

## Research Article

# The Political Economy of South Korea's Labor Landscape: Internalizing Labor Rights in the Global Industry

Audrey Dayang Abigail Punuh<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia (corresponding author)  
dayangpunuh@gmail.com

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## Abstract

In South Korea, the implementation of labor norms has been visible, with the internalization of these norms playing a crucial role. The dynamics and contestation between actors are key drivers that often determine the outcome of the labor norm internalization process. Previous research has focused on labor norm violations in South Korea and the influence of domestic politics, leaving a gap for studies that examine the process of norm internalization and the key actors involved. Using Finnemore and Sikkink's "Norm Life Cycle" framework, this research analyzes the interactions behind labor norm internalization in South Korea and the additional political economy landscape. The findings show that international labor standards have been essential in driving domestic changes to labor norms. Both international and domestic pressures, particularly from labor unions and the EU, have played a significant role. The integration of international labor norms into the domestic system is also evident through the ratification of ILO Conventions. However, despite these ratifications, the influence of the nation's political and cultural belief is substantial, as it hinders full internalization. This highlights how political dynamics in South Korea's economic sector, along with actor contestation, have significantly shaped the limitations of labor norm internalization.

**Keywords:** Labor; Norm Internalization; Norm Life Cycle; South Korea

## Introduction

The notion of norm internalization is the process through which people take on normative beliefs, and it serves as a bridge between personal and societal transformation (Batzke and Ernst, 2023). The incorporation of international law into a nation's domestic legal system has historically been a neglected focus of inquiry among international relations experts. However, this pattern has started to shift in the past few decades as more academics have realized how internalization is fundamental to one's understanding of how international law influences state conduct (Zartner, 2010). Over the past 25 years, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has influenced the creation and application of international labor laws. The ILO's rules and regulations have produced soft law pressures that support domestic reform (Brudney, 2017). In this light, merely signing the convention does not assure the implementation, bearing in mind the domestic cultural and political economy parameters that frequently impede the enactment of international norms (Martinsson, 2011). This thesis aims to further analyze the processes involved in labor norm internalization. Using Finnemore and Sikkink's

concept of the “Norm Life Cycle”, it will explore the dynamics of the actors and their positions in the internalization of labor norms, with a particular focus on South Korea.

South Korea, a developed nation that has extensive business ties, is well-versed in the idea of international standards, in this case, labor rights. The Constitution of South Korea upholds worker rights, which are further protected by labor legislations. Given this, the majority of legislation has distinct enforcement orders, which outlines specifics of how the laws will be put into effect (ILO, 2011). As in many other nations, labor laws in Korea place the primary responsibility for protecting workers’ rights upon the employer. Nonetheless, a lot of legal frameworks have been unable to adequately safeguard workers (Yun, 2017). Millions of workers under appalling working conditions have contributed to South Korea’s extraordinary economic achievement over the previous three decades (Koo, 2000). With various actors inherently participating in the dynamics, Lee (2019) argued that throughout the neo-liberal structure, labor power is undermined through a variety of novel approaches developed through the cooperation of government agencies and business interests. Such immense economic power is easily rendered within the scope of political leverage. Rather than acting as an impartial arbitrator of clashing social interests, state’s entities, which includes legal authorities and judiciary, repeatedly contributed as apparatus to reassure the interests of corporations.

The study of norms in South Korea has been the subject of numerous journal articles alongside additional publications. When this research was put together, considerable amounts of the writing on the subject focused upon the way the standards were applied inappropriately and were mostly evaluated based on the outcome. Examining and observing the mechanisms involved in the adoption of international labor standards is therefore crucial. The purpose of this study is to investigate the international labor norm internalization in greater detail within South Korea. This observation delves deeper into the dynamics of various actors participating in the process, including state authorities, business industry players, and norm entrepreneurs, such as labor unions and international organizations, and their influence on labor workers. The interactions among these actors have significantly shaped trends in South Korea’s labor market. Thus, this study illustrates these dynamics by analyzing the norm life cycle as a process.

## Literature Review

Inah Kim & Jeehee Min (2023) in their article titled “Working hours and the regulations in Korea” analyzed the state of weekly working hours and holidays that impact the total annual working hours, and provided an overview of the regulations governing working hours. Working hours are a substantial predictor of worker’s health, in this case, changes in the labor market and industrial structure have raised issues regarding arrangement of working hours. Although long working hours in South Korea have indeed been declining, many workers still face extended schedules, especially in smaller workplaces. Despite international standards, South Korea retains a high weekly working hour limit and permits flexible schedules with few restrictions. This article, however, specifically examines working hours and related regulations within the country.

Dong-one Kim & Seongsu Kim (2003) in their article titled “Globalization, Financial Crisis, and Industrial Relations: The Case of South Korea” examined the backgrounds of Korean IR along with its recent changes specifically on globalization trends in the 1990s. In the Korean case it is proved that globalization in the 1990s has two contrasting effects on labor rights: positive and negative sides in terms of working conditions and employment practices. The adverse effects of globalization include (1) declining labor standards as competition drives lower costs and greater HR flexibility, with stronger managerial control harming job security and conditions, and (2) increased capital bargaining power paired with weakened labor influence. Globalization’s positive effects are seen in changes to IR institutions like laws and representation, while its negative impacts are mostly on HR practices and relationships among IR actors. However, the article primarily concentrates on how globalization affected labor practices.

In her 2009 article “Legal Liminality: The Gender and Labour Politics of Organising South Korea's Irregular Workforce,” Jennifer Jihye Chun explores the labor struggles of South Korea’s irregular workers, particularly focusing on women. With over 70% of women employed in irregular positions, this employment model has significantly influenced labor market demographics and challenged traditional union organizing methods. Chun described the concept of “legal liminality” to explain how irregular workers exist in a gray zone—neither fully granted nor entirely excluded from formal labor rights—leading to struggles over their classification. This study critiques the limitations of male-dominated labor activism and suggests the need for more inclusive union strategies that address both gender and employment status.

Laura Watson (1998) in her article “Labor Relations and the Law in South Korea” explains how Korea’s post-war era was marked by harsh suppression of labor movements and the denial of fundamental worker rights. Consequently, existing labor regulations reflect significant power imbalances between employers and employees and continue to maintain this unequal structure. Watson asserts that unless these biases are corrected, labor unions will be restricted in their ability to make meaningful advancements and will have to focus on minor, workplace-specific improvements. She stresses that global organizations like the ILO and OECD should keep applying pressure on South Korea to guarantee workers' rights to organize and engage in collective bargaining. Additionally, she cautions that collusion between business and government, along with corruption, should not interfere with labor matters.

## Methods

A qualitative research approach is implemented in this research to further explore and comprehend the connection between variables within the phenomenon. As Morse (2003) indicated, the use of qualitative methods is appropriate because the issue addressed in this research requires further discussion given that the subject is not widely recognized and extensively studied. The aim of using qualitative research methodology is to expand concepts that serve to deepen the understanding of a social phenomenon in their natural state, emphasizing the interpretations, lens, and the experiences of the prominent actors (Huston and Rowan, 1998). The means of gathering data focuses on desk research by employing additional data sources, such as data obtained from international organizations like the International Labor Organization (ILO), government documents issued by South Korea, as well as labor unions or institutions associated with South Korea. The evidence through this approach is expected to further explain the human relations between the actors in terms of understanding how norms, particularly the international labor norms were diffused as well as how the dynamics between them affect the internalization.

Process tracing is the core method for analyzing data in this research, focusing on the interactions behind shifting dynamics (Checkel, 2008). The “explaining-outcome process tracing” approach, an iterative method for uncovering causal mechanisms (Beach, 2018), is used to examine how actor dynamics and contestation shape outcomes through multiple, often conflicting stages.

## Result and Analysis

### *The Status of Labor Standards*

When looking at the international standards for labor, the International Labor Organization (ILO) will undoubtedly play a vital role. By creating labor standards by means of agreements and recommendations, the ILO has led the way among international bodies in defining and establishing norms (Daele, 2008). The founding members understood the significance of addressing exploitation of workers in expanding nations, and the increasing recognition of the worldwide economic reliance highlighted the necessity for collaboration

to harmonize working conditions (ILO, n.d.). The eight Conventions that make up the so-called Core Labour Standards (CLS) are particularly noteworthy among them because of their exceptional significance and remarkably high ratification rates (Wildgruber, 2013).

The Republic of Korea is one of the key partners of ILO which pushes the agenda to improve suitable work and social justice globally. ILO works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, as well as the Korean International Cooperation Agency, to support women refugees and host residents to create a sustainable agro-business, to encourage productivity, skill enhancement and joy creation. The Republic of Korea has contributed as a member state of the ILO since 1991 and has endorsed 30 ILO Conventions (ILO, n.d.). In its efforts to prioritize labor protection, South Korea have ratified most of the fundamental ILO Conventions which are outlined below:

Table 1. Ratification Status of South Korea to the Fundamental ILO Conventions

<b>ILO Convention</b>	<b>Ratification Status by the Republic of South Korea</b>
Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)	20 April 2021 (In Force)
Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)	20 April 2021 (In Force)
Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)	20 April 2021 (In Force)
Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)	-
Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) <i>*Minimum age specified: 15 years</i>	28 January 1999 (In Force)
Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)	29 March 2001 (In Force)
Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)	08 December 1997 (In Force)
Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)	04 December 1998 (In Force)
Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155)	20 February 2008 (In Force)
Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187)	20 February 2008 (In Force)

Source: ILO (n.d.)

South Korea has ratified most fundamental ILO conventions, except the Convention on Abolition of Forced Labour. Nissen (2022b) mentioned that ratifying the Convention is challenging due to prison labor for political beliefs, a migrant labor system with limited rights, and particularly military service. Military duty seems to be classified as compelled labor under Convention 105. It is not negotiable from a security standpoint, as South Korea remains in conflict with its northern neighbor since the 1953 Armistice.

ILO (2011) noted that the Republic of Korea sets out labor rights in its Constitution and over two dozen labor laws, which fall into three categories:

1. Labor relations laws, including the Labor Standards Act, governing employer-employee relationships;
2. Collective labor relations regulations, notably the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act (TULRAA), regulating worker-management ties;
3. General employment regulations, such as the Act on Foreign Workers' Employment, covering employment security, coverage, and foreign worker hiring.

### *Dualism and Inequalities in South Korea's Labor Market*

Even with its rapid economic growth and a strong commitment to maintaining labor standards, South Korea still has numerous challenges to tackle. Song (2023) noted that despite having a robust economic growth, South Korea has also experienced a rapid incline of dualism and inequality amongst labor workers. Regardless of the government's efforts to put policies into place, its attempts to address these problems through policies have failed. In large-sized companies which include *chaebol* (Korean elite) firms, systematic regular employees have optimized their economic benefits in the work environment such as employment stability, elevated pay, generous business subsidies, as well as suitable working conditions. Conversely, non-regular workers like part-time, contract, and temporary workers as well as SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) workers, and subcontract workers have been subjected to inequalities in sense that they are unorganized and not included from privileges, while in the same time absorbing costs of adjustments in times of economic downturns. There are an increasing number of people who work in non-standard forms of employment which in the end has contributed to the complicated application of regulations for contracts, conditions of work, as well as the collective labor rights.

GCAP Korea (2016) highlighted persistent issues contributing to labor market inequality in South Korea. These include temporary work status caused by easy access to temporary labor. The 1997 employee dispatch law increased labor liquidity and temporary employment, minimizing labor costs. However, as low-paying jobs increased, profit distribution became inefficient, worsening consumer spending divides. These policies benefited the *chaebol*, creating a dominant corporate structure across various industries, while small businesses struggled. Temporary workers often worry about job security, lacking health insurance or pensions. This rise contributed to income polarization (Kwon Sun Jung, 2013, as cited in GCAP Korea, 2016). Another issue is female labor inequality, shown through salary gaps and lack of benefits. Though women's labor increases with more working parents, they still lack equal protection and treatment (GCAP Korea, 2016). South Korea's labor norms continue to present challenges, which have been fueled by inconsistencies in the way they are implemented. For example, sex discrimination has been one of the major problems in the world of employment, as was previously brought about. Although laws have guaranteed equal compensation for equal labor, the government has applied the law in inconsistent ways (US Department of State, 2023).

Despite widespread recognition of the issues of social inequality and labor market dualization, significant employer opposition, usually from the political right, has thwarted any significant attempts at labor market reregulation. In addition to the fact that legal compliance as well as enforcement are still lacking in the Korean economy, it appears that the few regulatory initiatives that have been made have had little impact on Korean employment practices (Fleckenstein and Soohyun Christine Lee, 2024).

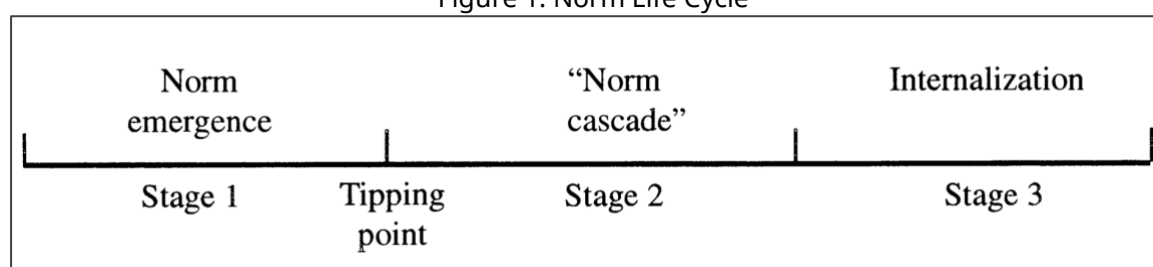
In light of these points, South Korea's labor laws largely align with ILO standards, as shown by its ratification of several conventions. Yet, despite these commitments, many labor issues persist, raising questions about the internalization of international norms and the complex dynamics among actors shaping labor policies.

### ***Engaging in the Norm Life Cycle: Actor's Contestation in Labor Norm Internalization***



The discourse of “Norm Life Cycle” represents the process of norm influence, in this case it is presented in a three-stage process. The stages are as follows: norm emergence, norm cascade, and internalization. A limit, or “tipping” mark, that separates the first two stages occurs when an adequate number of pertinent state actors accept the norm. The distinctive instrument of the first stage is depicted in the efforts of norm entrepreneurs striving to persuade a majority of states (leaders of the norm) to adopt a new norm. While the second stage places more emphasis on how norm leaders interact with other nations in order to develop into norm followers. Norm cascades are facilitated by the primary tendencies of adherence pressure, the goal to increase international legitimacy, and the longing of state leaders to increase their confidence, even though the influence of this second stage varies. Norm internalization, which happens at the top end of the norm cascade, is when standards become commonplace and are no longer the subject of elevated debate in society (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998).

Figure 1. Norm Life Cycle



Source: Finnemore and Sikkink (1998)

#### *Norm Emergence: The Role of Norm Entrepreneurs*

In the case of labor norm internalization in South Korea, firstly, it can be noted that ILO acts as a forefront. The ILO has led in setting labor standards through conventions and recommendations, contributing to international labor understanding and technical assistance. During the 1930s, despite global crises, the ILO defended its mission and adapted by supporting policies for economic recovery, such as trade and public works (Daele, 2008). As an international institution, the ILO works with employers, workers, and governments to promote socio-economic development. It encourages tripartism and social dialogue, ensuring all parties help shape labor standards, policies, and programs. Its structure gives equal voice to workers, employers, and governments, showing social dialogue in practice (ILO, n.d.).

Korean labor unions originated in the late 19th century, with the first formal union established in 1910 during Japanese colonial rule. Their emergence was driven by poor working conditions, low wages, anti-colonial sentiment, and the broader socio-political instability of the late *Chosun* period (Seung-ho & Leggett, 1995). Despite South Korea's rapid economic development, many workers did not benefit equally and continued to face repressive labor laws and limited union power (Watson, 1998). Labor unions were traditionally controlled by the state and corporate interests, with collective bargaining heavily restricted and enterprise unions prevented from engaging in labor negotiations (Song, 1999). The government created the Labour-Management Cooperative Council (LMCC) to manage workplace grievances, but it remained under tight state supervision. During the 1960s and 1970s, economic policies favored large conglomerates, while labor activism was suppressed and often labeled as communist or prosocialist (Rodgers, 1996; Lee & Lane, 2023). Strikes were met with police force, and union leaders were frequently arrested or intimidated (Song, 1999). Until 1987, South Korea relied on authoritarian labor practices that prioritized economic growth over workers' rights. However, the democratic transition that year revitalized labor movements, which emerged as key drivers of political liberalization and democratization (Pamungkas, 2011).

#### *The Norm Cascade*

South Korea's role as a "norm breacher" partly explains its openness to external influence. Ock (2016) reported on labor rights violations in Korean businesses, including underpayment, abuse, and punishment for minor actions like frequent restroom use, based on findings from Korean TransNational Corporation Watch. Labor rights concerns persist, with over 10,000 workplace harassment cases reported in 2023—a steady rise since 2019—though actual numbers are likely higher due to underreporting (The Korea Herald, 2024). In June 2023, major labor unions raised concerns with the ILO about President Yoon's repression of labor groups (Human Rights Watch, 2024). International pressure, particularly from the EU under the EU-Korea Free Trade Agreement, has highlighted Korea's failure to uphold ILO labor standards, especially in areas like freedom of association and collective bargaining (UNI Global Union, 2021; Nissen, 2022a). This has positioned South Korea as a "norm breacher" due to its labor rights violations. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) explain, international socialization aims to persuade norm violators to become norm followers, playing a key role in the norm cascade. South Korea's failure to protect workers' rights has been documented in reports and statistics, drawing international scrutiny. These perceptions have shaped its image globally. In response, external pressure may have prompted South Korea to begin aligning with international norms while balancing its national identity.

Additionally, in adopting labor norms, South Korea has faced pressure from both international and domestic actors. Labor unions lobbied the government to amend laws in line with ILO Core Conventions, leading to the 2021 ratification of Conventions No. 29, 87, and 98. The government submitted these for approval in 2020, though earlier ratification was delayed by resistance from conservative politicians and employers (UNI Global Union, 2021). Businesses raised concerns about the conventions' impact, while unions pushed for ratification of remaining conventions and further reforms to align with ILO standards (Hwang Jang-jin, 2021). Workers seek better protections, while employers oppose regulations they argue increase labor costs and reduce flexibility. These tensions have led to ongoing conflict between labor and business groups. The government, acting either in support of business, labor, or as a mediator, plays a key role in shaping labor legislation (Lee & Eun, 2009).

### *Internalization*

In response to growing global demand for policy coordination in employment and labor, South Korea participates in forums like the G20, ILO, OECD, and APEC to showcase policies and foster international cooperation. The Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) engages in trade negotiations, such as FTAs and WTO discussions, to promote labor rights, often including labor chapters. Expert consultations and inter-ministerial discussions were conducted to examine discrepancies between domestic laws and international conventions and develop strategies to align labor rights protection with global standards (MOEL, 2021a). The ILO (n.d.) emphasized that international labor standards provide a benchmark for aligning domestic law and practices, where some countries choose not to sign onto a convention but still align their laws with it. Others swiftly ratify ILO conventions and align their national laws with the help of technical assistance and feedback from ILO supervisory authorities. Ratification is a vital step toward implementation.

As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) explained, in the final phase of the norm life cycle, internalization involves compliance that becomes part of behavior. In 2021, South Korea ratified three essential ILO Conventions: No. 87, No. 98, and No. 29, increasing its total to 32, and its fundamental conventions from four to seven (ILO, 2021). A major national agenda prior to December 2020 was the enactment of these conventions, prompting the National Assembly to amend the Labor Relations Act, including the TULRAA. On April 20, 2021, the government announced the ratification, set to take effect one year later. According to Article 6 (1) of the Korean Constitution, these conventions gained legal force equal to national laws as of April 20, 2022. Labor-management relations are expected to change as unions argue for broader bargaining rights, and the government considers changes to recognize platform workers, subcontractor unions, and eliminate the paid time-off system (Cho and Lee, 2019).

In this instance, professions play a key role in internalizing standards by guiding individuals' priorities and offering technical expertise (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). In South Korea, the Ministry of Employment and Labor has expanded its labor inspector workforce to ensure fair labor practices and improve working conditions, including addressing wage delays. Efforts include reducing working hours to enhance health and efficiency, inspecting large companies, and offering financial support to employers who adopt better work structures. The government also assists SMEs with job-sharing initiatives and partners with the Korea Certified Public Labor Attorneys Association to help smaller workplaces improve compliance before inspections occur. Additionally, the Ministry of Employment and Labor has provided this chart to illustrate the processes involved in supporting the advancement of working conditions:

Figure 2. Supporting the Improvement of Working Conditions



Source: MOEL (2021)

Ultimately, in internalizing labor norms, it is essential to consider South Korea's political economy as well as cultural beliefs. Merely ratifying conventions does not ensure full and effective implementation, as competing interests and power dynamics among various actors within a specific context create a highly complex environment. High labor market rigidity is one of the major structural issues facing the Korean economy. With comparatively little funding for labor market initiatives and assistance for vulnerable groups, the social protection system is small. In contrast to most developed economies, the wage system is still primarily seniority-based instead of performance-based. In addition, there are significant gender differences in employment and pay in Korea, as well as unreasonably lengthy workdays and rigid schedules (Tam and Xu, 2024).

Furthermore, a major factor in South Korea's economic success has been political stability. Particularly prior to the political liberalization of 1987, where South Korea was regarded to be one of the most oppressive nations in the world, the Korean state tightly controlled labor and repressed resistance under the pretext of national growth. A key component of development plans focused on fast industrialization was labor suppression. As "economic patriots," employees were supposed to work with the government and businesses to promote economic expansion. In this context, Korean businesses were compared to families, with employees being the "children," employers being the "fathers," and long hours and diligence being viewed as admirable qualities. Employees were supposed to be loyal and selfless for the good of the company and the country, just like in a traditional family. The state's intervention and cultural standards operated closely to support South Korea's rapid economic development (Loy, 2008).

Despite South Korea's compliance to international standards, *chaebol's* existence contributes to the full implementation of labor norms domestically. South Korea's economy and politics are dominated by a group of enormous, primarily family-run business giants known as *chaebol*. These powerful groups were instrumental in turning what had been a small agricultural marketplace into the home of the biggest economies in the world. Since the beginning of the 1960s, the South Korean government has provided the *chaebol* with considerable assistance, fostering globally renowned firms like Samsung and Hyundai. There has long been a mutually beneficial connection between the *chaebol* and the South Korean government. The *Chaebol*, in the meantime, advocate for laws and policies that are favorable to them. Their close-knit relationship, according to critics, has encouraged an environment where tax fraud, corruption, and embezzlement are commonplace (Albert, 2018).



The negligent attitude towards labor protection came under the reality that *chaebols'* domination in South Korea was normalized for the sake of the country's economy. Additionally, through deregulation and conglomerate support policies, the government promoted the expansion of chaebols (GCAP Korea, 2016). The chaebol's growth strategy was centered on exports. Korean exports needed to be affordable to be able to compete in international markets. Poor pay and terrible working conditions were two ways companies maintained low costs. A 1970s factory paid its employees "1,500 to 3,000 won per month," which was about the same as the cost of a cup of coffee on a daily basis. Workers were provided with amphetamines to work lengthy night shifts in dangerous environments, which led to "anemia, digestive problems, bronchitis, irregular menstruation, etc." Businesses were able to export goods at prices that were competitive with those of other countries as they were not required to invest in paying adequate salaries or keeping a safe workplace (Otis, n.d.).

## Conclusion

All in all, this research highlights the role of key actors in the internalization of international labor rights in South Korea. Although South Korea's Constitution and labor laws support worker rights, many legal frameworks have fallen short in adequately protecting workers, influenced by the country's political economy. Using the "Norm Life Cycle" theory by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), this research examines the three-stage process of norm emergence, cascade, and internalization to analyze how labor norms take root in South Korea. The theory highlights key actors, including norm entrepreneurs like the ILO and domestic labor unions, who promote labor standards despite challenges. In the cascade stage, international and domestic pressure—especially from the EU and labor unions—has pushed Korea to adopt ILO conventions after being labeled a "norm breacher." Internalization is seen in Korea's ratification of international conventions; however, ongoing political resistance, cultural attitudes, and the influence of large business conglomerates continue to slow or weaken the full implementation of these labor norms.

This research explores how labor norms have been internalized in South Korea, emphasizing the role of various actors and the complex interplay between economic, political, and cultural forces. It argues that despite South Korea's strong economy, labor rights violations persist, often influenced by powerful interests, and highlights how labor norm internalization reflects broader human rights concerns within international relations.

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## Authors Biography

**Audrey Dayang Abigail Punuh** is a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. Her research interests center on human rights studies, sustainability, international politics and global development. Dayang can be contacted via [dayangpunuh@gmail.com](mailto:dayangpunuh@gmail.com).