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ASIA

## South Korea: Seoul subway killing sparks calls for new laws

Women complain that weak laws and a male-oriented society put them at risk from assailants who do not consider women their equals.



President Yoon acknowledged that the legal framework appears "insufficient to protect victims"

There was a public outcry after police in [Seoul](#) took Jeon Joo-hwan into custody and accused him of stalking and then stabbing a woman to death in a public toilet at a subway station.

The case sparked criticism that the police and courts had failed to protect the victim — even though Jeon continued his campaign of harassment and despite her reporting him twice in six months.

A week after the 28-year-old woman was killed, the story had largely disappeared from the headlines and people saw it as just another case of infatuation, rejection and — ultimately — the killing of a young woman.

But, for a growing number of Korean women, that's just not good enough.

The genesis of the case can be traced back over three years, when Jeon joined Seoul Metro, the company that operates the capital city's subway system. It was there where he first encountered the woman, who has not been named to protect her family's privacy.

Jeon's interest in his colleague was not reciprocated, however, at which point he began to harass her with hundreds of phone calls and text messages, and by illicitly filming her.



The city pledged to beef up efforts to protect stalking victims and prevent any recurrences

### Police complaint

The woman reported him for stalking to both her employer and the police. Jeon was fired from his job and scheduled to appear in court on September 15 to face charges of stalking, for which he faced a nine-year prison term.

Despite requests from the victim, the police declined to hold Jeon in custody ahead of the hearing after determining that he posed little or no threat to her.

The day before he was scheduled to be sentenced, 31-year-old Jeon is accused of traveling to Sindang Station in central Seoul, where the victim was working. He is accused of pulling out a knife and forcing her into the station toilets, where authorities say he stabbed her to death.

In response to questions from reporters as he was being taken into court the following day, Jeon could only say he had done "a truly crazy thing" and "I'm sorry."

### 'Reverse discrimination'

Jackie Kim-Wachutka, a professor of gender and identity in Japan and Korea at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, told DW that there was an initial "sense of shock" among women and Korean society in general, "but, of course, the shock dissipates within a few days and the sentiment becomes: 'Oh, another one.'"

"I feel a sense of worry rather than anger," she said.

"I think Korean society is experiencing a serious gender rift," she said. "This rift stems from long-simmering resentments from women who have been traditionally oppressed but through the years have gained some hard-fought rights, and simultaneously from men who feel a sense of unfairness and unjust 'reverse discrimination.'"

"At the moment, South Korea's gender politics — with misogyny being legitimated from the highest public office — is food for conflict," she said.

"Cases such as this trigger raw emotions both among women, who feel constantly victimized by an oppressive patriarchal society hiding behind the mask of women's rights," she said, as well as "men who demand that their own 'oppression' be recognized as they feel left behind."



The case has sparked a public demand for tougher measures to stamp out such crimes

### Escalating to murder

Hyobin Lee, an adjunct professor of Korean politics at Chungnam National University, said that, despite a number of stalking cases that eventually led to murder, "nothing has changed significantly, and these crimes are expected to continue to rise."

Part of the problem, she said, is that punishments for stalking or sexual harassment are weak. A first-time stalking offense can lead to a maximum of three years in prison or a fine of up to 30 million South Korean won (€21,355, \$21,120).

"Even the word 'stalking' is relatively new to many Koreans," she said. "Stalking has only been recognized as a crime for a short period of time. The law on stalking was proposed in 1999, but it took 22 years until it became enforceable."

"There was stalking in the past, of course, but it was not regarded as a crime and there was no way to report it," she said.

But that is changing, with 363 cases reported in 2015 — rising to 583 in 2019.

Despite concerns that the subway killing case could quickly be forgotten, there have been indications that it has had an initial impact.

### Increased prison terms

Jeon was given the maximum nine-year term when he appeared in court on the stalking charges. He will be tried at a later date for the killing of his former colleague.

Similarly, a man who in late September appealed a 35-year prison term for stalking and murdering a former girlfriend in 2020 saw his punishment increased to 40 years behind bars. The appeals court said it was increasing the prison term because 36-year-old Kim Byung-chan was not sufficiently remorseful for his actions.

Women are also taking additional measures to protect themselves, with local media reporting that sales of personal alarms and pepper spray soaring in recent weeks.



### New stalking laws

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo has announced that the government intended to work with colleagues from across the political spectrum to devise new laws to halt stalking.

Kim-Wachutk said Korean society needs to find ways to address the root causes of the problem.

"The rift must be mended through a kind of 'truth and reconciliation' process between young women and men, with the help of communities, schools, civil society and the

K-POP: SCANDALS AND TRAGEDIES

## More and more deaths

Cha In-ha, a popular South Korean actor-singer, was found dead at his home on December 3, 2019. A police official told media that the cause of Cha's death was not immediately known. The 27-year-old celebrity made his film debut in 2017 and was part of the Surprise U band, which released two albums. There were no reports to suggest that Cha had been a target of personal attacks or cyberbullying.

political world, for honest mediated dialogue," she said.

"Only then can there be healing," she said, "which South Korean society really needs at this point."

Lee is less optimistic, and her conclusion is both stark and worrying.

"The murderer in this case worked for a public firm, and the attack

happened in a crowded, public place in the middle of the day. I feel there is no such thing as a safe place in Korea for women any more," she said.

*Edited by: Keith Walker*

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