

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No. 64

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Enquirer	FCDO Korea

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About Helpdesk reports: The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, contracted through the Disability Inclusion Team (DIT) under the Disability Inclusive Development Programme. Helpdesk reports are based on between 3 and 4.5 days of desk-based research per query and are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues and expert thinking on issues around disability inclusion. Where referring to documented evidence, Helpdesk teams will seek to understand the methodologies used to generate evidence and will summarise this in Helpdesk outputs, noting any concerns with the robustness of the evidence being presented. For some Helpdesk services, in particular the practical know-how queries, the emphasis will be focused far less on academic validity of evidence and more on the validity of first-hand experience among disabled people and practitioners delivering and monitoring programmes on the ground. All sources will be clearly referenced.

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For any further request or enquiry, contact enquiries@disabilityinclusion.org.uk

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1. Key facts on disability in the Republic of Korea

- In 2020, 2.63 million people in Korea were registered as having a disability, which was approximately **5% of the population**. 57% of registered people with disabilities were male and 43% were female (KOSIS, 2020).
- In 2017, employment rates of people with disabilities were low: 45.9% of people with physical impairments, 43.1% of people with visual impairments, 33.4% of people with hearing impairments, 22.9% of people with developmental impairments, and 11.6% of people with cognitive impairments were employed (CRPD, 2019).
- In 2019, only 12% of people with disabilities reported that government welfare projects for people with disabilities over the age of 13 were sufficient, while **31% reported that government welfare projects for people with disabilities over the age of 13 years should be expanded** (KOSIS, 2019a).
- Korea actively participated in the formation of the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)** and ratified it in 2008.
- The main piece of national legislation regarding disability is **The Discrimination against and Remedies for Persons with Disabilities Act (2008)**.
- A national survey in 2019 found that **65% of respondents with disabilities said that Korean society is discriminative towards people with disabilities** (43% said somewhat discriminative, 22% said very discriminative) (KOSIS, 2019b).
- Korea launched and implemented the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific; it provides technical assistance in Asia and the Pacific for disability data collection; **and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) made eight commitments at the Global Disability Summit (GDS) in 2018.**

2. Defining Disability

People with disabilities are: ‘...those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.’ (Article 1, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities)

Impairments (e.g., physical, cognitive or sensory) become disabling when they interact with prevailing attitudes, behaviours and policies or physical spaces to effectively bar the individual(s) from participating fully in society.¹ For example, inaccessible signage or footpaths deny access to

¹ Medical models understand disability as an individual physical or mental impairment along with the impairment's personal and social consequences, while social models understand the association between disability and well-being as “highly contingent, mediated by a variety of environmental and social factors” (Stanford Encyclopaedia of

markets or workplaces for individuals with visual or physical impairments. Impairments can also combine with other key factors and characteristics to compound the level of marginalisation. These include differences based on age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, rural versus urban locations and other issues. There are also differences based on whether impairments are visible or not. The experience of disability varies widely, with at least as much variation amongst people with disabilities as there is amongst those without disabilities (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2016).

3. Disability prevalence in South Korea

As of 2020, 2.63 million people in Korea were registered as having a disability, which was approximately 5% of the population. 57% of registered people with disabilities were male and 43% were female (KOSIS, 2020). Disability is more prevalent amongst older people in Korea, and the percentage of older Koreans with disabilities has increased from 9.2% in 2005 to 16.3% in 2014 (Jeon et al, 2017).

In Korea, registration of people with disabilities is based on medical assessments. Typically, registration processes count fewer people with disabilities than surveys based on the [Washington Group Questions](#), which is widely recognised as the best methodology for identifying disability prevalence.

4. Policy and legislation context

Korea actively participated in the formation of the UNCRPD and ratified it in 2008. Korea has a comprehensive range of legislation and policies related to disability rights, which align with the UNCRPD. Key national disability legislation includes:

The Discrimination against and Remedies for Persons with Disabilities Act (2008), which prohibits disability-based discrimination in all areas of society and aims to enable people with disabilities to participate fully in social activities by securing equal rights and access through employment, education and political representation (UNESCAP, 2019).

The Act on Welfare of Persons with Disabilities (2015) promotes the rights and interests of people with disabilities, aims to prevent their mistreatment, and provides support to victims of mistreatment.

The Act on Guarantee of Right to Health and Access to Medical Services for Persons with Disabilities (2017) guarantees access to medical care for people with disabilities. Under the Act state and local governments may subsidise medical expenses for people with disabilities deemed unable to afford medical expenses.

5. Poverty, economic inclusion and disability in South Korea

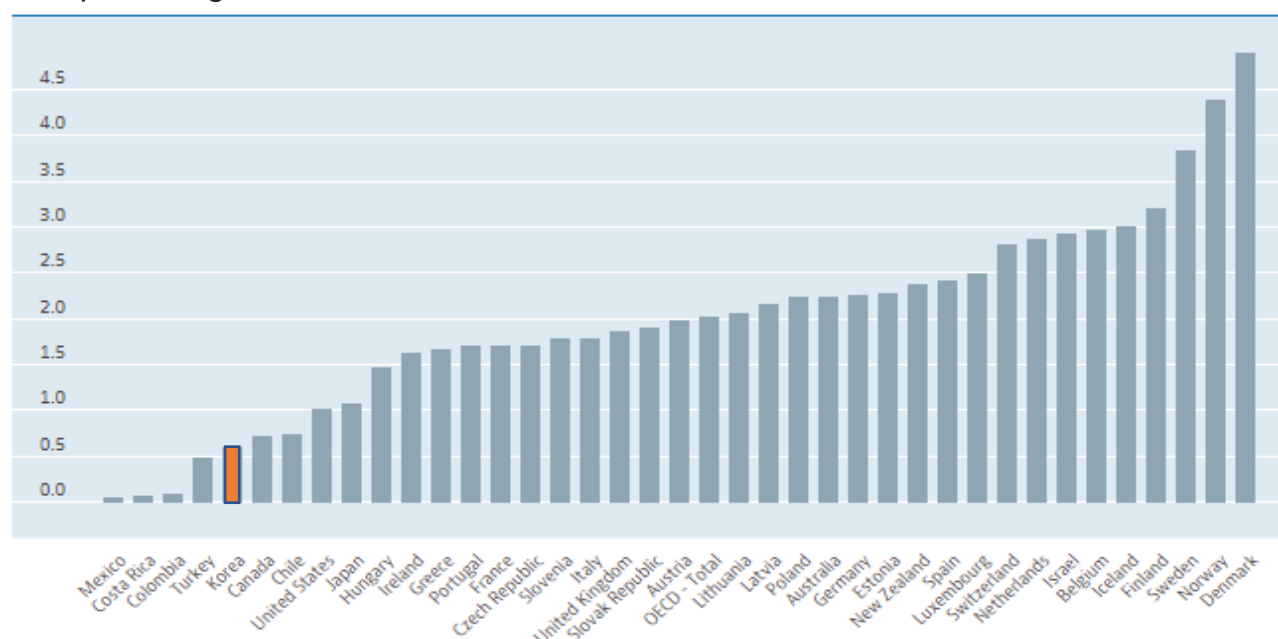
Employment rates amongst people with disabilities in Korea are low, and the welfare system for people with disabilities has historically been criticised as inappropriate and insufficient.

- As of 2017, 45.9% of people with physical impairments, 43.1% of people with visual impairments, 33.4% of people with hearing impairments, 22.9% of people with developmental impairments, and 11.6% of people with cognitive impairments were employed (CRPD, 2019).

Philosophy, 2016). Social models tend to interrogate the overarching systems which classify or segregate people and their characteristics or experiences based on norms of ability and disability (ibid).

- The Korean Government amended the Act on the Employment Promotion and Vocational Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities on 28 November 2017, mandating employers to conduct workplace-based disability awareness-raising designed to eliminate bias against people with disabilities, create secure working conditions for employees with disabilities, and increase employment of people with disabilities. The Ministry of Employment and Labour monitors the implementation of these awareness raising programs, develops and distributes educational materials, and designates relevant educational institutions (CRPD, 2019). The Korean Government also offers subsidies to employers specifically to promote the employment of women with disabilities (CRPD, 2019).
- In Korea's welfare system, people with disabilities have historically been classified under six different indices based on medical assessments, with Index One indicating the most severe degree of disability and Index Six indicating the least severe degree of disability. The disability movement campaigned against this classification system for many years, and the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) also recommended abolishing the system, because it follows a narrow medical model of disability that focuses on assessing impairments. This over-simplifies disability and fails to recognise other factors that contribute to the costs of living for people with disabilities, for example rural versus urban locations and societal barriers that interact with impairments to create disability. The system has been phased out since 2019 (CRPD, 2019).
- A national survey in 2019 found that 31% of respondents with disabilities thought that government welfare projects for people with disabilities over the age of 13 years should be expanded. 12% of respondents with disabilities thought that government welfare projects for people with disabilities over the age of 13 were sufficient (KOSIS, 2019).
- Public spending on incapacity (cash payments to people experiencing sickness, disability and occupational injuries) is significantly lower in Korea compared to other OECD countries. In 2018, Korea spent 0.6% of its GDP on these payments, compared to the OECD total of 2% (OECD, 2019).

Public spending on incapacity (spending due to sickness, disability and occupational injury) as a percentage of GDP, 2019 or latest available data. Source: OECD, 2019.



In 2014 the CRPD raised concerns that **students with disabilities in regular schools are returning to special schools and that education is not suitable for impairment-related**

requirements (CRPD, 2014). In 2019 Korea reported that it plans to develop and launch educational programs that bring together students with and without disabilities, one programme each for elementary schools in 2018, middle schools in 2019, high schools in 2020, and preschools in 2021. It reported that teaching and learning materials to promote inclusive education throughout all curriculums will be consecutively developed and distributed for each grade of elementary, middle, and high school by 2021 (CRPD, 2019).

6. Discrimination and abuse of people with disabilities

In the period from 1993 to 2002, the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities had a significant impact on raising public awareness of disability rights. However, stigma and discrimination are still prevalent, and significant concerns remain about segregation, abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities (You and Hwan, 2018; Hwang and Roulstone, 2015; CRPD, 2014; CRPD, 2019).

A national survey in 2019 found **65% of respondents with disabilities said that Korean society is discriminative towards people with disabilities** (43% said somewhat discriminative, 22% said very discriminative) (KOSIS, 2019b). In 2014, the CRPD highlighted the limited public awareness-raising by the government to reinforce the positive image of disability rights, and in Korea's 2019 report on progress on implementing the UNCRPD the government acknowledged that the implementation of disability awareness-raising remained limited, but it planned to create a mid- and long-term roadmap for disability awareness raising.

In its 2014 review of Korea's progress implementing the UNCRPD, the CRPD highlighted concerns about:

- The ineffective implementation of anti-discrimination legislation and the majority of complaints that have not been resolved.
- Violence, abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities.
- Cases of forced and illegal sterilisation of women with disabilities.
- Cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of people with psychosocial disabilities in psychiatric hospitals.
- Increasing numbers of institutions for people with disabilities and numbers of residents (CRPD, 2014).

Institutionalisation of people with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities:

In 2009 the National Human Rights Commission of Korea found that people with mental health conditions were involuntarily institutionalised at a rate of 86% (NHRCK, 2009). At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 the treatment of people with psychosocial disabilities in institutions was highlighted again when 101 out of 102 patients in the psychiatric ward of Cheongdo-Daenam Hospital were infected with COVID-19 and seven patients died. The fatality rate in the hospital was 7%, compared to 2% amongst the total population of Korea. One of the first people to die from COVID-19 in Korea was a person who had lived in the psychiatric ward for 20 years and weighed only 42 kilos at the time of death (Korean Disability Forum, 2020).

7. Progress on disability inclusion

Some of the actions taken by the Korean government since the CRPD's 2014 review of progress on implementing the UNCRPD include:

- Establishing a Discrimination Remedy Bureau in 2018 to strengthen the handling of disability discrimination complaints.

- Amending the Act on Welfare of Persons with Disabilities in 2015 to launch an institution to promote the rights and interests of people with disabilities, prevent their mistreatment, and provide support to victims of mistreatment.
- Abolishing the disability grading system for welfare services, and planning to improve the disability pension system.
- Adopting the reinforcement of support for women with disabilities as one of its 22 priority tasks in the 5th Comprehensive Policy Plans for Persons with Disabilities (2018-2022) (CRPD, 2019).
- Including “deinstitutionalisation and reinforcement of living support” as one of the 22 key tasks of the 5th Comprehensive Policy Plans for Persons with Disabilities (2018–2022) (CRPD, 2019).

8. International cooperation

Korea launched and implemented the [Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific](#), which includes goals for poverty reduction, participation in political processes, enhanced accessibility, social protection, education, gender equality, disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction, reliability of disability data, and international cooperation.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare provides support for UNESCAP’s disability statistics construction project, which provides technical assistance for disability statistics compilation to low-income countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

KOICA made eight commitments at the Global Disability Summit in 2018, including to:

- Monitor the establishment of disability legislation and improve civic and political participation of people with disabilities;
- Increase the number of students with disabilities who complete education;
- Improve production infrastructure, increase household income, and improve living conditions for people with disabilities;
- Solve economic and social problems of people with disabilities through collaborations for technology and innovation;
- Support disability data collection and disaggregation;
- Increase the economic participation of women and girls with disabilities and their participation in decision-making processes;
- Provide financial support to disability-inclusive humanitarian responses (KOICA, 2018).

9. Key stakeholders and their priorities

The National Human Rights Commission of Korea works with disability organisations to monitor the implementation of the UNCRPD in Korea. However, between 2014 to 2018 only one single staff member was responsible for tasks relating to implementation of the UNCRPD (CRPD, 2019).

As of 2018, there were three main national Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) in Korea, and approximately 347 local and regional OPDs. National organisations include [Korea Differently Abled Federation](#) (KODAF, representing 30 OPDs) and [Korea Federation of Organisations of the Disabled](#) (KFOD), which have both promoted new policies for disability rights through seminars, public hearings, education, publications and conferences; and Solidarity Against Disability Discrimination (SADD), which has used civil disobedience and direct action to raise public awareness of the rights of people with disabilities. According to You and Hwan (2018),

these organisations take significantly different approaches to disability inclusion and therefore do not often coordinate their work.

10. Accessibility and universal design

Korea has introduced several measures to improve accessibility and universal design of public amenities. The Act on Guarantee of Promotion of Convenience of Persons with Disabilities, the Aged, Pregnant Women, etc. (1998) aims to increase participation by people with disabilities, senior citizens and pregnant women; ensure their safe and convenient use of facilities such as parks, public buildings, supermarkets, restaurants, beauty parlours, hospitals, and art centres; and ensure their easy access to information. Compliance with the Act is monitored by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in collaboration with local governments and OPDs through a door-to-door survey every five years. Agencies that fail to provide accessible facilities are fined KRW 5,000,000 (approximately GBP 3,120). Small businesses built before January 1998 or businesses occupying less than 300 square metres are exempt from the Act.

The accessibility field survey conducted in 2018 found that **the number of accessible buildings increased from 67.9% in 2013 to 80.2% in 2018** (UNESCAP, 2019). The improved installation rate is attributed to ongoing awareness-raising and financial assistance from the government to implement universal design. The government also provides financial assistance for enhancing accessibility to employers of people with disabilities and introduced a 'Barrier-Free Certification' system in 2015 that is mandatory for government office buildings and cultural facilities built by governments.

The Act on the Promotion of the Transportation Convenience for Mobility Disadvantaged Persons (2004) guarantees the mobility rights of people who use wheelchairs, older people, pregnant women, children, and guardians of infants. In 2019, local governments began subsidising up to 50% of the price difference between accessible low-floor buses and other buses, and the central government covers the other 50% of the price difference.

The Discrimination Against and Remedies for Persons with Disabilities Act (2008) regulates ICT accessibility of web, mobile and unmanned public information devices. As of 2013, all medical institutions and corporations are required to comply with web accessibility standards, however there are no obligations for the private sector to comply with web accessibility guidelines (UNESCAP, 2019).

11. Inclusive workplace practices and inclusive cultures

There is limited evidence available on examples of effective and inclusive workplace practices and cultures in Korea. The former DFID [Disability Inclusion Business Standards](#) include the following standards for each business unit:

- Have clear commitment to disability inclusion from head of Office/Mission/Department.
- Appoint a disability champion.
- Have a disability inclusion plan or strategy in place, including to increase the number of staff with disabilities and ensure HR processes, communications and IT are accessible.
- Continue strong signalling from leadership on commitment to disability inclusion.
- Include disability in country or department strategies or plans.
- Increase capacity of staff on disability inclusion.
- Increase the number of staff with disabilities.

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