

Inequality and Structural Conflicts: A Gender Policy Analysis of South Korea

Introduction

Since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, gender equality has been officially enshrined in the country's constitutional principles. However, the substantive development of gender policies has shown an extremely uneven and controversial trajectory. The evolution of gender policies in South Korea did not proceed linearly or cumulatively; instead, it exhibited characteristics such as long-term institutional stagnation, intermittent reforms triggered by social crises, and repeated political resistance. This non-linear pattern reflects the interaction between the legacy of autocracy, the priorities of developmental states, democratisation, the mobilisation of civil society, and the pressure of international norms. By the mid-2020s, this tension over gender equality had become difficult for the government to ignore.

To specifically analyse the characteristics of South Korea's gender policies and their deep-seated social structural contradictions, this case study focuses on the following sections. First, it systematically traces the key features of South Korea's gender policies since 1948, emphasising their nature driven by events, crisis responses and political conditions. Secondly, it examines the reasons why South Korea, as a modern democratic country, faced such serious gender issues and why these issues repeatedly became the root cause of intense social division and ideological opposition, particularly focusing on developments during the Moon Jae-in administration period. Thirdly, this case analyses how international gender norms were incorporated into the domestic political environment, sometimes promoting reforms and at other times triggering opposition.

By adopting a historical institutionalist perspective and combining it with the perspective of identity politics, this case study examines the trajectory of South Korea's gender policy development as a dynamic and conflict-ridden process, shaped by ongoing negotiations of structural inequality, political competition, social mobilisation and global norms.

Evolution of Gender Policies in South Korea

The evolution of gender policies in South Korea was shaped less by a linear progression toward equality than by the interaction between state priorities, social mobilisation, and political contestation.

Phase One: Limited Gender Equality under Enduring Patriarchal Structures (1948-1994)

In the post-Korean War era, Confucian patriarchal norms had a profound influence on the state-building and nation-building processes in South Korea. The 1948 Constitution of South Korea (revised in 1987), nonetheless, stipulated the gender equality of all citizens under Article 11, but it was merely a symbolic clause.¹ In practice, the enactment of the 1960 Family Law directly contradicted the constitutional guarantee. It institutionalised the *hoju* system – a traditional male-headed family registry system – that strengthened patrilineal inheritance and male-dominant status in family relations.² The law reflected the state's view of the patriarchal family as the basic unit in maintaining social order, while patriarchal culture

¹ National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, "Constitution of the Republic of Korea, Oct.29, 1987", Korea Legislation Research Institute, accessed December 25, 2025, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=1&lang=.

² Jinsu Yune, "Tradition and the Constitution in the Context of the Korean Family Law", *Journal of Korean Law* 5, no. 1 (2005): 205–206.

was further employed as an important narrative in constructing national identity in Korea.³ Although the law underwent a minor amendment in 1962, the core patriarchal structure of the *hoju* system remained intact.⁴ This showed strong path dependence in the legal framework, which can be traced back to Japanese colonisation, and the Korean government deliberately ignored gender equality issues.⁵ This reflected a broader pattern of path dependence, where colonial legacies and state-building imperatives reinforced gender hierarchy rather than aligning with constitutional norms.

During the period of ‘militarised modernity’ from the 1960s to the 1980s, South Korea began export-oriented industrialisation under the developmental state model built on gender hierarchy.⁶ The military junta under Park Chung-Hee utilised gender as a political instrument to create distinct national roles for men and women.⁷ Men were described as the backbone of the national military and economy through compulsory conscription, which was structurally integrated into the industrial labour system.⁸ On the other hand, women played a dual role in both the economy and the family. They were absorbed into the light industrial sector and labour-intensive manufacturing industries as “temporary” and low-waged labour, and their roles and contributions to the national development were marginalised. Moreover, women were domestically labelled as “mother-wife” characters with the responsibility of family planning and household management.⁹

Due to prolonged exploitation and gender discrimination in the workplace, women workers protested in the 1976 Naked Demonstration to demand fair treatment and equal labour rights regardless of gender, but eventually failed.¹⁰ Despite rapid industrialisation which brought socio-economic changes in modern Korean society, legal reforms of Family Law in 1977 and 1989 to achieve gender equality were still limited. The former improved women’s inheritance rights and legal position, while the latter expanded rights in areas such as divorce, property, and childcare.¹¹ Yet, the patriarchal family-head system remained largely intact under both revisions.

The June Democratic Uprising was the watershed movement that triggered South Korea’s transition into democracy in 1987.¹² This political liberalisation prompted the expansion of civil society, which gave greater freedom for expression and mobilisation at the grassroots level.¹³ Many feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs), for instance, Korean Women’s Associations United (KWAU) and Korean Women Workers’ Association (KWWA), organised a series of public protests, submitted petitions, and lobbied politicians to challenge entrenched gender-inequality structures.¹⁴ In addition, the government was also

³ Hyunah Yang, “A Journey of Family Law Reform in Korea: Tradition, Equality, and Social Change”, *Journal of Korean Law* 8, no.1 (2008): 89–92.

⁴ Ibid., 80–81.

⁵ Ibid., 90–91.

⁶ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 12–13, 69–77; John Minns, “Of Miracles and Models: The Rise and Decline of the Developmental State in South Korea”, *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (2001): 1025–1043.

⁷ Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, 44–94.

⁸ Ibid., 44–67.

⁹ Ibid., 68–94.

¹⁰ Soul Han, “Korean Women Textile Workers Fight for Fair Union Election, 1976–1978”, *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, 11 November 2012, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/korean-women-textile-workers-fight-fair-union-election-1976-1978>.

¹¹ Hyunah Yang, ‘A Journey of Family Law Reform in Korea: Tradition, Equality, and Social Change’, *Journal of Korean Law* 8 (December 2008): 81–84.

¹² Yoon Min-sik, “June 1987: Democracy takes root, at least in the Constitution”, *The Korea Herald*, 24 May 2023, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3131387>.

¹³ Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, 109–110.

¹⁴ Lisa Kim Davis, “Korean Women’s Groups Organize for Change”, in *Women of Japan & Korea: Continuity and Change*, ed. Toyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 223–239.

under pressure from its international legal duties under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which called for South Korea to reform its existing gender-discriminatory laws to move gradually toward gender equality.¹⁵

Internal and external pressures pushed the South Korean government to implement several gender-related laws to safeguard women's rights, namely the 1987 Equal Employment Opportunity Act,¹⁶ the 1989 Mother-Child Welfare Act,¹⁷ and the 1994 Special Act on Sexual Violence.¹⁸ These legislative reforms made some progress in reducing gender inequality, but Korean society still had a long way to go, as the *hoju* system was not abrogated until 2005.

More broadly, the development of gender policy in South Korea was characterised by a recurring cycle: social pressures and crises – such as labour exploitation, sexual violence, or demographic concerns – prompted limited policy reforms, which were often followed by resistance or stagnation. Even with democratisation after 1987, increased political openness did not automatically translate into sustained progress in gender equality. Instead, it created space for both feminist mobilisation and countervailing backlash, shaping policy outcomes in a contested and uneven manner.

Phase Two: Vacillating Between Social Conflicts and Political Polarisation (1995–2014)

Following democratisation, gender policy in South Korea entered a phase of institutional expansion, driven by increasing interaction between the state and civil society. After years of struggle, feminists in South Korea achieved steady but limited gains in the formal political sphere. The promotion of gender equality was gradually advanced through cooperation between the government and the women's movement, marking a new phase that shifted from securing formal legislative protections and institutional infrastructure to pinpointing specific vulnerabilities. Grassroots campaigns helped to compel top-down gender reforms.¹⁹ During this period, the evolving policy focus can be grouped into the legal and institutional foundation phase (1995–2001), protection through victimhood discourse (2001–2005), and crisis response and structural contestation (2005–2014).

In the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea achieved progressive economic development. However, despite rising economic participation and social awareness among women,²⁰ entrenched Confucian patriarchy continued to shape South Korean society. Neoliberal economic policies then still promoted the male breadwinner role, often deploying discriminatory practices in employment.²¹

¹⁵ See United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), 1979, Art. 2, accessed November 20, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>.

¹⁶ See 국가기록원 (National Archives of Korea), '남녀고용평등법제정' ('Enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act'), 인사/조직, 2022, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.archives.go.kr/next/newsearch/listSubjectDescription.do?id=006008&pageFlag=&sitePage>.

¹⁷ See 국가기록원 (National Archives of Korea), '모부자복지법' ('Mother and Child Welfare Act'), 사회복지, 2022, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.archives.go.kr/next/newsearch/listSubjectDescription.do?id=000326&pageFlag=&sitePage=1-2-1>.

¹⁸ See 국가기록원 (National Archives of Korea), '성폭력특별법' ('Special Act on Sexual Violence'), 공공질서, 2022, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.archives.go.kr/next/newsearch/listSubjectDescription.do?id=001034&sitePage>.

¹⁹ According to Ju Hui Judy Han and Jennifer Jihye Chun, state feminism is the promotion of gender equality in law, policymaking, and governance at multiple levels. Source: Han, Ju Hui Judy, and Jennifer Jihye Chun. "Introduction: Gender and Politics in Contemporary Korea." *The Journal of Korean Studies* (1979-) 19, no. 2 (2014): 246.

²⁰ Cho, Michelle, and Jesook Song, eds, *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024) 32.

²¹ Han and Chun, "Introduction," 247.

Against this backdrop, gender equity legislation was enacted in 1999. In the same year, the Constitutional Court ruled that the practice of awarding preferential employment points to men who completed compulsory conscription was unconstitutional.²² Henceforth, the institutional foundation sought to reinforce new gender norms and support women's equal economic participation. Protections against individual abuse and structural forms of family violence were also broadened after the 1994 Special Act on Sexual Violence and the 1998 Domestic Violence Prevention Act were enacted. State feminism reached a milestone in 2001 with the creation of the Ministry of Gender Equality (MOGEF) and the introduction of electoral gender quotas.

Although women's political representation rose steadily, South Korea still ranked low globally in terms of parliamentary gender balance.²³ In July 2001, the U.S. Department of State released the *Trafficking in Persons Report*, ranking South Korea as a Tier 3 country for failing to take sufficient measures against trafficking. This directly spurred the reform of anti-prostitution and anti-human trafficking policies. Influenced by the historical memory of "comfort women"²⁴, domestic discussions on prostitution were mainly framed from the perspective of "victims", enabling feminist groups to collaborate with the newly established MOGEF and promote the protection of vulnerable women, especially immigrant women.²⁵

In 2004, the Anti-Prostitution Law redefined sexually exploited women as "victims" instead of "criminals", expanded protection for victims of human trafficking, and allowed the government to fund shelters, legal aid and medical support.²⁶ The legal vulnerability of immigrant wives was also included in the policy agenda. The government introduced relief policies to enable immigrant women whose marriages were broken due to their husband's death, disappearance or violence to apply for citizenship.²⁷ However, these protective measures relied on "victim narratives", which brought moral burdens: sex workers continued to be stigmatised and deprived of their agency. Immigrant wives had to constantly prove the legitimacy of their marriages to avoid being regarded as exploiting marriage for citizenship acquisition.

Around the same time, South Korea's fertility rate had fallen to a low of 1.08 in 2005 – the lowest in the world at the time²⁸ – triggering reactions from the government. The government implemented multiple pro-natalist measures and further reinforced the criminalisation of abortion. The Framework Act on Low Birth Rate in an Ageing Society was enacted, emphasising traditional maternity roles. In 2007, following earlier legal reforms for migrant wives, social welfare benefits were also expanded to noncitizen migrant wives raising Korean children.²⁹ Meanwhile, older, divorced or single women were often disadvantaged, as they lacked a "clear reproductive role," and policies tended to favour married couples.³⁰ In 2009, the Pro-Life

²² Ibid.

²³ "Five Things to Know about Women and South Korea's 2020 Elections," *Washington Post*, May 11, 2020, accessed November 29, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/11/five-things-know-about-women-south-korea-2020-elections/>.

²⁴ The term "comfort women" refers to the system of sexual slavery established by the Imperial Japanese Armed Forces before and during the Second World War. Women and girls, many from Korea, China, the Philippines, and other occupied territories, were coerced, deceived, or forcibly recruited into military brothels where they were subjected to repeated sexual violence. Since the war, the issue has become a major subject of historical research, human rights advocacy, and diplomatic contention, particularly in debates over state responsibility, memory, apology, and reparations in East Asia.

²⁵ Choo, Hae Yeon. "The Cost of Rights: Migrant Women, Feminist Advocacy, and Gendered Morality in South Korea." *Gender and Society* 27, no. 4 (2013): 445–468.

²⁶ Ibid., 451.

²⁷ Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), *Alliance News: ASIA - The Changing Context of Trafficking and Migration*, Issue 32, December 2009 (Bangkok, Thailand: GAATW International Secretariat, 2009), 46.

²⁸ Kim, Sunhye, Na Young, and Yurim Lee. "The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements in Challenging South Korea's Abortion Ban." *Health and Human Rights* 21, no. 2 (2019): 99.

²⁹ Choo, "The Cost of Rights," 463.

³⁰ Cho and Song, *Mediating Gender in Post-Authoritarian South Korea*, 143.

Doctors' Association was established to spearhead anti-abortion campaigns, reporting obstetrics and gynaecology clinics that performed abortions to the police. Consequently, women with unwanted pregnancies were sometimes forced to seek abortions outside the country.

The government's emphasis on pro-natalist policies, bolstered by other civilian political activities, faced severe backlash and intense legal contestation from feminist advocacy groups. Female reproductive rights were at the centre of this struggle, deeply intertwined with women's bodily autonomy and health issues. By 2010, South Korea saw its first mass movement foregrounding women's reproductive rights and health issues. The Network for Women's Right to Decide Pregnancy and Delivery was formed, bringing together feminist organisations, social justice groups, labour unions, and other progressive actors. The network became the first collective voice to challenge the existing criminal codes on abortion and contest the anti-abortion campaign.³¹ However, it failed to reap substantial gains in reproductive autonomy.³²

Phase 3: Fluctuation Between Feminist Promotion and Conservative Backlash (2015 to present)

Since 2017, the evolution of gender-related policies in South Korea has reflected both the strategic adjustments made by the government in response to social pressures and the profound divisions within South Korean society in terms of generations, classes, and ideologies. The "Candlelight Revolution" in 2016-2017 led to the rise of the Moon Jae-in administration, which emphasised democratic deepening and social reform, including regarding gender equality as one of the core governance agendas.

The policy backdrop during this period was a series of major events, such as the "An Hee-Jung sexual harassment case"³³, the "Nth Room Incident"³⁴, and the "#MeToo movement"³⁵, which enabled the discourse of Korean feminism to rapidly move from the periphery to the mainstream of public debate. The long-term challenges faced by women in the workplace, such as the glass ceiling, low fertility rate, structural pressure, gender discrimination based on appearance, and digital sexual violence, have become the policy focus at the national level. In terms of policy content, the evolution process during this period can be divided into two policy development stages.

The first stage under the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), which regarded addressing gender inequality as a top priority, saw government policy lean towards actively promoting gender equality. The Moon Jae-in administration implemented several key reforms, including expanding the legal definition and punishment for sexual harassment and sexual violence (such as the enactment of the Act on Punishment of Crime of Stalking), improving the reporting and protection mechanisms, and increasing the penalties for digital sexual crimes. After the N-Number Room incident, the government revised the Criminal Code and the Information Communication Network Law to increase the penalties for voyeurism, the dissemination of sexual images, and the sexual exploitation of minors, and raised the responsibility of online platforms.

³¹ Kim, Na, and Lee, "The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements," 99.

³² After years of continuous struggle and legal contestation, the anti-abortion law was legally dismantled and decriminalized in 2019. However, in practice, a range of implementation challenges has persisted ever since.

³³ The "An Hee-jung sexual harassment case" refers to a high-profile political scandal in 2018 involving An Hee-jung, then governor of South Chungcheong Province and a prominent presidential contender, who was accused by his secretary of repeated sexual assault. The case became a landmark moment in South Korea's #MeToo movement, exposing power-based sexual violence within political institutions and triggering nationwide debate on gender inequality and abuse of authority.

³⁴ The "Nth Room" (also known as the "N-Chat Room") case refers to a large-scale digital sex crime uncovered in 2019–2020, in which perpetrators blackmailed victims – many of them minors – into producing sexually exploitative content that was distributed through encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram. The case sparked widespread public outrage and led to significant legal reforms targeting digital sexual crimes in South Korea.

³⁵ The #MeToo movement is a global social movement against sexual harassment and sexual violence that gained prominence in 2017, encouraging survivors to publicly share their experiences. In South Korea, the movement emerged prominently in 2018, exposing widespread gender-based violence across sectors including politics, entertainment, and academia, and contributing to increased public awareness and policy responses.

Another reform was enhancing the representation of women in the public sector and promoting transparency in the proportion of female appointments and salaries in the public sector through measures like the "Gender Equality Hiring Target System".³⁶

However this progressive trend soon encountered a strong backlash from the male population, especially young men. They believed that the current policies had led to "reverse discrimination", and the gender issue quickly became a highly politicised focal point of social conflicts.^{37,38} The Anti-Discrimination Law, which aimed to address a broad range of discrimination including gender, disability, age, sexual orientation and employment status, failed to be passed due to social resistance.³⁹

In the second stage under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration (2022–2025), there was a fundamental reversal in policy direction. During his campaign, Yoon Suk-yeol promised to abolish MOGEF, arguing that there was no longer systematic gender discrimination in South Korea. Instead, he shifted the policy focus to gender neutrality and addressing the male population's perception of unequal treatment. Although the proposal to abolish MOGEF was later blocked in the parliament, the government's policy stance has clearly changed.

Gender policies in South Korea exhibited the simultaneous existence of structural dilemmas and political conflicts. On the one hand, although the policies have been adjusted, the structural gender inequality problem remains severe. The gender pay gap in South Korea has long ranked highest among the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and government policies had limited effectiveness in addressing this fundamental issue.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the evolution of policies has not led to social consensus; instead, it exacerbated social polarisation. Gender issues have become a key tool for mobilising young voters in elections.⁴¹

Since 2017, gender policies in South Korea have been tumultuous, swinging wildly between a progressive wave and conservative backlash. The key feature was that the policy goals have shifted repeatedly between "eliminating discrimination" and "eliminating reverse discrimination", ultimately leading to intensified social conflicts, while the underlying structural problems remain to be addressed. In the context of hardened party conflicts, more recent measures promoted by the government, such as the "employment equal pay

³⁶ "Moon Jae-in marks International Women's Day says 'South Korea's gender equality still lags behind... hopes next administration will improve it'" [文在寅致贺国际妇女节：韩国性别平等仍落后 望新政府继续予以改善] *KBS WORLD (Chinese)*, March 8, 2022, accessed December 25, 2025, https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=c&Seq_Code=74705.

³⁷ "South Korean Politics Ignite a Clash Between 'Anti-Men' and 'Misogyny'" ["韩国政坛，引爆‘仇男’‘厌女’之争！"], *Sina Military*, August 12, 2021, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://mil.sina.cn/2021-08-12/detail-ikqciyzm0945563.d.html>.

³⁸ Soohyun Christine Lee, "The Rise of Modern Sexism among Young Men in South Korea." *International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 32, no. 3 (2013): 584–611.

³⁹ Runjing Li, "South Korean Groups Oppose Government's Push for Anti-Discrimination Bill" [韩国团体反对政府推进‘禁止歧视法’] *Epoch Times*, April 23, 2022, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.epochtimes.com/gb/22/4/23/n13718175.htm>.

⁴⁰ "Statistics: Gender wage gap in South Korea ranks first among OECD countries," [统计：韩国男女工资差距居经合组织首位], *Yonhap News Agency*, March 21, 2024, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://cn.yna.co.kr/view/ACK20240321002900881>.

⁴¹ Kyungja Jung, "Gender wars" and populist politics in South Korea." *Women's Studies International Forum* 104, (May – June 2024), 102915.

disclosure system”, have been regarded as an attempt to indirectly address the stubborn issue of the gender pay gap by adopting a more transparent and data-based approach.⁴²

Analysing Gender Policy Development in South Korea

In the following sections, the case study uses different lenses – economic, social and international discourse – to analyse the development of gender issues and policies in South Korea.

Gender Cost of Growth-Driven Development Strategy

Modernisation is considered a progressive force that would bring about more economic resources and expansion of political participation, thereby paving the way for more egalitarian social relations.⁴³ In the case of South Korea, rapid industrialisation indeed enabled the transition to democracy; yet gender inequality still exists with mixed results in terms of societal improvements.⁴⁴ Neither underdevelopment nor democratic immaturity is the culprit behind the persistence of gender inequality in Korea.

Essentially, this inequality can be viewed as an institutional outcome of prioritising economic growth-led developmental strategies during the authoritarian era.⁴⁵ The Park authoritarian government absorbed Confucian patriarchal structure into the economic developmental paradigm by reconstructing and embedding gender identity as a form of labour division in the national economy.⁴⁶ As a result, other public goals, including individual development, social welfare, and living standards, were all subordinated to national goals of growth at that time in Korea.

Such gendered arrangements established under this growth-driven model continue to shape labour market patterns in contemporary South Korea. Employment of women has remained concentrated in the secondary segment of the labour market, which is characterised by lower job security, poorer working conditions, and limited opportunities for advancement.⁴⁷ This reflected the persistence of a dual labour market that positions men as core long-term workers and women as flexible labour. At the same time, despite the expansion of social welfare, it has reinforced reliance on women’s unpaid care work within households, constraining continuous labour force participation and contributing to career interruptions.⁴⁸ These conditions, therefore, have generated broader economic costs, including the underutilisation of female human capital and Korea’s persistently low fertility rate.⁴⁹

Over time, this gendered labour division became the basis of the Korean economic structure, putting women at a relative disadvantage. In employment, women, especially married women, have faced barriers to

⁴² Luyao Fu, “South Korea’s Gender Pay Gap Ranks Highest in OECD, Transparency Measures May Be Key to Breaking the Deadlock” [韩国性别薪酬差距居 OEC 首位 透明化制度或成破局关键] *AJUDaily*, November 9, 2025, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.ajudaily.com/view/20251109092213626>.

⁴³ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.” *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105.

⁴⁴ Hye-Seon Chae, “Still Worst in the OECD, Korea’s Gender Wage Gap Shrinks Little by Little”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 29 August 2025, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-08-29/business/economy/Still-worst-in-the-OECD-Koreas-gender-wage-gap-shrinks-little-by-little/2387214>.

⁴⁵ John Minns, “Of Miracles and Models: The Rise and Decline of the Developmental State in South Korea.” *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (2001): 1028–1032.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 1 to Chapter 3 in Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Choi, S. (2020), *Korean Women’s Life Course Restructuring and Changes in Marriage Behavior*, Department of Sociology, The Graduate School Seoul National University PhD Thesis (in Korean) cited in Sunyong Choi et al., *Women’s Employment and Fertility in Korea: A Literature Review*, OECD Economics Department Working Papers no. 1825, OECD Economics Department Working Papers (Paris: OECD, 2024), 1825:15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1825:12–13; Hyunok Lee, ‘The Paradox of Economic Growth and Gender Equality in South Korea’, *Critical Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (2025): 22, 25–26.

⁴⁹ Choi et al., *Women’s Employment and Fertility in Korea*, 1825:5–7, 13.

entering or remaining in long-term careers because of the Korean labour market's preference for long-serving workers.⁵⁰ Women are also traditionally locked into caregiving roles in the family. Only 8.7% of women have managed to continue working before and after marriage based on the 2016 Korean Labour and Income Panel Study data.⁵¹ Hence women tend to hold unstable posts with limited promotion opportunities or lower wages. Even when doing the same job as men, women's salaries are generally lower than men's, ranging from 18.9% to 36.7% based on job types (Figure 1).⁵² Hence, gender inequality in Korea is a structural problem stemming from national economic development.

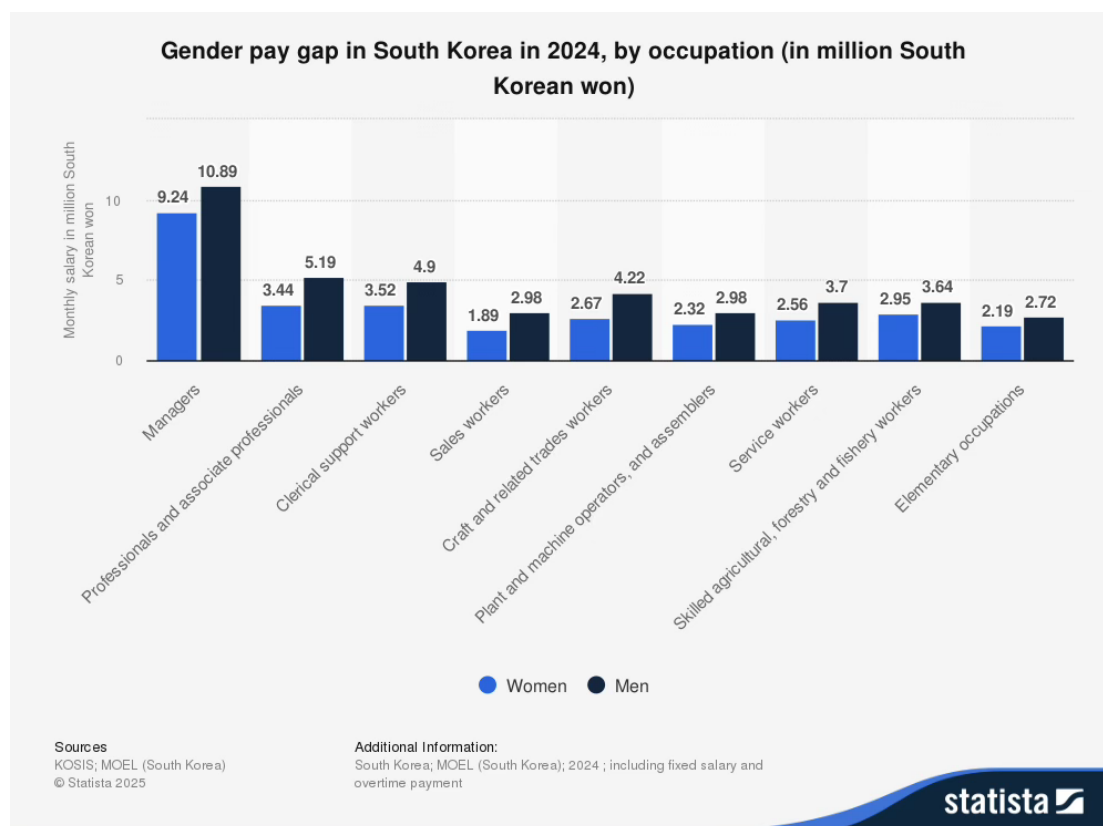


Figure 1: Gender Pay Gap in South Korea (2024)

Source: C. Textor, "Gender Pay Gap South Korea, in 2024, by Occupation", *Statista*, November 29, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/689775/south-korea-gender-pay-gap-by-occupation/#:~:text=Gender%20pay%20gap%20South%20Korea,and%20all%20age%20groups%2C%20with.>

Politicisation of Social and Ideological Divisions in Gender Issues

Gender issues are particularly prone to influencing social division and ideological polarisation as it touches on the fundamental cultural identity of the state and people.

Policies that are perceived by the public as altering the existing structure of resource allocation are likely to trigger social opposition, even if those policies produce a net gain to society. Gender policies involve important resource allocation issues such as employment opportunities, education and promotion, welfare, military service, caregiving responsibilities, legal protection and punishment. Htun and Weldon pointed out

⁵⁰ Sunyong Choi et al., *Women's Employment and Fertility in Korea: A Literature Review*, OECD Economics Department Working Papers no. 1825, OECD Economics Department Working Papers (Paris: OECD, 2024), 1825:12–15.

⁵¹ Ee Sun Kim and Keong-Suk Park, "Life Course of Korean Women: Conflictual Gender Differentiation and Enforced Classification." *Critical Sociology Association*, no. 122 (2019): 150–151 (in Korean).

⁵² C. Textor, 'Gender Pay Gap South Korea, in 2024, by Occupation', *Statista*, accessed November 29 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/689775/south-korea-gender-pay-gap-by-occupation/#:~:text=Gender%20pay%20gap%20South%20Korea,and%20all%20age%20groups%2C%20with.>

that the reason why gender equality policies are more likely to trigger backlash is that they directly challenge the institutional advantages of existing social groups, thereby triggering a sense of "deprivation".⁵³

Gender conflicts are also conflicts over identity and life choices. The issue of gender is highly emotional as it often: (1) involves family, intimate relationships, reproduction, and sexuality; (2) affects parental roles, masculinity, and femininity; (3) changes what constitutes a man or woman. Such moral conflicts are more likely to trigger extreme emotional polarisation compared to policy issues such as taxation or diplomacy. Inglehart and Norris called this a "cultural backlash" – when the traditional order is challenged, some will view gender equality as a "collapse of values".⁵⁴

Political psychology research shows that when an issue is perceived as an identity threat, people no longer engage in rational cost-benefit calculations but instead adopt a defensive stance.⁵⁵ The gender issue has often been framed as "Have we been treated fairly in this generation?", or "Have our efforts been denied by the system?". Hence gender issues have shifted from being a rational policy discussion to a more emotive confrontation. This is also why gender conflicts have been particularly prominent among young men – they are often in the most intense stage of life competition but have the least stable resources.⁵⁶

Lastly, the gender issue has often been hijacked by political parties. Political communication research indicates that when an issue possesses certain characteristics – high emotional intensity, tendency to be simplified into opposing narratives, and ability to mobilise specific voter groups – it is highly likely to be strategically magnified by political parties and used as a campaign tool.⁵⁷ In political campaigning, the gender issue has often been framed in simplistic binary terms, such as "equal rights vs. reverse discrimination", "progressivism vs. traditional values", "elite feminism vs. ordinary men". Such framing may not accurately reflect actual policy effects, but is easily leveraged to mobilise voter groups.

International Gender Norms and Domestic Politics

South Korean domestic politics has often been influenced by the interaction with international gender norms. This can be a complex process with both top-down and bottom-up approaches. International norms can act as a catalyst for reform, yet the government has also resisted them outright or repurposed them to serve a nationalistic agenda.

One example was the ratification of the CEDAW in 1984 which pressured the government to enact the 1987 Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the 1994 Special Act on Sexual Violence. Similarly, the 2004 Anti-Prostitution Law was a direct response to South Korea's downgrade to a "Tier 3" country in the US Human Trafficking Report. It forced the government to revise legislation from criminalising victims to protecting them. However international norms like multiculturalism have also been co-opted by the state for less socially progressive objectives. For example, the 2008 Support for Multicultural Families Act focused on integrating immigrant wives into traditional mother-wife roles to ensure national population sustainability, rather than granting them greater autonomy.⁵⁸

⁵³ Htun and Weldon, "Civic Origins," 548–569.

⁵⁴ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism," Harvard Kennedy School Working Paper Series, August 2016.

⁵⁵ Leonie Huddy, "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory." *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2001): 127–156.

⁵⁶ Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2017).

⁵⁷ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵⁸ Douglas MacLean, "Marriage Migrants and Commercial Marriage Trafficking in South Korea: Mapping the Current Legal Regime and Gaps in Addressing Exploitation." *KLRI Journal of Law and Legislation* 4, no.1(2014): 6-51.

On the other hand, international norms have consistently served as inspiration for grassroots mobilisation and feminist advocacy. Following the global #IAmAFeminist campaign, thousands of women in South Korea broke their silence using the hashtag #IAmAFeminist to challenge deep-seated misogyny.

The movement flourished as an intermedial phenomenon, merging online discourse on platforms like Twitter and Megalia with tangible offline action, such as the Post-it note memorial for a young woman killed at Kangnam Station which sparked nationwide debate over misogyny, and the successful campaign to shut down the illegal pornography site Soranet.⁵⁹ While the global #MeToo movement surged in Korea in 2018, its foundations were laid by earlier, ground-up digital campaigns. As early as October 2016, Korean women were using hashtags such as #SexualAssault_In_Literature and #SexualAssault_In_Art to expose perpetrators in professional circles. The 2016 “Black Protests” against the abortion ban in Poland inspired Korean activists to adopt the same name and imagery in their fight. This struggle culminated in the 2019 Constitutional Court ruling which explicitly referenced international human rights norms in its decision to decriminalise abortion.⁶⁰

Gender Policies under Recent Governments

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration showed a clear rupture from the direction of previous gender policies. The issue of gender became highly ideologically charged under this administration. While some existing gender-related laws were retained, Yoon steered the issue of gender inequality from a collective and structural policy issue towards gender-neutral and non-structural discrimination. He also attempted to abolish the MOGEF despite objections from the UN CEDAW committee, arguing that “systematic gender discrimination” no longer existed in Korea.⁶¹ Yoon further asserted that he would not implement the former government’s gender quotas which aimed to guarantee 30% of female representation in government jobs.⁶²

In the 2022 South Korean presidential election, Yoon and his People Power Party adopted conservative and anti-feminist rhetoric to mobilise male voter groups to win the election.⁶³ Men, particularly those in their 20s, had strong perceptions of being subject to “reverse discrimination” and felt unfairly treated in military conscription and the distribution of socio-economic resources.⁶⁴ This was because they believed existing government policies favoured women at the expense of their own burdens and sacrifices.⁶⁵ A survey from Hankook Ilbo-Korea Research poll in 2021 showed that 78.9% of men aged 20-29 (*idaenam*) and 70% of men aged 30-39 felt men were suffering from discrimination.⁶⁶ This backlash created electoral pressures that shaped the Yoon’s campaign messaging.

⁵⁹ Cho and Song, *Mediating Gender*, 46-65.

⁶⁰ Sunhye Kim, Na Young and Yurim Lee, “The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements in Challenging South Korea’s Abortion Ban.” *Health and Human Rights* 21, no.12(2019): 97-108.

⁶¹ “Joint Statement to South Korean president-elect Yoon Seok-youl on Women’s Rights,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 3, 2022, accessed December 20, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/04/joint-statement-south-korean-president-elect-yoon-seok-youl-womens-rights>.

⁶² Yim Hyun-su, ‘South Korea’s President-Elect to Break Away from Moon Administration’s Cabinet Gender Quota’, *Asia News Network (ANN)*, March 14, 2022, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://asianews.network/south-koreas-president-elect-to-break-away-from-moon-administrations-cabinet-gender-quota/>.

⁶³ Amy Gunia, “How South Korea’s Next President Capitalized on Anti-Feminist Backlash”, *TIME*, 10 March 2022, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://time.com/6156537/south-korea-president-yoon-suk-yeol-sexism/>; Jung, “Gender Wars,” 102915.

⁶⁴ Hojeong Lee, Soul Kim, Eunsoo Choi, “Claims of Reverse Gender Discrimination by Young Men in South Korea: The Role of Competitive and Common Victimhood”, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 28, no. 8 (2025): 1579–1598.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “78.9% of Men in Their 20s Perceive ‘Discrimination Against Men’... 70% of Those in Their 30s Agree”[박준석, ‘남성차별 존재한다는 “이남자”... “남성 우월주의” 오류남과는 달랐다’, 정치, 한국일보], *Hankook Ilbo*, June 16 2021, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021061321020001086>.

Yoon's decision to emphasise gender neutrality and question the role of MOGEF in gender policy could also be viewed as a government effort to appease some voters' concerns about perceived "reverse discrimination". His policy choice focused on shifting government discourse rather than tackling the institutional root causes of gender inequality. In particular, the elimination of MOGEF could have long-term impacts on Korean society as institutional problems such as gender pay gap and occupational segregation by gender⁶⁷ often require a specialised agency to continuously focus and coordinate efforts to tackle structural inequality.

When the Democratic Party's Lee Jae-myung came into power in 2025, his administration embodied a calculated electoral politics that deliberately sidesteps minority and gender-specific issues. While Lee acknowledged that "structural discrimination still exists" and criticised the Yoon administration's attempts to abolish the MOGEF,⁶⁸ his own campaign conspicuously lacked concrete policy pledges for women. Notably, he retracted his earlier pledge to ensure at least 30% female representation in the cabinet, replacing it with a vague commitment to consider "gender and age balance".⁶⁹ This manoeuvre could be seen as an attempt to secure support from young women without alienating young male voters, demonstrating the persistent and polarising politicisation of gender issues in South Korea.

Epilogue

This case study has traced the non-linear evolution of South Korea's gender policy, defined by a recurring cycle of social mobilisation, policy advancement and political backlash. The analysis reveals that gender inequality was not a symptom of democratic immaturity but a structural byproduct of national development, which was fundamentally governed by Confucian state ethics. Beyond mere economic planning, the state institutionalised Confucian patriarchal norms, most notably through the *hoju* system, viewing the patriarchal family as the foundational unit for social order and national identity.

During the era of "militarised modernity", the government absorbed this cultural structure into its economic paradigm, strategically re-engineering Confucian values to cast men as the military-industrial backbone and women as temporary, low-wage labour. Consequently, contemporary gender issues have ignited profound conflict on four fronts: resource allocation, identity recognition, moral order and political mobilisation. Even non-zero-sum policies are perceived as threats to male advantage, fuelling a potent sense of deprivation and a narrative of "reverse discrimination".

South Korean President Lee's proposal to restructure MOGEF has been framed as enhancing "gender-equal governance", yet he has simultaneously vowed to "examine and address cases of reverse discrimination."⁷⁰ This suggests that gender policy would continue to be used for electoral mobilisation, reinforcing a gender war that frames gender equality as a zero-sum game.

⁶⁷ See Seon-Mee Shin et al., 'Development of Strategies by Sector for Reducing the Gender Gap in the Labor Market (III): Focusing on Gender Segregation across Fields of Study', Korea Women's Development Institute, 2021, <https://eng.kwdi.re.kr/publications/researchReportDetail.do?p=5&idx=103060>.

⁶⁸ Moon Hyewon, "Lee Jae Myung Vows to Expand and Restructure Ministry of Gender Equality and Family into Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Affairs," *The Asia Business Daily*, May 28, 2025, accessed December 24, 2025, <https://cm.asiae.co.kr/en/article/2025052815164279004>.

⁶⁹ "'Gender Politics Avoidance' as the Presidential Election Default... Are 'Pledges for Women' a Risk?" ['젠더 정치 회피' 대선 기본값... '여성 공약'은 리스크?], *Nate News*, May 30, 2025, accessed December 24, 2025, <https://news.nate.com/view/20250530n01514>.

⁷⁰ Moon, "Lee Jae Myung Vows to Expand and Restructure Ministry."

Discussion questions

1. What are the key characteristics of gender policy evolution in South Korea?
2. Why does gender inequality continue to persist in a highly developed and democratic country?
3. Why do gender issues induce social division and even become ideologically contested?
4. How should a democratic government pursue gender equality without deepening political polarisation?
5. How do international gender norms interact with domestic politics in South Korea?
6. How should the government design gender policy in a context of persistent structural inequality and rising social backlash, and what institutional arrangement should it adopt?