

Work and Equalities Institute Research Briefing

Protecting Women's Labour Rights in the Creative Platform Economy: The Case of South Korean Webtoons and Webnovels

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Summary

This research examines gender inequality in the creative platform economy, focusing on the experiences of webtoonists and webnovelists in South Korea. The study finds that female creators are highly vulnerable to online harassment, discrimination and hatespeech, in addition to dealing with unequal pay and structural sexism.

Platform operators have tolerated and condoned misogynist and gender discriminatory attitudes within their organisation and from third party users. Furthermore, the anti-Feminist backlash has severely weakened commitment to tackling gender inequality and fuelled gender war. To address these issues, it is essential not only to include creative platform workers within the scope of employment protection, but also undertake reforms in the areas of gender equality and anti-discrimination, platform regulation and content moderation.

Keywords: platform work; gender inequality; creative work; webtoons; webnovels; women's rights; labour rights



Female Labour in the Webtoon and Webnovel Industry

Webtoons (web cartoons) and webnovels are creative contents optimised for reading on a smartphone, published as weekly or daily series on digital platforms. These contents are monetised through a combination of ad-supported free access and paid access (fixed fee per episode, time-limited pass, episode preview). The market is dominated by the South Korean IT giants Naver and Kakao, whose main content platforms captured respectively 8.23 and 4.73 million users in 2023 (Jobst 2023). The workforce is predominantly composed of freelance creators (artists, writers and illustrators), who are excluded from the scope of employment protection. The industry is polarised between a few top earning creators and a large number of precarious creators facing substandard working conditions, many of whom are subcontracted by agencies known as Content Providers. Women constitute 68.4% of webtoonists (KOCCA 2023) and 53.8% of web novelists (KPIPA 2023), corresponding to a broader trend of occupational segregation linked to structural barriers confronting women in the platform economy and beyond (Gerber 2022). In recent years, women's rights in South Korea have suffered a setback due to anti-Feminist backlash, exacerbated by the rise of far-right misogyny among young men since the 2022 presidential election. Far-right supporters deliberately conflate all types of Feminism with Radical Feminism, and claim that Feminism promotes reverse discrimination against men and female supremacy, some even likening it to Nazism (Kim 2023). Digital platforms have been key sites for the expansion of anti-Feminism and the associated Manosphere, reflecting the global rise of misogynistic backlash (UN-Women 2025). It is crucial to understand how these tendencies affect working conditions in the platform economy. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and extensive secondary source analysis this case study raises important issues regarding women's labour rights that are seldom addressed in discussions on platform work, particularly relating to harassment, discrimination and cyber-violence.

Gender Inequality in the Creative Platform Economy



(Left) Screenshot of a scene in the webtoon "Romance 101". The character says "So just a little bit...!" while pinching his fingers for emphasis.

Credit: Namuwiki.

(Right) Megalialian pinching hand logo. Credit: Namuwiki.

Workplace Harassment and Discrimination:

Creative content has been affected by a wave of harassment and discrimination against "potential Feminists", initially led by young male gamers who mounted a conspiracy theory around the appearance of purportedly Radical Feminist symbols. A prime example is the "pinching hand" gesture, which was used by some members of the defunct Radical Feminist website Megalia to mock the size of Korean men's genitals and symbolically belittle their masculinity. However, it is now deliberately misconstrued as a sign of support for Megalia, regardless of the context where it appears. However, the scope of anti-Feminism has significantly expanded.

For instance, drawings that de-emphasise sexual features of female bodies can be taken as an affirmation of Feminism. Several colloquialisms are seen as coded Feminist mockery toward men. Consumers also monitor creators' social media accounts for signs of affinity with Feminism, which they view as synonymous with misandry. Once they identify a "culprit", consumers instigate a witch hunt by leaving negative ratings and aggressive comments on content platforms, social media and fan communities.

Female creators are particularly targeted by anti-Feminist cyber-bullying, including gaslighting, doxxing, stalking and threats of violence, posing serious risks to their mental health and safety.

Creators are largely unprotected against such harassment. Most platforms use a minimal comment filtering system focusing on selected terms that are explicitly obscene, insulting or violent. Interviewees explained that many forms of hateful and aggressive language remain unfiltered which causes enormous stress and anxiety. Since harassment also occurs on social media, female creators increasingly withdraw or limit their engagement to avoid conflict.

Platforms and agencies often condone the harassment either implicitly or explicitly, and even penalise creators in an attempt to appease consumers. As a result, many creators faced discriminatory treatment including stigmatisation, contract termination and blacklisting. Interviews revealed that after several cases of discrimination were mediated, companies have sought to minimise public exposure while continuing to oppress victims. Creators are routinely asked by managers to modify content that might offend anti-Feminist readers before publication. This practice significantly increases workloads and time pressure in an already labour-intensive industry, while also decreasing work autonomy.

In these circumstances, creators are systemically disempowered and silenced. According to a creator interviewed in 2022, some companies added a clause in their contract forbidding creators from associating with "subversive organisations", implicitly targeting Feminist organisations. Subsequently, secrecy around contracts has been heightened, making it very challenging to obtain evidence of discrimination and convince victims to share their experiences.

Recent interviews in 2025 indicate that many creators are afraid of retaliation. As explained by a union official:

“There was a blacklist in the webtoon industry [...] It was only exposed because the platform Lezhin Comics was caught. If it hadn't been caught... Creators think that other platforms surely have similar blacklists, and they are really afraid. Only a very small minority find the courage to speak out. The majority simply don't speak out because they have to publish their series and earn money. So even though there is a union, and we try to collect cases [of discrimination] and even guarantee anonymity, they don't talk.”

This problem is worsened by public opposition to gender inequality policies which have been de-prioritised by the Conservative Yoon Suk-Yeol administration, making it challenging for unions and women's groups to engage in effective representation and advocacy.

Opportunistic Misogyny and Rise of the Manosphere:

The working conditions of female creators are also affected by the broader rise of the Manosphere, driven by an opportunistic approach to misogyny and complacency toward hate speech. This problem is well illustrated by the case of a webtoon titled “Otherworldly Pongpong” that went viral on Naver Webtoon in 2024. The internet slang “pongpong” refers to a man exploited by a promiscuous wife, and has a sinister connotation in relation to gang rape. The story explicitly promotes anti-Feminist tropes, such as men's ‘victimisation’. Women's organisations staged protests against Naver, while female consumers led a long-term boycott against the platform, demanding a formal apology and an overhaul of its content moderation guidelines. However, the company's dismissive attitude fuelled anger and intensified the gender conflict, causing a decrease in female creators' revenues and placing them in a delicate position, since female readers consider them as “traitors” for publishing their work on a misogynist platform. As one creator shared:

“It's really difficult. I understand why they are doing the boycott. I also think that this has caused damage to Naver, and all the criticism is due to the fact that they're not responding appropriately. But also, female creators are actually suffering damages from it. It's a very tricky situation.”

Interviewees felt that Naver mishandled the issue, while some suggested that this was no accident given its tendency to exploit inflammatory content for views. While the whole industry has a history of amplifying the tastes of sexist male audiences, Naver's role is salient. Most recently, a controversy has arisen against the planned Netflix adaptation of Naver's top webtoon "Get Schooled" due to its glorification of violence in schools and vilification of gender equality education, further extending the boycott.



Screenshot from the webtoon "Get Schooled" reposted on far-right website FM Korea, showing a female teacher being slapped for teaching Feminism. The FM Korea caption describes the scene as refreshing. Credit: Girls' Generation Daum Cafe.

Gender Pay Gap and Structural Sexism:

Due to its massive user base, Naver is still an attractive publishing venue for female creators, even though they are paid at least 20% less than men according to the 2020 Webtoon Creator Survey published by the Korea Creative Content Promotion Agency. Subsequent surveys have ceased to provide data on earnings by gender, and labour unions are unable to conduct similar surveys due to logistical challenges. However, qualitative data strongly suggests that the gender pay gap persists and affects both webtoonists and web novelists. This gap is likely due to the effects of structural sexism on women's earnings.

- **Poor Work-life Balance:**

In South Korea, women face the twin pressures of trying to keep up with high workloads and intense competition in the labour market, while also shouldering the unequal burden of care and domestic labour. This means women are more likely to have difficulty meeting deadlines of weekly/daily serialisation, negatively impacting their performance relative to male creators.

Pregnancy is particularly challenging as freelancers are not entitled to maternity leave. It is also not uncommon for managers to gaslight female workers regarding undesirable effects of pregnancy on work. According to interviews, there were at least two cases of miscarriage from overwork. Women who take a career break due to pregnancy or childcare struggle when returning to work due to skill erosion and retraining costs.

Women who live with their families, and those who work from home are particularly disadvantaged regardless of marital status and parenthood as they are under pressure to perform domestic chores due to patriarchal norms, which reduces their availability for work.

- **Patriarchal Work Culture:**

Patriarchal work cultures negatively affect career opportunities for female creators. Webtoons in particular are dominated by male-centric networks, and contracts are often negotiated over informal drink meetings that disadvantage women. Therefore, favourable contracts with large platforms are more likely to be secured by male creators; a tendency that is particularly salient for Naver's top webtoon contractors. Furthermore, sexist biases and misogyny expose women to unfair criticism and personal attacks based on their views, appearance or behaviour.

As such, female creators are reluctant toward public exposure both on mainstream and social media, restricting their visibility and ability to promote their content.

- **Gendered Genre Classification :**

Content is classified into “male-oriented” and “female-oriented” genres, a practice inherited from print comics. Previously, print publishers offered lower manuscript fees for female-oriented content, predominantly created by women. In the digital age, creators are rarely paid through manuscript fees, but the classification persisted and led to gender-based market segmentation. Female-oriented genres have less exposure to readers compared to male-oriented genres at an aggregate level, which can undermine women's revenue shares.

Policy Recommendations Expanding the Scope of Labour Rights Protection:

Including freelancers and platform workers under the scope of the Labour Standards Act is essential to protect workers against abuse, harassment and discrimination. However, the Labour Standards Act is limited in terms of protection against workplace harassment, which is defined as an act that causes

“physical or mental suffering to other employees or deteriorate[s] the work environment beyond the appropriate scope of work by taking advantage of superiority in rank, relationship, etc. in the workplace.”

It is necessary to define what falls within the appropriate scope of work, and introduce liability for harassment perpetrated by third parties, particularly in an online setting. Amendments are also needed to clarify employer duties in terms of remediation, and to establish mandatory preventative measures against workplace harassment.

Strengthening Anti-Discrimination and Gender Equality Legislation:

Although discrimination is prohibited in the National Human Rights Commission Act, the latter provides no enforceable sanctions and has so far been ineffective in resolving gender discrimination, including cases of unfair dismissal due to anti-Feminism.

Enacting an Anti-Discrimination Act is necessary to clarify the status of sex and gender as protected categories, implement legally-binding penalties against offenders, and introduce an overarching duty to promote equality and prevent discrimination across all sectors regardless of employment status.

However, effective implementation is premised on the availability of accurate data on gender inequality. Currently, only companies with 500 or more employees are required to report on pay gaps and implement affirmative action under the Work-Family Balance Assistance Act (or 300 or more for those subject to the Monopoly Regulation and Fair Trade Act).

Expanding mandatory reporting and commissioning annual surveys on gender inequality, along with government support for affirmative action such as addressing pay gaps and staff training for small businesses, would significantly improve work equality in the creative platform economy.

Strengthening Platform Liability for Harm Prevention:

Many creators are harassed on social media platforms such as X/Twitter, which is unlikely to be resolved within the scope of workplace harassment even if expanded. As such, it is important to strengthen the liability of online platform operators (publishers, social media, OTT) for preventing harms to users including cyber-bullying, hate speech and other digital crimes.

However, South Korean law contains no definition of hate speech, and measures against cyber-bullying are too restricted. Online speech regulation predominantly focuses on the protection of minors through the Juvenile Protection Act and the Network Act, which prohibit the circulation of specific categories of harmful content, excluding hate speech. While the category of defamation includes harms to adults through reputational damage, it has often served as a tool for companies to sue victims of abuse for spreading false

rumours. Conversely, victims seldom pursue this route due to the intimidating legal process and prohibitive costs.

It is thus necessary to hold platforms accountable for the prevention of online harm while reducing the risk of secondary victimisation, via amendment of existing criminal/telecommunication laws or new comprehensive legislation (cf. the UK Online Safety Act).

Further measures may be required to tackle misogyny. South Korea enacted the Framework Act on Prevention of Violence Against Women in 2019, but it has been criticised for failing to define and regulate misogyny, restricting its effectiveness in curbing gender-based violence.

Introducing a legal definition of misogyny, together with criminal provisions against offenders can create a legal duty for platform operators to stop monetising content that incites hate and violence against women.

Establishing Transparent Content Moderation Guidelines:

Preventing hatespeech in creative content itself is a more delicate issue, due to concerns about infringement of free speech and excessive government interference within the industry. Currently, creative content is a self-regulated system coordinated by the Korea Internet Self-Governance Organisation and the Korea Communications Standards Commission. However, recurrent incidents of misogyny and other forms of hate speech in creative content indicate that this system fails to represent the voices and interests of targeted groups including women, sexual and racial minorities. Content moderation guidelines are also opaque and inconsistent, undermining accountability. While self-regulation is clearly limited, a prescriptive approach would also be counter-productive. An alternative is to implement a human rights-based approach (Sander 2020) requiring platforms to publish and observe guidelines aligned with human rights provisions (as per the National Human Rights Commission Act and/or a prospective Anti-Discrimination Act). The role of regulatory authorities would be to ensure compliance and enforce remedy on a compulsory basis when platforms fail to take appropriate measures.

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