**Submission to the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children**

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**Republic of Korea**

Submitted by: International Child Rights Center (InCRC)

Contact Details: incrc@incrc.org , +82-2-741-3132



Sexual exploitation and abuse became one of the top social agenda after the infamous case of ‘Nth Room’[[1]](#footnote-1). Around the time of this very issue, discussions around sexual exploitation of minors have become more than ever before. The fury in public sentiment led to the amendment of acts such as the Act on Punishment of Sexual Crimes, Act on the Protection of Children and Youth Against Sex Offences, Criminal Act- so called the “Nth Room Prevention act” which mainly strengthened punishment of the perpetrators. Not only did it end there, but it was also followed by efforts to regulate digital sexual exploitative practices such the amendment of Children and Youth act to introduce law to punish online grooming. Nevertheless, no significant decrease in number of cases has been observed which could partly be due to increase in number of punished cases due to broader criteria after the amendment. Likewise, with the nature of digital dimension ever so growing and expanding, the law may still have to be adjusted to comprehensively cover the reality.

In the Republic of Korea, 95.7% of teenagers and 58.3% of children below the age of 10 possess a smartphone for personal use.[[2]](#footnote-2) The percentage of children possessing smartphones is high, increasing the chances of them encountering possible dangers in the digital world. Though there are numerous ways caretakers take to regulate abuse of smartphones of their children, there are still holes in which perpetrators sneak in, to reach the child victims. According to the 2022 annual report of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of Republic of Korea of the Support Centre for Sexual Trafficking of Children and Youth, 77.9% sexual trafficking were induced online (49.1% via chatting applications and 28.8% via social media).[[3]](#footnote-3)

**1. Sexually Exploitative Practices against Children in the Digital Environment in the Republic of Korea**

1. **Social Media Platforms**
2. **Open Chat Rooms**

Unlike private chat rooms, open chat rooms are chat rooms where anyone who has the link or access to the chat room can enter anonymously and be a part of the chat group. Such open chat rooms are widely used amongst children in the Republic of Korea, continuously bringing perpetrators to abuse such chats to lure children into sexually exploitative practices. Targeted victims are as young as children in primary school.

Most perpetrators approach children by either pretending to be in a similar age group or offering to provide support. After primary online interaction, the two meet in a private location – perpetrator’s home or room cafes\* – where sexual abuse/exploitation takes place. During such sexual contact, perpetrators often secretly record the sexual activities. These videos are either used to threaten children to continually have sexual relations or are uploaded on pornography websites for profit.
\*Room cafes refer to establishments where people can enjoy various activities (board games, karaoke etc.) in a comfortable secluded environment: a private room. These ‘room cafes’ have become controversial in Korea as many children, mostly adolescents, enter such premises for illicit activities. By law, children are prohibited from entering room cafes with beddings and separate bathrooms, however, many have changed their structures, shrewdly avoiding the law, to allow children to enter. Instead of enclosed rooms, they operate by using curtains or open ceilings, thus altering the structure. Also, most room cafes are unmanned easily allowing perpetrators to approach children.

Inevitable limitations to detection of crimes within open chat rooms exist as such open chat rooms are created and disappearing in real time, making it impossible to look into what subjects are discussed within these chats.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. **Social Video Platforms (Youtube, Tiktok etc.)**

Many prostitution agents upload contents on social video platforms introducing the life of an employee working at an adult entertainment industry. These contents refer to such industry as a “flower world” and approach viewers in a hospitable and positive manner. The contents of these videos are problematic; however, it is the ‘fixed comments’ section that directly leads children into sexual exploitative practices. Channel owners purposefully include messages such as *‘we also accept teenagers to work part-time at kiss-rooms’*, *‘night part-time jobs’* with website links that lead to prostitution agents. These videos neither verify the viewers age nor have restraints so children can easily come across and get lured by such content.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. **Helper**

‘Helper’ is a jargon used amongst adolescents, specifically adolescents outside homes, to refer to someone who helps teenagers who left their homes by providing shelter, food, or monetary support. There are several youth shelters in Korea however they aren’t sufficient to accommodate all adolescents outside homes as many shelters are already at full capacity. Aside from that, many adolescents refrain from entering shelters because they are aware of the strict rules they must adhere to. Adolescents either upload posts searching for helpers or helpers upload advertisements looking for those in need of helpers. Helpers don’t provide support for no cost; usually they require children to be their girlfriend/boyfriend, or even have sexual relations in return.

The scale of this so called ‘helper’ community is growing immensely. Various Facebook groups exist solely for the meeting of helpers and adolescents. Currently, the largest group consists of 9,700 members and is continuously growing.[[6]](#footnote-6) Despite it being a growing community, it is unknown whether it is properly being monitored by the government.

1. **Deepfake technology**

The use of deepfake technology to create false videos of children engaging in sexual activity is a relatively new form of sexual abuse in the Republic of Korea. The perpetrator either uses actual images of children they are acquainted to create such images or searches AI generated images of children. The use of actual images of children is an obvious crime, however, if the sexual videos are created by artificial intelligence (AI) generated images of children, the problem is viewed to be less problematic. Therefore, there has not been many prosecuted cases yet. However, it is undoubtfully a growing field in the Republic of Korea.

**2. Efforts in Tackling Digital Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Republic of Korea**

**1) AI digital sex crime deletion support[[7]](#footnote-7)**

The Seoul Metropolitan Government’s ‘AI Digital Sex Crime AI Deletion Support Program’, launched in March of 2023, is a system where AI technology automatically detects victimized videos through 24-hour real-time monitoring, deletes the videos, and prevents redistribution. Advantage of such system is the speediness and the accuracy compared to prior method involving human monitoring. Through the AI monitoring within 7 months of introduction, a total of 450,000 videos were monitored. This is an enormous 1,265% increase compared to human monitoring (33,511 cases).

**2) Smart Anshim Dream (스마트 안심 드림)[[8]](#footnote-8)**

“Smart Anshim Dream” is an application designed to delete any illegal explicit videos, alert parents when certain keywords are entered into their child’s smartphone. Although this application was developed early in 2014 it is yet unknown to many people. Despite the program’s goal to prevent and protect children from digital sexual abuse, the program is said to be able to monitor only limited range of apps and unable to operate in iOS settings, its effectiveness and validity is rather questionable.

**3) Counselling Channel (D4youth)[[9]](#footnote-9)**

A government operated channel to provide professional counselling for child victims of online sexual exploitation was launched in 2023. Children receive counselling and information when they suspect they are involved in online sexual exploitation. Counselling is offered via kakaotalk (widely used chat application in ROK), line (chat application), twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Through this channel, acts that induce sexual abuse and exploitation is also inspected and can be reported.

**4) Digital Sexual Abuse Prevention Education Platform ‘DICLE (Digital Clean)’[[10]](#footnote-10)**

Awareness is key in preventing abuse and exploitation against children. DICLE ('digital world without sexual crimes, clean digital world') is a learning platform that provides educational content to prevent digital sex crimes, such as online grooming, illegal filming and non-consensual distribution, and deep fakes, tailored to each elementary, middle, and high school age level, developed by the Korean Institute for Gender Equality Promotion and Education in May 2022.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**5) Deepfake Detection Program (scheduled to be launched in 2025)[[12]](#footnote-12)**

One of the efforts in tackling problems around deepfake technology made by the public sector was when Korea’s National Police Agency, together with a private company Deep Brain AI, released a deepfake detection program. This program is an online based software which does not require any equipment, from wherever and whenever the video is uploaded, by setting the model, person and section, the authenticity is immediately determined. By 2025, the government plan is to introduce AI technology to find deepfake videos and automatically requestion removal from the server owner. Strengthened cooperation with overseas law enforcement agencies such as the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and global internet companies to eradicate illegal sites with servers located overseas is expected to further boost the process.

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