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Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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KOREA, REPUBLIC OF

Digitising social welfare: Challenges of privacy



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Introduction

Currently, the Republic of Korea occupies a prominent position globally in internet access and utilisation. According to a 2012 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Korea is the first country to exceed 100% access to high-speed wireless internet. In addition, the Korea Communications Commission's 2012 Internet Usage Status Report also notes rising internet usage in Korea.

According to a statistics breakdown, 83.6% of men and 73.2% of women use the internet. At a glance, it appears that there is a 10% gap between the internet utilisation rates of the sexes. However, an age group breakdown reveals that the gap becomes apparent among those in their 40s and older. Therefore, it seems that this gap is bridged at least in the younger generation. In the meantime, research conducted by the Ministry for Gender Equality and Family Affairs (currently the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family) did not indicate a clear difference between male and female internet utilisation rates.

This can be attributed to a number of factors, which include the government's "Informatisation Education for One Million Housewives" policy in 1999, which sought to expand women's access to the internet and, in doing so, promote informatisation. Korea also has a "smart device" sociocultural context, in which over 60% of the population over the age of six owns a smart phone or smart pad. In addition, women's movements in Korea actively use the internet as a tool to raise awareness on issues.

However, questions still remain over whether the quantitative increase in women's access to the internet has resulted in a shift in Korea's male-dominated social governance structure.

Policy and political background

With the spread of the internet in Korea, Korean women have made consistent efforts to use it as a medium to voice their opinions. The early online women's

movement was led by existing women's rights movements, whose main focus was to elevate women's social status and fight sexual discrimination.

In fact, the internet provided Korean women's movements with great benefits, as it reduced labour needs and costs. The internet was also an effective tool through which women could publicise their issues in the media. The most notable of these is the "comfort women" issue.

Comfort women, or Japanese sex slaves, are women who were forcibly or collectively taken by the Japanese imperial army during World War II to satisfy the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers. Some were tricked into providing service, others were kidnapped or bought by human traffickers and pimps.

Surviving comfort women in Korea believe that Japan has not done enough to show its remorse or make amends. In 2005, Korea's Comfort Women Resolution Council cooperated with relevant organisations within and outside Korea. In addition, the council initiated a "million member international petition" among international NGOs to warn Japan that it cannot become a permanent member of the UN Security Council unless it takes legal responsibility for this issue.

In the petition, over 250,000 showed their support through the internet and international NGOs. The petition was submitted to the International Labour Organization in March 2005.

As the internet became more prevalent in Korea, women began to voice their socio-political opinions, even in ostensibly non-political forums. For example, women's online communities such as "Soul Dresser", "Ssangko" and "Hwajangbal" – which primarily discuss fashion, cosmetic surgery and make-up – actively participated in the candlelight vigils that protested against the import of US beef out of concerns over bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Their active participation is credited with having publicised the issue.

Women's internet access is consistently expanding in Korea, and with it, more women utilise the internet and proactively engage in socio-political issues. However, it seems that the current government's internet policies do not sufficiently encourage an improvement in women's legal rights.

For example, although the abovementioned “one million housewives” policy is noted for greatly advancing women’s internet access, it also faced heavy criticism that its intent was not to qualitatively foster women’s internet capacity as active producers of information; rather, the programme was part of an effort to increase the number of consumers in the internet market to boost the economy following the 1997 Asian economic crisis.

Today, Korean women face a growing risk of personal information leaks, which inevitably rises with internet usage. Female victims of sexual and domestic violence are especially at greater risk, as exposure of their private information can have a far greater and destructive impact on their lives. Surprisingly, Korea’s legal system does not protect these women.

On the contrary, the Korean government forcibly collects and accumulates the women’s information through the Integrated Social Welfare Network (ISWN), which was built to digitise social welfare work. This increases the risk of revictimisation. In this regard, this report will address the problems with the government’s collection and accumulation of personal information from female sexual violence victims through case examples provided by the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre. Based on this, this report will seek alternatives to construct an internet environment that upholds the legal and systemic rights of female victims and the human rights of socially disadvantaged citizens in general.

Practical challenges with the ISWN system

The Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre is a women’s organisation that has provided counselling, legal and medical support for victims of sexual violence since April 1991. The organisation has also worked to promote a human-centred sexual culture with equality between the sexes, and the restoration of women’s human rights. It also operates the “Open Centre” which provides shelter for those who require immediate assistance due to violence, and supports their livelihood, rehabilitation and independence.

However, the organisation’s female victim support services faced a crisis when the government changed its policy in 2010. Resulting from the change, the government would provide support payments only to shelters that register victims’ personal information in the ISWN. The required data included the victim’s resident registration number (RRN), which consists of the individual’s year and date of birth, sex, place of birth, and a verification number.

Women’s organisations that support victims of sexual and domestic violence and prostitution protested against the policy change, but the government enforced the new policy and announced that organisations that refuse to comply will no longer be eligible for government subsidies. The Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre in particular cited the violation of female victims’ human rights and resisted the change. As of now, it is the only shelter for female victims that refuses to register victims’ personal information in the ISWN.

At the time, the government’s bases for the change were that ISWN will alleviate the workload for asset and income identification, and improve service provision and welfare payment work. The government contended that if women registered their personal information in the ISWN system, they would not have to endure tedious procedures and visit multiple offices to receive livelihood and welfare support. In addition, this would reduce the bureaucratic workload and raise efficiency in welfare work. Furthermore, the government intended to gauge the victims’ current assets by calling up their personal information in the system, and give proportional support to women with greater need. The system could prevent illicit or redundant payment.

However, the centre points out that the government is overlooking the fact that the new policy can have a devastating effect on female victims. The biggest concern is that the change greatly inhibits victims’ rights to the privacy of personal information. The fact that the government forced the ISWN on victims whose lives are threatened and are hiding in shelters shows that the administration values efficient work processes over the human rights of victims.

In the past, there have been many cases where government officials provided a perpetrator with a victim’s personal information. All too often, this put victims and their social service workers at risk. In an emergency situation, the fear that such a scenario can come to pass is likely to strip the victim of her capacity and right to make rational judgment. Most female abuse victims come to the shelter as they require immediate refuge. Demanding their personal information and refusing to provide assistance until they acquiesce in effect does not allow them to make an autonomous choice. Because of this, they are vulnerable to making rash judgments without fully understanding the importance of their personal information and the implications that their choice can have on their future.

This is nothing less than a threat from the government, with cruel disregard for the urgency of the abuse victims' needs. In addition, the government's plan to call up victims' financial information and provide proportional support denotes that it is not mindful of how victims who flee from violence to seek security in shelters have great difficulty in exercising their legal rights over property.

Unfortunately, relevant ministries (Ministry of Health and Welfare, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family) are not aware of how severely victims' rights to the privacy of personal information are violated.

For example, until 2010, vocational training for abuse victims was partially paid for by the government to assist victims' rehabilitation. However, as part of an electronic government system established in 2011, it was advised that female victims also visit the local employment support centre to register their personal information, including their RRN, and engage in job-seeking activities just as any unemployed or job-seeking individual does.

The current law does not mandate women victims of violence to update their current address in their resident registration, in order not to disclose their location to the perpetrators. However, the victim is required to visit a local employment support centre that is in the proximity of the address on their resident registration, not their current address (i.e. the shelter). There is no consideration for concerns that a victim may unwillingly expose her location to the perpetrator, or be accosted by the perpetrator or the perpetrator's relatives.

This reveals the government's painful lack of understanding regarding the different needs of social service providers and recipients. This also shows that the government lacks the least understanding of women's rights, and this even oppresses the victims' future economic and social activity.

It is also alarming that collecting victims' personal information increases the possibility of information leaks. As of May 2013, there have been ten cases of personal information leaks since the ISWN began. These are only the reported cases in which victims were aware of the leak; there could be many more leaks that victims are not aware of.

This raises the chance of perpetrators attacking the victim again. Recording the victim's information on the ISWN makes it easy for perpetrators to identify her location. For example, when abused wives flee from their husbands, they are apt to take their children with them. In fact, prior to the ISWN, there

were cases in which abusive fathers who located their children through the National Education Information System came to the shelter to threaten their wives and children.

If these abusers access the ISWN, the information could precipitate more violent actions. Victims of sexual abuse are by no means free from the threats their perpetrators can pose if their personal information is compromised.

The government should note that due to social prejudice, most women prefer not to disclose the fact that they have stayed at a shelter. However, when her RRN and personal information are accumulated into administrative information, there is virtually nothing a woman can do to protect her privacy.

To these assertions, the Korean government made the following counterargument: RRNs are replaced by electronic management numbers that cannot be matched to a person, so that a person accessing data cannot identify a person with a RRN. However, this is a flawed argument. The electronic management number is not randomly created. Rather, it is a serial code that is derived from the victim's RRN. In addition, the serial code contains the type and location of the facility where a victim seeks support. This means that a perpetrator could derive a victim's location. Someone may also discover that a victim had once stayed at a shelter. Further, the serial code can be exposed not only to government officials who process data, but even to officials in other offices. There have been reported cases where someone was able to confirm from a local provincial office clerk that a certain woman had stayed at a shelter. What would happen if such sensitive information, which is so poorly protected, were released on the internet at once?

For the above reasons, the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre has refused to disclose female victims' personal information to the government at the cost of losing subsidies. They have come up with alternatives, which include raising funds through internet portal sites and using social network services such as Twitter to promote their activities and attract sponsors.

Conclusions

From the above examples, we can see that the internet itself presents neither a positive nor negative effect on women per se; rather, it is how the social governance structure allocates internet technology that affects women's rights.

In addition to the cases mentioned above, there is increased electronic monitoring of women in care work, such as daycare centre and hospice workers. Methods include using mobile devices and the internet to record workers on their job and GPS to track their locations. This increases social surveillance on women in care work and increases the intensity of their labour.

Unless Korea's chauvinistic culture and male-centred governance structure undergo qualitative changes, technical tools such as the internet can have only limited impact on promoting women's rights.

Action steps

It is the government's duty to protect its citizens; therefore, there is little justification for the government to prioritise administrative efficiency over the rights of the socially disadvantaged. As a short-term goal, relevant laws must be amended so that female victims of violence can minimise exposure of their personal information. Of course, in the long term, legislators should consider gender-specific needs prior to making all policies in order to prevent such trial and error.

In this process, civil society has a duty to monitor government policies, reach out to victims and raise awareness on relevant issues. It is undeniable that the internet will be the greatest partner in this endeavour. ■