Digital Sex Crimes on the Rise in South Korea

Josephine Ørgaard Rasmussen & Tove Jalmerud

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South Korea is experiencing a rise in digital sex crimes, a trend likely linked to the growing number of young men expressing anti-feminist and sexist views toward women. Fueled by online forums known as the "manosphere," groups of men including a significant number of boys aged 10 to 14 congregate in these spaces to share misogynistic sentiments. Some users exploit the anonymity of the internet to commit digital sex crimes against women. These offenses vary in severity, ranging from voyeurism to sextortion. The emergence of advanced AI technologies has further enabled such crimes, presenting new challenges for authorities in Seoul. As South Korea grapples with the escalating threat of digital sex crimes, this issue brief discusses how Seoul must go beyond strengthening legal and investigative measures and also implement systemic societal reforms and proactive prevention strategies. To prevent these crimes from occurring in the first place, Seoul must address the underlying social attitudes and misogyny that enable them, as well as take steps to raise public awareness and establish social intolerance towards such gender-based violence.

Introduction

According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's 2024[1] nationwide study on violence against women, more than one-third of Korean women had suffered a violent act at least once in their lives. Using the same criteria as in 2021, the rate in 2024 increased by 0.9 percentage points to 35.8 percent. This upward trend is mirrored in the rise of digital sex crimes against women in South Korea, a development likely linked to the growing number of young men expressing anti-feminist and sexist views, often reinforced and spread through online communities. In a very short time span, digital sex crimes have evolved from covert cameras in hotel rooms and public restrooms to include AI-

generated images and videos of women engaging in sexual acts.

Recent cases of digital sex crimes, including deepfakes generated by artificial intelligence (AI) and their usage, reveal that these crimes are not just sexual in nature, but also meant to demean, humiliate, blackmail and silence women. One of the most recent cases pertains to an online sexual extortion ring known as "The Vigilantes", which operated via Telegram from May 2020 until early 2025. At least 234 victims have been identified, 159 of whom are minors.

In response to the surge in digital sex crimes, Seoul is currently attempting to adjust to the new reality through the implementation of new legislation. Nevertheless, given the dynamic nature of AI advancements, ongoing vigilance and continuous policy development are essential to secure the rights of South Korean women, who make up the majority of victims. Although men can also be subjected to digital sex crimes, an unproportionate number of these crimes are committed by men against women, reflecting the gendered dimension of these offenses. To effectively prevent digital sex crimes against women, Seoul must go beyond legislation. It must address the growing anti-feminist and misogynistic attitudes among young South Korean men while promoting public education and awareness about the nature and impact of digital sex crimes.

The 'Manosphere' – Endorsement of Misogyny and Sexism in the Modern Age

Despite being a modern, contemporary nation by many standards, South Korea's societal norms remain influenced by conservative ideals that uphold traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideas. While meaningful progress has been made toward gender equality in recent decades, there is also a growing number of men who view efforts to address gender inequality as

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a form of reverse discrimination.[2] Traditional Confucian values still linger in society, shaping expectations around gender roles where women are often expected to prioritize family and domestic responsibilities over career ambitions, while men are typically seen as the primary breadwinners.[3] These expectations are reinforced by structural inequalities in employment, political presentation, caregiving policies, and persistent gender wage gaps.

This underlying societal environment has created fertile ground for the rise of more radical gender ideas, such as misogyny,[4] the hatred or devaluation of, hostility to, or prejudice against women, as well as anti-feminist campaigns. The digital age has further enabled the spread of these ideas. With cyberspace providing a platform for communication and online communities, men who hold anti-feminist and misogynistic views can now gather in private online communities to share their negative views on women. This phenomenon is referred to as the "manosphere"[5]–a wide range of men's groups operating on the internet that promote a narrow and harmful definition of masculinity. These groups endorse the notion that men are naturally dominant and

that traditional gender roles are a "natural" phenomenon. Online platforms such as forums, social media, and YouTube have become breeding grounds for radical anti-feminist discourse. Certain communities deliberately target and harass women, particularly those who publicly advocate for gender equality. The rise of male-centric communities amplifies these sentiments, fostering an environment where misogynistic views are normalized and widely accepted. This cycle of negative sentiments towards women perpetuates globally, including among South Korean men, through these online spaces.

Nonetheless, some of these individuals have gone a step further and started using the anonymity given by the internet to commit crimes against women, including digital sex crimes. According to the National Police Agency, in 2024, 80 percent of those apprehended for digital sex crimes were minors and teenagers.[6] Of those, 25 percent were under the age of 14 and therefore could not be subject to criminal prosecution. After national

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newspapers like *Hankyoreh* increased their coverage of digital sex crimes, South Korean women's rights activists went undercover on social media sites[7] and discovered that students from over 500 middle and high schools across the country had, to varying degrees, participated in the production or possession of sexual deepfake content involving their peers. It can thus be argued that social media platforms and the manosphere are cultivating an environment where boys are socialized to sexually objectify women and develop sexist and misogynistic tendencies toward women at a young age.

As the objectification and sexualization of women's bodies on the internet become increasingly common and normalized, teenagers and young boys who engage in such illegal internet activity may not even fully realize the impact of their actions. In these online environments, these harmful actions are often framed as jokes or challenges, while the anonymity and emotional detachment of staying behind a screen can dull moral judgment. Victims are reduced to images and usernames, rather than seen as real individuals. As a result, many perpetrators fail to realize that their actions extend beyond the online space, causing victims not only psychological damage such as anxiety, shame, and depression, but also potential reputation damage from the spread of non-consensual sexual content. With the endorsement of thousands of other individuals in the manosphere chatrooms, the exploitation of women in digital spaces is spreading rapidly. It is within this domain that South Korea finds itself waging a tough and complicated battle against a new wave of gender-based offenses online.

Surge in Digital Sex Crimes – Means and Intent

Fueled by the manosphere and the anonymity of the internet, South Korea has seen an alarming increase in digital sex crimes such as illegal and nonconsensual filming, the broadcast of intimate

photos, cyber harassment and the creation of deepfakes. According to data from the Sex Crime Victims Support Center,[8] authorities deleted 243,855 unlawfully made and distributed sexual pictures and videos in 2023, up by 30,855 from 213,000 in 2022. This points to an alarming rise in victims of cyber-sex crimes. However, this figure only reflects known incidences, and the actual number is likely much higher, as many victims remain silent due to fear of humiliation, victim-blaming and societal judgement.

Digital sex crimes in South Korea have evolved from covert cameras in hotel rooms and public restrooms, known as molka,[9] to AI-generated photographs and videos of women engaged in sexual acts. Depending on the perpetrator's intent, the nature and method of these crimes often vary. *Molka* crimes,[10] for instance, are voyeuristic in nature, with the footage being sold to websites that profit by offering access to unlawfully obtained or nonconsensual content.

By contrast, the infamous Nth Room case[11] from 2020 revealed a more sadistic and degrading dimension of digital sex crimes. The crimes included "sextortion,"[12] the nonconsensual misuse of sexual images to blackmail victims, accompanied by threats of sharing the victim's personal information, including home address, as well as threats of physical violence. With the promise of employment opportunities, the criminals would entice women and girls into Telegram chat rooms. They would then persuade the women to send personal information and pictures of themselves, which were subsequently used to threaten the women into performing degrading acts of a sexual nature. Pictures and videos of these acts were then sent to the chatrooms as proof of compliance, serving as additional blackmail material. Victims were forced to perform acts such as licking dirty public bathroom floors and sending explicit pictures of themselves. In many cases, the victims were compelled to watermark the images and

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refer to themselves as "slaves",[13] demonstrating the perpetrators' hateful and domineering intentions. The coerced pornographic content was also distributed and sold in private Telegram chat rooms.

In a case comparable to Nth Room, the most recent known digital sex crime in South Korea involves an online sexual blackmail ring called "The Vigilantes",[14] which is currently being investigated and has had some of its members recently indicted. Like in the Nth Room case, the perpetrators utilized Telegram for its data encryption and privacy features to evade detection and police investigation. The group's ringleader was a man in his 30s, and the organization included 14 members,[15] with 11 of its members being teenagers and enrolled in high school at the time of the crimes. As in the Nth Room case, Vigilantes members would obtain women's personal information and then

use it to persuade and blackmail their targets by threatening to publish and spread sensitive material involving the women participating in sexual activities. Police discovered that the perpetrators had enticed and sexually exploited 234 people, including 159 teenagers. Aside from digital sextortion, at least 10 of the victims were also sexually assaulted physically.

Both the Nth Room and Vigilantes cases involved the use of AI-generated pornographic content, commonly referred to as deepfakes. These are becoming more common as offenders can easily create them from the privacy of their homes without the use of hidden cameras or other invasive measures. As early as 2020, the Nth Room members were creating and sharing over 100 deepfake videos as well as over 5,000 images using AI and footage from hidden cameras.[16] By 2024, police had received 946 reports of deepfake sex offenders but were only able to detain 506 suspects. The majority of both victims and perpetrators in known deepfake crimes were minors with suspects aged 10 to 14 accounting for 81.2 percent of those

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detained.[17] With the rapid commercialization and advancement of AI technology by 2025, individuals are now able to create highly realistic imagery and videos using nothing more than a photograph, such as those posted on Instagram, and superimposing it on naked women's bodies to create deepfake pornographic material.[18] With the rapid evolution of AI technology, no one is safe from being targeted and potentially becoming a victim of digital sex crime.

Accountability Difficulties

Seoul has struggled to respond effectively to the increasing severity of digital sex crimes and faces three major challenges, with the first struggle pertaining to the evidence-gathering process. With the encryption and privacy policies of some foreign social media platforms, like Telegram,[19] the South Korean authorities have struggled to gather the necessary information to indict the perpetrators. Telegram was specifically chosen by the perpetrators from both the Nth Room and Vigilantes cases due to the platform's strict confidentiality policy, which prohibited the sharing of account information and other forms of personal information with investigative officials or law enforcement agencies, as well as a mechanism that allowed data to be stored solely on the platform rather than on an individual's private computer. These factors made it almost impossible for law enforcement to gather evidence and connect the perpetrators to the crimes, both being a necessity for prosecution. However, toward the end of 2024, Telegram changed its privacy policy in an effort to work with law enforcement to deter illicit activities on the platform.[20] This change along with efforts to collaborate with foreign law enforcement agencies, including South Korea's, may enhance the ongoing investigation into the Vigilantes case. Still, given the infinite number of opportunities the web provides, future perpetrators will migrate to other social media platforms, making the problem of evidence gathering in digital sex crimes a persistent and evolving one.

The second obstacle also relates to the evidence-gathering procedure, but stems from systemic issues within the South Korean law enforcement culture. The police, the majority of whom are men, have been known to humiliate, belittle or dismiss victims of sex crimes. This has led to some victims being "forced" to collect the evidence themselves if they want to take the case to court. Given the history of South Korean police failing to take these crimes seriously and further harming the victims mentally by invalidating their circumstances, it is likely that several women did not go to the police to report such crimes in the first place. As a result, an unknown number of South Korean women who have fallen victim to digital sex crimes have not received the justice they deserve.[21]

The third major challenge in holding perpetrators accountable and combating the rise in digital sex crimes resides in the growing gap between the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the slower pace of government legislation. Compared to more traditional offenses, digital sex offenses and the means to carry these out are evolving at a lighting speed and are overall harder to identify and prosecute. This fast-paced technological evolution combined with a history of insufficient legal protections against sex crimes in general[22] has resulted in South Korea's legal system being ill-equipped to address technological innovations and their application in digital sex crimes, particularly AI-deepfake imaging. This gap is evident in the messages between deepfake perpetrators, revealing their awareness of the fact that deepfake sex crimes were not previously legislated and they could continue without fear of punishment.[23] Seoul's tardy response to adopting legislation in this sector may result in only 23 arrests out of 964 recorded deepfake-related sex crimes between January and October 2024, resulting in several perpetrators not being held accountable for their crimes. While recent legislative amendments have begun addressing

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these gaps, persistent efforts are crucial to ensure justice and accountability.

Government Response and the Need for more Proactive Measures

With the surge in digital sex crimes, feminist organizations and activist groups have been at the forefront of the push for stronger legislation, better victim support systems, and cultural shifts that challenges the deep-seated misogyny in South Korean society. In response to growing public concerns, as evidenced by activist groups and media coverage from agencies such as *Hankyoreh*, the South Korean government has enacted new legislation to address the evolving reality of digital sex crimes, including increased penalties and expanded investigative powers.

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viewing, purchase, and storage of non-consensual deepfakes, with offenders facing up to three years in prison or a fine of 30 million won (around USD 20,000). The second targeted the use of deepfakes to exploit minors, stipulating that anyone who uses deepfake content to threaten or blackmail minors now faces at least three years of imprisonment, and at least five years if they coerce minors into unwanted actions.[25] In addition, as of February 2025, the police have pledged to invest 9.1 billion won (around USD 6.6 million) to develop a deepfake- detection system, scheduled for completion by December 2027.[26]

Seoul has also expanded the country's victim support system with the launch of the "National Center for Digital Sexual Crime Response".[27] Operating 24/7, the center serves as a centralized hub for reporting, counseling, and coordinating victim support, aiming to delete illegal content, improve investigations on closed platforms like Telegram, and provide counseling for victims.

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Furthermore, the Seoul Metropolitan Government announced the launch of a new AI-powered system on May 21, 2025, that can automatically monitor, detect, report, and seek the removal of sexually exploitative content online in minutes. The AI tool can generate a report of its findings, and the system will automatically compose an email requesting that website operators, such as Telegram or Instagram, erase the illegal sexual content. An official in charge then reviews the report and email before sending it to the website operators. It will also be able to monitor content posted overseas and draft emails in foreign languages, such as English and Chinese, to overseas website owners in the face of a growing number of situations where sexually exploitative videos of South Korea women are uploaded to foreign servers.[28]

Nonetheless, even with the recent development of new legislative tools, the current investigative methods for deepfake-related cases still make it difficult for victims to seek justice. South Korean authorities often require clear identification of the victim in the material, meaning that if a person's face is obscured or cannot be easily verified, reports are dismissed and not treated as a sex crime. Given the high level of sophistication of AI-generated images, it can be difficult for prosecutors to verify whether the material features a real person, was illegally filmed, or was generated by AI, making it challenging to determine the appropriate legal basis for prosecution. This will only become even more difficult as deepfake technology becomes more sophisticated, with even AI-based detection tools struggling to keep up.[29]

Overall enforcement remains limited in dealing with digital sex crimes. While the introduction of stricter laws and increased investigation efforts to hold perpetrators accountable represents significant progress in combating these crimes, punitive actions alone will not be sufficient

to resolve the issue. To prevent these crimes from occurring in the first place, preventative measures that address the underlying causes are essential.

Policy Recommendations

As South Korea continues to confront the rise of digital sex crimes, Seoul should not only enhance legal and investigative responses but also prioritize systematic societal reforms and introduce preventive measures. To prevent these crimes from occurring in the first place, Seoul must address the underlying social attitudes and misogyny that enable them, as well as take steps to raise public awareness and establish social intolerance towards such gender-based violence.

In particular, given the high rate of cybersex crimes being committed by adolescents and juveniles in South Korea, action targeting this demographic group is crucial in combating the surge in digital sex crimes in the country. Special emphasis should be placed on developing a more comprehensive sexual education program. Currently, the South Korean School Health Act only requires 15 hours of sex education per year for middle and high school students, which mainly relies on materials that cover reproductive anatomy and physical changes during adolescence. In elementary schools, only two hours is devoted to education on sexual and domestic violence, while middle and high schools are required to offer an additional hour on prostitution prevention. Moreover, sex education is not only taught by health teachers or outside experts, but also by general subject teachers, resulting in the quality and content of teaching often depending on each teacher's level of understanding of sexual education.[30] Consequently, Seoul needs to implement a more thorough and standardized sex education program in schools to teach children about gender

> *Apart from law enforcement, Seoul needs to implement a more thorough and standardized sex education program in schools to teach children about gender equality, consent, responsible online behavior, and the dangers of deepfake technology.*

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Beyond the classroom, societal campaigns should be launched to challenge and dismantle norms that trivialize or ignore digital gender-based violence. Apart from raising general awareness, such campaigns should directly confront victim-blaming attitudes and misogynistic discourse, as well as shed light on the lasting mental and social effects digital violence has on victims. To reach a broader audience, these efforts should be implemented across various platforms, including traditional and social media, and especially the online platforms where illegal content often circulates.

At the same time, South Korea must continue to invest in legal and investigative measures to ensure that victims receive justice. This includes expanding victim support services, developing and deploying AI-based tools to detect and remove non-consensual content, and stronger oversight of online forums that facilitate the sharing of harmful content. In addition, Seoul should explore stronger legal frameworks to hold tech companies and platforms accountable for hosting or enabling exploitative content.

Finally, Seoul should move from observer status to full accession to the Budapest "Convention on Cybercrime"—the only multilateral treaty dedicated to addressing cybercrime.[31] Joining the convention could strengthen South Korea's legal framework and enable faster, more coordinated access to digital evidence across borders, which is crucial since much exploitative content is hosted or shared overseas.

As one of the world's most digitally advanced nations, South Korea has the opportunity and the tools to combat digital sex crimes and create a safer online environment. Going forward, the fight against digital gender-based violence must remain a priority. Only through sustained efforts, both legally and socially, can the country hope to build a safe and inclusive digital space.

Authors –

Ms. Josephine Ørgaard Rasmussen is the Project Manager at the Stockholm Korea Center of the Institute for Security and Development Policy. She graduated with a master's degree from the University of Southern Denmark in International Security and Law. Through her master's degree, Ms. Ørgaard Rasmussen concentrated on the security situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula. In her master's thesis she examined how, among other things, the green transition agenda could be used as a diplomatic tool to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula in the long run through security cooperation. Following the completion of her master's degree, she studied Korean at Pukyong National University in Busan for eight months.

Ms. Tove Jalmerud was Project Coordinator at the Institute for Security and Development Policy's Stockholm Korea Center. She holds a Bachelor of Arts with double majors in Political Science and Chinese from Uppsala University and is currently enrolled in its Political Science Master's program, focusing on international politics.

Institute for Security & Development Policy

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