of the discussions on framing their feminist demands.

South Korean Feminists as Femi School Participants

This Womanifesto is a feminist manifesto of women who are leading political change towards gender equality in South Korea.

The Korea Network of Organized Women in Politics (KNOW) was established to create an equal and safe society for women. KNOW seeks to increase opportunities for women to participate in politics and to foster the country's feminist social movements. The Womanifesto was produced through an intensive learning and dialogical process at KNOW's Femi School, through which over 300 women learnt about feminist theory, law, women's human rights and enhanced their skills around movement-building and political leadership. While women intuitively understand women's issues based on their experiences, the Femi school supported their articulation of the same through feminist terms, concepts, and trends, strengthening their capacities to publicly raise their voices. The Womanifesto process built on the learning journeys of women at the Femi school, who collectively identified their key demands for structural change. Women who participated in the Womanifesto journey have developed a feminist political discourse and agenda for leading the movement. As the next step, the group will organise a Femi Action Camp to undertake advocacy aimed at the general elections due in 2024.

South Korean Feminists Raise Priority Issues

As described above, gender-based discrimination is widespread in South Korea's socio-economic and political life. While women continue to bear the costs of its patriarchal systems, the national government is increasingly closed to acknowledging feminist concerns. The following are some of the priority issues that need urgent addressing:

- ❖ **Sexism in politics:** Korean politics is dominated by two major parties – Blue party and Red party which are largely male dominated and have participated in the backlash against the country's feminist movements. Women and minority groups are under-represented in these parties, where most actors are hostile towards issues such as women's human rights, climate crisis and democratisation. Modifications to the electoral system such as the introduction of proportional representation system and alternate rotation system, has enabled feminists and other rights-based activists to enter politics through national parties. However, the experiences of women politicians in the Parliament and other decision-making spaces highlight the highly adverse environment that women have to face, including being targeted with misogynistic comments over their attire, being denied voice in discussions, and even facing death threats.²¹ The patriarchal attitudes that are prevalent in the country insist on viewing women as apolitical beings, instead of citizens with a political voice, power and responsibility to participate in public life.²² This reduces acceptance for women entering politics and increases their struggles for recognition.
- ❖ **Pervasive Gender-Based Violence (GBV):** According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, one in three women in Korean society has experienced violence, while 46 per cent of survivors responded that they were assaulted by close people such as family members or lovers. The survey also found that 1 in 10 teenage girls answered that they had experiences of receiving sexual advances online, with digital crimes against women finding new routes to operate even as regulations tighten.²³ Despite the high levels of violence that women routinely face, such as being filmed in toilets and changing rooms, the President has stated that structural sexism is a 'thing of the past' in South Korea.²⁴ Official statistics and findings on pervasive levels of GBV are being denied and overlooked by the top rungs of political leadership, and are being used as justification to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, which has been an important source of support and corrective action for women in the country.
- ❖ **Systematic gender-based discrimination in the labour market:** Since the 1970s, Korean women have driven the country's economic progress by working in large numbers in export-oriented industries.²⁵ Yet, women continue to face discrimination at all levels in workplaces including wage gaps, greater intensity of work and expectations for women to perform gender-stereotyped roles of cooking and cleaning in offices. Employers discriminate against women in promotions, and are unwilling to bear the costs of maternity leave. The lack of social and public support in

²¹ McCurry J. (2020, Aug 6). *Criticism of South Korean MP's red dress stirs sexism debate*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/06/criticism-mp-red-dress-stirs-south-korea-sexism-debate>

²² OECD. (n.d). *Social Institutions and Gender Index*. <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/KR.pdf>

²³ Young Seoun. P, Jung_Im. H, Chi-Seon. S, Hyun-Ah. K, Jeong-Hye. K. (2017). *Measures for improving legislation on violence against women: Focusing on stalking and dating violence*. <http://www.mogef.go.kr/kor/skin/doc.html?fn=6c522fc65cf943d0ab3c9c851be3f77d.pdf&rs=/rsfiles/202304/>

²⁴ Mackenzie. J. (2022, Dec 14). *As South Korea abolishes its gender ministry, women fight back*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63905490>

²⁵ Hwang. Y. (2022, July 26). *All pain, no gain: the gender story of Korean economic development*. University of London. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/study/blog/all-pain-no-gain-gender-story-korean-economic-development>

South Korea for women's work is evidenced from the fact that around 95 per cent of women between the ages of 30-45 years had to quit their jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁶ Since then, women in the country have been faced with large-scale layoffs and reduction in wage rates to poverty level wages. In families with working couples, women spend more than three hours a day on domestic work and childcare (while men perform only half an hour in a day), bearing a disproportionate labour burden at home, in addition to facing discrimination at the workplace.²⁷



Photo: Femi School participants joined the Climate March in Seoul, South Korea.

²⁶ Sam-il, O, Jong-ha, L. (2021). Covid-19 and women's employment: A comparison between pandemic and general recession. <https://www.bok.or.kr/portal/singl/pblicitn/view.do?nttId=10064360&searchOptn10=ECNMY&menuNo=200636&pageIndex=1>

²⁷ The Economist. (2020, April 8). South Korean women are fighting to be heard. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/04/08/south-korean-women-are-fighting-to-be-heard?gclid=CjwKCAjwrJ-hBhB7EiwAuyBVXX0hOPRMBvDtkouDaHeLtuqcEI5mMhP6JLRU7haORZxKS1y_elqQ0xoCPa8QAvD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds

Womanifesto: South Korean Feminists Demand the Fulfilment of Their Human Rights

Women in South Korea want to live a life of dignity and equality in all domains of their lives. Specifically, they demand that the following actions and agendas be taken up as a priority by the national government:

- ❖ **Reinstatement of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family:** The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family was set up in 2001 to promote the gender equality policies of the national government. However, the current administration is driving a campaign to abolish the ministry, to appease men who feel threatened by gender equality. Feminists demand that the plans for abolishment be scrapped and the Ministry be reinstated as the control tower of all gender related policies. Many accounts of women show that the Ministry played a very concrete role in providing safety, counselling and legal aid to women experiencing violence, when all other support structures including that of family, failed to support women.²⁸ Given the proven role and importance of the Ministry, it should be further strengthened and resourced with a bigger budget to drive change on women's issues.
- ❖ **Ensure equal opportunities for women's political participation:** South Korean feminists demand that the national government take a leading role in ensuring that women are able to substantively participate in the political domain. This requires policy change, with amendments to key laws such as the Political Parties Act, 1962²⁹ and Public Official Elections Act, 1994.³⁰ These laws help to maintain the status quo of a two-party system, putting restrictions that discourage smaller and younger parties to form and gain ground, in addition to regulating freedom of expression of public officials. These laws

²⁸ Mackenzie, J. (2022, Dec 14). As South Korea abolishes its gender ministry, women fight back. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63905490>

²⁹ KLRI. (n.d). *Political parties act*. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=60320&lang=ENG

³⁰ KLRI. (n.d). *Public official elections act*. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/%20lawView.do?hseq=38405&lang=ENG



need to be amended to allow for deeper democracy and political diversity, creating space for women and minorities to politically organise. Furthermore, the national government must actively discourage and condemn male political actors and public officials for misogynistic behaviour towards women political leaders.

❖ **Strengthen laws and response to address GBV:**

Sexual violence in various forms continue unabated in South Korea. The government response is inadequate and weak. Feminists demand that the national government undertake a comprehensive approach to ending GBV in the country, including online violence against women and girls, making it a top policy priority. Two specific areas of urgent intervention towards this goal are to strengthen and correct existing laws prohibiting GBV in different forms.

For instance, the standard of validation that is used in cases of rape, require the existence of assault and intimidation, which is a highly narrow standard for evaluating the nature and impact of such a crime. Women demand that the standard should be consent. Similarly, the justice system of South Korea views crimes related to domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking as private, trivial matters, which is a blatant violation of women's human rights (who are usually the target of these crimes).³¹ The Ministry of Justice must work with the national government to strengthen the laws against GBV as per feminist standards and reform attitudes of judges, prosecutors and the police to acknowledge the grave nature of these crimes, and ensure appropriate punishments for the perpetrators.



³¹ Human Rights Watch. (2021). *My life is not your porn. Digital sex crimes in South Korea.* https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/06/southkorea0621_web_1_0.pdf

❖ **Ensure workplace equality for women:** The Republic of Korea has ratified International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions 100 (Equal Remuneration), 111 (Discrimination in Employment and Occupation) and 156 (Workers and Family Responsibility).³² These call for equal pay for equal work, and practice of non-discrimination based on gender, marital status, family status or pregnancy or childbirth. Yet, women experience routine discrimination and indignity in the country's labour market. The national government must amend relevant laws such as the Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act,³³ to eliminate gender-based discrimination during recruitment, promotions, wage gap and terminations. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family should centrally lead these reforms, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Welfare as well as the Ministry of Employment and Labour.

❖ **Commit to an anti-discriminatory policy approach:** Feminists demand that the national government commits to following an anti-discriminatory approach in its policies. Towards this end, it must enact the Anti-Discrimination Act, which was a campaign promise in 2020.³⁴ The Act must be implemented to safeguard all citizens against any form of discrimination based on their sexual orientation, gender, religion, or any other beliefs. Anti-discrimination as a principle should be mainstreamed in all government policies. For instance, the Act on Registration of Family Relations, 2007³⁵ and the Framework Act on Healthy Families, 2014,³⁶ need to be revised and reworded to recognise and include non-traditional families.

³² KLRI (n.d.) *Equal Employment Opportunity and Work Family Balance Assistance Act*. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=37613&lang=ENG

³³ Hyun-su, Y. (2022, Feb 7). *Now is the time to pass anti-discrimination law*. The Korean Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220207000530>

³⁴ KLRI. (n.d). *Act on registration of family relations*. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?lang=ENG&hseq=33071

³⁵ KLRI. (n.d). *Framework act on healthy families*. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=7788&lang=ENG

³⁶ McCurry, J. (2020, Oct 28). *South Korea vows to go carbon neutral by 2050 to fight climate emergency*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/28/south-korea-vows-to-go-carbon-neutral-by-2050-to-fight-climate-emergency>



❖ **Strengthen response to the climate crisis:** South Korean feminists demand a sustainable and responsible climate policy in energy, transportation, housing, and urban development. The national government's proposed Green New Deal promises to end the country's heavy dependence on fossil fuel, while investing in green infrastructure, clean energy and electric vehicles.³⁷

However, the goal of 40 per cent reduction by 2030 is low given the urgency of the climate crisis. Moreover, the national government has failed to provide a clear roadmap for achieving milestones, while it has lowered the previously set milestone of carbon emissions reduction by the industrial sector.³⁸ Furthermore, the government's Shaheen project plans to build new petrochemical units, which will cause large-scale carbon emissions. The government is also pursuing nuclear energy development as a priority. South Korean feminists demand that the national government steps back from these pro-industry policies, and commits to a clear roadmap to meet its green milestones, while investing in the development of renewable energy and mainstreaming a climate focus in its policies on transportation, housing and urban development.

❖ **Ensure a systematic solution to women's unequal care burden:** Women in South Korea experience a disproportionate care burden in households as compared to men. This is not only with respect to care work for their children, but also of the elderly. As South Korea's society rapidly ages, women are increasingly finding themselves being responsible for caring for younger and older generations, while earning wages. This is unsustainable and unjust. The national government must take up this issue as a priority, ensuring that care-giving responsibility is shared equally between men and women, and is paid by or provided for by the state and employer. The government must strengthen its Act on

³⁷ McCurry, J. (2020, Oct 28). *South Korea vows to go carbon neutral by 2050 to fight climate emergency*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/28/south-korea-vows-to-go-carbon-neutral-by-2050-to-fight-climate-emergency>

³⁸ Shin, H. (2023, Mar 21). *South Korea cuts 2030 emissions reductions targets for industry*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/south-korea-cuts-2030-emissions-reductions-targets-industry-2023-03-21/>



Assistance in Social Services and the Establishment and Operation of Public Agency for Social Service, 2021³⁹ and the Community Care Policy,⁴⁰ while rolling out public awareness campaigns on this issue, as well as strengthening the institutions that support care work as a social function.



³⁹ KLRI. (n.d). *Act on Assistance in Social Services and The Establishment and Operation of Public Agency for Social Service*. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/kor_service/lawView.do?hseq=61043&lang=ENG

⁴⁰ Hwang, Y. & Park, H. (2018, Nov 21)., *Comprehensive community care system to allow elderly Koreans to live in their homes by 2025*. Hankyoreh. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/871188.html



About APWLD

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist and women's rights organisations and individual activists. For over 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.

This publication is produced with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Foundation for a Just Society (FJS), and Wellspring.

Written by: Priyanka Jain

Edited and Reviewed by: Kamakshi Amar, Zar Zar Tun (APWLD Programme Leads), and APWLD Secretariat

Designed by: A. Zarate

Year of Publication: 2023