

Policy Brief, No. 05  
2022



# Mobilising the EU–South Korean Digital Partnership

How to move towards Gender Equality

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August 2022

## Abstract

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*South Korea and the European Union (EU) are 'like-minded partners' who have strengthened their relationship over the past decade. Leaders of the EU and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have emphasised the need for a more human rights based approach to digitalisation given that this is a key area of interest for both partners. The World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks the ROK 124th out of 149 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunities for women, meaning it is one of the lowest ranking OECD countries as regards gender equality in the workplace. On top of the gender pay gap South Korea reports a high amount of online violence towards women. Online violence against women can take many forms, such as cyber harassment, revenge porn and threats of rape and sexual assault. This EIAS Policy Brief will analyse South Korea's approach to its struggle with gender equality while comparing it with the situation in the EU and identifying avenues for joint action and cooperation in this field. Special attention will be given to the importance of the digital sphere and gender equality and the role of the recently elected ROK president, Yoon Suk-yeol. Finally, based on the digital partnership efforts between the EU and South Korea, policy recommendations are given so as to help address the issue.*

### **Keywords:**

*European Union, Republic of Korea, gender inequality, digital cooperation, gender based violence, digitalisation*

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## Introduction

South Korea and the EU are 'like-minded partners' who have strengthened their relationship over the past decade. Their relations were upgraded to a Strategic Partnership in 2010. Following this, South Korea and the EU entered into a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which was agreed upon in 2011 and formally entered into force in 2015. As well as these partnerships, the two are also formally engaged in a Framework Agreement (2014) and a Crisis Management Participation Agreement (2016). These accords cover the three key areas of economics, politics, and security. As of June 2020, leaders of the European Union (EU) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) emphasised the need for human-centred digitalisation during an online forum. During this video conference, both parties committed to enhancing cooperation in the digital realm "harnessing human-centric digitalisation" through enhanced research and innovation cooperation and confirmed the launching of the High-Level Dialogue on the digital economy in the near future.

Online violence against women can take many forms, such as cyber harassment, revenge porn and threats of rape and sexual assault. Perpetrators may be known to the victim or could be anonymous, and often police find it hard to track them down and prosecute them for their crimes. The root cause of this violence is gender inequality (discrimination, gender stereotypes, sexism).

With the EU's new Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action, 2021–2025 (GAP III) being adopted as of 2021, gender equality appears high on the list of priorities for the EU. This Action Plan aims to accelerate progress on empowering women and girls, and promote gender equality and women's empowerment through all external action of the European Union. Considering South Korea is ranked as one of the lowest OECD countries in gender equality, it will be worthwhile to assess how this new plan will be seen in light of the Strategic Partnership between the EU and South Korea.

## Chapter 1: The Legacy of Institutionalised Gender Inequality in South Korea

In premodern Korea, women were strictly confined to a patriarchal family system. This family system, which was officially incorporated into the constitution under the name "Hoju" in 1953, has its origins in the Joseon dynasty and continues to influence the situation of Korean women today. At its core, this is a [strictly patrilineal kinship system](#) that defined in detail the status and roles of all household members under the unchallenged authority of the (male) head of the family. For example, it was often presumed that after marriage, women would join their husband's lineage. Therefore, it was considered one of the primary duties for women to ensure the continuation of the family line [by giving birth to a son](#). These values were considered worthy of protection by the government, even in the second half of the 20th century, when the state sought to strengthen these traditions in order to stabilise the social and political order. Therefore the patrilineal social organisation was formally [codified](#) in the Korean Civil Code starting in 1958.

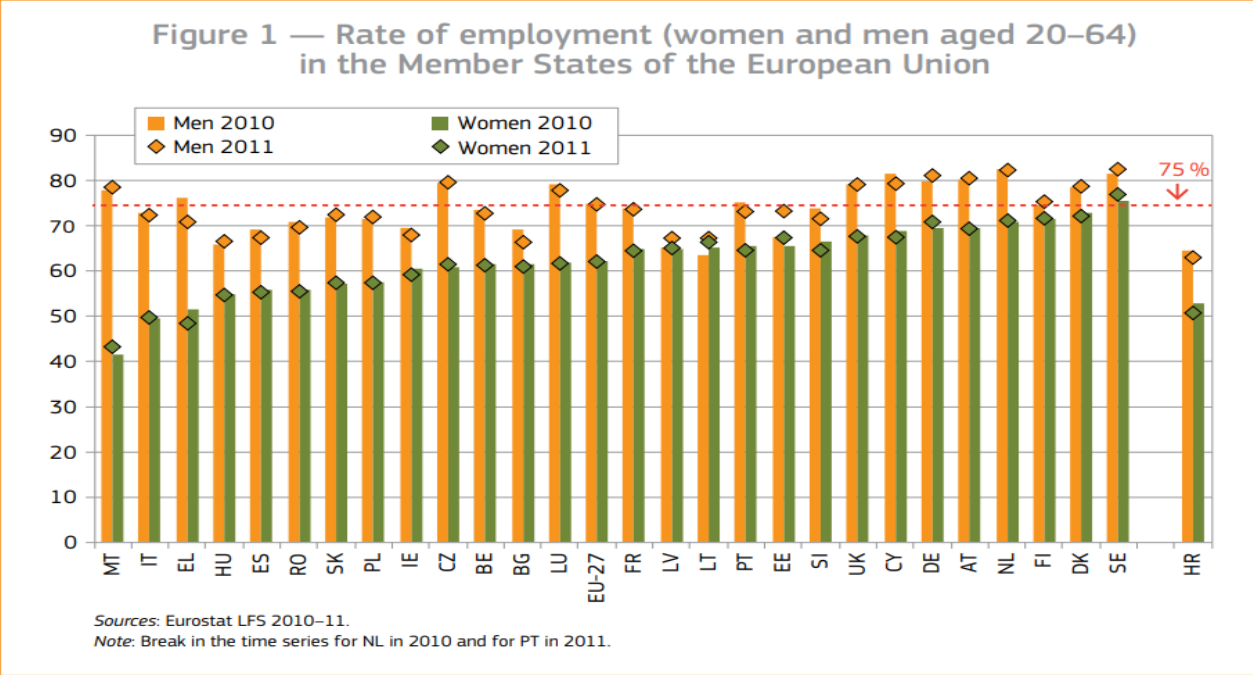
An outdated Korean term to describe wives is a compound of the Korean word for home and person, a [home person](#) (집사람: 집=home 사람=person), which signifies a stereotyped perception that women should stay home rearing children and doing unpaid work. The corresponding term to describe the husband, on the other hand, is outside man. This perception has changed since the 1960s, as more and more women began to work in factories outside the domestic sphere as part of South Korea's rapid industrialization. In the past six decades, the Korean economy has grown [800-fold](#) and it is undeniable that women have played a significant role in this development. Since the 1960s female workers were mainly [employed in factories](#) producing textiles and fabrics, shoes and electronic goods. Working conditions were poor and wages were low. Since many women did not

have comprehensive training, they were also exposed to [extreme job insecurity](#) as is common amongst unskilled labourers. Between 1960-1975 the rate of women's labour participation nearly doubled, rising from ~27% to ~47%. However, this share dropped between the mid-1970s to 1990 due to government policy focusing on men's participation in the manufacturing industry. In 1997, the ROK joined the OECD and women's labour force participation rate has continuously increased from [49% in 1990 to 60% in 2019](#).

Although the hoju system was removed from the constitution in 2008 after a court found it to be inconsistent with the constitution in 2005, large gender gaps remain in reality. In no OECD country is the gender pay gap higher than in South Korea. The Centre for Strategic Studies described Korean developments as "[in many ways the worst of both worlds](#)": The World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks Korea [124th out of 149](#) in terms of economic participation and opportunities for women. As of 2017, women in Korea accounted for 39.5% of full-time employment, but 62.5% of part-time employment with women tending to [occupy low-paying, non-regular jobs](#) and being less likely to be promoted to managerial positions. In addition, Korea has the [highest suicide rate](#) among OECD countries, with young women being the most affected. In addition, the country has the lowest fertility rate among OECD countries and [lowest female employment rate](#). This stands in sharp contrast to the 75% of Korean women aged 25-34 who have obtained [a university degree](#) – which is the [highest among OECD](#) countries.

In The Economist's 2020 glass-ceiling Index, the gender pay gap in South Korea was called "[the worst ... among developed countries](#)" after the country ranked last for the 8th consecutive year. The index was calculated using various indicators such as the wage gap, labour force participation, the percentage of women in management positions, and the possibility of paid maternity leave.

According to the Department of Employment and Labour, female employees in 2020 still earn, on average, only [67.7 percent](#) of what their male counterparts received. This inequality worsens with age. According to the Office of National Statistics, by age 50, the average monthly wage for women can [drop to about 56 percent](#) of that for men in the same age group. This inequality is exacerbated when one considers that women are disproportionately employed as subcontractors and in other irregular positions in the labour market, which are both lower paid and less likely to have wage growth than permanent employees.

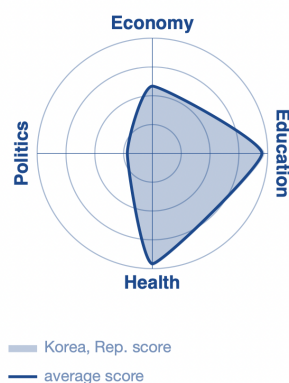


Source: [European Commission, page 5](#)

## 1.1 South Korea's Gender Gap

The [World Economic Forum's \(WEF\) Global Gender Gap Report](#) from 2020 highlights these differences with impressive figures. In the ranking, different categories are rated on a scale between 0 and 1, where 0 stands for total inequality, 1 for total parity. In terms of educational achievement, Korea scores 0.973, indicating a high degree of equality. In political participation and representation, on the other hand, the score is just 0.179.

Nevertheless, young South Korean women are the best educated among all OECD countries: 76% of South Korean women aged 25-34 have at least a college degree, compared to 64% of South Korean men in the same age group. In 2021 around [53.3% of women](#) aged 15 years and older participated in the labour force within South Korea, a statistic far below that of its OECD counterparts. Although more women are participating in the labour market they are still underrepresented overall. The comparatively [low proportion of female managers, female workers in legal professions, and female lawmakers](#) illustrates a deep-rooted gender inequality which is also reflected in pay, as can be seen in the significantly lower [female to male earnings ratio](#).

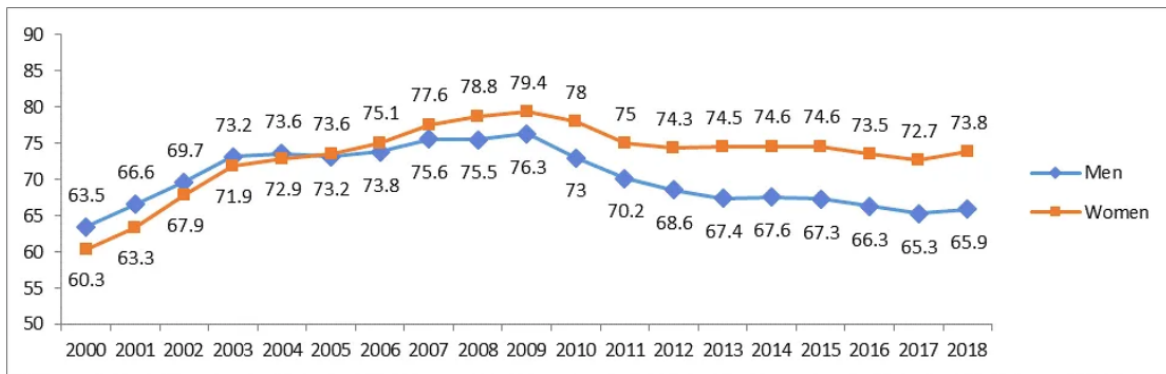


Source: Global Gender Gap Report (2020)

As is shown by this graph by the WEF Women and men stand almost totally equal in the field of health and education, the disparity becomes clear when looking at the economic indicators and the political sector. This lack of representation and equality cannot be explained logically and implies the existence of a very persistent glass ceiling and other obstacles women face when it comes to transferring academic accomplishments into the business and public sectors.

This persistent inequality between men and women was also acknowledged by former President Moon Jae-in, who wanted to make it one of the main objectives of his presidency to increase the representation of women in important offices and boards of directors. However, even the stated goal of filling [30 % of cabinet posts](#) with women was far behind the standard of other established democracies. After all, the proportion of women in Moon's cabinet was 27.8 %. The fact that women are underrepresented even though they have the same or a higher level of education was also addressed by the Ministry of Education under Moon when an order was issued requiring national universities to increase the proportion of female professors from 16% to 25% by 2030.

Figure 4. Higher education enrollment rate of Korea (2000-2018, %)



Source: [OECD](#)

The very fact that it was hailed as a success or milestone in 2022 that the proportion of women in high-level government positions [reached 10%](#) for the first time shows that there are still many hurdles to overcome. One reason for the low representation of women in high official positions is also that [various studies](#) have shown that female politicians are [more scrutinised](#) for their political experience and background compared to their male counterparts.

Despite these grim figures, the Moon administration has been able to report further cautious progress. For example, the proportion of parental leave taken by fathers increased [from 1.4 percent to 21.2 percent](#) between 2009 and 2019. Accordingly, the notorious gender pay gap in South Korea has also narrowed slightly under the Moon administration, and in a 2020 survey, 43.2 percent of respondents said gender discrimination [has decreased during traditional holidays](#), when women typically take on a disproportionate amount of household and emotional labor.

## 1.2 South Korean Birth Rate

A major problem in Korea that can hardly be separated from gender inequality is the low birth rate per woman (TRF), [which currently stands at 0.82](#). This is the lowest birth rate in the OECD and, if it does not increase, could lead to South Korea losing a large proportion of its population within a generation. South Korean women are still expected to choose between a career and a family. However, a lack of family support, pressure from employers and stress from South Korea's notoriously cutthroat education system may be partly responsible for many South Korean women reconsidering having children or even rejecting marriage altogether. The recent trend of [rising suicide rates among young South Korean women](#) is also indicative of the sad truth of increasing societal pressures.

In addition to the inequality, low birth rate, and high suicide rate, South Korea has the [second lowest labor productivity rate](#) in the OECD, which is currently compensated by long working hours that are also not very family-friendly.

However, as mentioned earlier, within a century, the population could shrink by [three quarters](#). This also means that the economy as a whole will shrink rapidly. The population is already decreasing at an annual rate of about 0.2% - a rate that will only increase in the coming years. South Korea, as one of the most ethnically homogeneous societies in the world, also does not have an immigration strategy to offset this decline. Since the current President Yoon has expressed [no intention](#) of addressing this problem, it is unlikely that this trend will reverse during his tenure.

These inequalities between men and women also manifest in the digital sphere, as the Internet is anything but a [safe space](#) for Korean women. Cyber violence against women is a topical issue that has received a lot of attention in recent years. In 2017, [20% of sexual crimes](#) in South Korea were

committed using so-called spycams (몰카). In these cases, victims are secretly filmed in hotel rooms, public toilets or escalators. The significant increase in cases in recent years has led to the massive discomfort of Korean women, as they have had to constantly face the threat of being filmed at any moment. In 2018, several [thousand South Koreans participated in protests](#) calling for tougher action against perpetrators.

The so-called "Nth Room" case (n번방 사건) and the copycat "Doctor's Room" case (박사방) were also particularly controversial in this regard. In these cases, that were [uncovered in early 2020](#), over [100 women, including at least 26 minors, were blackmailed and forced to perform and film sexually exploitative acts](#). These videos were then distributed via Telegram groups, to which access was gained by paying with [cryptocurrency](#).

In response to the cases and their scale, significant public pressure was generated. The response to this case eventually led to the [revision of a number of laws](#): not only the distribution and provision of illegal content, but also the sole possession or viewing has become punishable. Threats to coerce people into recording pornographic content against their consent may [also be prosecuted](#) with prison sentences in the future. In the same context, the age of consent was raised from 13 to 16.

## Chapter 2 Gender Inequality under Yoon - What to expect?

[President Yoon stirred up much concern from human rights groups due to several anti-feminist remarks](#) during his presidential election campaign. His pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Quality and Family was a cause for concern as he stated its officials treated men like “potential sex criminals” and blamed the country’s low birth rate on feminism. Yoon also claimed that systemic gender discrimination does not exist in South Korea. However, the statistics mentioned previously tell a different story, as South Korea’s gender equality index is near the bottom among the developed countries. [The percentage of women parliamentarians currently stands at 19% compared to the OECD average of 32%, while South Korea ranks 123rd out of 156 countries globally in women’s economic participation and opportunity](#).

Yoon’s comments cause concern about how effective his leadership may be in tackling gender inequality. [According to the OECD, women in South Korea earn \(on average\) 31.5% less than men](#). Although [Yoon later apologised](#) for his comments, his remarks convey the misogynistic perspectives that reflect harmful gender stereotypes within South Korean society. All able-bodied men are obliged to perform 2 years of military duty, and failure to serve can have consequences which could affect their career. [During his campaign, Yoon promised to increase the wages of enlisted soldiers to 2 million won a month from the current 676,100 won, during his term](#).

During his election campaign, Yoon appeared to win the hearts and minds of some young men (the majority of which aged between 20-30) by promising to [abolish the Ministry for Gender Equality](#) and Family. This younger demographic is sensitive to gender-related issues and rather than setting out campaign pledges directed at women, Yoon appeared to focus on young men. While this strategy gave him favour among young male voters, it did come at a price. While Yoon has not openly stated that his campaign favoured young male voters, he has [recently apologised](#) and admitted that his scope may have been too narrow.

### 2.1 Yoons campaign towards young men

Yoon’s language when pressed on the issue of gender equality has not helped tackle the problem. In a canvassing speech, Yoon denounced North Korea after they launched a ballistic missile stating, [“The government has spent some thirty trillion Korean won \(25 billion USD\) for gender sensitivity education. If we can use some of that budget for national defence, South Korea would be able to protect itself better”](#).



This remark immediately attracted criticism as it cited widespread misinformation insinuating that the government had set aside thirty trillion Korean won for a “gender sensitivity budget”. This argument caught popularity among some male-oriented online communities with anti-feminist sentiments, which is a major source of gender-based online violence.

Adding further fuel to the fire, [Yoon also vowed to strengthen punishment for false accusations related to sexual violence](#). This immediately alarmed women’s rights activists, for it would discourage victims from coming forward if enacted.

[President Yoon nominated two women on 26 May 2022](#) to fill the remainder of his cabinet. There are now 3 women elected within his cabinet, Education Minister nominee Park Soon-ae (from the left party), Health Minister nominee for the ruling party Kim Seung-hee, and Food and Drug Safety Vice Minister nominee Oh Yu-kyoung. On [29 May 2022 Vice Speaker Kim Sang-hee confronted Yoon about the issue of gender equality](#), stressing how South Korea’s gender inequality pitted young men and women against each other. She said that gender was used to some candidates’ advantage during the presidential election, creating “an unnecessary tension” between women and men. She advised President Yoon to take the issue of gender equality seriously, noting that he is now the president and not a presidential candidate. Yoon responded by citing the “pitfalls of meritocracy in a society where gender inequality persists”, a fact an unnamed aide had recently taught him. According to reports, this occurred when Yoon chose a Cabinet minister nominee. There were several candidates — one of whom was a woman but whose evaluations were lacking compared to her male competition. This revelation appears to mean that Yoon has changed his mindset, or this is a carefully thought-out PR campaign aimed at those who criticise Yoon’s lack of tact when it comes to issues around gender.

In spite of this Yoon’s new cabinet remains male-dominated and his revelation may have occurred too late. Yoon continuously stated that his selection would be solely merit-based, ruling out the possibility of selections based on affirmative actions or political considerations. There were no quotas for women or people from minority groups (such as those from the [Jeju people from the Jeolla province](#)). Both groups have been historically underrepresented in government, and Yoon’s new cabinet, unfortunately, carries on that tradition.

Many cabinet nominations are dominated by men in their fifties who have graduated from Seoul National University, South Korea’s most prestigious university. Out of sixteen cabinet positions, only two of them are occupied by women.

President Yoon’s top priorities will most likely be economic [growth](#), [national](#) security, and [reducing](#) property prices. However, given this recent turnaround and his previous promise to [abolish](#) the Ministry for Gender Equality and Family, he may still restructure it or lessen the Ministry’s capabilities. [Under the Moon administration, there had been some steps made toward the betterment of women's position in society](#). However, if Yoon does not enact policies that strive for gender equality, this could inevitably hurt gender equality and negatively impact future economic growth. To date, Yoon has not put forward policies that directly support women’s rights, nor has he released a plan to reduce the gender wage gap.

## 2.2 The Yoon Campaign and the Gender Pay Gap

During his presidential campaign, Yoon focused on economic growth, which proved popular among South Korean citizens. [The South Korean economy is projected to continue forward but its underlying gender disparity suppresses its full economic potential](#). South Korean women may experience critical financial issues, which could become more visible once the economy slows down and the wage disparity more pronounced. South Korea’s economic potential is vast, as it has a large population of highly skilled workers, a vibrant economy, and an enormous technological capacity for innovation and future development. However, its gender pay gap suggests its unrealised potential. This is demonstrated by South Korea having one of the OECD’s lowest [labour productivity](#) rates, offset by long working hours. Society’s intense focus on tertiary education ensures that it will have many well-educated workers. However, there could be an increase in workers [leaving](#) the country in the

next few years. Perhaps under-appreciated women and overworked men may choose to [vote](#) with their feet, creating an unfavourable shift in the demographic.

Most governments in developed countries need to prepare for a shift in demographics, and South Korean society likely sooner than most. [South Korea's population is already decreasing at around 0.2% annually — a rate that is only expected to accelerate as time goes on.](#) Quick and wide-ranging action by the government would be required to counteract the sources of South Korea's rapid population decline, including narrowing the gender pay gap, reducing discrimination against women in the workplace, and making it more affordable to raise children. In the absence of political will to even acknowledge these societal issues, the situation seems unlikely to improve much during Yoon's term. A lack of progress may eventually translate into political pressure resulting and a potential renewed focus on reducing gender disparity.

Figure 5. Gender wage gap in Korea (2000-2019)



Source: [OECD](#)

## Chapter 3 The State of the Union

In the EU, women continue to be underrepresented in the labour market. Currently, 66.8% of women are employed, while the employment rate for men is 78.1%, thus implying a gender [employment gap of 11.3%](#).

Even though more women are continuously participating in the labour market, it is still overwhelmingly up to them to take on the primary caregiving role, and thus unpaid, tasks. If unpaid work were to be included in the models, [women work more every day than men do.](#) In addition, women are increasingly better qualified and educated. As in Korea, more women than men graduate from universities in Europe. Nevertheless, women feel less free in their career choices and report the impression of having fewer professional opportunities. This is often due to their responsibilities as parents or as caregivers for family members. For the same reason, women are more likely than men to work part-time. Since work is the best way to empower women economically, it is necessary to increase women's labour force participation.

The economic loss due to the gender employment gap amounts to [370 billion](#) EUR per year. Taking action to reduce these welfare losses thus becomes both a social and an economic imperative. Improving gender equality could add up to 3.15 trillion EUR to GDP by 2050.

### 3.1 Korea vs the EU

As in Korea, women earn less per hour than men within the EU. The gender pay gap is roughly [13%](#), which is significantly lower than in Korea. However, this figure has hardly changed in the last ten years. The reasons for the gap are seen in different work patterns of women since they are more likely to interrupt their careers to take care of a child or relatives than their male counterparts.

Another reason is that women also often work in low-paid sectors in the EU and their salaries are also lower due to their part-time employment. In many cases, women even receive less pay than men for the same work.

The [unequal concentration of women and men in different sectors](#) of the labour market in the EU is a persistent problem. 3 out of 10 women work in education, health and social work, while only 8% of men are employed in the sector. These are traditionally rather low-paid sectors. On the other hand, almost one-third of men are employed in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, which are among the better-paid sectors. This contrasts sharply with the mere 7% of women who work in this sector.

In addition, there is the problem of a [glass ceiling](#) that professional women face. They rarely make it to the top and are underrepresented in both political and business decision-making positions. For example, as of October 2018, only 6.7% of board chairs and 6.5% of CEOs were women.

Gender-based violence also remains a problem in EU countries: one in three women in the EU has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15, more than half of all women have been sexually harassed, and in almost one-fifth of cases of violence against women, the [perpetrator is an intimate partner](#).

Gender-based and domestic violence particularly affects women and girls, but also LGBTIQ+ people. The EU is therefore taking action to put an end to this violence. Consequently, most EU countries have laws to combat violence against people based on their gender or sexual orientation, but the lack of a common definition of gender-based violence and common rules to combat it contributes to the persistence of the problem. For this reason, the [European Parliament](#) has [repeatedly called for new EU legislation](#) on this issue.

### 3.2 Tackling gender based violence in the EU

Combating gender-based violence in all EU countries is also an objective the EU has set for itself. A group of MEPs called on the European Commission in September 2021 to make sexual violence a criminal offense under EU law alongside terrorism, human trafficking, cybercrime, sexual exploitation and money laundering. This would allow for common legal definitions, standards and minimum penalties across the EU.

The initiative follows a call in February, 2021 when the Parliament called for an EU directive to prevent and combat all forms of gender-based violence. At the time, MEPs pointed to the need for an EU protocol on gender-based violence in times of crisis to address the problem and support victims of domestic violence. The Covid 19 pandemic has also led to a dramatic increase in violence against women on [social media and the internet in general](#). In December 2021, MEPs called on the EU to adopt [a common definition of gender-based cyberviolence](#) and criminalise it, with harmonised minimum and maximum penalties for all EU countries. The call stems from a 2016 Parliament report on cyber harassment.

Following to the repeated calls for a stricter legislation and as part of International Women's Day 2022, the European Commission also unveiled [EU-wide rules to combat violence against women](#). The proposed directive will criminalize lack of consent rape, female genital mutilation and cyber violence, including non-consensual sharing of intimate images; cyber stalking; cyber harassment; and cyber incitement to violence or hatred. The new rules also strengthen victims' access to justice and allow victims to seek compensation in criminal proceedings. The proposal also calls for adequate and specialized protection and support, such as through free hotlines and rape crisis centers. It also provides for targeted support for groups with specific needs or at risk, including women fleeing armed conflict.

### 3.3 EU framework on online gender based violence

There is a likelihood that the EU and the ROK can collaborate in the search for servers where such kind of abuse occurs. However, there is insufficient data to understand the magnitude of digital violence against women and girls, a task impacting global society and which may need to be opened up more internationally. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, online spaces have become increasingly important as they became a social space for [isolated young people](#) and adults by keeping them connected to the outside world. Since essential societal functions such as education and work have been moved online it has become more critical than ever to understand how to keep equal access to the opportunities provided by the internet and social media. [By early April 2022, more than half of the world's population was under lockdown conditions](#), increasing internet usage between 50% and 70%. In this context, [UN Women argues that online-based violence "has spread under the shadow pandemic of violence against women"](#).

Due to women's role in society, particular groups of young women may also be more exposed to online gender-based violence. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights [has written a letter](#) outlining the need to address gender-based violence in the digital sphere. She suggests that there should be a legal framework that recognises it as a manifestation of gender-based violence that hampers the goal of gender equality and violates women's rights.

[General Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women](#) has been put forward to the EU council and proposes the ratification and adequate implementation of the Istanbul Convention. For the EU, the Istanbul Convention is currently the most far-reaching legal instrument to

The European Commission wrote a [proposal](#) for a Directive on combating violence against women as well as domestic violence. This proposal foresees the criminalisation of certain forms of digital violence. [General Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women](#) has been put forward to the EU council and proposes the ratification and adequate implementation of the Istanbul Convention. For the EU, the Istanbul Convention is currently the most far-reaching legal instrument to prevent and combat violence against gender-based and domestic violence. The [Istanbul Convention](#) is complemented by other treaties such as the [Lanzarote Convention](#) and the [Budapest Convention](#) on Cybercrime. The Committee of Ministers' has put forward a [recommendation](#) on preventing and combating sexism, and ECRI General Policy [Recommendation No.15](#) on Combating Hate Speech. However, no treaty or legislation allows for a comprehensive framework for combating online gender-based violence. Nevertheless, the [European Court of Human Rights](#) has provided essential indications on the obligations that EU member states have to protect women from digital manifestations of violence. The European Parliament issued a [Resolution](#) with recommendations on how to combat gender-based violence, particularly cyber violence.

However, the implementation of such legislation is difficult to act upon given the digital dimension of violence against women and girls, and thus it remains insufficiently addressed. Comparing the EU and South Korean legislation may seem problematic given that the EU does not have the sole legal authority and EU Member States must adopt their domestic laws in order to fully tackle online gender-based violence. However, the EU can issue legislation that recognises and sanctions harmful online actions toward women, given its role as a norm maker. It could go a long way to lessening the problem.

Regarding norm setting, the [legislative frameworks developed by South Korea and the EU are based around similar principles: openness and freedom, a people-first approach including individual rights, inclusiveness and fostering participation, and safety and security](#). These principles are also laid down in the [January 2022 proposal by the European Commission for a declaration on digital rights and principles for the EU](#). The foundation for cooperation is mainly in place. All that is needed is for substantial efforts to be made by both parties toward mitigating this issue.

## Chapter 4 Digital Cooperation

In July 2022 the EU expressed its explicit willingness to [intensify its digital cooperation](#) with South Korea as one particular aspect of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. In this context, the EU aims to sign a bilateral agreement that will strengthen the EU-ROK digital partnership. This also involves joint efforts to respond to current challenges and considerations on how to extend cooperation [beyond purely economic matters](#) to include topics such as climate protection, politics, and security. The comprehensive commitments to close collaboration in the digital field made by both sides can set a good example worldwide for a forward-looking and prosperity-enhancing partnership that is multifaceted and can contribute to global well-being. It certainly also helps that the EU and South Korea have repeatedly professed common values, interests and goals that can pave the way for extensive digital cooperation.

The importance of the digital world and the use of digital tools have greatly increased in recent years. This trend has accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as workers, consumers, students - and indeed society at large - has had no choice but to use digital communication tools to continue their activities. Despite the benefits, however, it also poses many risks for all actors involved. Dozens of states and private actors have tried to unify norms and standards in cyberspace, but their efforts have so far been unsuccessful. Especially in relation to the normative ambitions of the European Union and the identification of [equal values and interests](#), the EU and the ROK have an opportunity here to establish new, common standards. Already, South Korea and the EU are among the [first and most eager adopters of digital tools](#) to respond to these challenges. For instance, the EU and South Korea have announced plans to improve the convergence of their data protection rules. This is a measure that can also help them better respond to cyberviolence, given that [spy cams](#) and other [tools](#) to harass women continue to be a prevalent issue.

South Korea and the EU are key players in digitalisation. And the EU has also made digitalisation one of its primary targets in its relationship with the ROK. Due to COVID-19, digitalisation has accelerated and has threatened many workers' livelihoods, especially female workers, due to their high concentration in the service sector. As is well documented, SMEs and non-regular employment have been hit the hardest by the pandemic.

Meanwhile, women who have obtained more reliable jobs with permanent labour contracts in tech industries (as well as other industries) often choose to postpone marriage and parenthood, reducing fertility rates. Declining birthrates is a concern for both the EU and South Korea, although the ROK is set to descend much quicker.

### 4.1 Gender inequality and digitalisation

Gender inequality is an intersection issue linked with numerous social and economic issues. Ensuring policy measures that enhance gender equality would have a knock-on effect that would benefit not only women. Considering that digitalisation and gender equality are on the list for the EU-ROK strategic partnership, both partners should work on building domestic policies and legislation that strengthens and protects women and vulnerable communities within the online space. Therefore, gender equality should be approached in a broader context of addressing Korea's mega-challenges. Unless these challenges are properly addressed before it is too late, the actual advancement of Korea will remain elusive. Moreover, through its Digitalisation Strategic Partnership with the ROK, the EU can assist in building and ensuring a well-rounded structural framework. Gender Inequality affects women everywhere, and given the cross-border element of digitalisation, world powers should collaborate to show a unified line, particularly regarding online gender-based violence.

Although experience of online violence and abuse can be argued as a universal experience. Women and marginalised groups are more likely to receive repeated and severe forms of harmful actions

online. There are numerous incidents to be found in the EU and indeed anywhere else in the world, including - non-consensual image or video sharing, intimidation and threats via email or social media platforms, rape and death threats, online sexual harassment, stalking, the use of tracking apps and devices, as well as impersonation, and economic harm via digital means. Young girls are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abuse and bullying within the digital space as their generation is more digitally active and therefore exposed. However, the lack of comprehensive and accurate data collection in this area results in information being fragmented and incomplete.

## 4.2 Potential EU – ROK cooperation on Gender Equality

The EU and South Korea have marked their cooperation as democratic governments that wish to advance human rights worldwide. From an EU perspective, it is with the Union's interests to strengthen the multilateral global system and work with like-minded partners to achieve its goals of advancing human rights globally. Although South Korea is a democratic system with established freedoms and human rights protection, it still struggles to close the gap to overcome gender-related inequalities. Regarding bilateral cooperation, the [EU delegation to Seoul has identified gender equality](#) as an area of mutual interest, including online gender-based violence.

However, concrete examples of cooperation are not as apparent. Despite the institutionalisation of its human rights agenda South Korea is lagging behind the EU in this particular field. In the late 1980s, a number of formal protections for gender equality, such as the [Sexual Equality Employment Act \(1987\)](#), the [Women's Development Act \(1995\)](#) to [the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victim Act \(1997\)](#) were adopted.

The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (which Yoon planned to abolish during his presidential campaign) was formed in 2001. This Ministry aimed to develop and implement the "[2nd Framework Plan for Gender Equality Policies](#)," which is organised around four priorities: promoting (1) "mature" awareness of gender equality, (2) work-life balance, (3) women's employment and participation, and (4) women's safety and health. With these policies, the Ministry sought to highlight the intersectionality of gender issues in public, professional, and personal space. However, as discussed above, these policies have had a negligible effect on moving South Korea away from the bottom of the gender equality index. The ROK [ranks the lowest among the OECD countries](#) regarding gender equality within the workplace. [A 2021 World Economic Forum survey](#) on the gender gap confirms this finding, placing South Korea at 102 out of 156 countries with a pay gap of 31.5 per cent - the largest of any advanced economy.

Gender-based violence is a significant common concern for the EU and South Korea. In Korea, the problem is proliferated due to the ineffectiveness of some of the legal measures. Despite the protections against gendered violence, South Korean prosecutors tend to drop cases at a disproportionately higher rate when they concern sexual crimes compared to other categories of crime; and [the prosecution rates for those accused of such crimes seldomly end up serving prison sentences](#). This means that gender inequalities are not appropriately managed by the civil institutions meant to protect them. These include the [Act on the Protection of Children and Juveniles from Sexual Abuse \(2010\)](#) and [the Multicultural Families Support Act \(2008\)](#).

Young girls in South Korea frequently fall victim to sexual exploitation and trafficking. [As illuminated by recent instances of digital sex crimes such as the "Nth room" scandal](#) —an area the EU has identified in its legislation— some form of cooperation on this issue could be mutually beneficial for both parties. These intersecting issues of online violence and the gender pay gap highlight the general need for improving gender equality legislation. The EU could assist in improving the comprehensiveness of these laws through its strategic partnership with South Korea. Within the institutional structure of the EU, there is dedicated support and emphasis on promoting and protecting human rights and human security, even if some member states do not feel as ardent on the subject. The states that have a specific focus on human security and are most likely to campaign

for a more gender equality-oriented approach with South Korea within the European Union include Finland, Sweden, and EU members of the Human Security Network (i.e., Austria, the Netherlands, Greece, Ireland, and Slovenia). For instance, Josep Borrell gave a statement to the Korea Herald stating the importance of gender equality to the EU citing the EU Gender Action Plan III and the new EU external action budget which he states provides a [“road map for global action toward a gender-equal world”](#).

While there has been no coordinated efforts towards Gender Equality in the EU’s foreign policy they have been hitting the headlines recenting for their actions towards human rights issues and normative values. The EU frames itself as a [“global force for human rights”](#) and since it has formulated a common foreign policy approach, human rights has been a clear focus. The EU has even gone so far as to issue sanctions on states they consider to be in violation of human rights law such as China and Belarus. For example, GAP III aligns with the funding commitment under the new EU foreign policy funding programme, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI– Global Europe) with a budget of 79 billion EUR. It sets an ambitious target that at least 85% of all new actions should contribute to gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment. At least 5% of these actions should promote gender equality as a principal objective.

Regarding cooperation, the EU and the ROK do not have many projects that directly affect gender equality domestically. However, this could change, given that both partners are interested in tackling gender-based online violence. Nevertheless, there have been some instances where the ROK and the EU have cooperated internationally. South Korea is now a significant donor of official development assistance (ODA) and [joined the Development Assistance Committee \(DAC\) in 2010](#). According to [Article 3.1 of the Framework Act on International Development Cooperation](#) (which the ROK must comply with to provide developmental aid), the basic idea of development cooperation is to “reduce poverty in developing nations, improve the human rights of women, children and people with disabilities, achieve gender equality, realise sustainable development and humanitarianism, promote economic cooperation relationship with cooperation partners and pursue peace and prosperity in the international community”. These are norms and values closely related to the EU’s ones. The strategic partnership between the EU and the ROK has been praised by both parties and has been successful due to their [shared values](#), which has translated into regular cooperation on development cooperation. Both parties have often shared similar goals, but this has not translated into any direct partnerships in improving gender equality. However, the two partners have conducted regular consultations on [development cooperation since 2008](#). During [the seventh meeting held in 2019](#), the two sides discussed issues such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, and gender equality.

Yet, some individual EU member states have entered into agreements with the ROK on gender equality. Since 2014, the Social Democratic and Green Party government in Sweden has been practising a ‘feminist foreign policy’ approach, which has been defined as a policy that applies [“a systematic gender equality foreign policy agenda”](#). Sweden is an excellent partner for South Korea in dismantling gender inequality. Sweden scored fifth, whereas South Korea scored low (102 out of 156 countries) in the [World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report](#). In 2017, South Korea’s Ministry of Gender Equality and Family signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Sweden and Norway, which called for [“increased cooperation and exchange in gender equality policies, practices, and knowledge”](#). During a visit to South Korea in 2019 by the Prime Minister of Sweden Stefan Löfven, the two states signed a [bilateral MoU for cooperation on gender equality and family policies for cooperation and policy exchanges for improving gender equality](#). The MoU seeks to strengthen cooperation between Sweden and the ROK for engaging in gender equality and improving women’s lives within general society. The [main contents of the MoU are](#) sharing of performances of policies related to gender equality; personnel exchanges of the people in charge of gender equality policies and experts; and joint operation of lectures and education programs as well as cooperation in

international conferences such as global forums on gender equality and UN Commission on the Status of Women.

## Chapter 5 Online gender based violence and the rule of law

Digitalisation has its benefits but has also opened up new ways for criminal offences such as sex crimes and gender-based cyber violence. South Korea is a technological giant and a key player in the technological sector but has been lagging behind in mobilising these strengths to tackle profound related challenges. The previous Moon Jae-in administration did make some progress in tackling this issue. [In 2017 Moon passed the Comprehensive Measures for the Prevention of Digital Sexual Crimes which assists in the removal of sexually exploitative content from the internet. In 2018 every South Korean regional police department had a specialised team to investigate digital sex crimes.](#) After the recent scandal of [the Nth Room](#), the National Assembly has passed a law that allows for legal action to be taken against online platforms that fail to prevent illegal content from circulating, holding them criminally responsible if they are found guilty.

This law has had a knock-on effect on South Korean internet companies, most of which have introduced filter systems designed by the Korea Communications Standards Commission to remove sexually exploitive content. Considering Yoon's campaign stance on gender inequality, the likelihood that such progress laws will be passed has been diminished, as Yoon and his People Power Party have historically placed less emphasis on advancing women's rights. Yoon had previously dismissed the idea of gender discrimination as being a systemic problem in South Korea. He blamed the country's low birth rate on feminism and proposed to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. However, the [European parliament has adopted a legislative initiative report](#) on tackling gender-based cyber violence with 513 votes in favour, 122 against, and 58 abstentions. The report outlines the need for the European Commission to implement an adequate legal framework to combat sexual cyberviolence and protect and support victims. Currently, there is no common definition of gender-based cyber violence within the EU, which is needed to prosecute criminally.

The MEPs have asked the Commission to criminalise gender-based cyber violence and calls for the Council to extend the list of '[EU crimes](#)' to officially recognise that gender-based violence is a grave crime with a cross-border dimension. This would enable the EU to enact specific actions with legislation and would include issues such as cyber harassment; cyberstalking; violations of privacy; recording and sharing images of sexual assault; remote control or surveillance (including spy apps); threats and calls to violence; sexist hate speech; induction to self-harm; unlawful access to messages or social media accounts; breach of the prohibitions of communication imposed by courts; and human trafficking.

### 5.1 Improving the legal framework

Because gender-based online violence is a cross-sectional issue, preventive actions should be implemented using various policy methods. To formulate a more gender equality-oriented approach, the EU and the ROK should recognise that violence against women and girls in the digital sphere is a manifestation of gender-based violence and a continuum of violence that affects all areas of a person's life. By doing so, they can ensure that a robust legal framework is in place to prevent and combat gender-based violence, hate speech and discrimination, online and offline and that it is applied effectively. This should be implemented throughout the digital partnership strategy. If both actors accelerate efforts to complete the crucial elements of this legal framework, this can ensure that digital violence is addressed in all its forms.

Within the framework of the digital partnership, the EU and South Korea should coordinate working with private actors or firms who are driving cyber technologies in combating gender-based violence online. Legislation should ensure the effective enforcement of social media companies' obligations to



restrict access to illegal content, in line with freedom of expression standards and corroborated by both judiciary systems. Given the EU's experience in these matters, they should also be able to implement it within any digital partnership strategy. Gender-based violence takes place across all demographics of the global society. This is why it is essential to raise awareness about this multifaceted problem. Through a collaborative effort, this partnership could assist in advocating the risks of online violence and educate people on their rights and the dangers in the digital space.

By advocating for safer online spaces, their partnership will also assist in advocating for children and minority rights online. In both South Korea and the EU there is a role for civil society organisations to collaborate with authorities to assist women who face online violence. Through the digital strategy the EU and South Korea should be enabled to collaborate with all relevant civil society organisations and formulate and facilitate strategies that support gender equality within the digital sphere. Lastly, given the adaptiveness of the online community and the fluid nature of the internet, policy officers involved in the digital strategy must remain vigilant and flexible to combat the different types of behaviours and acts of violence in the digital sphere that are still not addressed or have yet to emerge.

## Conclusion

Gender inequality is an important and highly topical issue in South Korea. The serious differences in the private, political and economic spheres cause internal social tensions, an ever decreasing birth rate and threaten the economic prosperity of the country. Violence against women, especially —but of course not only— in the digital space, also ensures that many women have to fear being made an online target. Gender inequality also exists in the EU member states, and is a policy target for the European Union. Even if the situation seems less severe than in Korea, there are still existing disparities that have hardly improved in recent years, despite intensive efforts at the European and national levels.

The European Union and South Korea have repeatedly committed to shared values and goals, and this should also include combating gender inequality in a structural manner. One means of moving a step closer to this goal can be the efforts of the EU and the ROK to cooperate more closely in the digital space. Both the EU and South Korea are key players when it comes to digitalisation and given the prevalence of online gender based violence, their upcoming Digital Strategy collaboration should include measures to tackle this issue.

Both the EU and South Korea have repeatedly expressed their commitment to closer digital cooperation. In addition to promoting research, development and trade relations, this also involves the harmonisation of standards, for example in the area of data protection law. These commitments, together with the mutual recognition that both actors are guided by shared values, can provide the starting point to jointly combat gender-based violence and leverage both sides' expertise and experience to meet this challenge. The opportunities for EU-Korea cooperation in the digital space are manifold and should not remain untapped. In order to fully utilize the potential, the first step should be to recognize that violence against women and girls in the digital space is a manifestation of gender-based violence that also affects those outside the Internet.

Harmonizing the legal framework in the area of combating hate speech and discrimination online and offline and adapting data protection standards can further contribute to achieving improvements in this area. This should involve joint efforts with private actors, such as platform providers or network operators. In order to successfully prosecute violence online and pursue further legal action, cooperation is also needed in the area of law enforcement. Ultimately, both sides can make a concerted effort to raise general awareness of the issue.

Since the digital sphere does not end with national borders, it requires cross-border cooperation to address and effectively fight digital crimes such as gender based online violence. The EU and South Korea can thereby take a leading role in establishing new global standards and increasing equality and security in cyberspace.

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