

SOUTH KOREA: Sexual harassment in the workplace is organized violence

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In a speech given on 4 February 2014, at a meeting organized by the Korean Women's Development Institute, South Korean President Park Geun-hye said that her administration would strive to maintain and better programs and systems to ensure that capable women are not barred from achieving their dreams. President Park further promised to create various programmes exploring women's abilities, which will also contribute to society. About 500 women 'leaders' participated in this meeting that was sponsored by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

While South Korea's strong affirmation of a national policy on women was welcomed and appreciated by the 'leaders' at the meeting, the speech means hardly anything to ordinary women, particularly those who face discrimination and harassment at their workplaces. Ironically, one day after President Park's speech, a group of civil society organizations supporting victims of sexual harassment held a press conference revealing how such victims are discriminated at their workplace for seeking justice.

According to their statement, a woman employee with a decade of work experience at Renault Samsung Motors Company, was assigned to a research team in January 2012 and had been sexually harassed for about a year by her team leader, who joined in March 2012. The team leader is responsible for evaluating the merits of each team member. Unable to bear the situation, she decided to resign and informed the company in March 2013, but was encouraged by an executive not to resign. Soon after, however, the executive advised her to resign. Two months of international investigation concluded that the team leader received two weeks of suspension of work and was discharged from his position on grounds of sexual harassment on 13 May 2013. Meanwhile, a sudden rumour floated around the company that the woman had seduced the team leader.

The victim filed a civil suit against the CEO of the company. In June 2013, the company's human resources department warned Ms. Jeong, whose name was found as one of the witnesses in the law suit filed by the victim, not to associate with the victim. When Ms. Jeong refused, the company took punitive disciplinary action against her for negligence in July. The company also took disciplinary action against the victim on the grounds of obtaining testimony from her colleagues. It is reported that the process of the internal investigation was unfair. Furthermore, the Gyeonggi National Labor Relations Commission ruled on 4 December 2013 that the disciplinary actions against the victim and Ms. Jeong were unfair. Nonetheless, the company suspended Ms. Jeong and the victim from work on December 6 and 11 respectively. It further filed a criminal suit against them on charge of theft (removing classified documents).

Routine and ordinary cases of sexual harassment in a workplace are disconnected from the speech and promises made at the women 'leaders' meeting. Apart from senior company officials, sexual harassment is also routinely practiced by prosecutors against female journalists, followed by very lenient disciplinary action. The NGO Korea Women link released a report in 2013 saying that more than half of the counseling cases they come across (56.35 percent) were related to sexual harassment issues within the company (which had increased by 12 percent compared to the previous year).

National policies are always important in delineating the promotion and protection of rights. It is therefore a good sign that the South Korean administration is planning to develop various programmes for women's economic participation. However, as the case of Renault Samsung Motors Company indicates, if victims of sexual harassment are discriminated for seeking justice in a workplace, and if organizations encourage others to discriminate against the victim, it is nothing but a place of organized violence that the victims will face. Without this practice being changed, President Park's words will simply remain empty promises to ordinary women. Moreover, without any change, these women will be cornered to a place of organized violence requiring their obedient submission to sexual harassment.