

What Happened to Kim Sae-ron was a Tragedy

Two things can be true: You can commit a crime, and you can atone for your actions without being harassed to death.



K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

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Two things can be true

You can commit a crime, and you can atone for your actions without being harassed to death.¹

On February 16, 2025, actress Kim Sae-ron died by suicide. She was 24.

Kim had been a child actress who made her acting debut at the age of nine in the 2009 film *A Brand New Life*, which was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. The following year, she won accolades starring opposite Won Bin in the film *The Man from Nowhere*, which was Korea's highest-grossing film of 2010, attracting more ticket buyers than either *Iron Man 2* or *Inception*.

The Man From Nowhere Official Int'l Main Trailer



In May of 2022, Kim crashed her car into a transformer, causing almost 60 businesses to lose their power for a few hours. Her blood alcohol level was 0.2%, exceeding the drivers license revocation limit of 0.08%. Thankfully, no one was hurt. But the damage was done. She became a pariah over night.

After her DUI, the Netflix K-drama “**Bloodhounds**” tried to distance itself from her by replacing her with another actress in the final two episodes. In my review of the show, I contemplated what good that did.

I'm not really sure why the creative team did what they did. They made a financial compromise based on ethics. But what was the end result? Kim committed a crime. How does cutting her out of the final two episodes solve anything? It would've made more sense if they scrapped her role entirely and reshot all of her scenes with another similar-looking actress. Yes, it would've cost money. But that would've made sense.

Or, they could've left Kim in the series and made a sizeable donation to a charity dedicated to victims of drunk driving. I'm not sure what the best method would've been.

During that time, Kim stayed out of the limelight as much as she could. She got a job at a cafe. But netizens wouldn't leave her alone. They picked on her for having a job. They picked on the cafe for hiring a 'drunk.' They picked on her when there were rumors that she might return to acting.

At this point, one has to wonder: what was she meant to do? Sit in her house and not do anything? How would she earn money and pay her bills?

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Why Does This Keep Happening?

I wrote about this for [VARIETY](#) in 2019 and, unfortunately, not much progress has been made since then. Here are some relevant excerpts from that piece:

Experts say a number of factors in South Korea are contributing to a sense of desperation felt by many young entertainers: the demand that they present a perfect public image, their rigorous training schedule — especially for musical performers — and a culture of online bullying that especially targets outspoken women like Sulli and Hara.

“Koreans have a strict moral code for their celebrities,” says Jeeheng Lee, a culture expert at Chung-Ang University in Seoul. “Demonizing the K-pop industry alone doesn't solve the problem. Sulli and Goo Hara suffered more from misogynistic attacks than from K-pop fans.”

And in order for actual change to be made, individual responsibility simply isn't enough. There needs to be social change.

“The audience, media and culture need to shift into acceptance rather than demanding artists conform to meet our expectations,” says Royce Lee, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience at the University of Chicago. “Otherwise, these stars are caught in a loop of abuse that will never end.”

South Korea's Defamation Laws

South Korea has one of the world's most draconian defamation laws, according to the [Human Rights Watch](#). What this means is that people can be sued for telling the *truth*, if the truth damages a person's reputation. As in many other countries, defamation is a civil liability. But in Korea, that civil liability can result in being criminally punished (including jail time of up to seven years), regardless of whether what you said was true or false.

It was with this in mind that I sorted through the details surrounding Kim Sae-ron's alleged six-year relationship with [Kim Soo-hyun](#), the highest-paid actor in Korea. Her aunt claimed that Sae-ron and Soo-hyun began 'dating' when she was 15 years old, and he was 27.

If true, he was a grown man preying on a literal child. If false, his reputation will be tainted by the lurid speculations circulating on the internet. This is a situation where the actor could sue the aunt and probably win, but at what cost?

His agency, Gold Medalist — which had also represented the actress, until her DUI — released a statement on Monday that read: "The claims about Kim Soo-hyun made are completely false. We are reviewing the strongest possible legal action."

Whether a coincidence or not, the timing of her death is chilling. She died on his birthday (February 16).

Korean Age vs. International Age

I've noticed that a lot of non-Korean social media commenters are confused about how Korean age works, especially when it pertains to the age of consent. The age of consent in South Korea was raised to 16 in 2020. It had previously been 13.

Some commenters were saying that 13 in Korea means that the age of consent used to be just 11 or 12 years old.

No.

Koreans use *traditional age* on a social level, meaning that they will say they are 1 to 2 years older than their *biological age*. This is determined by when they were born. For instance, a Korean baby is considered 1 when they are born. They grow another year ‘older’ on Jan. 1. So a baby born in December will be considered to be 2 on the first day of the new year.

But, parents celebrate their baby’s first birthday (or dol/돌) based on their actual birth date.

On a recent episode of “Running Man,” the younger cast members joked about this. Unbothered about seeming old, they gave their Korean age when asked how old they were. But the elder members (Yoo Jae-seok, Jee Seok-jin, Kim Jong-kook) offered their *international age* — which is their actual age determined by their birthdate — to appear younger.

But, *all* Koreans use their biological age for official documents, just like in the United States. When laws refer to an age, they are citing the biological age.

Famous Men Who *Dated*, Lived With, and/or Married Children

Because few Korean celebrities will admit to dating *anyone*, much less a minor, I’m using some Western examples here. Aside from Jerry Lee Lewis, who received hatred for marrying his *13-year-old cousin* (once removed), most of these men went on to have thriving careers and spent no time in jail for ‘dating’ literal children. It’s mind-boggling that everyone just accepted it instead of saying, “Ewwwww. *What is wrong with you?*”

- Bill Wyman (47), Mandy Smith (13)
- Brad Pitt (26), Juliette Lewis (16)
- Bret Michaels (22), Tracey Lewis (16)
- Don Johnson (22), Melanie Griffith (14)
- Doug Fieger (25), Sharona Alperin (17)

The Knack - My Sharona (Official Music Video)



- Doug Hutchinson (51), Courtney Stodden (16)
- Elvis Presley (24), Priscilla Beaulieu (14)
- Jerry Seinfeld (38), Shoshanna Lonstein (17)
- Joel Madden (26), Hilary Duff (16)
- Johnny Depp (27), Winona Ryder (17)
- Justin Gaston (20), Miley Cyrus (15)
- Prince (32), Mayte Garcia (16)
- R. Kelly (27), Aaliyah (15)
- Rick Springfield (25), Linda Blair (15)
- Sonny Bono (27), Cher (16)
- Steven Tyler (25), Julia Holcomb (16)
- Wilmer Valderrama (20), Mandy Moore (16)
- Wilmer Valderrama (24), Lindsay Lohan (17)
- Wilmer Valderrama (29), Demi Lovato (17)

In the U.S., You Can F_CK Up & Still Have a Career

On Oscar night, you probably heard Ariana Grande sing a medley of songs from the film “Wicked,” with her Cynthia Erivo. Beautiful and famous with a gorgeous voice, Grande had an *incident* back in 2015 that would’ve ended a Korean actress’s career.

Then 22, Grande went to a bakery with her boyfriend, where they both spit on and/or licked some donuts. It wouldn't have been as bad if they bought the donuts for their own consumption. But they didn't. Not knowing what had happened, the owner sold those donuts to other customers.

Grande also added that she hated America and Americans.

When confronted about her actions, the entertainer issued an apology. She didn't address the donut licking incident, but said that she had been medicated from having her wisdom teeth extracted. That was why she acted erratically, according to her. She also said she didn't hate America or Americans. What she hated actually was childhood obesity.

Which begs the question, why was *she* in a bakery then? I get that she's thin. But if she's so worried about obesity, doesn't it send a wrong message to *her* fans to be patronizing a store that pretty much only sells high-caloric treats? Isn't *she* part of the problem then?

Of course, those were merely excuses. She did what she did and was forgiven. Her career wasn't impacted much at all. Academy Award-winning actress Susan Sarandon even made light of the incident, *tweeting out*:



Susan Sarandon 
@SusanSarandon



Today, lick a doughnut in solidarity with @ArianaGrande. A sweet, talented, true American. 🍩🇺🇸

9:46 AM · Jul 9, 2015

I'm not saying I want Korean celebrities to go around spitting on donuts with no repercussions. What I am saying is that two things can be true. You can commit a crime, and you can atone for your actions without being harassed to death.

¹ *I am fully aware that I sometimes have a difficult time with forgiveness. It doesn't bother me much if someone is taking illegal drugs for their own personal consumption (i.e. not selling it to*

others, particularly children). And people have pointed out that I should forgive *Mark Wahlberg* for terrorizing and beating up minorities in his younger days.

And that I should stop talking about *Lee Kyung-young*, who has a thriving career despite having had sex multiple times with a minor who he had promised to help get an acting job. Is it ironic that he had a co-starring role in the K-drama “Stranger,” which included a story arc focusing on powerful men sleeping with underage girls? Or did the showrunner simply not care about the optics of casting a sex offender in a show that had episodes about sex offenders?

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K-DRAMA INDEX

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Kat Turner 문순자 1d



♥ Liked by K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim

There's no excuse for DUI but luckily no one was hurt. If my math is right she would not have been of drinking age for very long when it happened. And if the drinking culture in Korea is anything like they

portray in K-dramas then the outrage towards DUI seems ironic at the very least if not outright hypocritical.

If KSH was dating her when she was 15 then shame on him. But at this point it's pure speculation by Korean media. I can't help but wonder what the headline is going to be if they drive him to the same

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1 reply by K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim



Scarlett KdramAstrology with Scarlett 1d



♥️ Liked by K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim

(Tone: Soft / Sincere) Thank you for your direct, discerning, eloquent, and among much else heartfelt words; not to mention, for touching on this 'trending' topic with sensitivity and grace 🙏

(T: Reflective) I often ponder the points you've raised & for me they feel like a ball of tangled threads. Since yours is the only clear & levelheaded take I have read on the matter I have a few things to ponder as it pertains to the tragic events surrounding Kim Sae-Ron.

One thing I will say is to the point that it's not just the entertainment industry at fault (this isn't about defending it- I think it's safe to say we all agree plenty needs to change); we all play a role...

I think if more people took the time to reflect on what role they want to 'play' before they hit 'post' (no matter how well-meaning an emotionally reactive post may be...) or gossip in the name of moral-superiority? then perhaps the artists we love & treasure (not to mention- those who deserve our gratitude for their gifts) wouldn't turn to such drastic measures so often...of course, there is much more to consider, but I'll leave it here for now.

Thank you again for your words! 🙏💜❤️👉

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