

Human Rights Education in Gwangju: A Comprehensive Analysis

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GWANGJU'S TRANSFORMATION into a human rights city represents one of the most remarkable journeys from tragedy to triumph in modern urban governance. Located in the southwestern region of South Korea with a population of 1.44 million, Gwangju has evolved from being known as "the city of resistance" to becoming a leading human rights city in Asia and a global model for rights-based governance.

The city's commitment to human rights is deeply rooted in its painful yet inspiring history of resistance to injustice, colonialism, and dictatorship. This legacy includes the Donghak Peasant Revolution in 1894, which is the first grassroots uprising for freedom and equality in Korea, the March First Independence Movement of 1919, the Gwangju Student Independence Movement in 1929, and the April 19th Revolution in 1960 that toppled the civilian authoritarian government.

The defining moment came with the May 18, 1980 Democratization Movement,¹ when citizens of Gwangju bravely challenged the military rulers. Despite extreme fear of death, human dignity was respected as citizens shared food, donated blood to the wounded, and remarkably, not a single store was looted during the nine-day struggle even in the absence of security forces. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands more injured, but the movement became the beginning of a seven-year struggle toward democracy that culminated in South Korea's new democratic constitution being established by a nation-wide uprising in 1987.

The so-called "Gwangju Spirit," representing "democracy, human rights, and peace," has become the core philosophy of the city's administration and the foundation for its development as a human rights city. This spirit plays a key role in building and maintaining human rights mechanisms regardless of changes in political leadership, enabling the city to develop positive nar-

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ratives from its painful history to construct its human rights city brand and promote a community spirit in the city governance.

Gwangju's journey toward becoming a symbol of human rights began in 1998, when the Gwangju Citizens' Solidarity declared the Asian Human Rights Charter in collaboration with the Asia Human Rights Commission. In 2000, the May 18 Memorial Foundation established the Gwangju Human Rights Prize to annually recognize prominent human rights activists and organizations in Asia. Another significant milestone came in 2011 when UNESCO's Memory of the World Register listed the May 18 Archives as a World Human Rights Documentary Heritage Site. The archives include 858,900 pages in 4,271 volumes, 2,017 cuts in negative films, and 1,733 photos, serving as crucial documentation of the struggle for human rights and democracy. It serves as one of the most important memorials for young people to learn the value of democracy and human rights.

Basis of Human Rights Education

a. Legal Framework for Human Rights Education

Gwangju has established a comprehensive legal framework for human rights education among Korean cities, creating a robust foundation that supports systematic implementation of human rights principles across all aspects of municipal governance.

The city's legal journey began with the enactment of the "Democratization, Human Rights, and Peace City Promotion Ordinance" in 2007—the first human rights ordinance by a local government in Korea. This ordinance underwent extensive revisions to become the "Gwangju Human Rights Protection and Promotion Ordinance" in 2012, which includes the chapter on "Democratization, Human Rights, and Peace City Promotion."

The current version of the ordinance includes comprehensive provisions for the human rights city with specific articles and chapters on the Human Rights Master Plan (Article 7), human rights indicators (Article 9), the Democracy, Human Rights and Peace City (Chapter 3), the Human Rights Promotion Citizen Committee (Chapter 4), and the Human Rights Ombudsman (Chapter 5), among others.

Article 10 stipulates on the Establishment of a Human Rights Education System:

- A. The Mayor and Superintendent of the Board of Education shall implement the following projects to raise human rights

awareness and spread a human rights culture through the institutionalization and establishment of a human rights education system.

To conduct human rights education at least twice a year for employees of affiliated public officials, city corporations, public corporations, invested/funded organizations, and corporations or organizations under the guidance and supervision of the Mayor (amended on 1 January 2020);

To establish and operate a regional human rights education council;

To recommend and support human rights education for public institutions, corporations, and private organizations;

To develop human rights education materials and to train and support human rights education instructors.

B. The Mayor shall encourage private organizations and workplaces to implement the projects set forth in Paragraph 1, Item A in this article.

The Gwangju Human Rights Charter, declared on 21 May 2012, serves as the first city-level human rights charter in Asia and the third in the world. Developed through more than forty meetings with about thirty institutions and organizations over a year-long period, the Charter incorporates diverse perspectives from civil society activists, academics, human rights experts, public officials, refugees, women, laborers, and other stakeholders.

The Charter presents guidelines for human rights institutions and establishes a new model for mainstreaming human rights within local government administrations. Since 2013, the city has conducted annual Human Rights Promotion Contests accompanied by exhibitions of human rights-related slogans and posters to familiarize citizens with the Charter's contents.

In 2020, the City Council specifically addressed the educational aspects of human rights (establishing formal requirements and frameworks for democratic citizenship and human rights education throughout the city) by enacting the Ordinance on Democratic Citizenship Education of Gwangju. This ordinance complements the broader human rights framework by ensuring that citizenship education remains central to Gwangju's human rights city vision.

b. Institutional Framework for Human Rights Promotion

In January 2019, the city established the Democracy, Human Rights and Peace Bureau, expanding from the original Human Rights Office created

in 2010. This bureau, comprising forty-five officials across three divisions—Democracy and Human Rights (sixteen), Promotion of May 18 (seventeen), and Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation (twelve)—serves as the control tower for implementing human rights policies, including comprehensive educational programs.

Established in April 2013, the Human Rights Ombudsman system focuses on relieving citizens experiencing human rights violations or discrimination in administrative processes. The system consists of one standing ombudsman and six experts in various human rights areas designated as non-standing human rights ombudsmen. In 2018 alone, the ombudsman office provided three hundred forty-six counseling sessions and registered seventy-eight human rights violation cases, contributing significantly to public awareness and education about human rights issues.

c. Holistic Operation of Human Rights Education

Gwangju's approach to human rights education distinguishes itself through several unique characteristics that reflect the city's historical experience, comprehensive vision, and commitment to systemic change.

Gwangju has adopted a holistic approach to emphasize the promotion of all human rights. This comprehensive strategy ensures that all human rights - civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights - receive adequate attention in educational programs. The city avoids concentrating on particular fields, instead focuses on comprehensive human rights enhancement across all sectors of society.

Gwangju's human rights education is uniquely grounded in the city's tradition of resistance against dictatorship and authoritarianism. The May 18 Democratic Uprising serves as both historical context and moral foundation for contemporary human rights education efforts, providing authentic, locally-relevant examples of human rights struggles and victories that resonate deeply with citizens.

The city's educational approach centers on three interconnected pillars: democracy, human rights, and citizen participation. This integration reflects the understanding that human rights cannot be protected without democratic institutions and active citizen engagement. As a result, Gwangju's human rights education emphasizes democratic values, human rights principles, and participatory citizenship as inseparable elements.

The Survey on the Status of Human Rights Education for Public Officials in Local Governments (NHRCK 2021) shows that Gwangju excels over other cities in terms of legal basis, institutional systems, and operational effectiveness. This superiority stems from the city's systematic approach to building human rights infrastructure and its sustained commitment to continuous improvement and innovation in human rights education methodologies.

The Gwangju human rights education system emphasizes both process and outcome indicators rather than focusing solely on structural elements in documents. With a comprehensive legal and structural foundation already in place, the city concentrates on measuring the effectiveness and impact of educational programs through both quantitative participation metrics and qualitative assessment of learning outcomes.

Targets of Human Rights Education

Gwangju's human rights education programs demonstrate remarkable breadth and depth in targeting diverse population groups, reflecting the city's commitment to creating an inclusive human rights culture throughout the entire community.

a. Comprehensive Participation Strategy

The City of Gwangju positions human rights education as the fundamental starting point for establishing itself as a Human Rights City. Education enables local government officials and residents to understand that embodying human rights values represents the city's ultimate aspiration and serves as the most effective tool for implementing human rights principles in daily life and governance.

The number of participants in human rights education is stable and high in city officials and students while limited to the general public. Table 1 shows a detailed breakdown of participation by target groups in 2017 to 2019 (Jeon 2017, Kim 2020).

Table 1. Participation by target groups

Target	Activities	2017	2019
Public Officials	Wednesday Human Rights Talk, City Training Institute, Executive/Fire fighter/District office class, Cyber class & human rights events	9,518	6,727
Children and Youth	Visiting Classes, Out-of-School Youth, Model United Nations Human Rights Council	203,323	185,285
General Public	Classes for city bus workers, apartment residents' associations, human rights culture communities and sports workers	20,880	32,954
Vulnerable Groups	Classes for multicultural families, temporary workers, social service agents	696	778
Expert Training	Youth Human Rights Education instructor courses, strengthening human rights education activist capabilities	44	166
Social Workers	Classes for nursery school teachers, elderly care, disabled services, social welfare facility workers, local children's center workers	40,618	50,067

b. Institutional Support for Human Rights Education of Students

The City Council established the Student Human Rights Ordinance in 2011. The ordinance also includes specific articles and chapters on the Human Rights Master Plan (Article 4) accompanied by annual implementation plan and human rights indicators (Article 5), the Democracy, Human Rights and Peace City (Chapter 3), the Student Human Rights Committee (Chapter 4), and the Student Human Rights Council (Chapter 5). Chapter 3 stipulates what the schools need to do to protect thirteen student rights listed below:

1. Right to learn
2. Right to physical freedom
3. Right to privacy and information protection
4. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion
5. Freedom of expression and assembly
6. Right to autonomy and participation
7. Right to due disciplinary procedures
8. Right to educational welfare
9. Right to rest and cultural activities
10. Right to health and safety
11. Right to non-discrimination
12. Rights of minority students
13. Right to petition.

Human rights education in primary, middle secondary and senior secondary schools in Gwangju is considered one of the most progressive and comprehensive in Korea. This approach reflects Gwangju's history as a city for democracy and human rights. The key characteristics include:

- **Systematic policy support:** The Gwangju Metropolitan Office of Education has established the Democracy and Human Rights Education Center in 2013, which develops curricula, provides resources, and supports human rights initiatives across schools. It is notable that there are only four student human rights centers out of seventeen sub-national local governments;
- **Curriculum Integration:** Human rights topics are included in social studies and ethics classes, as well as in special and extracurricular programs. Education covers issues such as respect, equality, diversity, anti-discrimination, privacy, and the prevention of bullying;
- **Student Participation:** Students are encouraged to exercise their rights and responsibilities through student councils, self-governing bodies, and participation in school policies, promoting democratic citizenship from an early age;
- **Teacher Training:** Teachers receive professional development on human rights and anti-discrimination to ensure a positive, inclusive, and respectful learning environment;
- **Practical Programs:** Schools conduct campaigns, workshops, and experiential activities such as mock trials, debates, and peace education;
- **Prevention and Counseling:** There are robust systems for human rights counseling, addressing violations, and supporting victims of school violence or discrimination;
- **Community Collaboration:** Schools often collaborate with local organizations and the broader community.

As a result, Gwangju's schools are widely recognized for fostering human rights awareness and democratic values in students, teachers, and the wider community.

These characteristics make Gwangju a pioneer in human rights education within Korea, frequently cited as a benchmark for other municipalities and international initiatives.

c. University education

Most universities in Gwangju offer a range of human rights-related courses as part of their curriculum. A review of the human rights-related liberal arts and major courses offered at ten national flagship universities of Korea shows that Jeonnam National University (JNU)² offers four liberal arts courses specifically focused on human rights, which aligns closely with the number of similar courses available at other national universities across the country. However, JNU stands out by uniquely hosting a graduate program dedicated to Non-governmental Organization (NGO) studies, consisting of five specialized human rights courses, emphasizing advanced, practical engagement with civil society and human rights advocacy.³

Beyond formal academia, JNU enriches its human rights education through ongoing civic engagement and community outreach. The university's Human Rights Law Center organizes free weekly Community Human Rights Lecture Series.⁴ The program usually hosts around twenty to thirty lectures annually, with participation numbers often reaching several hundred attendees in total. The lectures feature experts from academia, law, civil society, and cultural sectors who provide insights and facilitate discussions on contemporary human rights challenges.

JNU also features three trails on its campus, each dedicated to themes of democracy, human rights, and the memory of the May 18 Movement. Democracy Trail is approximately two-kilometer long and covers key campus areas related to Korea's democratization movement. It includes memorials, monuments, and educational plaques, allowing visitors to explore the history and spirit of democracy that shaped modern Korea. May 18 Trail is dedicated to commemorating the victims and heroes of the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Uprising in 1980. This trail connects various memorial sites including the 5.18 Square. It offers a space for reflection on the sacrifices made during the movement and serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for justice and democratic rights in South Korea. Human Rights Trail links significant areas such as human rights memorial walls and spaces honoring professors and students who suffered for democracy and human rights under authoritarian governments.

Places and Events: Human Rights Education Beyond Formal Curriculum

Gwangju employs a comprehensive approach to human rights education that extends beyond traditional classroom settings, utilizing the city's physical spaces, cultural events, and participatory governance mechanisms as educational platforms. The city maintains numerous monuments, sites, and events related to the democratization movement, particularly commemorating the May 18 Democratization Movement. These physical spaces and events serve as powerful educational tools to the residents.

a. Human Rights Places

Here is a list of exemplary places and institutions tied to democracy and memory of the May 18 Movement (1980–1998 and beyond), followed by short explanations.

Jeonnam National University Main Gate and Campus: The main gate was the starting point of the May 18 Uprising. The campus became a frequent site of clashes between students and riot police throughout the 1980s, preserving many memorial spaces such as the famous May 18 mural and memorial halls dedicated to Yun Sang-won and poet Kim Namju.

Provincial Hall (Asia Culture Center): The Provincial Hall was the heart of resistance where the citizen army held out until 27 May 1980. It later became the site of sorrow and martyrdom, especially with Yun Sang-won's last stand. Today, the site hosts the Asia Culture Center, symbolizing both commemoration and cultural renewal.

Geumnam-ro Street: This central Gwangju thoroughfare was the main battleground between demonstrators and martial law forces in May 1980, and a place of prolonged conflict in the 1980s. Today, it is transformed into a street of remembrance, cultural festivals, and annual May 18 commemorations.

Democracy Plaza with May 21 Fountain: Located in front of the former Provincial Hall, the plaza and fountain became central rallying points during the uprising, especially after the mass shooting on May 21, 1980, which triggered the full-scale citywide uprising. Now the plaza has become a place of gathering for diverse events.

Jeon-il Building: This is an iconic site marked with more than two hundred bullet holes discovered in 2017. Despite earlier demolition plans, it has been preserved and renovated as a reminder of military violence against the

citizenry. It also accommodates diverse functions and events. Its roof-top provides a good view of the provincial hall and the May 18 Plaza.

YMCA and YWCA Buildings: The YMCA housed protest leadership meetings and citizen army firearms training, while the YWCA hosted the production of resistance newsletters and settlement committee meetings. Both served as hubs of civil society and anti-military activities throughout the 1980s.⁵

Catholic Center: A critical safe space and organizing point for protests, the Catholic Center provided moral and logistical support to democratization activists. Later purchased by the city, it became the site of the May 18 Democratization Movement Archives.

May 18 Democratization Movement Archives: Designated as part of UNESCO's World Heritage Documentary Heritage (2011), this archive documents the uprising, preserves testimonies, and strengthens global recognition of May 18 as a human rights struggle. It plays a pivotal role in education and countering the distortion effort by right-wing groups.

May 18 National Cemetery: Established officially in 1997 (upgraded to National Cemetery in 2002), it holds seven hundred sixty-four graves of victims as of 2025, including those missing or who later died after the uprising. It has become one of the three primary symbols of May 18, along with the Provincial Hall and the Jeonnam National University Main Gate.

b. Participatory Devices and Platforms

The May 18 Institute at Jeonnam National University (JNU) is a leading research center dedicated to advancing the study, memory, and global discourse surrounding the May 18 Movement and democratization in Korea. The Institute conducts multidisciplinary academic research, organizes international conferences, and publishes the *Journal of Democracy and Human Rights* to promote the values of democracy, human rights, peace, and civic engagement. It fosters collaboration among scholars, local communities, and international partners, serving as an important hub for education and the preservation of the May 18 spirit in Korea and worldwide. It operates with a core team of three professors specializing in law, sociology, and NGO studies, alongside several dedicated office assistants and administrative support staff. This academic workforce is complemented by affiliated graduate students and collaborators from various departments, enabling the Institute

to conduct interdisciplinary research, education, and public projects related to democracy and human rights.

The May 18 Memorial Foundation was founded in 1994 by movement participants to promote the spirit of May 18 through education, activism, and international networking with the funding support from the local and central governments. It hosts the annual Gwangju Democracy Forum (since 1999) and awards the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights (since 2000). As of 2025, the Foundation has thirty staff members, organized into six functional offices, including administrative, international, educational/cultural, archiving, and research sections.

Gwangju has hosted the World Human Rights Cities Forum (WHRCF) annually since 2011, making it one of the longest-running human rights forums hosted by a local government.

The WHRCF has grown significantly in both quality and quantity providing an international platform for the people and the civil society to grow with participants including human rights city officials and NGO activists from other countries. However, the growth of WHRCF has been negatively influenced by COVID 19 since 2020.

Table 2. Data on WHRCF

Year	Participants	Sessions	Countries	Cities
2011	500			
2015	1,000	19	29	58
2017	1,300	27	38	74
2018	1,500	38	58	137
2019	1,831	45	47	119
2021	1,488	54	76	326
2023	860	32	64	156
2025	1,588	25	31	80

The WHRCF provides opportunities for human rights cities and activists worldwide to share experiences and expertise, while serving as a platform for Gwangju to share its own experiences and learn from other cities simultaneously.⁶ Even young students are exposed to the issue of human rights while participating in the forum as shown in the following photo.



Gwangju has implemented the Human Rights Neighborhood Project since 2013 to promote human rights awareness and problem-solving capabilities among citizens within their living spaces. The project aims to create human rights culture and improve human rights environments at the neighborhood level. The number of participating neighborhoods is around fifteen annually. They present their achievements at the WHRCF site.

The Human Rights Promotion Citizen Committee was established in 2009 as part of the implementation of the “Gwangju Human Rights Protection and Promotion Ordinance,” which was enacted that year. This committee consists of twenty members on two-year terms who represent civil society organizations, human rights activists, and experts. The committee conducts sub-committee meetings and workshops in addition to four regular meetings annually. It has official powers and responsibilities under the city ordinance, which include making recommendations on the city’s human rights policies to the city hall, participating in establishing the city’s human rights master and annual plans, promoting human rights education and impact assessments and indicators, recommending necessary measures for policy adjustments, and facilitating public hearings and dialogue as a public facilitator in human rights governance.

The Gwangju Governance Council was established in 2021 with an expanded membership and broader organizational structure (one hundred eighty-five members in eleven subcommittees as of 2025) to better address diverse local issues. This Council functions as an official collaborative platform where civil society and government jointly discuss regional matters, discover policy agendas, and implement cooperative projects including human rights. This structure promotes a wider channel of democratization and collaborative governance by inviting more partnerships among govern-



Gwangju Governance Council, 2025

ment, citizens, and social organizations through institutionalized dialogue and joint decision-making.

Human Rights Indicators to Assess Achievement

One of the strengths of Gwangju’s human rights education initiatives is its statistical indicators that demonstrate the achievement of the city’s human rights policies and education. In 2012, Gwangju developed a sophisticated human rights indicator system comprising one hundred nine indicators under five areas of “participatory city, happy city, inclusive city, safe city, and collaborative city.” The system was revised by removing (seventy-one) and adding (thirty-five) indicators resulting in seventy-three current indicators.

The annual assessment shows that the human rights situation has been improving since 2014 with more indicators showing positive changes.

Table 3. Items showing positive changes over time

Year	Positive Change	Negative Change	Total Indicators	Positive Change (%)
2014	73	25	98	74%
2015	74	16	90	82%
2018	58	14	72	81%
2021	51	22	73	75%
2022	56	15	71	79%
2023	52	19	71	73%

However, the number of participants in human rights education shows a negative trend in both city employees and common residents. The obligatory requirement of human rights education became optional since 2022.⁷ The number of participants from schools has remained at 100 percent from 2021 to 2024 (Table 4).

Table 4. Number of participants in human rights education programs

Human Rights training participants	2014	2016	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
Citizen	17.7	18.1	18.9	19	15.08	12.85	12.55	12.45
City officials	72.7	100	100	100	100.78	97.4	67.17	59.13
School	97.1	97.2	99.4	100	100	100	100	100

a. Human Rights City Gwangju in Comparison

The city of Gwangju is compared with six other metropolitan cities: Seoul, Busan, Daegu, Incheon, Daejeon, and Ulsan in terms of political participation, women representation, gender equality and school violence.

Gwangju demonstrates exceptional political engagement in presidential elections as shown in Table 5. With participation rates of 89.9 percent (1997), 80.4 percent (2012), 82.7 percent (2017), 81.5 percent (2022), and 83.9 percent (2025), it consistently outperforms other major cities. This pattern suggests Gwangju citizens maintain strong civic engagement and democratic participation compared to cities like Seoul, Busan and Daegu.

Table 5. Engagement of citizens

Cities	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022	2025
Seoul	80.5	71.4	62.9	75.1	78.6	77.9	79.4
Busan	78.9	79.3	62.1	76.2	76.7	75.3	78.4
Daegu	78.1	70.5	66.8	78.5	74.5	78.7	80.2
Incheon	80.7	74.2	60.3	74.0	75.6	74.8	77.7
Gwangju	89.9	78.1	64.3	80.4	82.7	81.5	83.9
Daejeon	80.7	77.1	61.9	78.5	77.5	76.7	79.4
Ulsan	80.7	71.5	64.6	77.3	78.5	78.1	80.1
	80.7	70.8	63.0	75.8	77.2	77.1	79.4

Gwangju shows remarkable progress in women’s representation in city councils, particularly in recent years. The city achieved the highest rates

among major cities in 2018 (37.5 percent) and 2022 (43.5 percent), significantly above the national average of 25.3 percent. This upward trajectory from 12.0 percent in 2006 indicates substantial advancement in gender equality within political institutions (Table 6).⁸

Table 6. Women's representation

Cities	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Seoul			12	21.1	27.7
Busan	17.5	11.4	10.6	18.9	24.9
Daegu	13.3	13.5	20.6	15.8	34.4
Incheon	9.1	8.1	11.4	15	15
Gwangju	12.0	15.4	27.3	37.5	43.5
Daejeon	12.0	15.4	27.3	27.3	18.2
Ulsan	26.1	18.2	31.8	15.8	13.6
Average	15	13.7	20.1	21.6	25.3

Despite strong performance in political representation, Gwangju's overall gender equality rating by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Families places it in the middle range (71.5 average score). While it excels in decision-making (50.6, highest among cities), it has average performance in employment (77.5), income (69.5), and other categories. This suggests that political progress has not fully translated to broader socioeconomic gender equality (Table 7).

Table 7. Gender equality rating

City	Decision-making	Employment	Income	Education	Health	Special Care	Gender Equality	Average
Seoul	36.6	83.9	76.5	96.8	94	36	81.9	72.2
Busan	37.2	78.7	66.9	95.7	93.1	35	81.7	69.8
Daegu	43.1	78.5	68.9	95.9	94	29.9	81.9	70.3
Incheon	32.4	77.3	70.3	96.6	92.4	36.4	81.4	69.5
Gwangju	50.6	77.5	69.5	95.6	94.5	31.4	81.6	71.5
Daejeon	41.7	80	73.5	95.3	95.5	39.9	80.9	72.4
Ulsan	33.6	70	69.2	96.7	92.2	44	82.2	69.7

Gwangju's school violence statistics align closely with other major cities across all categories - verbal abuse (38.7 percent), bullying (16.9 percent),

physical violence (15.1 percent), and cyber incidents (7.2 percent). This similarity indicates that despite political progressiveness, social issues affecting youth remain consistent nationwide.

Table 8. School violence nationwide

Cities	Violence report	Verbal	Bullying	Physical	Cyber	Extortion	Stalking
Seoul	2.9	39.1	17.1	15.1	7.6	4.8	5.6
Busan	2.6	38.2	16.2	15.5	7.1	5.3	5.8
Daegu	1.1	39	15.7	15.4	6.9	6	5.6
Incheon	2.6	39.2	16.2	14.5	8.6	3	N/A
Gwangju	2.6	38.7	16.9	15.1	7.2	7.6	3.1
Daejeon	2	39.7	16.1	14.9	7.8	5.1	4.8
Ulsan	2.1	38.9	15.3	15.7	7.5	N/A	N/A

The data, though limited in scope, reveals an interesting paradox: Gwangju citizens demonstrate progressive political attitudes through high electoral participation and strong support for women’s political representation, yet daily social realities - including gender equality outcomes and school violence rates - remain largely consistent with other Korean cities. This suggests that while Gwangju may lead in political consciousness and democratic values, translating these ideals into comprehensive social change across all aspects of daily life remains an ongoing challenge. In other words, comprehensive human rights education efforts should be accompanied by city governance directed at creating a more rights-conscious and peaceful community in diverse ways.

Challenges: Declining Attention to Human Rights Education

As suggested in the conclusion of the previous section, despite significant achievements, Gwangju has faced notable challenges in establishing itself as a human rights city.

a. Institutional Weakening and Administrative Changes

Changes in mayoral leadership and shifting political priorities have led to reduced emphasis on human rights education, demonstrating the vulner-

ability of human rights initiatives to political transitions despite the foundational “Gwangju Spirit.”

The importance and influence of the human rights department have declined within the municipal structure over time, potentially undermining the systematic approach that previously characterized Gwangju’s human rights efforts. This institutional weakening threatens the sustainability of comprehensive human rights education programs.

A significant setback occurred when human rights education became optional rather than mandatory in several contexts, particularly for public officials starting in 2022. This change potentially weakens the institutional foundation for maintaining high levels of human rights awareness among city employees who play crucial roles in implementing rights-based policies. The transformation of mandatory human rights education requirements into optional programs has diminished the systematic approach to ensuring that all public servants maintain adequate human rights knowledge and sensitivity.

b. Systemic Challenges and Structural Issues

The Human Rights Office faced challenges functioning effectively as the control tower for implementing human rights policies across all departments due to lack of coordination mechanisms, highlighting the need for enhanced inter-departmental collaboration.

Reduced priority for human rights education has led to challenges in maintaining adequate human and financial resources for comprehensive educational programs. For example, the WHRCF provides comprehensive educational opportunities for both students and general public. The city can increase its financial support to WHRCF to make it more effective for human rights education.

The experience reveals the critical importance of institutionalizing human rights education in ways that transcend political changes and maintain continuity regardless of leadership transitions.

Conclusion: Lessons and Future Directions

Gwangju’s transformative journey from a city of resistance to a global model for human rights education demonstrates the enduring power of civic spirit and participatory democracy. Through innovative legal frameworks, inclu-

sive institutions, and vibrant educational initiatives, Gwangju has institutionalized the core values of democracy, human rights, and peace across municipal governance and civil society. This commitment is reflected in strong civic engagement, pioneering women's representation, and a robust ecosystem for human rights learning in schools, universities, and public institutions.

The city's integration of history, practical programs, and community collaboration places it at the forefront of human rights education in Korea and beyond. However, recent challenges - including shifts in administrative priorities and the weakening of mandatory education - highlight the need for renewed commitment to institutional sustainability and broad-based participation. While Gwangju's ideals remain influential, translating these into everyday practice and ensuring long-term impact will require ongoing collaboration and innovation among local government, civil society and educational stakeholders.

In conclusion, Gwangju's experience offers valuable lessons:

- a. Comprehensive human rights education must be grounded in both historical context and contemporary practice;
- b. Democratic values thrive when actively fostered through participatory institutions under a strong political will supported by inclusive civil society engagement; and
- c. Advancing a human rights city should be translated into advancing the quality of life of its residents.

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Endnotes

1 This movement was originally named as Gwangju Riot by the then military regime in May 1980, but it was quickly renamed as Gwangju Incident. In 1988, the National Assembly officially renamed it as May 18 Democratization Movement. However, it has been commonly named as Gwangju Uprising by people and researchers.

2 Chonnam National University (CNU) is a more widely used name of the university. However, this paper follows the romanization scheme of the Korean Government with Jeonnam National University (JNU).

3 May 18 Institute, Jeonnam National University https://cnu518.jnu.ac.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=curriculum&page=1.

4 Law School, Jeonnam National University, <https://lawschool.jnu.ac.kr/lawschool/11343/subview.do>.

5 The YWCA building was sold and demolished for commercial purposes.

6 The forum has been co-hosted by UNESCO and United Nations Human Rights Office since 2020. It is also co-organized by the Gwangju International Center, Raoul Wallenberg Institute, and UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (UCLG-CSIPDHR).

7 The requirement of human rights education participation was made in 2025, when a blunder in issuing cards of different colors to different level of income groups occurred.

8 The women ratio of Seoul was not available in its homepage.