

# 'A part of daily life': South Korea confronts its voyeurism epidemic

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## **Demand grows for tougher penalties for 'molka' - the secret filming of images of a sexual nature**



Women march for justice in South Korea where they say deep-seated sexism exists in the workplace. Photograph: Courage to Be Uncomfortable

Han Jin-young was working for a trading company in Seoul when a visit to the office bathroom revealed the ugly truth about one of her male colleagues.

As she was about to leave, she spotted a hole in the toilet-seat cover, a recent "gift" for female employees from the firm's vice president. She lifted up the cover to find a tiny camera. It had been recording her every move.

As the [UK prepares to introduce legislation banning upskirting](#), South Korea has been forced to confront its own epidemic of secretly filmed images of a sexual nature, known as *molka*.

According to police, the number of *molka* arrests soared from 1,110 in 2010 to more than 6,600 in 2014, although the real number of cases is thought to be many times higher.

Of the 16,201 people arrested between 2012 and 2017 for making illegal recordings, 98% were men; 84% of the 26,000 recorded victims over that period were women.

The country's president, Moon Jae-in, recently acknowledged that illegal spycam images had become "a part of daily life" and called for tougher penalties for perpetrators.

Offenders face a fine of up to 10m won (£6,800) or a maximum prison sentence of up to five years, but campaigners say few feel the full force of the law. Many offenders are ordered to pay modest fines and in most cases the crime goes unpunished.

## **'A deep-seated sexism'**

More than 400,000 people recently signed a petition calling on the presidential Blue House to force police to properly investigate all *molka* allegations. And last month, an estimated 22,000 women took to the streets of Seoul in what local media reported as the biggest women's rights demonstration in South Korea's history.

The protest was called after a woman was quickly arrested and paraded in front of the media – albeit wearing a mask – after she was found to have secretly filmed a nude male model during a university drawing class and posted the video online.

The speed of her arrest led to accusations from an anonymous collective that organised the Right to be Uncomfortable march in June that a double standard was at work when the victims were men.

“A deep-seated [sexism](#) lies behind the incredibly unbalanced numbers between men and women regarding this crime,” one of the organisers, who asked to remain anonymous, told the Guardian. “The problem is aggravated by the uncooperative attitude of the police and the light penalties given out by the courts.”

[South Korea](#)’s ubiquitous smartphones and miniature spycams aside, offenders can turn to an array of seemingly everyday items – including pens, watches and shoes – equipped with spycams. The filming is not confined to public toilets: websites carrying spycam footage show women being filmed without their knowledge having sex, relaxing at home and walking along the street.



South Korean women protest against gender inequality and sexual harassment in the workplace. Photograph: Jean Chung/Getty Images

## **‘The police believed everything he said’**

Han, whose name has been changed at her request, said she “froze in terror” when she realised she had been secretly filmed.

She confronted the suspect, who admitted he had installed the device but denied watching any of the footage as the camera had only been switched on the previous day. A sceptical Han persevered, and uncovered hundreds of video clips and photographs he had kept of her and other women.

What happened next was typical of the response experienced by South Korean women who attempt to take legal action. Han complained to the police, who initially tried to dismiss her concerns. The vice-president, a colleague of five years, told them he was in love with her and complained that he was no longer intimate with his heavily pregnant wife.

“The police believed everything he said,” said Han, who quit the firm while the vice-president, who still works for the company, was fined just 500,000 won (£340).

In response to the protest in June, the South Korean government said it would take preventative measures, including checks on tens of thousands of public toilets and inspections of public buildings.

Police have denied accusations that they fail to take women’s complaints seriously, citing the difficulty of verifying allegations based on footage that often does not show the victim’s face. When they are prosecuted, most perpetrators are told to pay a modest fine.

Wee Eun-jin, head of the women’s rights committee at Lawyers for a Democratic Society, said the current law did little to help victims.

“There have been cases in which no action was taken against a suspect because the recordings were of the victim’s legs or covered buttocks, and the judges believed that this would not have caused feelings of humiliation,” said Wee, who represents *molka* victims.

“They live in constant fear. I often advise them not to take their complaint to court as I know it will not lead to the result they want. I often end up being their counsellor, not their lawyer. It is heartbreaking. There have only been a handful of instances where offenders who uploaded such materials were prosecuted and punished,” said the march organiser, adding that more protests were planned.

“The victims have to look through countless websites searching for videos that show their genitals, then capture the image so they can show it to the police. It is humiliating.”

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### **Justin McCurry**

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