

SEOUL SMART WOMEN REPORT
2026 Volume 1

Seoul Smart Women Report

Volume 1



Seoul Smart Women Report

Part 1, “Seoul in Focus,” analyzes gender equality challenges directly linked to Seoul’s competitiveness, using major global and regional gender indicators as key reference materials and drawing on expert analysis. Part 2, “Insights from Global Cities,” presents analyses by experts on London and Tokyo, examining the current landscape of gender equality through data and case studies, illustrating how gender equality contributes to urban competitiveness, and offering policy implications for Seoul.

This report was originally written in Korean (for the Seoul and London cases) and Japanese (for the Tokyo case). The English version was prepared using generative AI and subsequently reviewed and edited by the Seoul Foundation of Women & Family.

Published by Jung-sook Park, Jaeun Choi, Min Jung Kim, and Yeri Shim

Foreword

As a platform supporting work, care, and safety for women and families, the Seoul Foundation of Women & Family (SFWF) has worked to create tangible changes in the lives of Seoul's citizens through research, programs, and collaborative networks. In particular, amid major social changes such as declining birth rates and digital transformation, the Foundation has responded proactively to emerging needs related to employment, gender equality, care, and diverse forms of parenting and family life. SFWF has also remained committed to protecting citizens from gender-based violence, including digital sex crimes, through victim support, preventive education, and public awareness-raising efforts.

Today, the smart city has evolved beyond the mere expansion of technology and infrastructure to become a broader paradigm that is reshaping the ways citizens live and interact across all dimensions of urban life, including the economy, education, governance, welfare, the environment, and culture. Given this transformation, citizens' safety, work-life balance, and the creation of an environment in which everyone can fully realize their potential have become important criteria for assessing urban competitiveness and sustainability.

Women, in particular, are directly affected by policies across multiple urban domains—including care, safety, mobility, and economic participation—making their experiences and participation indispensable to building an inclusive and sustainable smart city. In this light, the “Smart Women” concept serves as an important policy framework that complements and extends the human-centered smart city from a gender perspective.

Driven by this vision, we are especially pleased to present the Seoul Smart Women Report, which examines Seoul's gender equality policy. This report is designed to review the current status of gender equality policy in Seoul and to explore the direction the city should pursue by linking Seoul's experiences with those of major cities around the world. In particular, the first issue aligns global and regional gender indicators to identify Seoul's policy priorities. The report series will continue to address a wide range of major themes, including safety, employment, and caregiving for women in Seoul, as well as various other issues facing women, families, and children. We hope that the Seoul Smart Women Report will serve as a useful resource for reflecting on where Seoul stands today and for envisioning its future together.

Looking ahead, the Seoul Foundation of Women & Family remains dedicated to sharing Seoul's policy expertise and advancing agendas that deliver meaningful impact on our citizens.



April 2026

President of Seoul Foundation of Women & Family

Jung-sook Park

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Data Speaks

Gender Equality as a Key to Seoul's Competitiveness

※Note: In this report, "regional" refers to Korea's provinces and metropolitan cities covered by the Regional Gender Equality Index, and the Republic of Korea is referred to simply as "Korea."



Executive Summary

This report aims to demonstrate that gender equality is a key driver of Seoul's global competitiveness and to identify data-driven policy priorities for advancing gender equality in the city.

Rationale

Challenge	Seoul ranks sixth globally in overall competitiveness in the Global Power City Index (GPCI), yet its performance in "livability" remains outside the top 20, limiting the city's overall attractiveness.
Underlying issue	Korea's low Global Gender Gap Index ranking (101st in 2025) remains a significant constraint on Seoul's performance in the "livability" category.
Strategic response	Gender equality should be redefined as a comprehensive strategy for strengthening Seoul's overall competitiveness.

Methodology

Multilayered data analysis	The report examines seven global gender indices that measure national-level performance, institutions, and attitudes related to gender equality, together with Korea's Regional Gender Equality Index, which compares gender equality across regions within the country.
Analytical framework	It uses a 2x2 matrix that maps Korea's global standing against Seoul's performance, categorizing policy areas into four quadrants to identify strategic priorities.
Integrated approach	The report draws on global gender indices produced by diverse actors, including international organizations, expert networks, and research institutions, to diagnose gender equality from multiple angles. By examining not only outcome-based indicators but also social attitudes and institutional conditions, it analyzes the gap between performance and structure.

Findings

The report maps ten gender policy domains into four quadrants and proposes policy directions for each.

Education, health, and digital Sustain and expand core strengths	Consistently strong areas with little gender disparity in both global and regional gender indices. Policy should focus on maintaining these strengths while continuing to build on them.
Employment, economy, and income Translate Seoul's performance into global competitiveness	A strategy is required to ensure that Seoul's relative performance translates into stronger national-level global competitiveness.
Safety Close the gap between national performance and the lived realities	To ensure that national-level safety effectively translates into everyday safety in Seoul, gender-responsive safety policies should be redesigned to move beyond a policing-centered approach.
Decision-making, gender awareness, and care/family Address structural vulnerabilities through transformative reform	Addressing common gaps identified by global and regional gender indicators will require innovation in Seoul's social norms and organizational culture.

Policy Implications

Building a Seoul-style measurement framework for digital gender equality	Develop and expand regional indicators that capture digital inclusion and women's ICT capabilities.
Advancing a Seoul-style integrated career and care policy	Integrate responses to low birth rates, care, work-life balance, and the gender wage gap, linking fragmented policy areas through a gender equality perspective and supporting women in balancing career development and family life.
Shifting the safety paradigm	Strengthen awareness of gender-based violence and victim-centered responses, and build an integrated safety net that extends to online spaces.
Citizen-centered smart city development	Enhance Seoul's attractiveness through a Smart Women Project that incorporates a gender equality perspective into technological innovation.

Data Speaks

Gender Equality as a Key to Seoul's Competitiveness

Rationale

Challenge	Underlying issue	Strategic response
Seoul ranks sixth globally in overall competitiveness in the GPCI, yet its performance in "livability" remains outside the top 20, limiting the city's overall attractiveness.	Korea's low Global Gender Gap Index ranking (101st in 2025) remains a significant constraint on Seoul's performance in the "livability" category.	Redefines gender equality as a comprehensive strategy for strengthening Seoul's overall competitiveness.

Methodology

Multilayered data analysis	Analytical framework	Integrated approach
Examines seven global gender indices that measure national-level performance, institutions, and attitudes related to gender equality, together with Korea's Regional Gender Equality Index, which compares gender equality across regions within the country.	Uses a 2x2 matrix that maps Korea's global standing against Seoul's performance, categorizing policy areas into four quadrants to identify strategic priorities.	Draws on global gender indices produced by diverse actors, including international organizations, expert networks, and research institutions. Assesses indicators across outcomes, social attitudes, and institutional frameworks.

Findings

Korea's Standing vs. Seoul's Performance Matrix			
Seoul's Performance (Regional Gender Equality Index)	strong	Korea Weak / Seoul Strong Employment, Economy, and Income Translate Seoul's performance into global competitiveness	Korea Strong / Seoul Strong Education, Health, and Digital Sustain and expand core strengths
		Korea Weak / Seoul Weak Decision-making, Gender Awareness, and Care/Family Address structural vulnerabilities through transformative reform	Korea Strong / Seoul Weak Safety Close the gap between national performance and lived realities
	weak		
	Korea's Standing (Global Gender Indices)		
			strong

Policy Implications

Building a Seoul-style measurement framework for digital gender equality Develop and expand regional indicators that capture digital inclusion and women's ICT capabilities.	Advancing a Seoul-style integrated career and care policy Integrate responses to low birth rates, care, work-life balance, and the gender wage gap, linking fragmented policy areas through a gender equality perspective and supporting women in balancing career development and family life.	Shifting the safety paradigm Strengthen awareness of gender-based violence and victim-centered approaches, and build an integrated safety net that extends to online spaces.	Citizen-centered smart city development Enhance Seoul's attractiveness through a Smart Women Project that incorporates a gender equality perspective into technological innovation.
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Positioning Seoul Among the Global Top 5 through Gender Equality

Gender Equality as a Driver of Seoul's "Magnetism"



Urban Competitiveness | From Economic Growth to Quality of Life

Urban competitiveness is a multidimensional concept that has been measured and defined through a range of data sources and evaluative frameworks.

In 2005, Seoul was assessed as a city seeking to transform itself into a “world city,” with environmental management, better use of cultural and natural assets, and the provision of affordable housing identified as key priorities for enhancing its international attractiveness (OECD, 2005). Twenty years later, Korea is recognized as a global model in digital government and the use of AI, and Seoul is likewise cited as a leading example of a smart city (OECD, 2025). At the same time, strengthening responsiveness through human-centered service design and inclusion has been emphasized as a key priority for sustainable digital transformation (OECD, 2025).

In A.T. Kearney's 2025 Global Cities Index (GCI) and Global Cities Outlook (GCO), which assess sustainable urban competitiveness in terms of both current performance and future potential, Seoul ranked 12th and 2nd, respectively (A.T. Kearney, 2025). While Seoul demonstrated clear strengths in growth potential and innovation capacity, it received relatively lower scores in areas related to personal well-being, including indicators such as safety and social equity (A.T. Kearney, 2025).

This shows that urban competitiveness cannot be achieved through economic and technological advancement alone. Quality of life and a citizen-centered perspective have become central criteria. In other words, Seoul is recognized as a “smart city” for its digital innovation and growth, but the key challenge is ensuring that these achievements translate into citizens' everyday lives in a stable and equitable way.

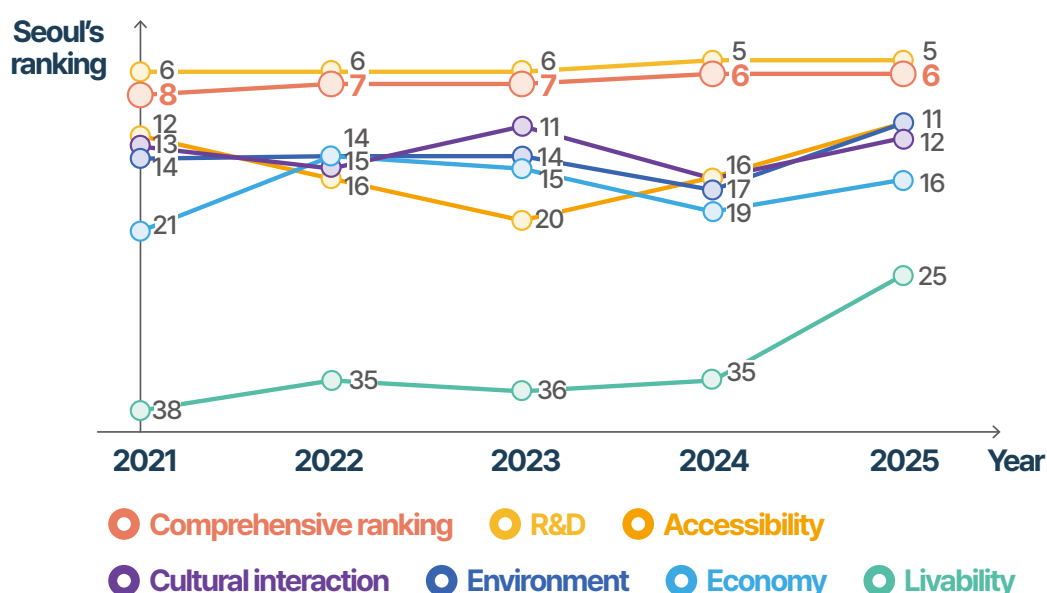
The Smart City Index, published by the International Institute of Management Development (IMD) World Competitiveness Center, serves as an important reference point in understanding the importance of lived experience. Seoul ranked 12th in the 2026 index, which examines how residents perceive urban structures and technologies in areas such as health and safety, mobility, activities, opportunities, and governance (IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2026). However, because the sample size for each city is limited and publicly available data make it difficult to identify structural disparities across groups such as gender, a separate analytical framework is needed to better understand gender equality issues within discussions of urban competitiveness.

The Global Power City Index and the Gender Equality Agenda

Against this backdrop, this report seeks to establish gender equality as a core condition for enhancing Seoul's global competitiveness. To this end, it examines the structure of Seoul's competitiveness through the GPCI published by the Mori Memorial Foundation. The GPCI defines urban competitiveness in terms of "magnetism"—a city's ability to attract people, capital, and businesses—and measures 72 indicators across six functions: economy, research and development, cultural interaction, livability, environment, and accessibility (Mori Memorial Foundation, 2025).

Seoul maintained 6th place overall in the 2025 GPCI, consolidating its position among the world's leading cities. This framework is particularly useful in that it disaggregates urban competitiveness by function, making it possible to identify both strengths and bottlenecks. Since the GPCI covers a broad range of indicators, this report focuses specifically on livability. It explores how this dimension relates to gender equality and identifies relevant policy challenges.

Figure 1-1 Trends in Seoul's GPCI Rankings by Function (2021-2025)

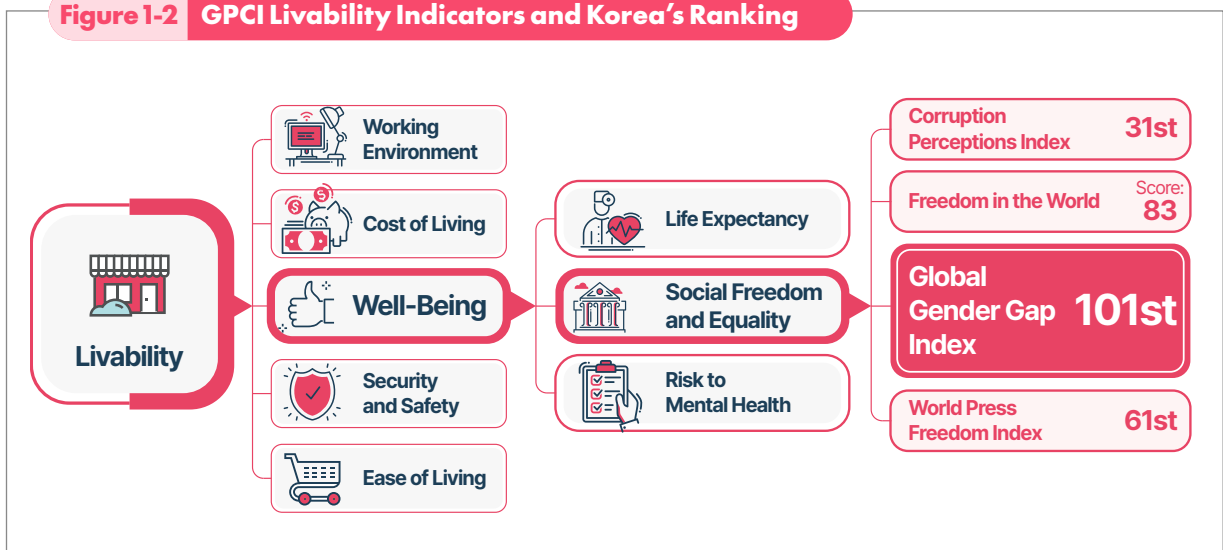


Source | Adapted from the Mori Memorial Foundation (2025)

When examining rankings across the various functions that support urban competitiveness, Seoul shows considerable room for improvement in "livability." Looking at trends from 2021 to 2025, although livability rose in 2025 compared with the previous year, its ranking remained relatively low compared with other functional areas (Figure 1-1). Consistent with the international assessments discussed earlier, this suggests that Seoul's competitiveness cannot be fully understood through the achievements of the economy, technology, and innovation alone. It also points to the need for closer attention to the quality and inclusiveness of the city's living conditions.

The GPCI livability function consists of five indicator groups. Across these groups, a total of 14 sub-indicators are included, such as the total unemployment rate, total working hours per capita, workstyle flexibility, housing rent, price level, homicide incidence, economic risk of natural disaster, life expectancy, social freedom and equality, risk to mental health, number of medical doctors, ICT environment, and the number of retail shops and restaurants.

Figure 1-2 GPCI Livability Indicators and Korea's Ranking



Source | Adapted from the Mori Memorial Foundation (2025)

Among these, the indicator to which this report pays particular attention is social freedom and equality within the well-being category. This indicator is calculated as the average of scores from four indices measured at the national level in the country to which the city belongs: the Corruption Perceptions Index, Freedom in the World, the World Press Freedom Index, and the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) **Figure 1-2**.

According to these indicators, Korea recorded a score of 63 on the Corruption Perceptions Index in 2025, ranking 31st out of 182 countries; a score of 83 out of 100 in Freedom in the World in 2026, and a score of 64.06 on the World Press Freedom Index in 2025, ranking 61st out of 180 countries. While Korea performed relatively well overall in terms of freedom and governance integrity, its GGGI score stood at 0.687 in 2025, placing it 101st out of 148 countries (WEF, 2025) and indicating a substantial gender gap.

This suggests that gender inequality may constitute a structural vulnerability within the components of social freedom and equality and that such limitations may affect not only performance in the livability dimension but also broader assessments of urban competitiveness. In this sense, gender equality is not merely a social policy issue affecting a specific group; it is a core condition for enhancing Seoul's competitiveness and should be addressed as a central agenda within the city's competitiveness strategy.

To this end, this report traces the evolution of the gender equality paradigm and the development of approaches to measuring progress toward gender equality. It then reviews Korea's standing in global gender indices alongside Seoul's performance in the Regional Gender Equality Index. Building on this analysis, the report seeks to identify Seoul's priority policy tasks for gender equality as highlighted by both global and regional data.

Measuring Gender Equality

How It Started and Why It Matters



Evolution of the Gender Equality Paradigm

The international framework for measuring gender equality has evolved through the historical development of the women's movement and broader political and social consensus. Its roots can be traced back to the suffrage movement and, in Korea, to *Yeogwon Tongmun*, the nation's first women's rights declaration in 1898. A pivotal moment in the institutionalization of gender equality through a legally binding international convention came with the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979.¹⁾ This was also the period when budgets and programs were concentrated on women's development under the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985).²⁾ Amid these developments, the concept of gender equality gradually expanded through intense debates over whether women should be understood as a group in need of protection, as human resources for economic development, or as agents of development in their own right.

The 1993 Vienna Declaration subsequently affirmed that women's rights are human rights and framed gender-based violence not as a private matter but as a universal human rights issue that must be addressed in the public sphere (UN, 1993). This was followed by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, which declared sexual and reproductive health and rights to be a basic condition for achieving gender equality (UN, 1994). Most notably, the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, established gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for advancing gender equality (UN, 1995). By integrating a gender perspective throughout all stages of policy and program design, implementation, and evaluation, this strategy sought to ensure that the interests of women and men would be considered equally. It marked an important expansion in the scope of gender equality measurement and brought attention to the importance of sex-disaggregated statistics, gender analysis, and gender-responsive evaluation tools **Figure 1-3**.

1) National Archives of Korea, "UN CEDAW Ratification"

2) United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace

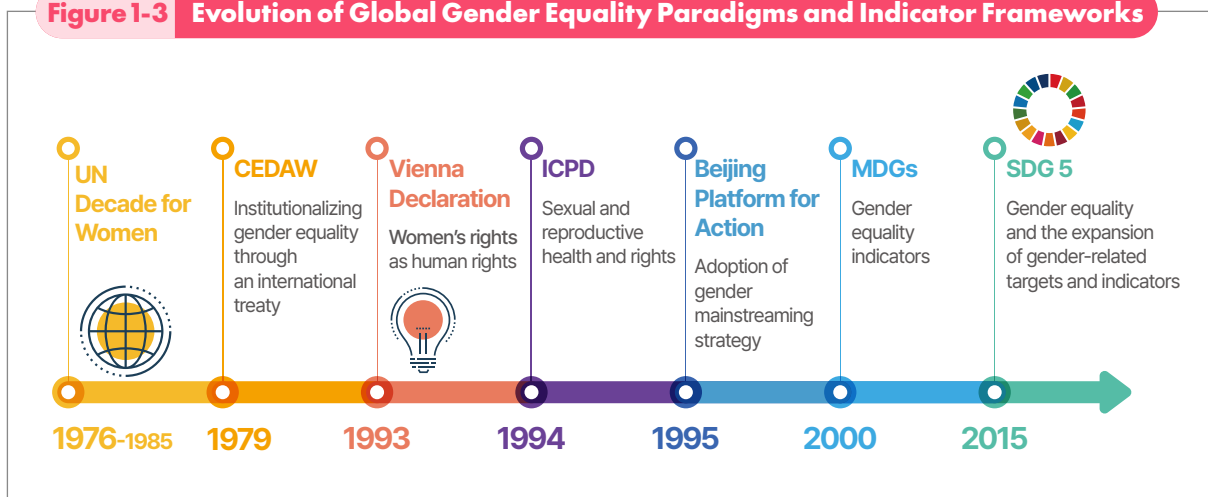
3) National Archives of Korea, "Women's Policy"

4) Prescribes the basic provisions of Seoul's gender equality policy in accordance with the Framework Act on Gender Equality.

5) The Seoul Women's Foundation was established in 2002 and was reconstituted as the Seoul Foundation of Women & Family in 2007, pursuant to the Ordinance on the Establishment and Operation of the Seoul Foundation of Women and Family.



Figure 1-3 Evolution of Global Gender Equality Paradigms and Indicator Frameworks



Source | Adapted from UN (1993, 1994, 1995, 2015)

In line with these international developments, Korea also made institutional efforts to measure gender equality and incorporate it into policy. The legal and institutional foundations of gender equality policy, as well its as implementation mechanisms, were put in place through the enactment of the Framework Act on Women's Development in 1995, the launch of the Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs in 1998, and the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001. With the transition to the Framework Act on Gender Equality in 2014, the policy paradigm was formally shifted from women's development to the realization of gender equality.³⁾ Based on related legislation, including the Seoul Metropolitan Government Framework Ordinance on Gender Equality, Seoul has advanced gender mainstreaming through gender impact assessments, gender-responsive budgeting and settlement reporting, gender statistics, and gender training.⁴⁾ Since its establishment in 2002, the Seoul Foundation of Women & Family has included gender training in its Articles of Incorporation, and as of 2026, continues to operate three core gender mainstreaming mechanisms in an integrated manner: gender impact assessment, gender-responsive budgeting and settlement, and gender training.⁵⁾

Expansion of Gender Equality Indicators

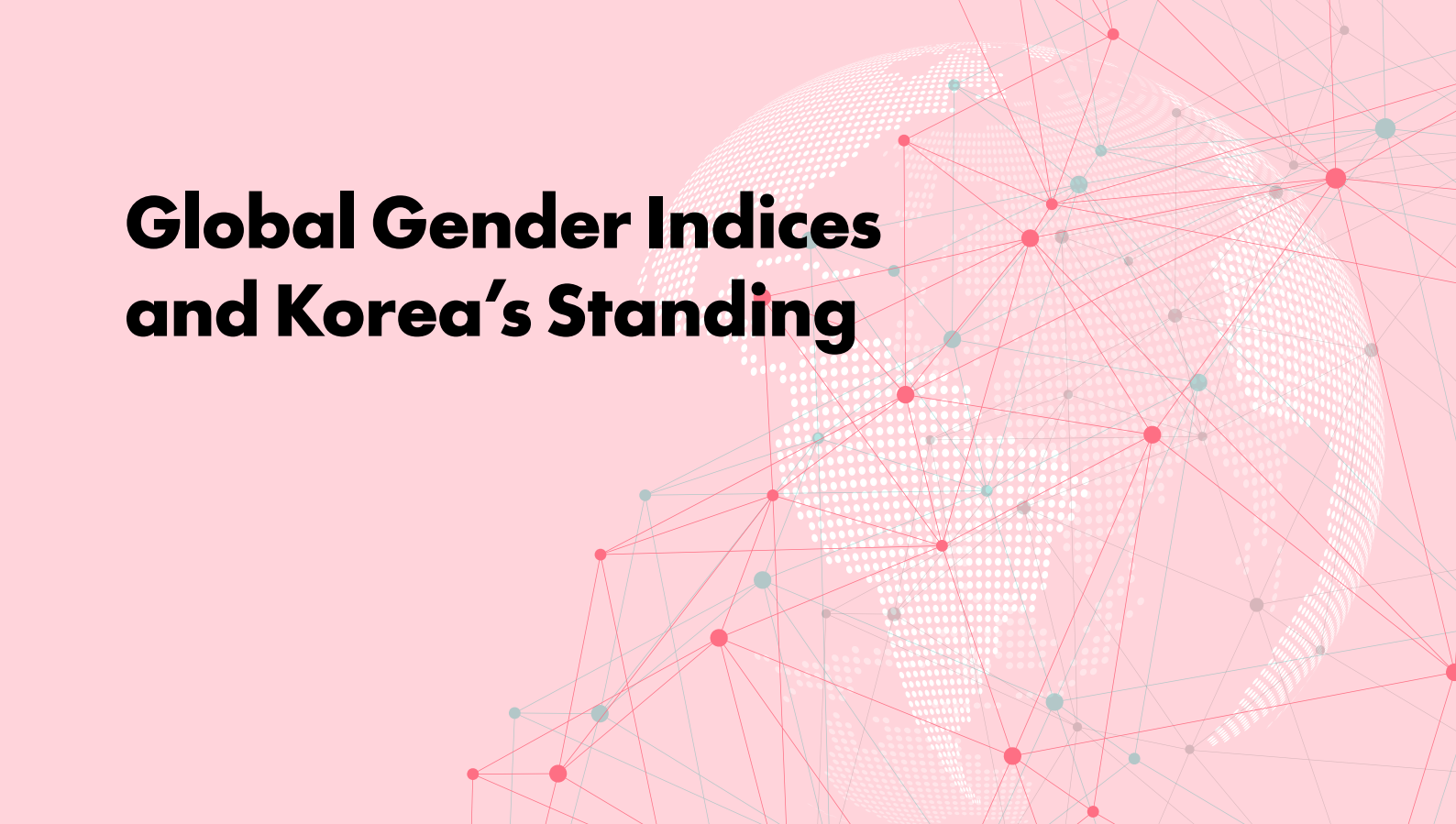
Examining specific gender indicators underscores the significant evolution of international measurement frameworks. Under Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), titled “Promote gender equality and empower women,” only three indicators were included: the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education; women’s share of employment in the non-agricultural sector; and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. Although the MDG framework also included other gender indicators beyond Goal 3, it was still criticized for failing to adequately reflect the achievements and core values of gender equality accumulated through international conferences such as Vienna (human rights), Cairo (population and sexual health), and Beijing (gender mainstreaming) (Fukuda-Parr, 2016).

In contrast, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, were conceived as a universal global agenda to be implemented across all societies, encompassing the economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions of development. Within this framework, gender equality was included both as a standalone goal (SDG 5) and as a cross-cutting issue integrated into targets and indicators across the SDG agenda.

A noteworthy shift under the SDG framework is the international consensus that the absence of data should not limit the scope of goal-setting (UN, 2015). The SDGs established 17 goals, 169 targets, and 234 indicators, and introduced a tier classification system: Tier 1, where concepts and methodologies are internationally agreed upon and data are regularly produced; Tier 2, where concepts and methodologies are agreed upon but data are produced irregularly; and Tier 3, where no agreed concepts or methodologies yet exist. Through continued discussion, the UN Statistical Commission upgraded or reorganized Tier 3 indicators into Tier 2 and worked to close data gaps.⁶⁾

This represents a shift away from a passive approach that sets goals based solely on existing data. Instead, it reflects a new priority: where a critical objective must be met, such as addressing gender-based violence or recognizing the value of unpaid care work, reliable and disaggregated statistics must be produced and managed accordingly. In this sense, data are no longer merely records of social phenomena, but also a driving force for policy realization.

6) As of the 51st session of the UN Statistical Commission, the global indicator framework for the SDGs included no Tier 3 indicators.



Global Gender Indices and Korea's Standing

At present, the international community measures levels of gender equality across countries through a variety of indices, including the Gender Development Index (GDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII), Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), and Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI).

The indicators that make up gender indices can also be classified into inputs, institutions, and outcomes, depending on the specific dimension being evaluated. Outcome indicators include relatively familiar measures such as the proportion of women in parliament, women's employment rates, and girls' enrollment rates. Institutions, by contrast, encompass not only formal arrangements such as laws and policies, but also invisible barriers that operate prior to observable outcomes. These include social norms, practices, and prejudices that either facilitate or hinder progress toward gender equality (OECD, 2023b). While few of these factors were statistically captured in the past, the emergence of indices such as SIGI has shifted the focus toward making the root causes of gender inequality more visible. Finally, inputs refer to the key resources and budgetary commitments required to sustain systems that promote gender equality and support both institutional arrangements and outcomes.

Taken together, this means that gender equality must be understood not only through outcome indicators but also through the broader social context surrounding them, including resources, institutions, and norms. This perspective is also in line with major academic discussions in the international community, such as Sen's (1999) view of development as the expansion of capabilities and Kabeer's (1999) explanation of women's empowerment as an interaction among resources, agency, and achievements.

As shown in **Table 1-1**, these indices also differ in their units of analysis, number of indicators, publishing institutions, and frequency of publication. Although they all address gender equality, their evaluation domains and priority areas vary depending on which sectors each index considers central to gender equality. As a result, Korea's level of gender equality is assessed differently across various indices. Taking these differences into account, this report includes in its analysis not only indices published by international organizations, but also those developed by research institutes and civil society organizations.

Table 1-1 Overview of Global Gender Indices and Korea's Performance

Category	Gender Development Index (GDI)	Gender Inequality Index (GII)	Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)	Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)	Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI)	SDG Gender Index	Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index
Focus	Outcomes			Institutions		Input, Institutions, Outcomes	Institutions, Outcomes
Scope	Gender gaps in development	Gender inequality in development outcomes	Gender gaps	Discriminatory social institutions	Discriminatory social norms and biases	Gender equality in SDG progress	Status of women in inclusion, justice, and security
Dimensions	Health, Education, Income	Health, Education, Politics, Labor	Economy, Education, Health, Politics	Discrimination in the family, Restricted physical integrity, Restricted access to productive and financial resources, Restricted civil liberties	Politics, Education, Economy, Violence against Women, Reproduction	All SDGs except 12, 14, 15	Inclusion, Justice, Security
First/Latest publication years, cycle	1995/2025, Annual	1995/2025, Annual	2006/2025, Annual	2009/2023, Approx. 4 years	2019/2023, Irregular	2019/2024, Irregular	2017/2025, Biennial
No. of Indicators	4	5	14	16	7	56	13
Score Range (Interpretation)	0-1 (Higher = more equal)	0-1 (Lower = more equal)	0-1 (Higher = more equal)	0-100 (Lower = more equal)	0-100 (Lower = more equal)	0-100 (Higher = more equal)	0-1 (Higher = more equal)
Issuing Organization	UNDP	UNDP	WEF	OECD	UNDP	EM2030	Georgetown Univ. & PRIO
Data Sources	HDI	UN	ILO, WHO, IPU, UNESCO, World Bank, EOS Survey	OECD, UN Agencies, WVS, WHO, DHS, Gallup, etc.	World Values Survey (WVS)	UNDP, World Bank, OECD, Gallup, etc.	UN Agencies, World Bank, Gallup, etc.
Coverage (No. of countries)	172	172	148	140	172	139	181
Korea's Standing	0.959 Group 2	0.038 / 12th	0.687 / 101st	19.8 Very Low Discrimination	89.88%	78.9 / 26th	0.815 / 37th

Source | Compiled by the author based on EM2030 (2024), GIWPS & PRIO (2025), OECD (2023b), UN (2023, 2025), and WEF (2025).

National Development and Gender Gaps (GDI, GII, GGGI)

The Gender Development Index (GDI) measures three main dimensions: health, education, and income. Korea, with a high score of 0.959, is classified in Group 2 (UNDP, 2025). This indicates that, quantitatively, Korean women enjoy levels of educational opportunity and health broadly comparable to those of men. Korea is also classified within the “very high human development” group in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which covers health, education, political participation, and labor dimensions. In the most recent assessment, Korea ranked 12th globally with a score of 0.038 (UNDP, 2025). In particular, low maternal mortality and high educational attainment are major factors underpinning this strong performance. As such, Korea ranks highly in indices that assess women’s status within the broader context of national development.

By contrast, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), which measures the relative gaps between women and men across four areas—economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment—places Korea significantly lower in its global rankings. In 2025, Korea ranked 101st out of 148 countries, with a score of 0.687 (WEF, 2025). Despite achieving world-leading outcomes in education and health, Korea continues to face limitations in translating these achievements into substantive equality in economic participation and political empowerment. In particular, the gender wage gap and the underrepresentation of women in senior and managerial positions point to structural barriers in the labor market. Similarly, the low proportion of women in parliament indicates a decision-making structure that lacks the representation needed to integrate gender perspectives into national policymaking.



Institutions and Social Norms (SIGI, GSNI)

Korea's performance in the area of social institutions and norms also varies depending on the index used. The OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) measures discriminatory formal and informal social institutions across four dimensions: discrimination in the family, restricted physical integrity, restricted access to productive and financial resources, and restricted civil liberties. Each of the 16 indicators combines legal, attitudinal, and practice variables. Among these, the legal variables evaluate the presence and strength of institutional frameworks and procedures for advancing gender equality, such as legal protections for victims of domestic violence and regulations prohibiting and sanctioning sexual harassment in the workplace. According to the 2023 SIGI, Korea received a score of 20, placing it in the "very low" discrimination category (OECD, 2023b).⁷⁾

This can be understood as the result of the combined force of women's movements, which have consistently called for the active incorporation of international gender equality standards into domestic legal systems, and the implementation efforts of national women's machinery to translate these demands into policy. Korea signed CEDAW in 1983 as its 90th signatory and ratified it in 1984, becoming the 61st State Party to the Convention. Since then, it has laid the groundwork for eliminating gender discrimination in formal institutions by gradually revising domestic laws that conflicted with the Convention. In addition, through the regular submission of implementation reports and participation in international review processes, Korea has continued to advance its gender mainstreaming framework across the legislative, judicial, and administrative spheres.⁸⁾

Despite these institutional achievements, further progress is still needed at the level of everyday norms and social attitudes. According to the Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI), which utilizes World Values Survey (WVS) data to measure gender bias across political, educational, economic, and physical integrity dimensions, 89.9% of the population in Korea was found to hold at least one bias in gender social norms (UNDP, 2023).⁹⁾ Korea was identified as a country in which the share of people without gender bias had declined compared with the previous round, making it one of the most pronounced cases of gender backlash among the 172 countries surveyed (UNDP, 2023). This does not mean that Korea ranks at the bottom in terms of gender equality outcomes, but rather that gender role norms have moved in a more discriminatory direction.



7) Individual dimension scores for Korea: discrimination in the family (20.2), restricted physical integrity (15.5), restricted access to productive and financial resources (28.9), and restricted civil liberties (13.8) (OECD, 2023b)

8) National Archives of Korea, "UN CEDAW Ratification"

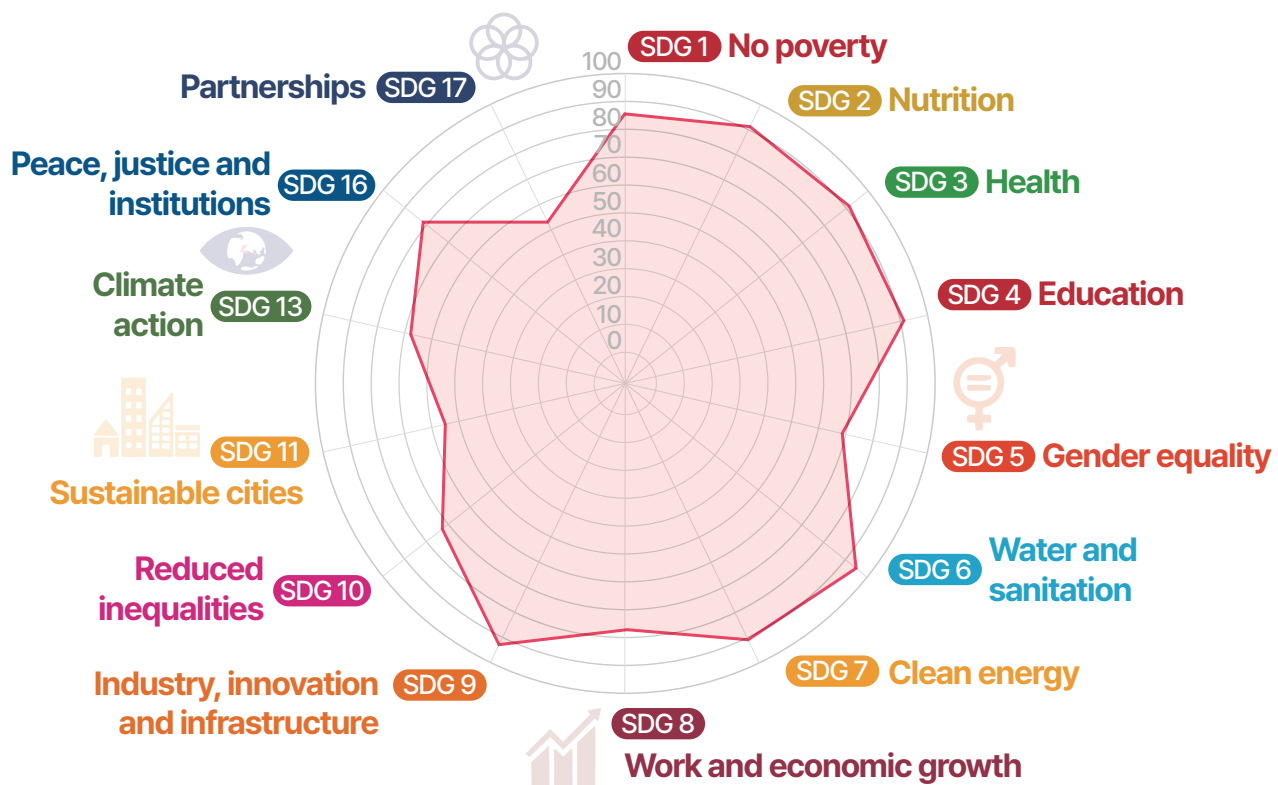
9) Based on data from the 2017–2022 WVS wave, measuring respondents' agreement with statements such as "Men make better political leaders than women do" and "Men make better business executives than women do."

Overall Assessment and Safety (SDG Gender Index, WPS Index)

Among the indices introduced in this report, the SDG Gender Index, published at irregular intervals by the global coalition Equal Measures 2030 (EM2030), is the most comprehensive in terms of its range of sectors and indicators covered. The index encompasses 14 of the 17 SDGs, excluding Goals 12 (responsible consumption and production), 14 (life below water), and 15 (life on land), and incorporates a total of 56 indicators. In terms of its evaluative perspective, it includes not only indicators of outcomes and institutions, but also a range of measures that capture policy inputs, such as budget allocations and access to infrastructure. In addition to indicators drawn from the official UN SDG framework, the index incorporates additional measures selected by EM2030 to address gender gaps and issues not fully captured in official SDG monitoring (EM2030, 2024).

Korea's score rose gradually from 74.4 in 2015 to 76.3 in 2019 and 78.9 in 2024, placing it 26th out of 139 countries in the 2024 edition (EM2030, 2024). Korea recorded strong results, generally in the 80–90 point range, on poverty (Goal 1), nutrition (Goal 2), health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), water and sanitation (Goal 6), energy (Goal 7), industry and innovation (Goal 9), and peace and justice (Goal 16). By contrast, gender equality (Goal 5) and gender mainstreaming in the areas of decent work (Goal 8), reduced inequalities (Goal 10), sustainable cities (Goal 11), climate action (Goal 13), and partnerships (Goal 17) remained relatively weak (Figure 1-4). In particular, Goal 5 (gender equality) recorded the lowest score among all goals in 2015, at 54.6, and was assessed as “very poor,” although it improved to 71 by 2022.

Figure 1-4 Korea's SDG Gender Index Scores by Goal

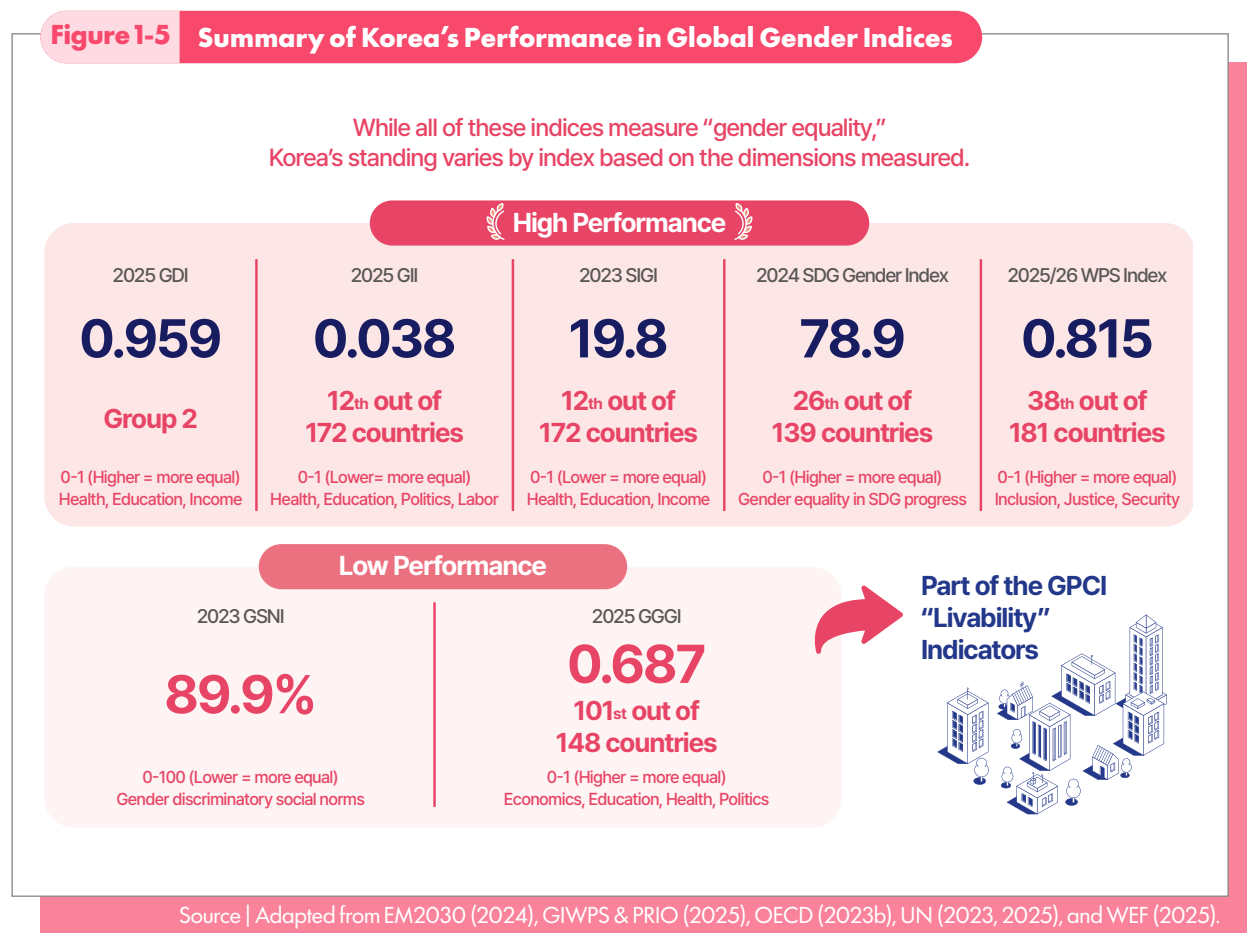


Source | Adapted from EM2030 (2024)

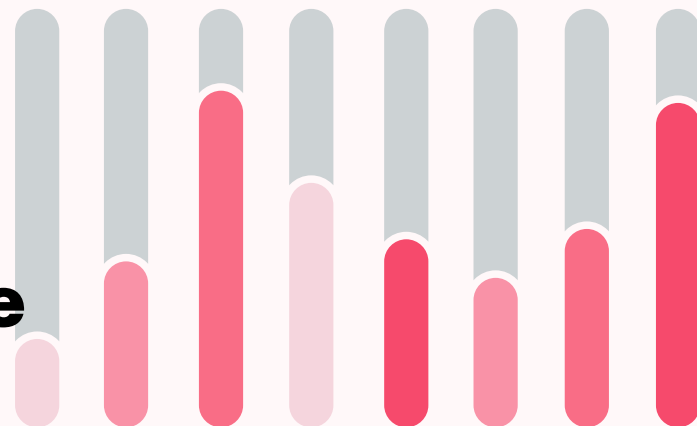
Finally, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index measures women's status across 13 indicators grouped into three dimensions: inclusion, justice, and security. In the 2025/26 edition, Korea scored 0.815 and ranked 37th out of 181 countries, maintaining a relatively high position. The security dimension covers safety at the individual, community, and national levels and includes four indicators: intimate partner violence, community safety, political violence targeting women, and proximity to conflict. Similar to other high-income countries, Korea holds a relatively favorable position on the proximity to conflict indicator, which measures the percentage of women and girls living within 50 km of an armed conflict event. However, the government's consideration in 2022 of anti-feminist campaign pledges, including the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, was interpreted as part of a broader backlash against women's status and the women, peace, and security agenda. (GIWPS & PRIO, 2025).

Taken together, the global gender indices show that Korea generally performs strongly in health and education, while scoring lower in the political and economic spheres, particularly in relation to decision-making structures and the gender wage gap. At the same time, although gender discrimination at the legal and institutional levels appears minimal, gender awareness remains uneven due to persistent gender role stereotypes and prejudice. This points to a structural gap in which everyday norms have not kept pace with institutional change

Figure 1-5



Regional Gender Equality Index and Seoul's Performance



The following analysis identifies Seoul's key policy priorities based on the findings of the Regional Gender Equality Index. The Regional Gender Equality Index is an indicator framework designed to measure and compare gender equality levels and trends across Korea's 17 metropolitan cities and provinces, identify regional disparities, and derive tasks for policy review and improvement (SFWE, 2024; MOGEF, 2024). While global indices focus on cross-national comparisons, the Regional Gender Equality Index is directly linked to the core focus of this report, as it highlights the strengths and areas for improvement of Seoul's policies within the context in which they are implemented.¹⁰⁾

The Regional Gender Equality Index is composed of seven areas—decision-making, employment, income, education, health, care, and gender awareness—encompassing a total of 20 indicators under three overarching goals: equal authority, equal access to resources, and equal relationships. In addition, safety is measured separately using two indicators **Figure 1-6**.¹¹⁾

According to the 2024 report, Seoul maintained a high standing in employment, income, education, and health, while recording lower rankings in areas such as safety, gender awareness, care, and decision-making. This suggests that while Seoul demonstrates strengths in institutional conditions—namely economic and educational infrastructure—challenges remain in the everyday dimensions of gender equality, including citizen perception, social norms, and safety.

In the area of employment, Seoul maintained a stable upper-tier position, scoring 82.8 (3rd) in 2021, 84.7 (3rd) in 2022, and 85.6 (3rd) in 2023. Seoul also consistently ranked near the top in income, with scores of 76.1 (3rd) in 2021, 76.5 (3rd) in 2022, and 77.0 (3rd) in 2023. In education, Seoul recorded 97.1 (1st) in 2021, 96.8 (1st) in 2022, and 96.8 (3rd) in 2023, indicating a slight decline in ranking while the score itself remained high. In health, Seoul improved from 93.5 (4th) in 2021 to 94.0 (3rd) in 2022 and 95.8 (2nd) in 2023 (MOGEF, 2024).

10) As the 2025 report had not been published at the time of writing, this report uses the 2024 Regional Gender Equality Report to assess Seoul's relative strengths and areas for improvement.

11) The index is calculated by standardizing indicators based on gender ratios or achievement levels, adjusting for the target population, and applying weighted arithmetic means across dimensions to derive a composite score. For further methodological details, refer to the 2024 Regional Gender Equality Report (MOGEF).

By contrast, in the area of decision-making, Seoul's score rose from 35.1 (6th) in 2021 to 35.2 (7th) in 2022 and 38.2 (9th) in 2023. Although the score increased, Seoul's relative ranking declined. This suggests that while Seoul's improvement trend has continued, its upward trajectory remains relatively modest compared to other regions.

Furthermore, greater efforts are needed in areas closely linked to urban living conditions. In care, the ranking shifted from 7th (34.1) in 2021 to 12th (36.0) in 2022, followed by a slight recovery to 11th (35.7) in 2023. Gender awareness, which recorded 78.6 (9th) in 2021 and 80.6 (8th) in 2022, declined to 74.3 (13th) in 2023. Similarly, in safety, scores fell to 65.8 (15th) in 2021, 64.7 (16th) in 2022, and 57.6 (16th) in 2023, underscoring the need for policy interventions to enhance safety as perceived by citizens.

In summary, the Regional Gender Equality Index shows that Seoul, as the nation's capital and largest metropolis, demonstrates strengths in areas requiring economic resources and human capacity, such as employment, income, education, and health. Conversely, relatively greater policy effort is required in areas deeply connected to citizens' daily experiences and the socio-cultural environment, specifically decision-making, safety, care, and gender awareness.

Figure 1-6 Regional Gender Equality Index: Indicators by Dimension and Seoul's Performance



Source | 2024 Regional Gender Equality Report, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

Aligning Global and Regional Gender Indices

A Policy Action Map



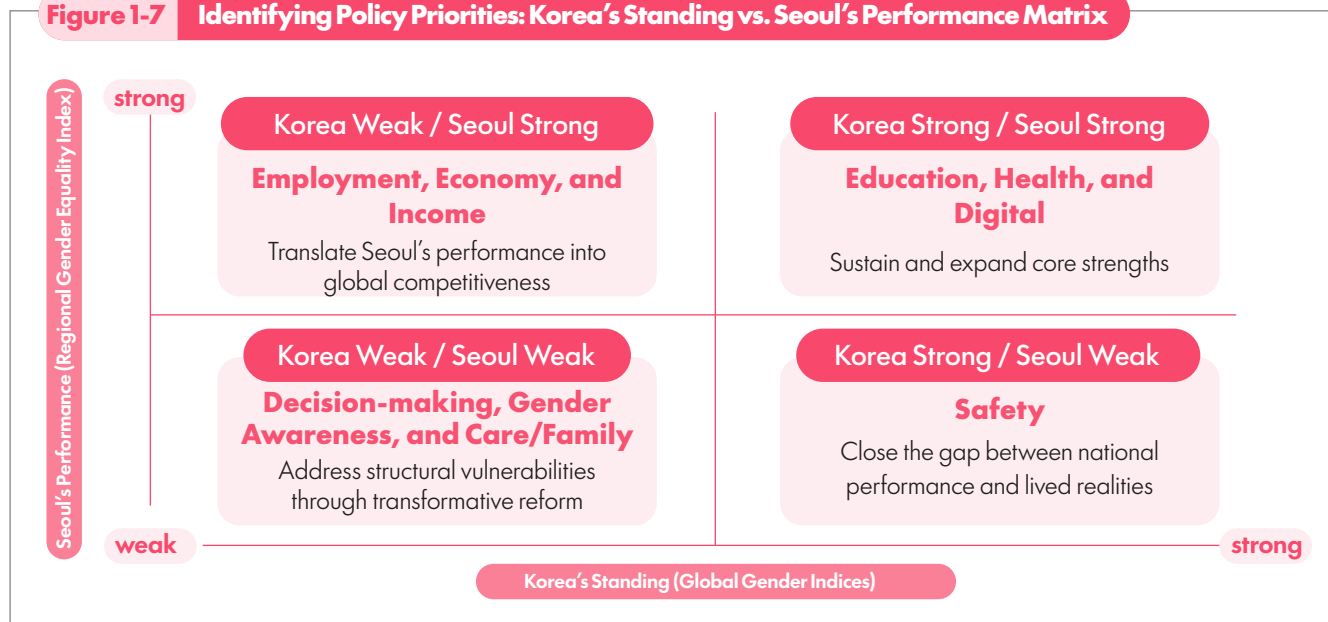
The next step involves mapping the performance of Korea and Seoul across global and regional gender indices, integrating these findings to identify Seoul's policy priorities. For the international comparison, Korea's relative position in major gender indices—including the GDI, GII, GGGI, SIGI, GSNI, SDG Gender Index, and WPS Index—was used to identify areas of relative strength and vulnerability. For the regional comparison, Seoul's rankings in the Regional Gender Equality Index were used to distinguish areas of strong policy performance from those requiring further intervention. While global indices reveal Korea's standing and structural gaps in comparative terms, the Regional Gender Equality Index reflects Seoul's policy outcomes and the challenges experienced in the daily lives of its citizens. This mapping illustrates that national-level strengths do not automatically translate into tangible benefits for Seoul's residents. Conversely, areas of relative regional strength may still appear weak from a global perspective.

As shown in **Figure 1-7**, the results of this mapping are organized into four quadrants, with corresponding policy actions proposed as follows:

- Korea Strong / Seoul Strong** | **Education, health, and digital**
| Sustain and expand core strengths
- Korea Weak / Seoul Strong** | **Employment, economy, and income**
| Translate Seoul's performance into global competitiveness
- Korea Strong / Seoul Weak** | **Safety**
| Close the gap between national performance and lived realities
- Korea Weak / Seoul Weak** | **Decision-making, gender awareness, and care/family**
| Address structural vulnerabilities through transformative reform

Although some overlap exists between global and regional indicators, the total number of indicators is too large to present exhaustively in the main text. Accordingly, this report selectively presents key indicators that best illustrate the defining characteristics of each quadrant. For the SDG Gender Index, goal-level composite scores are used as the basis for analysis, reflecting the structure of the source data. Furthermore, given its integration into the GPCI as a measure of livability, the GGGI is prioritized in this analysis. Specifically, where indicators overlap across multiple global indices, the GGGI framework serves as the primary reference.

Figure 1-7 Identifying Policy Priorities: Korea's Standing vs. Seoul's Performance Matrix



Source | Author

Korea Strong / Seoul Strong

Education, health, and digital domains

Education and health are consistently identified as domains of strong performance in both global and regional data. Accordingly, these domains require a strategy that ensures the maintenance of current advantages while supporting their continued expansion. In education, Korea was ranked 1st out of 148 countries in 2025 on the GGGI literacy rate indicator, with a score of 1.0, indicating full parity and virtually no observable gender gap. In Goal 4 (education) of the SDG Gender Index, Korea also recorded a high overall score of 90.2 in 2022. In addition, the GGGI indicator on the gender ratio among professional and technical workers showed near parity, with women accounting for 49.98% and men 50.02% in 2025. This near-perfect parity indicates that strong educational outcomes are being translated, to a considerable extent, into women's entry into professional occupations in the labor market.¹²⁾ National indicators point in a similar direction. In Seoul, average years of schooling ranked 3rd among the 17 regions in 2023, with women at 13.1 years and men at 14.0 years, indicating only a limited gender gap [Table 1-2](#).

The health sector likewise appears as a relative strength in both global and regional data. In the GGGI, the healthy life expectancy sex ratio stood at 1.048 in 2025, exceeding 1 and reflecting women's advantage in healthy life expectancy. In the SDG Gender Index, Goal 3 (health) received a score of 90.6 in 2022, ranking Korea 11th out of 139 countries and placing it in the category of "very good" performance. At the regional level, despite a gender gap in subjective health status—standing at 47.2% for women and 52.1% for men in 2023—Seoul ranked first among all 17 regions [Table 1-2](#). Overall, the health domain can be assessed as an area of relative strength.

¹²⁾ Although this indicator is part of the GGGI Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex, this report discusses it under education, as it can be understood as reflecting how strong educational attainment translates into women's entry into professional careers.

In the digital domain, global gender indices include several baseline indicators that make it possible to identify areas of strength, although no comparable indicator exists in the Regional Gender Equality Index. In the WPS Index, women's mobile phone use stood at 96% in 2025, suggesting a broad foundation of digital access [Table 1-2](#). The WPS includes this indicator in recognition of mobile phone access as a critical enabling factor for participation in economic, social, and political life (GIWPS & PRIO, 2025). Furthermore, Korea achieved a "very good" score of 91.8 in the 2022 SDG Gender Index for Goal 9 (Industry, Infrastructure, and Innovation). While Goal 9 encompasses broader infrastructure, including road conditions, two specific metrics serve as valuable reference points: the share of women who made or received a digital payment in the past year (Indicator 9.1) and the share of women with internet access (Indicator 9.3). These indicators capture not only digital access but also the capacity to use digital tools in daily life and financial services. Given that global indices now move beyond basic ownership to measure functional use, Korea should consider the development of a national indicator framework for digital gender equality and the establishment of mechanisms for regional data generation and dissemination.

Despite the strengths identified in these outcome indicators, challenges remain in gender norms and attitudes. Data from the 2023 GSNi show that approximately 33.73% of respondents—comprising 30.41% of women and 37.23% of men—agree that university education is more important for men than for women, a clear reflection of persistent bias. This disparity underscores that excellence in educational attainment does not inherently result in the erosion of gender stereotypes. Consequently, the maintenance and expansion of core achievements must be coupled with dedicated, long-term initiatives to transform public awareness and attitudes.

Table 1-2 Education, Health, and Digital Domains : Key Global and Regional Indicators

Domain	Category	Indicator	Index	Assessment Results			Remarks
				Value	Rank	Year	
Education	Global	Literacy rate	GGGI	1.0	1st/148 countries	2025	Presents baseline achievement in "educational access" from a gender equality perspective
		SDG 4	SDG Gender Index	90.2	36th/139 countries	2022	Categorized as "Very Good." A composite score of four SDG 4 indicators.
		Professional and technical workers	GGGI	0.999	67th/148 countries	2025	Close to gender parity with 49.98% women and 50.02% men, but many countries reached 1.0, leading to a lower rank.
	Regional	Mean years of schooling	Regional Gender Equality Index	93.5	3rd/17 regions	2023	Women: 13.1 years, Men: 14 years
Health	Global	Healthy life expectancy	GGGI	1.048	42nd/148 countries	2025	Exceeding 1.0 indicates female advantage. Note that GGGI does not reflect values above 1.0 as additional achievement.
		SDG 3	SDG Gender Index	90.6	11th/139 countries	2022	Categorized as "Very Good." A composite score of four SDG 3 indicators.
	Regional	Subjective health status	Regional Gender Equality Index	90.6	1st/17 regions	2023	Women: 47.2%, Men: 52.1%
Digital	Global	Mobile phone use	WPS Index	96%	-	2025	Proportion of women aged 15+ owning a mobile phone, indicating a foundation for digital access.
		SDG 9	SDG Gender Index	91.8	2nd/139 countries	2022	Categorized as "Very Good." A composite score of four SDG 9 indicators. Among these, two indicators—"Digital payment usage in the past year (9.1)" and "Internet service access (9.3)"—relate to digital access and capability.

Source | Compiled by the author based on MOGEF (2024), EM2030 (2024), and WEF (2025).

Employment, economy, and income domains

Employment, the economy, and income are areas in which Seoul shows relatively strong performance in regional indicators, while Korea's vulnerabilities are clearly exposed in global indices. This calls for an improvement strategy that focuses on both sustaining Seoul's performance and addressing the structural causes of these gaps.

In international comparison, Korea performs relatively poorly in the Economic Participation and Opportunity dimension of the GGGI, where the ratios of estimated earned income, labor force participation, and wage equality for similar work remain low indicating gender disparities in labor market participation and access to income. In 2025, Korea ranked 114th in this subindex, lower than its overall ranking (101st). The labor force participation ratio shows women at 56.80% and men at 72.98%, a gap of 16.18 percentage points. In particular, the wage equality for similar work indicator based on the Executive Opinion Survey (EOS) scored 0.602, highlighting the need for continuous efforts to establish substantial wage fairness. The ratio of estimated earned income also reveals a pronounced gender gap, with women (34.03) being considerably lower than that for men (66.03) **Table 1-3**.

By contrast, Seoul ranks 3rd in the Economy and Income domain of the Regional Gender Equality Index. The share of women with career interruptions stands at 13.6%, lower than the national average (17%), and its gender wage gap also ranks in the upper tier regionally. However, the absolute wage levels reveal a persistent disparity, at KRW 2,732,000 for women versus KRW 4,112,000 for men. Mixed results are also seen in income indicators: while Seoul ranks 2nd in the share of Basic Livelihood Security recipients, its National Pension receipt rate ranks low at 15th, highlighting the need for greater policy attention to old-age income security. Accordingly, rather than concluding based solely on aggregate rankings, a strategy is needed to address the policy gaps indicated by the variations among specific indicators.

Institutional and awareness-related indices also confirm that restrictions remain in Korea regarding women's entry into specific occupations and night-shift work.¹³⁾ Regarding social attitudes, GSNi indicators show that 59.40% of women and 71.99% of men agree that "men should have more right to a job than women" or "men make better business executives," confirming a gender gap in perception. This suggests that norms and expectations continue to reproduce gender inequality in the labor market. Therefore, alongside reducing care burdens and strengthening work-life balance, improving gender awareness within the economic domain is essential.

13) In the SIGI legal survey, Korea is recorded as "Yes" for the existence of laws prohibiting women's entry into certain occupations and "No" for whether women can perform the same night work as men.

In particular, there is a need to examine whether the wide range of policies aimed at addressing low birth rates is being designed and implemented from a gender equality perspective and to ensure that such policies are not managed in a fragmented manner, isolated from efforts to reduce the gender wage gap. While the term *jeochulsan* (low fertility) has gradually been replaced by *jeochulsaeng* (low birth levels) in Korean policy discourse to shift attention toward structural social factors, there remains a significant risk of short-sighted responses if the focus is placed solely on the phenomenon itself. An OECD working paper (Choi et al., 2024) points out that Korea's social environment makes it difficult for women to reconcile career and childbirth, arguing that the fertility rate may decline even further unless conditions allow for a sustainable balance between the two. Likewise, Doepke et al. (2023) explain that in high-income countries, a key determinant of fertility is the ease with which women can integrate career and family life; when these two goals conflict, both women's employment and fertility tend to decline. They further emphasize that, in addition to the expansion of public childcare, the conditions supporting such compatibility include social norms supportive of working mothers, flexible labor markets, and increased paternal participation in caregiving (Doepke et al., 2023). Goldin (2021) similarly argues that care and the economy are interdependent spheres, and that mitigating the tension between women's careers and family formation requires both greater male participation in caregiving and job structures with high temporal flexibility.

Seoul, therefore, needs to transition toward an integrated policy framework that addresses low birth rates, the prevention of career interruption, and the reduction of the gender wage gap—not as separate challenges, but as part of a holistic effort to address structural inequality.

Table 1-3 Employment, Economy, and Income Domains : Key Global and Regional Indicators

Category	Indicator	Index	Assessment Results			Remarks
			Value	Rank	Year	
Global	Estimated earned income	GGGI	0.515	116th/148 countries	2025	A significant income gap is observed: Women \$34.03, Men \$66.03 (Unit: Int'l \$1,000).
	Labour force participation	GGGI	0.778	80th/148 countries	2025	A gender gap in labour force participation is present: Women 56.8%, Men 72.98%.
	Wage equality for similar work	GGGI	0.602	94th/148 countries	2025	Based on the Executive Opinion Survey (EOS); reflects perceptions of wage equality for the same or similar work.
	SDG 8	SDG Gender Index	77.7	56th/139 countries	2022	Categorized as "Fair." A composite score of five SDG 8 indicators related to employment and labour.
Regional	Rate of career interruptions among women	Regional Gender Equality Index	86.4	4th/17 regions	2023	Seoul's rate is 13.6%, which is lower than the national average (17%).
	Gender wage gap		66.4	4th/17 regions	2023	Ranks high domestically compared to the national average (64.2), yet a substantial gap exists: Women KRW 2,732,000, Men KRW 4,112,000.
	Basic livelihood security recipients		93.7	2nd/17 regions	2023	An indicator reflecting the scale of the economically vulnerable population.
	National pension coverage		70.8	15th/17 regions	2023	While Seoul ranks 3rd overall in the economy and income domain, it ranks lower (15th) in indicators for post-retirement income security.

Source | Compiled by the author based on MOGEF (2024), EM2030 (2024), and WEF (2025).

Safety domain

In the area of safety, efforts are needed to ensure that national-level strengths are sufficiently connected to the daily perceptions of Seoul citizens [Table 1-4](#). The security dimension of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index encompasses national-level risk environments—such as political violence against women and proximity to conflict—in addition to individual and community-level indicators like intimate partner violence and safety perceptions when walking alone at night. By contrast, the safety dimension of the Regional Gender Equality Index includes an indicator for victims of violent crime, which directly reflects the city’s crime status, alongside perceptions of safety during nighttime travel. Given the absence of active armed conflict in Korea, the country generally receives positive evaluations on WPS indicators, similar to other advanced nations. However, continuous policy improvements are required so that this macro-level national security can be more closely linked to citizens’ sense of everyday safety. Therefore, it is necessary to further enhance performance in the safety domain through policy design that meticulously reflects safety experiences and daily risk factors perceived within citizens’ living spheres.

Furthermore, Seoul’s safety tasks require a long-term and comprehensive approach that goes beyond expanding policing infrastructure. Article 297 of the Korean Criminal Act defines rape based on the requirements of violence or intimidation.¹⁴⁾ This differs from the recent trend among OECD countries to redefine rape centered on the absence of consent (OECD, 2023a). According to the SIGI legal survey, Korea is classified as a case in which legal protections against sexual harassment are not sufficiently applied to educational institutions (OECD, 2023b), highlighting the need to examine the effectiveness of prevention and response systems in educational settings. These institutional issues, coupled with Seoul’s high concentration of educational and youth facilities, suggest the need to broaden the safety agenda across the wider institutional framework.

There are also tasks Seoul should focus on at the level of awareness and norms. In the GSNi domain covering violence and reproductive rights, gender bias in Korea was recorded at 59.20% (56.11% for women and 62.44% for men).¹⁵⁾ This acts as a factor shaping the quality of safety in living spheres, affecting not only the response after a crime but also reporting, counseling, access to justice, victim-blaming, and secondary victimization. Therefore, improving everyday safety in Seoul requires strengthening the policy-based awareness foundation that supports the practical operation of a victim-centered approach to gender-based violence.

14) In the OECD SIGI legal survey, Korea is recorded as “No” to whether the legal definition of rape is based on the absence of consent—a question designed to identify potential gaps in legal protection against violence against women (OECD, 2023b).

15) The GSNi measures bias in the domain of violence and reproductive rights through proxy indicators, including items such as whether there are circumstances under which a husband is justified in beating his wife (UNDP, 2023).

Ultimately, in the safety domain, Seoul needs to apply a socio-ecological approach that addresses both risk and protective factors across multiple levels, including the individual, relationships, and the community (Heise, 1998). Furthermore, considering the “continuity of violence” perspective, which posits that violence is not confined to isolated incidents but is experienced continuously in women’s daily lives (Kelly, 1988), safety policies should be designed as an integrated framework of prevention, protection, and recovery aimed at reducing everyday anxiety and vulnerability. In other words, as Seoul continues to implement diverse safety policies that account for both urban characteristics and online environments, it must now further refine its policy framework to ensure that national-level strengths are more closely linked to citizens’ daily sense of safety, so that these achievements are more broadly experienced and recognized in everyday life.

Table 1-4 Safety Domain : Key Global and Regional Indicators

Category	Indicator	Index	Assessment Results			Remarks
			Value	Rank	Year	
Global	Son bias	WPS Index	105.9	-	2024	Number of sons born per 100 girls.
	Intimate partner violence		8	-	2018	Physical or sexual violence experienced in the past 12 months.
	Community safety		72	-	2022-2024	Reflects the level of perceived safety within the community; presents the level of “everyday safety” in international comparison.
	Political violence targeting women		0.004	-	2024	Events per 100,000 women.
	Proximity to conflict		0	-	2023-2024	Refers to the proportion of the population living within 50 km of a conflict area.
	SDG 16	SDG Gender Index	81.4	18th/139 countries	2022	Categorized as “Good.” A composite score of four SDG 16 indicators. Includes factors related to safety, security, and justice, such as women’s access to justice, victims of intentional homicide, perception of safety walking alone at night, and the functioning of the criminal justice system.
Regional	Fear of walking alone at night	Regional Gender Equality Index	64	13th/17 regions	2023	Seoul ranks in the lower-middle tier, reflecting citizen’s everyday perception of safety.
	Victims of violent crime		51.1	17th/17 regions	2023	Ranks lowest among the 17 regions. While metropolitan characteristics should be considered, the effectiveness of victim prevention and response systems needs to be reviewed.

Source | Compiled by the author based on MOGEF (2024), EM2030 (2024), and GIWPS & PRIO (2025).

Decision-making, gender awareness, and care/family

Decision-making, gender awareness, and care/family are domains in which global and regional gender indices consistently point to the need for improvement; they should therefore be identified as priority areas for Seoul's policy agenda (Table 1-5). In international comparison, Korea ranks low in the GGGI in terms of the share of women in parliament, at the ministerial level, and in legislative, senior official, and managerial positions, indicating that women's representation remains insufficient in core decision-making structures. Within Korea, Seoul also performs weakly in the decision-making dimension of the Regional Gender Equality Index, recording a score of 38.2 in 2023. Although the proportion of women among metropolitan and local council members ranks relatively high (4th), the shares of women among senior civil servants at Grade 5 and above and among school principals and vice principals rank 9th and 14th, respectively. This suggests that Seoul should build on its success in local councils to further refine its policy foundations, ensuring that women's representation and influence expand more evenly across administrative systems, public institutions, and the education sector.

The gender gap in representation is a structural issue tied to gender role stereotypes. In 2023, the level of agreement with gender stereotypes in the political domain of the GSNI was 72.85% (68.81% for women and 77.10% for men).¹⁶⁾ These results show that the process of securing women's political representation can be influenced by citizens' perceptions and social expectations. Seoul, therefore, needs to promote efforts to increase social empathy and acceptance for the expansion of female leadership.

In the care/family domain, a contextual GGGI indicator shows that in Korea, the share of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work is 12.85% for women and 3.82% for men, representing a gap of approximately 3.3 times (WEF, 2025). Another useful international reference is the SIGI legal survey. Regarding "discrimination within the family," Korea responded "yes" to whether informal norms such as custom, tradition, or religion create differences in the right to be recognized as heads of household, and whether informal rules treat sons and daughters differently in inheritance rights (OECD, 2023b). This suggests that social and cultural perceptions and practices regarding roles and resource distribution within the family continue to affect gender gaps.

In the care dimension of the Regional Gender Equality Index, Seoul shows a middle-tier distribution, and gender imbalances persist in domestic work time and the use of parental leave. This gap in the care domain is closely linked to the economy, employment, and income domains, where Seoul previously showed relatively high performance in regional comparisons.

16) Calculated based on responses to statements such as "Women having the same rights as men is essential for democracy" and "Men make better political leaders than women do."

The disproportionate concentration of caregiving burdens on women restricts their labor market entry, career continuity, and opportunities for growth, which in turn impacts female representation within decision-making structures. In this regard, the gendered division of care work is not merely a household concern; it is a structural factor intricately linked to organizational promotion and reward systems and the environment for public decision-making.

Seoul, therefore, must expand its public care infrastructure while implementing institutional mechanisms to encourage men's participation in care and innovating organizational cultures. Such integrated policy efforts are essential to transforming the nexus of care, employment, and representation into a virtuous cycle. Ultimately, strategic improvements in the care and family domain are directly aligned with the integrated framework proposed earlier for addressing low birth rates, work-life balance, and the gender wage gap.

Table 1-5 Decision-making, Gender awareness, and Care/Family Domains : Key Global and Regional Indicators

Domain	Category	Indicator	Index	Assessed results			Remarks
				Value	Rank	Year	
Decision-making	Global	Women in parliament	GGGI	0.255	102nd/148 countries	2025	Women: 20.33%; men: 79.67%. Indicates low women's representation in national-level decision-making.
		Women in ministerial positions		0.231	85th/148 countries	2025	Women: 18.75%; men: 81.25%. Women's representation in government operations remains limited, confirming a gender gap in senior policy decision-making positions.
		Legislators, senior officials and managers		0.213	124th/148 countries	2025	Included in the GGGI Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex, but used here as a decision-making indicator. Women: 17.53%; men: 82.47%.
	Regional	Share of principals and vice-principals	Regional Gender Equality Index	28.5	14th/17 regions	2023	Seoul's overall Decision-making domain rank is 9th, with large gender gaps visible in the education and public administration indicators.
		Share of government officials at grade 5 or higher		47.8	9th/17 regions	2023	
Gender awareness	Global	Percentage of people with at least one bias	GSNI	89.88%	—	2023	Women: 86.83%; men: 93.08%. Gender-biased social norms remain widespread.
	Regional	Gender role stereotypes within the family	Regional Gender Equality Index	44.9	7th/17 regions	2023	Seoul's overall Gender awareness domain rank was 13th in 2023, and its score declined from 80.6 in 2022 to 74.3 in 2023.
		Perception of women's rights		85.1	10th/17 regions	2023	
		Rate of experiencing gender discrimination		92.8	13th/17 regions	2023	
Care/Family	Global	Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work	GGGI	—	—	2025	Contextual indicator in the GGGI economy profile; no score or rank is provided. Women: 12.85%; men: 3.82%, meaning women spent about 3.3 times as much time as men on unpaid domestic and care work in a 24-hour day.
	Regional	Time spent on domestic work	Regional Gender Equality Index	33.0	6th/17 regions	2023	Seoul's overall Care domain rank was 11th in 2023, placing it in the mid-lower group.
		Use of parental leave		38.4	11th/17 regions	2023	

Source | Compiled by the author based on MOGEF (2024), UN (2023), and WEF (2025).

Policy implications

This report mapped global and regional gender indices to identify areas where achievements align across both datasets and to confirm the gaps between national performance and regional living standards—gaps arising from differences in analysis levels and indicator composition. Based on this analysis, the report outlines the areas where Seoul should prioritize policy intervention and repositions gender equality as a strategic agenda essential to enhancing urban competitiveness. Accordingly, the report proposes the following policy directions.

First, develop and disseminate a domestic measurement framework for gender equality in the digital domain. While some achievements in the digital area can be identified through global gender indices, the Regional Gender Equality Index lacks comparable indicators that directly capture this dimension. Seoul should therefore consider strengthening its domestic measurement system to monitor and manage digital gender equality as a policy outcome. For example, the society dimension of the OECD Going Digital project includes reference indicators such as the share of high-achieving students in science, mathematics, and reading by sex, the proportion of young female coders, and gender gaps in internet use. These can serve as useful benchmarks for Seoul to assess digital inclusion, women's ICT competencies, and gender equality in the digital sphere. Since digital access is a foundation for everyday services, economic participation, and access to safety and rights, Seoul can maintain its international strengths while building a domestic measurement system that fills current data gaps.

Second, there is a need for an integrated approach that connects career and care policies in responding to the low birth rate, care, work-life balance, and the gender wage gap. Measures to address the low birth rate and the gender wage gap cannot be handled separately; support for childbirth and childrearing functions as a strategy for tackling structural inequality only when combined with the prevention of career interruptions, improvement of the gender division of care, and mitigation of the gender wage gap. Seoul needs to further strengthen the connectivity between policies for the low birth rate response, care, work-life balance, and wage gap mitigation, evolving into an integrated policy framework that simultaneously supports women's career continuity and family formation. Seoul's public childcare infrastructure, such as Seoul-style Kids Cafes and Childcare Centers, can serve as a starting point for this integrated strategy. Systematically connecting these resources with policies for employment retention and the reduction of the gender wage gap will lead to enhanced global competitiveness.



Third, the safety domain is a field where, alongside generally positive evaluations at the national level, the level of safety perceived by citizens within the daily living spheres of metropolitan Seoul also serves as a critical policy factor. Given Seoul's metropolitan characteristics, such as high population density and complex mobility environments, there is a persistent demand for fostering an urban environment where citizens can feel a greater sense of security. Thus, Seoul must expand victim-centered responses to gender-based violence and preventive education grounded in consent and respect, while advancing an integrated protection system that encompasses individual, relational, community, and institutional risk factors across both physical and online environments.

Fourth, the citizen-centered smart city strategy should be advanced from a gender perspective. A citizen-centered smart city is a model that places the improvement of citizens' quality of life as its top priority beyond technological development, seeking urban sustainability through inclusive urban design and data-driven governance (Kim, 2021). The "Smart Women" concept takes this a step further; by reflecting the perspectives of women—who are key actors directly impacted by urban policies such as work, care, and safety—it constitutes an advanced human-centered smart city model that aims to realize a city for all citizens (SFWF, 2025). Moving beyond a smart city vision centered on technological innovation, the Seoul Foundation of Women & Family launched the "Smart Women Project" in 2025 to bridge the digital divide and promote social inclusion, and continues to advance the project as of 2026.

The synergistic implementation of these policy directions will enable improvements in the GGGI—which is aggregated based on gender gaps—and is further expected to generate spillover effects across urban competitiveness indicators. These changes can contribute to enhancing Seoul's urban competitiveness by mitigating the points where gender gaps act as hurdles in evaluations of livability and quality of life. Ultimately, gender equality is a core condition for advancing Seoul's urban attractiveness. Through this commitment, Seoul can move beyond a technology-centered smart city and advance toward a true smart city that places citizens' lives at its center.

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The Case of London

| Global Power City Index No. 1



Executive Summary

This report examines how London's gender equality framework contributes to urban competitiveness and quality of life, focusing on how systems such as shared parental leave support labor market stability.

Main Analysis

Global City Competitiveness

London ranked 1st in the GPCI for 14 consecutive years.

Strong in economy, R&D, cultural interaction, and accessibility, supporting the continued inflow of global firms and talent.

A substantial gap in gender equality between the UK (4th) and Korea (101st) in the GGGI.

A concentration of high-performing gender equality areas in London, as shown by the GEIUK.

How Gender Equality Works

Maternity and parental leave are treated as a natural part of work, not an exception.

Work gaps are managed through temporary staffing, reducing the burden on individuals.

A relatively smooth return to previous work after leave is possible.

Shared Parental Leave enables parents to coordinate care jointly.

How Gender Equality Strengthens City Competitiveness

Sustained participation of skilled workers as a key condition for high-value urban economies.

Gender equality functions not as an added welfare element, but as a structure for retaining human capital.

Women's employment, shared care, and return-to-work support operate together in London.

Human capital loss can be reduced when childbirth and care do not lead to labor market exit.

A Human Capital Retention Structure Shaped by Gender Equality ➔ City Competitiveness through Labor Market Continuity

Key Implications

Shifting Organizational Practice

Parental leave is treated not as an individual issue, but as a matter of workforce management.

Systems for temporary staffing and workload redistribution.

Standardized pre-return consultation, handover, and adjustment support.

Integrating Institutions, Budget, and Governance

Parental leave and flexible work are linked to organizational culture.

A financial basis for operating temporary staffing.

Integrated design of care policy and labor market policy.

Points of Caution

Avoiding gaps between policy introduction and actual implementation.

Looking beyond take-up rates to post-leave return and work patterns.

Taking structural differences between Seoul and London into account.

This section takes London, ranked first overall in the Global Power City Index (GPCI) for 14 consecutive years, as a case through which to examine how gender equality is connected to urban competitiveness and citizens' quality of life. Drawing on the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) and the Gender Equality Index UK (GEIUK), it shows that London is supported by a relatively strong structure in terms of women's labor market participation and the sharing of care responsibilities, and explores how this structure is reflected in everyday practices such as workplace leave culture and the shared parental leave system. It further considers how women's employment, work-life balance, and the public value of care are linked to the retention of skilled workers, labor market stability, and the effective use of human resources in the city, before outlining policy implications relevant to Seoul.

What the Data Reveal About London



Since 2012, London has consistently held the top position in the Global Power City Index (GPCI) for 14 consecutive years. In the 2025 GPCI results as well, London retained its lead among 48 cities. It demonstrates world-leading competitiveness particularly in cultural interaction and accessibility, while also consistently ranking near the top in economy and research and development. These results are closely tied to London's position as a global financial center and an international hub for culture and tourism that attracts firms, talent, and visitors from around the world.

Seoul likewise remains in the upper tier of the GPCI and continues to hold its status as a global city. As of 2025, Seoul ranked sixth in the world and showed strong competitiveness in research and development, but there remains a considerable gap with London in areas such as economy, cultural interaction, and accessibility, where London performs particularly well [Table2-1](#). This structural difference illustrates the contrasting ways in which the two cities generate global influence and urban competitiveness.

At the same time, urban competitiveness cannot be explained simply by economic size or industrial structure alone. Equally important are the extent to which a city can effectively utilize diverse human resources and whether it provides a social environment that allows citizens to participate in economic activity in a stable and sustainable way. Gender equality is closely connected to labor market structure, the use of human capital, and social institutions, and can therefore serve as part of the institutional background shaping urban competitiveness.¹⁷⁾

Table 2-1 Comparison of Urban Competitiveness (GPCI): London and Seoul (GPCI)

Category	London (UK)	Seoul (Korea)
Overall rank	1	6
Economy	2	16
Research and development	2	5
Cultural interaction	1	12
Livability	13	25
Environment	18	11
Accessibility	1	11

Source | The Mori Memorial Foundation (2025)

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025, the United Kingdom ranks 4th out of 148 countries with a score of 0.838, indicating a globally high level of gender equality. Korea, by contrast, ranks 101st with a score of 0.687, revealing a substantial gap between the two countries [Table2-2](#). This structural difference suggests that the institutional environments affecting women's economic participation and the sustainability of their careers differ significantly between the two countries.

21) Most major international indicators of gender equality, however, are calculated at the national level. For example, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), published by the World Economic Forum, is a representative international index measuring gender gaps at the national level. Although it does not directly explain urban competitiveness, it provides an important point of reference for understanding the institutional context, such as labor market structures and social systems, that shapes a city's economic and social environment.



Table 2-2 Comparison of Gender Gap between Korea and the United Kingdom¹⁸⁾

Index/Indicator	Korea		UK	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
Global Gender Gap Index	101	0.687	4	0.838
Economic Participation and Opportunity	114	0.608	38	0.744
Labor-force participation ratio	80	0.778	32	0.873
Wage equality for similar work	94	0.602	54	0.675
Estimated earned income ratio	116	0.515	72	0.632
Legislators, senior officials and managers	124	0.213	42	0.673
Professional and technical workers	67	0.999	1	1.000
Educational attainment	98	0.980	1	1.000
Literacy rate	1	1.000	1	1.000
Enrollment in primary education	87	0.998	1	1.000
Enrollment in secondary education	95	0.995	1	1.000
Enrollment in tertiary education	117	0.855	1	1.000
Health and survival	35	0.976	102	0.965
Sex ratio at birth	1	0.944	1	0.944
Healthy life expectancy	42	1.048	114	1.012
Political empowerment	92	0.182	5	0.643
Women in parliament	102	0.255	23	0.680
Women in ministerial positions	85	0.231	1	1.000
Years with female head of state (last 50 years)	39	0.104	10	0.418

Source | WEF(2025)

Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that national-level gender equality indices directly explain the competitiveness of a particular city. Nevertheless, national gender equality conditions shape the institutional environment that affects labor market structures, social systems, and the use of human resources, and this environment can in turn influence a city's economic activity and patterns of human capital utilization. This is especially relevant in the case of London and Seoul, which are the political, economic, and educational centers of the UK and Korea respectively, and are therefore particularly affected by national institutions and policy environments. In this sense, differences in gender equality between the UK and Korea offer important context for understanding labor market structures and women's economic participation in London and Seoul.

At the same time, London is a vast global city with characteristics that cannot be fully explained by the UK average alone. Since labor market structures, living conditions, and care environments vary considerably even within a single country, it is necessary to look separately at gender equality within London itself.

The Gender Equality Index UK (GEIUK) is a useful source for examining gender equality in London more concretely. Rather than using the national average, this index measures gender equality across 372 local authorities in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In other words, while the GGGI helps identify the institutional environment at the national level, the GEIUK allows us to explore how that environment appears in actual regions and cities in more concrete terms. The GEIUK measures gender equality across six domains: paid work, unpaid work, income, power and participation, education, and health. Of these, the paid work and unpaid work domains are particularly useful for understanding women's labor market participation and the structure of care and domestic labor sharing.

According to the GEIUK, several boroughs in London show relatively high levels of gender equality even within the UK context. In particular, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kingston upon Thames, Lambeth, and Waltham Forest are identified as high-performing areas in terms of gender equality.¹⁹⁾ This is also related, to some extent, to London's character as a city in which economic activity is driven by a highly diverse pool of human resources. Yet while such indicators can show the level of gender equality numerically, they do not fully explain how gender equality is experienced in the everyday lives of citizens. Questions such as women's labor market participation, work-life balance, and care structures need to be understood within a broader social context that goes beyond statistics alone.

18) The score is a value between 0 and 1. The closer it is to 1, the smaller the gap between women and men and the higher the level of gender equality. Conversely, the closer it is to 0, the larger the gender gap. Some health-related indicators may exceed 1 because their reference values are defined differently.

19) This corresponds to the category of "Prime parity" in the GEIUK typology, meaning not only that the gap between women and men is small, but also that both women and men demonstrate high socioeconomic outcomes. By contrast, "Deep disparities" refers to areas with low gender equality and poor outcomes for both women and men; "Equal erosion" refers to cases where the gender gap is small but outcomes for both are low; and "Partial progress" refers to intermediate levels of both gap and performance. This suggests that gender equality should be understood not simply as the narrowing of gaps, but as a concept linked to broader socioeconomic outcomes.



Gender Equality in Everyday Life

One of the most striking aspects of living in the UK, particularly in relation to women's work-life balance, is the way colleagues take leave following childbirth or for childcare. In many workplaces, taking parental leave for a certain period after childbirth is seen as relatively normal, and returning to work after some time is also common. What is important here is that such leave is not treated as something exceptional, but as a natural part of working life. When a colleague takes leave for a period of time, organizations often arrange temporary staff to fill the resulting gap. In many cases, this is not handled simply by distributing the absent employee's work among colleagues, but by separately securing staff who can take charge of the role during the leave period. As a result, even if some internal adjustment is required, overall workloads do not generally increase significantly for coworkers.

Another notable feature is how smoothly people are able to return to their previous work routines after leave. Since temporary staff often operate with a degree of independence during the leave period, the process of handing back responsibilities upon return is relatively smooth. In such an environment, people taking parental leave are less likely to worry that they are placing an excessive burden on colleagues. The fact that return to work is institutionally guaranteed also helps alleviate concerns that childbirth or childcare may lead to career interruption.

Alongside this workplace culture, another noteworthy feature is the UK's Shared Parental Leave system [Figure 2-1](#). Under this system, after a certain period following childbirth, parents can share the remaining period of parental leave between them. They may take leave simultaneously or sequentially, and the system allows for considerable flexibility depending on family circumstances. For example, one parent may take leave first and the other may then take the remainder, or both parents may take leave at the same time for a certain period [Figure 2-2](#). Rather than fixing parental leave into a single standard form, this design allows families to use it in ways that fit their own situations.



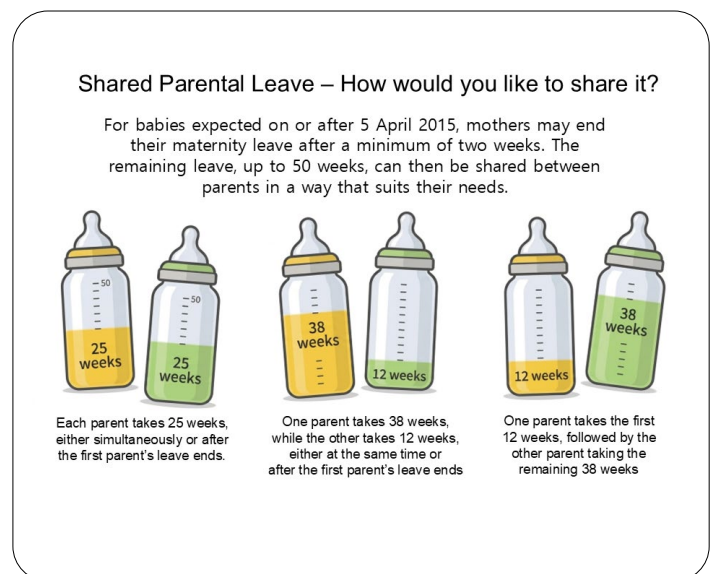
This type of system shows a policy approach that treats childbirth and childrearing not simply as the responsibility of one individual, but as something to be shared between parents. In practice, workplaces tend to allow relatively varied choices regarding how parents will use leave, and leave-taking is often adjusted to individual circumstances. In this sense, the UK's institutional environment, where parents can share parental leave, both reflects a broader social understanding of care as something to be shared within families and helps create conditions that allow continued labor market participation after childbirth.

Figure 2-1 UK Government "Share the Joy" campaign poster (2018)



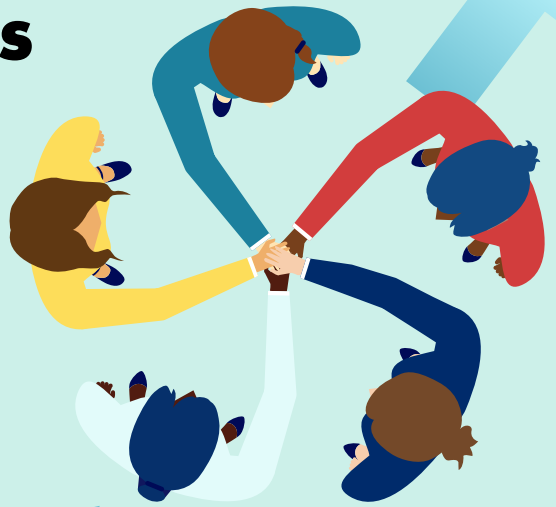
Source | Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Government Equalities Office, 2018, Share the Joy Campaign

Figure 2-2 Examples of how parental leave can be shared between parents



Source and production method | This figure is adapted from a diagram on shared parental leave published on the Advance HE website. It has been modified in terms of color, numerical representation, and wording, and was recreated using generative AI for the purposes of this report.

How Gender Equality Drives Urban Competitiveness



When London's competitiveness is discussed, the first things usually mentioned are finance, tourism, culture, universities, and international networks. Yet for these factors to operate as real drivers of urban competitiveness, highly educated workers must be able to remain stably in the labor market and continue building expertise without career interruption. In this sense, gender equality is less an added value than a structural condition that shows how efficiently a city uses its human resources. If one recalls that the GPCI evaluates a city across economy, research and development, cultural interaction, livability, environment, and accessibility, then women's labor market participation and the care system should not be seen as issues outside urban competitiveness, but as part of its underlying foundation. Behind London's ability to remain number one in the world for 14 consecutive years, backed by 2nd place in economy, 2nd in research and development, 1st in cultural interaction, and 1st in accessibility, lies this broader structure for leveraging human resources.



Women's employment and labor market participation

How a city retains skilled workers

One of the UK's strengths lies in the fact that women's human capital, built through education, is relatively well carried over into the labor market. In the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), the UK ranks 4th overall and 38th in economic participation and opportunity. In particular, the labor-force participation ratio shows women at 58.11% and men at 66.55%, a gap of 8.44 percentage points, which is noticeable, but not extreme. The share of professional workers is also relatively balanced, at 48.19% for women and 51.81% for men. In education, the UK scores 1.000 and ranks first across all subcategories. In other words, the UK can be seen as a country in which pathways for women to enter and remain in the labor market after education function relatively well.

This national-level structure appears even more clearly in London. The Gender Equality Index UK (GEIUK) shows that several areas in London are among the regions with highest levels of gender equality in the country. In particular, London includes boroughs categorized as Prime parity, meaning not only that the gender gap is small, but that both women and men achieve high socioeconomic outcomes. This suggests that women's high educational attainment and labor market participation are connected to real economic outcomes.

Once gender equality is combined with high levels of economic participation in this way, the connection to urban competitiveness becomes clear. London is a city dense with high value-added service industries, professional occupations, research, education, and creative industries. In such a city, the continued activity of skilled workers matters more than the simple supply of labor. If women do not leave the labor market due to childbirth and caregiving, and are able to return even after temporary interruptions, cities are better able to preserve their investment in education and skilled workers. From the perspective of firms and institutions as well, retaining skilled workers is more efficient than training new ones from scratch. Women's continued participation in the labor market therefore translates directly into organizational competitiveness and the overall productivity of the city. The use of temporary replacement and the relative normality of return after leave, discussed above, can be understood as the way this structure operates in everyday life.

This does not mean the structure is without weaknesses. The UK performs relatively well in economic participation, but income gaps still remain. According to the GGGI, the estimated earned income figures for the UK show a substantial difference between women at 40.88 and men at 64.55, and the wage-equality-for-similar-work indicator has not yet reached full parity. Although progress has been made in corporate leadership, gender balance has not been fully achieved. In other words, while London and the UK have made progress in reducing barriers to women's entry into the labor market, challenges remain in terms of compensation and representation in senior decision-making positions. This shows that even when gender equality contributes to urban competitiveness, it does not automatically resolve every form of inequality.

Work-life balance and care

I the social infrastructure that enables labor market participation

Another axis through which women's employment connects to urban competitiveness is care. Even when women's labor market participation is high, if care remains entirely concentrated within the private household—especially on women—that participation can easily become unstable. What matters, therefore, is not simply whether women work, but under what conditions they are able to continue working. In this respect, work-life balance and the public provision of care are not simply welfare issues; they function as key infrastructure directly linked to the labor market.

Here, the UK shows a somewhat different pattern from Korea. According to the supplementary indicators in the GGGI, the share of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work in the UK is 16.01% for women and 12.25% for men, a gap of around 1.3 times. While this does not imply that care and housework are shared completely equally in the UK, it suggests that the concentration of care entirely on women is relatively less pronounced. The Gender Equality Index UK also identifies unpaid work as one of the domains where some of the largest gender gaps remain, while arguing that higher levels of unpaid care participation by men are associated with higher levels of gender equality overall. This suggests that the sharing of care is not simply a matter of private household choice, but a structural factor linked to the level of gender equality in a region.

In this context, Shared Parental Leave carries symbolic significance. The system has not necessarily been used at very high rates in the UK, but its design at least does not fix childbirth and childrearing as the woman's problem alone. Instead, it frames care as something that parents can negotiate together. This institutional approach also aligns with workplace culture. When temporary staff are secured during leave, and return after leave is accepted as a relatively natural process, childbirth and care can be treated not as events that presuppose women's exit from the labor market, but as one phase in an ongoing career. In the end, treating care as a public and organizational issue raises the sustainability of women's careers and enables the city to retain more skilled workers.

This also connects to the GPCI's concept of livability, which is measured not simply in terms of residential convenience, but in relation to working hours, work flexibility, safety, access to healthcare, and everyday convenience. In other words, work-life balance is already built into the assessment of global urban competitiveness. For a city to sustain high levels of international competitiveness, it is not enough simply to attract people; it must also provide living conditions that allow them to remain and work there. Care systems and workplace flexibility are part of those conditions. London is well known as a city that attracts global talent and firms, but the environment that enables that talent to remain in the city rather than being pushed out during periods of childbirth and caregiving must also be understood as part of its competitiveness.

Yet London's dilemma in this area is also clear. The most representative problem is the burden of high living costs, including education, housing, and childcare. In the GPCI, London is relatively weaker in livability and environment, and the reports also identify rising prices and pressure on the living environment as major issues. In other words, while institutional and cultural supports for work-life balance do exist, the actual cost of living, especially housing and childcare, remains a major constraint. London thus shows a tension: it is both a city where gender equality functions relatively well and a city where the cost of sustaining that environment is extremely high. Put differently, London's strength lies in not leaving care and work entirely to private responsibility, while its dilemma lies in the very high cost structure required to maintain that environment.

Insights from the London case

Taken together, the discussion above suggests that London's competitiveness does not stem simply from the fact that it is a financial center. It is also connected to an institutional and organizational environment that is relatively more accommodating of women's labor market participation and the sharing of care. The UK performs strongly in educational equality, women's participation in professional occupations, and political representation. London, in particular, is home to a concentration of areas where both gender equality and economic performance are high. On top of this, workplace practices such as the use of temporary staff, the relative normality of return after leave, and shared parental leave create conditions in which childbirth and caregiving do not necessarily function as triggers for women's career interruption.

London is far from an ideal city. Wage gaps remain, the gendered burden of care has not disappeared, and the pressure of living costs continues to undermine work-life balance. Even so, the case of London makes one point very clear: gender equality is not an additional value external to urban competitiveness, but is directly related to how a city retains and makes use of its human resources. It is precisely at this point that gender equality becomes part of both a city's overall capacity and its citizens' quality of life.



From London to Seoul

Key Implications



The key lesson from the London case is that gender equality does not remain at the level of an abstract value. Rather, it is connected to urban competitiveness through institutional design and organizational practices that sustain women's participation in the labor market and help rebalance care burdens. Applying this lesson to Seoul does not mean simply importing a particular system as it is. Instead, what is needed is an approach that adapts the underlying logic to Seoul's own labor market structure and care realities. In particular, Seoul performs relatively well in employment, income, and education in the Regional Gender Equality Index, while the area of care requires continued policy attention. In other words, Seoul's task is to create a structure that allows women's existing human capital to continue to be utilized even after periods of childbirth and caregiving.

An approach starting with organizational practices

Seoul could immediately draw from the perspective that leave is not merely a personal matter, but a workforce management issue that organizations must proactively address. A notable feature of the London model is that when employees take parental leave, the resulting vacancy is not simply absorbed by their coworkers. Instead, there is a widespread expectation that organizations will secure temporary cover where possible and readjust workloads accordingly. Implementing this principle in Seoul—starting with the public sector, government-funded institutions, and large-scale enterprises—would significantly alleviate the psychological burden of taking parental leave.

Another useful point of reference is the management of leave on the assumption of return. More important than leave-taking itself is whether people can actually return to their original workflow afterwards. If public institutions and organizations under the Seoul Metropolitan Government were to standardize operating principles such as pre-return consultation, clear standards for handover, and adjustment support after return, parental leave could become established not as the starting point of career interruption, but as one stage in a continuing career.²⁰⁾

Another valuable reference point is structuring leave around the expectation of return. The true measure of success is not merely leave uptake, but whether employees can seamlessly reintegrate into their former roles. If the Seoul Metropolitan Government and its affiliated institutions were to standardize protocols—such as pre-return consultations, clear handover guidelines, and reintegration support—parental leave would no longer be viewed as a career break. Instead, it would be recognized as a standard phase within a continuous professional trajectory.

20) The Seoul Metropolitan Government Public Officials Service Ordinance includes relatively detailed provisions related to pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare, such as maternity leave, childcare hours, and family care leave (Article 24), and it also allows certain periods of childcare-related leave to count toward years of service within a defined range (Article 19). However, these provisions focus primarily on the granting of leave and eligibility conditions, and there appear to be no separate ordinance-level provisions specifically governing return management, such as pre-return consultation, standards for handover, or post-return adjustment support.

An approach in which institutions, budgets, and governance move together

A longer-term lesson Seoul could draw from London is the view that care should not be left solely as a family issue, but addressed together with labor market policy. In Seoul, the Regional Gender Equality Index indicates that care remains an area requiring continued policy attention, and gender differences are also observed in indicators related to time spent on housework and the use of parental leave. This suggests that care should be examined beyond the level of individual choice, from a structural perspective linked to the labor market, organizational culture, and social support systems.

As Seoul has already continued to expand public care policies and work-life balance support policies, the next step is to strengthen more integrated policy linkages on this foundation. First, organizational culture and personnel management systems need to be further developed so that parental leave and flexible work arrangements can be used reliably. Second, replacement staffing arrangements and support systems need to be continuously strengthened to facilitate smooth return to work after leave. Third, policy governance should be strengthened by organically linking care services and labor market policies, thereby supporting women's continued employment and career development. If London's competitiveness is connected to an environment that relatively stably supports women's labor market participation and care structures, Seoul can also expand similar policy effects by further enhancing the linkage and perceived impact of its existing care and employment policies.

Points of caution

The greatest danger is to import only the name of a policy without changing the conditions that allow it to function in practice. Even if a scheme exists that lets parents divide parental leave between them, it becomes formal rather than substantive if it cannot actually be used freely within organizations, if the leave-related workload is simply shifted onto colleagues, or if there are implicit career penalties after return. What matters in the London case is not simply the existence of Shared Parental Leave as a formal policy, but the fact that it operates alongside workplace culture, temporary staffing, and the relative normality of return.

Seoul must also recognize that it differs from London in labor market structure, cost-of-living patterns, and organizational culture, making it difficult to apply the same model directly. London is relatively weak in livability and environment in the GPCI, and high living costs and childcare costs are identified as major dilemmas. In other words, London offers useful institutional lessons, but it is also a city in which the costs of sustaining that environment are high. If Seoul were to borrow only the institutional form without taking these contextual differences into account, there is a risk that the policy would see low rates of actual use or become something utilized only by particular groups.

In the end, what Seoul should take from London is not a single policy model, but an approach in which care is publicly shared, women's return to the labor market is supported organizationally, and institutions and management practices are designed together so that skilled workers are not lost. The London case is therefore better understood not as a model showing what Seoul should copy directly, but as an example of the conditions that need to operate together for gender equality to be meaningfully connected to urban competitiveness.

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The Case of Tokyo

| Global Power City Index No. 2



Executive Summary

This report aims to evaluate Tokyo's policies on work-family balance, care and mobility by exploring the gap between the city's high urban competitiveness and its lagging gender equality indicators.

The Misalignment between Urban Competitiveness and Gender Equality

Key Issue

GPCI 2025 | Tokyo ranks 2nd globally

GGGI 2025 | Japan ranks 118th out of 148 countries

Prefectural Gender Gap Index | Tokyo ranks 1st in politics and economy, yet remains far from full equality (economy: 0.454; politics: 0.386).

High urban competitiveness coexists with insufficient gender equality.

Case Analysis

Examined through Three Everyday Scenes

Work-Family Balance

More fathers are seen doing drop-off and pick-up before going to work.
Men's parental leave take-up rate increased by 15.9 percentage points from the previous year to 54.8%.
Childcare facilities and work booths inside stations are expanding.

Distribution of Care Work

'Mamachari' symbolizes gendered mobility.
Mobility that connects multiple errands is concentrated among women.
58.2% of those responsible for drop-off and pick-up have experienced danger, and about 30% have experienced it three or more times.

Urban Space and Mobility

Childcare facilities in commercial spaces are expanding, and signage indicating use by fathers is becoming more common.
Spaces where caregivers can feel at ease still depend heavily on commercial facilities.
The inclusiveness of public space itself remains insufficient.

Gender equality is a condition for retaining urban human capital and sustaining city competitiveness.

Urban space and policies that start from citizens' everyday experiences of economic activity, care, and mobility can enhance both city competitiveness and everyday convenience.

Implications for Seoul

Making Everyday Care and Mobility Visible

Strengthen the visibility of fathers' participation in childcare.
Review the safety of care routes.
Improve information on childcare-related facilities.

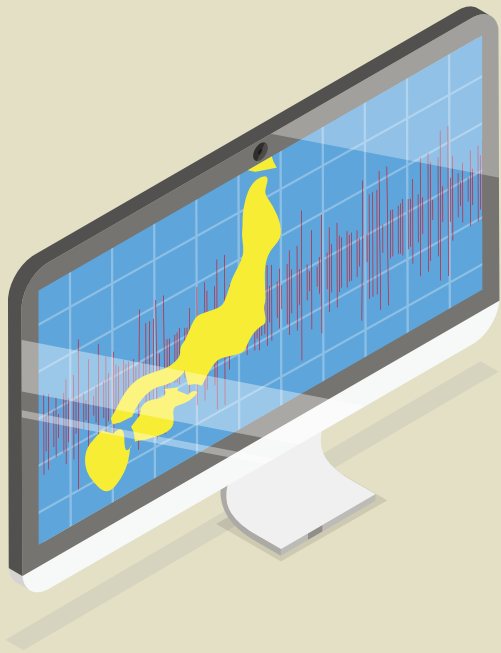
Linking Local Service Systems and Urban Design

Expand access to parental leave support for non-regular workers and employees of SMEs
Build a continuous local service system from pregnancy through childcare
Reflect a gender perspective in urban planning

Points to Keep in Mind

Expansion of systems ≠ change in the division of care (evaluation should consider qualitative change, not only the number of users)
Limitations of relying on commercial spaces

Tokyo ranked 2nd globally in the 2025 Global Power City Index (GPCI), yet Japan remained 118th in the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). Addressing this disparity between 'high urban competitiveness' and 'insufficient gender equality,' this section examines how gender equality is integrated into Tokyo's daily life and identifies the structural barriers that persist. Specifically, it reviews institutions, public services, and operational frameworks through three lenses: work-family balance, the distribution of care responsibilities, and urban space and mobility. The analysis reveals that while Tokyo has made measurable institutional progress, persistent imbalances in care burdens and shortcomings in urban inclusivity remain. Based on these findings, the paper offers practical implications for Seoul as it addresses similar demographic and social challenges.



Understanding Tokyo Through Global and Regional Data

Tokyo ranked the world’s 2nd most competitive city in the 2025 GPCI (The Mori Memorial Foundation, 2025). Tokyo outperformed Seoul across all functions, with a particularly notable margin in Livability. While Seoul maintains relatively strong competitiveness in Research and Development, Tokyo ranks within the global top 10 in every dimension except Economy, demonstrating a more well-rounded competitiveness profile [Table 3-1](#) . This suggests that Tokyo possesses robust urban capacity across multiple dimensions—including economy, culture, livability, and accessibility—and continues to exert significant global magnetism.

In contrast, Japan ranked 118th out of 148 countries in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), placing it below Korea, which ranked 101st. While both countries demonstrate relative strength in education and health, they continue to face substantial challenges in the economic and political domains [Table 3-2](#) .

Table 3-1 Comparison of City Competitiveness between Tokyo and Seoul (2025 GPCI)

Category	Tokyo (Japan)	Seoul (Korea)
Overall rank	2	6
Economy	12	16
Research and development	3	5
Cultural interaction	2	12
Livability	1	25
Environment	7	11
Accessibility	6	11

Source | The Mori Memorial Foundation(2025)

Table 3-2 Comparison of Gender Gaps between Korea and Japan (2025 GGGI)

Index	Korea		Japan	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
Global Gender Gap Index	101	0.687	118	0.666
Economic Participation and Opportunity	114	0.608	112	0.613
Educational attainment	98	0.980	66	0.994
Health and survival	35	0.976	50	0.973
Political empowerment	92	0.182	125	0.085

Source | WEF(2025).

In other words, Tokyo is a highly competitive city, while Japan as a whole has yet to make sufficient progress in gender equality. Tokyo thus embodies the coexistence of these dual realities.

This tension serves as a crucial point of departure for understanding Tokyo. A city's high overall capacity does not necessarily mean that gender equality is fully realized in daily life. This paper therefore examines, through concrete examples, areas of progress and persistent gaps. The key question is not simply whether Tokyo is a "strong" city, but for whom, and in what ways, its strengths are actually shared.

Japan does not have an official annual statistical framework directly equivalent to Korea's Regional Gender Equality Index. However, the Regional Gender Equality Research Group, which includes researchers from Sophia University, publishes a Prefectural Gender Gap Index every year on March 8, timed to coincide with International Women's Day. This enables comparisons across Japan's 47 prefectures in four domains: politics, administration, education, and the economy (Regional Gender Equality Research Group, 2026). In the 2026 edition, Tokyo ranked 1st among the 47 prefectures in both politics and the economy. Despite these rankings, its economic score (0.454) and political score (0.386) remained well below parity (1.0). The index serves as a vital domestic reference by highlighting regional disparities that are often obscured in international indices.

At the same time, because the index focuses primarily on macro-level indicators, it has limitations in capturing the nuances of everyday life. This paper therefore focuses on three priority areas: work, care, and mobility. In addition to the GGGI and the Prefectural Gender Gap Index, the analysis draws on domestic Japanese data such as women's employment rates, men's parental leave uptake, and mobility-related statistics.



21) The original Japanese text uses the phrase 'compatibility of work and childcare'. In this English version, 'work-family balance' is used as a broader and more conventional policy term, while retaining the original emphasis on childcare in the discussion.

Table 3-3 summarizes the primary indicators used in this paper to analyze three focal areas: work–family balance, the gendered division of care work, and urban mobility.²¹⁾ While the global indices, GPCI and GGGI, show the overall standing of the city and the country, the subsequent indicators quantify the specific conditions within each domain. Two overarching observations emerge from this data. First, Tokyo’s robust urban capacity does not automatically translate into gender equality. Second, gender inequality is not merely an abstract concept; it manifests tangibly across all three areas through disparities in career continuity, the division of care labor, and the inclusivity of mobility spaces. Ultimately, these factors are deeply related to women’s continued employment and access to quality jobs.

Table 3-3 Key Indicators and Issues for Understanding Tokyo’s Urban Competitiveness and Gender Equality Challenges

Index/Indicator (Year)	Tokyo & Japan’s Position	Relevance to this paper
GPCI (2025)	Tokyo: 2nd in the world	Serves as the starting point for showing that Tokyo has very high overall urban capacity. In particular, its strengths in livability and accessibility provide the context for examining quality of everyday life and mobility conditions.
GGGI (2025)	Japan: 118th out of 148 countries	Shows that Tokyo’s high urban competitiveness does not automatically translate into the achievement of gender equality. This is directly tied to the central concern of this paper.
Employment rate of women aged 25–44 in Tokyo (2022)	83.4%	Indicates that women’s continued employment during childcare years has improved to some extent, while conditions for work–family balance and job quality remain key challenges. → Work–family balance
Men’s parental leave rate in Tokyo (2022)	54.8%	Men’s use of parental leave is expanding, but leave duration and the actual division of household responsibilities remain separate issues. → Gendered division of care work
Mobility patterns for nursery and kindergarten drop-off & pick-up in Tokyo’s 23 wards (2024)	· Walking and cycling each account for about 50% · 58.2% of those walking or cycling experienced danger	Highlights the burden of mobility related to care responsibilities, as well as challenges in safety and ease of use. → Urban space and mobility

Source | Compiled by the author based on the Mori Memorial Foundation (2025), World Economic Forum (2025), Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Industrial and Labor Affairs (2025), Tokyo Metropolitan Government (2023), and the Council for Regulatory Reform, Cabinet Office of Japan (2024)

Gender Equality in Everyday Life



Gender equality in Tokyo cannot be understood through statistics or institutions alone. Rather, its achievements and limitations are revealed through the rhythms of daily life—commuting, school drop-offs and pick-ups, grocery shopping, shared meals, and nighttime travel. The following section examines how gender equality is experienced in Tokyo through three lenses: work-family balance, the division of care work, and urban space and mobility.

Morning Routines and Work-Family Balance

In Tokyo, it becomes apparent that gender equality is not an abstract ideal, but a tangible feature of the morning cityscape. On the streets outside daycare centers and along routes to major stations, it is now common to see caregivers dropping off children before heading to work.

When I first arrived in Japan as an international student in 2018, these drop-off scenes were dominated by mothers. Today, however, fathers in professional attire are increasingly visible, taking their children to daycare before heading directly to the station for their commute. This shift reflects significant institutional changes: the 2022 revision of the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act introduced a postpartum paternity leave scheme, and by fiscal year 2024, the rate of men taking parental leave in Tokyo reached 54.8%, a sharp increase of 15.9 percentage points from the previous year (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Industrial and Labor Affairs, 2025). These changes are also supported by physical infrastructure. The presence of childcare facilities near stations or along commuting routes appears to be a key factor supporting work-family reconciliation. In addition, the proliferation of individual work booths in and around stations—including private services like “Station Work” operated by the JR East Group—has created new conditions for work-life integration, making it easier to work for short periods immediately before or after drop-off and pick-up.

This landscape is maintained by a synergy of institutional reforms and public services, including expanded parental leave, increased childcare capacity, barrier-free station improvements, and local government support.²²⁾ Nevertheless, these morning scenes also highlight a persistent reality: the logistical burden of daily life—preparing supplies, managing schedules, and responding to emergencies—still tends to fall disproportionately on mothers. While work-family balance has advanced, the domestic burden is not yet shared equally.

22) Under the Act on Promotion of Smooth Transportation, etc. of Elderly Persons, Disabled Persons, etc. (the Barrier-Free Act), which came into effect in 2006, railway stations and public facilities were required to install elevators, ramps, and other accessibility facilities.

23) Originally, the term referred to utility bicycles with low frames that made them easy to ride even while wearing a skirt, and they became widely used for shopping and everyday movement. More recently, variants equipped with electric assistance and child seats have spread rapidly, and expressions such as *papachari* have also begun to appear.



Mobility as a Reflection of Women's Disproportionate Care Burden

Shortly after eight in the morning, electric-assist bicycles carrying children line up along the roads outside daycare centers. Some caregivers head straight to the supermarket after drop-off, while others make for the station. Here, daycare drop-off, grocery shopping, and commuting are merged into a single trip chain.

In Japan, the practical bicycles used for daily errands and short-distance travel have long been called *mamachari*—literally “mom’s bike.”²³⁾ The term itself suggests that the mobility required to sustain daily life, such as shopping and routine errands, has historically been perceived as an extension of women’s roles. It is common to see multiple daily tasks, including daycare drop-off and pick-up, shopping, and accompanying family members to medical appointments, linked into one continuous chain of movement. Transport research has long established that trip chaining is more prevalent among women, and that mobility involving care tends to be significantly more complex (McGuckin and Nakamoto, 2005). What this reveals is not simply a matter of transport modes, but the gendered division of care work itself: who is expected to sustain everyday life, and the specific types of movement they are required to undertake as a result.

Recent studies suggest that the design and naming of the *mamachari* embody the gendered mobility patterns that have shaped Japanese urban space (Tanaka, 2023). During the high-growth period, as the traditional division of labor—“the husband works, the wife manages the household”—became entrenched, women’s bicycles were modified with luggage racks, baskets, and child seats, evolving into specialized tools for care. Given this historical context, the recent and growing discomfort with the label *mamachari* suggests that the assumption linking childcare exclusively to women is no longer accepted as the norm.

Despite these evolving attitudes, urban infrastructure has not kept pace. Among caregivers in Tokyo’s 23 wards who rely on walking or cycling for daycare transit, 58.2% reported encountering safety hazards in the past three months; approximately 30% of those respondents had experienced such incidents “three times or more” (Council for Regulatory Reform, Cabinet Office, 2024). Urban road space remains largely designed for automobile traffic, and care-centered mobility has yet to be prioritized in urban design. To advance gender equality, it is necessary to recognize the mobility burden borne by caregivers as a critical issue of urban policy. Despite Japan’s Second Bicycle Utilization Promotion Plan (2022) and Tokyo’s 2023 regional guidelines beginning to address the cycling environments of families with young children, prioritizing care routes is not yet a central pillar of urban planning. (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Construction, 2023).

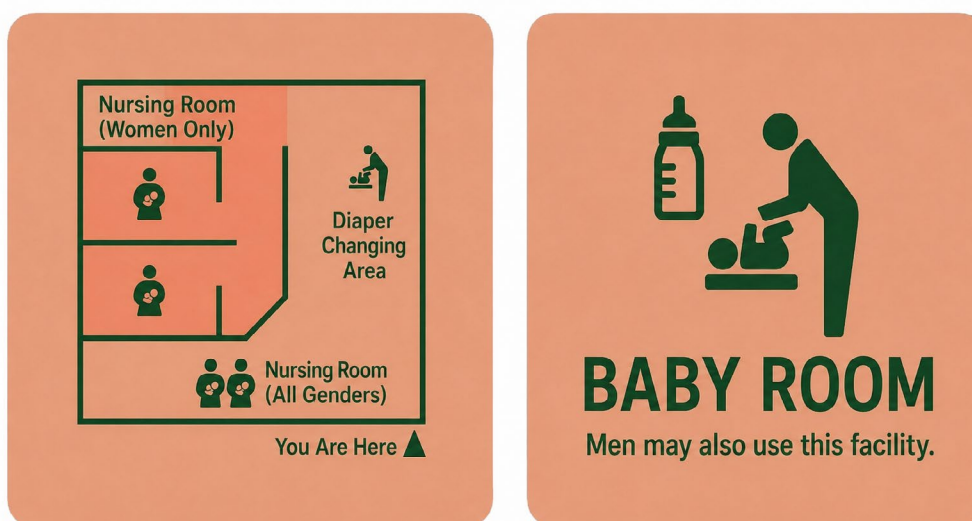
For Whom Is Urban Space Convenient?

Tokyo is, overall, an easy city to move around in, supported by well-developed public transport and a dense concentration of lively commercial facilities. But whether that convenience is equally open to everyone remains a separate question. In particular, when going out with children, it becomes readily apparent who the space assumes to be its standard user. Tasks such as breastfeeding, changing diapers, or finding a place where a child can rest have long tended to be implicitly assigned to mothers. In other words, urban space itself has often assumed women to be the primary caregivers.

In this respect, however, recent changes can also be observed in Tokyo. In shopping centers and large commercial complexes, infant lounges, breastfeeding and diaper-changing facilities, kids' spaces, and rest areas designed for parents and children to use together seem more fully developed than before. Moreover, signage that assumes use by fathers as well has also begun to expand gradually. As shown in [Figure 3-1](#), baby-room signage in a commercial facility explicitly states that "men may also use this facility," suggesting a shift away from implicitly assuming that mothers alone are the intended users of childcare-related facilities. Such spaces not only reduce the psychological burden of going out for caregivers accompanying children, especially women, who still tend to shoulder more day-to-day care, but also make visible a broader shift away from defining childcare as the mother's role alone.

At the same time, these changes do not automatically mean that urban space as a whole has become inclusive. If caregivers accompanying children still need to seek out places where they can feel safe and comfortable primarily inside particular commercial facilities, this suggests that public space itself is not yet sufficiently inclusive. Urban inclusiveness is not determined by crime prevention measures alone. Gender equality becomes visible not only in who can move around easily, but also in who can stay comfortably and continue care-related outings with reasonable ease.

Figure 3-1 Examples of Gender-Inclusive Baby Room Facilities and Signage



Source | Reconstructed using generative AI based on a photograph taken by the author in a commercial facility in Tokyo.

24) The dual operating structure refers to a system in which the Tokyo Metropolitan Government provides funding and program options, while ward, city, town, and village governments deliver services directly to residents.

35) Akachan Furatto is the term used by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government for facilities where caregivers with infants can briefly stop by to change diapers, breastfeed or feed babies, and attend to other childcare needs.

Translating Gender Equality into Urban Competitiveness

None of the three everyday scenes discussed above—morning drop-off and pick-up, mobility by mamachari, and time spent in semi-public spaces—can be sustained by individual effort alone. Behind them lies an overlapping set of institutions, public services, urban infrastructure, and operating rules. This section organizes these enabling arrangements by field and examines how gender equality connects to city competitiveness and everyday convenience.

Table 3-4 summarizes, in comparative form, the strengths and dilemmas in the three fields discussed below. While Tokyo has made institutional and spatial progress in each area, it also has a common structural pattern: such progress does not automatically translate into equality in everyday life.

Table 3-4 Strengths and Dilemmas across Three Areas

	Work-Family Balance	Gendered Division of Care Work	Urban Space and Mobility
Strengths	- Expansion of parental leave, including postpartum paternity leave - Men's parental leave take-up rate: 54.8% - Sharp decline in daycare waiting lists - Employment rate of women aged 25–44: 83.4% - Childcare facilities along commuting routes	- Official and statistical recognition of unpaid labor through the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications - Tokyo Mama Papa Support Program - Development of accompanied counseling support systems - Dual operating structure between the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and wards/cities/towns/villages²⁴⁾	- Barrier-free rate at stations: 93.9% - Legalization of indoor smoking bans - Expansion of childcare-related facilities in commercial establishments through voluntary private-sector efforts - Increased signage explicitly indicating access for fathers - Provision of information on facilities such as Akachan Furatto²⁵⁾
Dilemmas	- Parental leave remains short in duration (among men in Tokyo, the most common duration is '1 to under 3 months' at 46.1%; among women, '1 year to 1 year 6 months' is the most common at 25.9%) - Detailed coordination remains concentrated on mothers - Limited benefits for non-regular workers - Evaluation and compensation systems still premised on long working hours - Workplace culture has not kept pace with institutional change	- Asymmetry in time spent on housework (women spend about 3.9 times as much as men) - Expansion of policy support does not necessarily lead to change in the everyday division of labor - The second-shift problem persists - Implicit workplace assumptions remain that women are responsible for children and household matters	58.2% of those responsible for child drop-off and pick-up have experienced danger - Public space remains insufficiently inclusive - Places where people can stay comfortably still depend heavily on commercial facilities - Road design remains car-centered - Care routes have not yet been placed at the center of urban design

Source | Compiled by the author based on Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2022, 2024), Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2021), Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Industrial and Labor Affairs (2025), Tokyo Metropolitan Government (2023), Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Construction (2023), Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (2024), and Council for Regulatory Reform (2024).

What is common across all three fields is that the strength of the arrangements—that is, the development of institutions and infrastructure—tends to come first, while their benefits do not automatically translate into substantive equality in everyday life. The following sections examine these arrangements in more detail.

Work-Family Balance | Conditions for a City that Retains Talent

Tokyo's approach to supporting work-family balance relies on enhancing parental leave systems and broadening access to childcare services. In particular, the Childcare Leave at Birth scheme introduced through the 2022 revision of the Child Care and Family Care Leave Act—commonly known as postpartum paternity leave—allows fathers to take up to four weeks of leave, in two installments, within eight weeks of childbirth. This has widened the institutional conditions for fathers to participate in childcare immediately after birth (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022). In Tokyo as well, men's parental leave take-up rate rose sharply from 4.5% in 2015 to 54.8% in 2024, providing institutional support for the idea that childcare is not the sole responsibility of mothers.

These conditions are not supported by national legislation alone. Work-family balance becomes a reality only when local governments expand childcare capacity, childcare support services are located around stations and along daily commuting routes, and companies promote the use of leave while introducing flexible work arrangements. According to Tokyo Metropolitan Government policy documents, the employment rate of women aged 25–44 stood at 83.4% in 2022 (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Industrial and Labor Affairs, 2025). The number of children on daycare waiting lists also fell sharply, from 8,586 in 2017 to 286 in 2023. This decline was driven mainly by the rapid expansion of licensed childcare facilities, while the effect of falling demand due to low fertility was limited (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023). From the city's perspective, the fact that women with childcare responsibilities can continue working rather than leaving employment is directly linked to retaining talent and sustaining the labor force.

As shown in [Table 3-4](#), however, the robustness of the system does not automatically lead to equality within the household. Short leave durations, limited benefits for non-regular workers such as part-time and fixed-term contract employees, and evaluation and compensation systems still premised on long working hours for regular workers all indicate that a gap remains between institutional provision and workplace culture. Even where leave is formally available under certain conditions, part-time or fixed-term workers may in practice find it difficult to use because of workplace norms or contractual arrangements. If support for work-family balance is to function as a source of urban capacity, workplace practices and evaluation systems themselves must also be reconsidered.

The Gendered Division of Care Work | Making Invisible Labor a Policy Issue

The imbalance visible in mamachari mobility also appears clearly in the data. According to the 2021 Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, in households with children under six, wives spent 7 hours and 28 minutes per day on housework-related activities, while husbands spent 1 hour and 54 minutes—a persistent asymmetry of about 3.9 times. A contextual indicator in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index also shows that in Japan the share of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work stands at 14.71% for women and 3.75% for men (WEF, 2025). This is closely related to what Hochschild (1989) called the second shift, in which responsibility for housework and childcare remains concentrated on women even when they are in paid employment. Such burdens are easily treated as private matters within the household. In reality, however, they directly affect time allocation, continued employment, and mental and physical well-being, making them a public issue closely tied to the sustainability of urban life.

It is therefore important to make invisible labor statistically visible and to use that evidence as the basis for policy design. Through the Tokyo Mama Papa Support Program, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has adopted a dual operating structure that enables wards, cities, towns, and villages to provide uninterrupted accompanied counseling support, postpartum care, and the dispatch of household and childcare supporters.

Yet even when support measures expand, if the household division of labor and implicit workplace expectations do not change, primary responsibility for care is still likely to remain with women. The range of policies supporting care is widening, but changes in the everyday division of labor are not keeping pace. The redistribution of care work is also a condition that supports women's continued employment and the sustainability of urban life.

Urban Space and Mobility | Inclusive Design and Urban Attractiveness

As discussed above, the fact that women and caregivers accompanying children seek out places where they can stay with relative comfort within commercial spaces suggests that the design of public space itself remains an unresolved issue. Urban attractiveness is not determined simply by whether transport is convenient. It also depends on who can move around with a sense of security and who can stay in a place with reasonable ease.

Recent improvements have been supported by the accumulated effects of legal regulation, facility enhancement, and information provision: the rapid progress of station barrier-free improvements since the 2006 Barrier-Free Act, reaching 93.9% for stations with more than 3,000 daily users (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2024); the mandatory indoor smoking bans introduced through the revised Health Promotion Act; and information on childcare-related facilities such as Akachan Furatto. In addition, as noted earlier, the growing number of facilities whose baby-room signage explicitly states that “men may also use this facility” marks a small but important shift away from fixing women as the primary caregivers.

Still, if such changes remain limited mainly to commercial facilities, it is difficult to say that public space as a whole has become inclusive. What matters for enhancing urban competitiveness is not creating a few exceptional spaces that are easy to use, but spreading spaces that are easy for everyone to use as the urban standard. Internationally, Vienna offers a well-known example of integrating a gender perspective into urban planning by focusing on designing the city as a whole so that all citizens can work, care for family, move around, and live securely (Kail and Irschik, 2013). Tokyo's next challenge is to extend this perspective from a limited number of facilities to the level of a citywide standard.

From Tokyo to Seoul

Key Implications



Tokyo's experience is also relevant to Seoul. Compared with other regions, traditional gender-role attitudes tend to be relatively weaker in Tokyo, and such attitudinal change may itself be seen as an important social foundation supporting the effectiveness of institutions. In Korea as well, the share of women in non-regular employment remains higher than that of men, and women's earnings are known to decline sharply over the long term after childbirth, whereas men's earnings change little (OECD, 2025; KDI, 2024). In addition, Korea's total fertility rate remained at 0.72 in 2023, while the compatibility of work and childcare, the concentration of care burdens, and employment insecurity remain major challenges (JETRO, 2024).

Making Everyday Care and Mobility Visible

One task that Seoul could advance relatively quickly is to make the realities of care and mobility more visible in policy terms. At the local-government level, patterns of men's participation in childcare and use of parental leave should be published in more disaggregated form by firm size, employment type, and industry, so that it becomes socially visible which kinds of workplaces enable, and which hinder, the sharing of care. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Industrial and Labor Affairs publishes an annual Survey on Equal Employment and Participation by Gender, thereby making actual patterns of use visible on a regular basis and enabling local governments, firms, and citizens to share this information (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Industrial and Labor Affairs, 2025; JILPT, 2024).

In addition, it is important to review the safety of care routes linking childcare facilities, schools, and medical facilities, and to reflect factors such as accompanying children, stroller use, and drop-off and pick-up hours in existing road-safety review systems. Improving the guidance system so that various caregivers, including fathers, can easily find and use information on breastfeeding, diaper-changing, and rest facilities can also be pursued at relatively low cost. In this respect, a perspective that expands the intended users of facilities and support measures beyond mothers alone to fathers and other caregivers is essential.

What the Tokyo case suggests is that, rather than simply creating new measures, it is equally important to make visible the existing conditions of care and mobility and to improve their accessibility along everyday routes.

Linking Local Service Systems and Urban Design

At the same time, more substantive change requires attention to policy tasks that depend on broader institutional and fiscal conditions. One such task is improving access to parental leave and childcare support so that they reach non-regular workers and employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in practice. As Tokyo's experience shows, if systems exist but access to them is limited, the benefits are likely to be concentrated among certain groups of regular employees.

It is also important for support from pregnancy through the childcare period to evolve beyond separate programs into a locally coordinated system that provides continuity. In Tokyo, the metropolitan government supports ward, city, town, and village governments through a structure that combines counseling support, postpartum care, and household and childcare assistance. More broadly, a gender perspective should be integrated into urban planning and public-space improvements, so that policy does not stop at improving roads, parks, stations, and commercial spaces separately, but instead asks whose everyday routes the city is actually designed around.

Points to Keep in Mind

It should be noted, however, that expanding systems and facilities does not by itself lead to equal sharing of care. In Korea as well, support measures for work–family balance have expanded, but workplace customs, wage gaps, and the concentration of housework and childcare burdens continue to impose high costs on women's continued employment and childbearing decisions (OECD, 2025; KDI, 2024). Accordingly, policy evaluation should not focus only on figures such as parental leave take-up rates, but also consider what happens afterward, including patterns of return to the labor market.

Ultimately, what Seoul can learn from Tokyo is not to adopt individual facilities or institutions as they are, but to reframe the underlying perspective on policy and space in ways that fit Seoul's own context. Urban space and policy can enhance both city competitiveness and the convenience of everyday life only when they are designed from the standpoint of citizens' lived experiences of mobility, care, and economic participation. Tokyo's achievements and limitations illustrate precisely this point.

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