

## The Work and Church Experiences of Asian Female Migrants in South Korea

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### 〈국문초록〉

이 논문은 외국인근로자들의 한국사회, 즉 직장에서의 경험과 한국교회에서의 경험을 비교해본다. 또한 젠더와 관련하여 외국인여성근로자들의 경험을 살펴본다. 1990년 이후 한국정부는 저출산과 노동력의 감소로 필요한 인력과 노동력을 산업기술연수생이나 고용허가제를 통하여 들여오고 있다. 2009년 현재 45만 명의 외국인 근로자와 20만 여명의 불법체류자가 있다. 외국인근로자들은 언어와 문화차이, 언어 및 신체적 폭행, 임금에 대한 차별, 자신들의 삶에 대한 결정권 부족 등을 경험하면서 한국사회에서 상당한 어려움을 겪고 있다. 또한 여성외국인근로자들은 남성들에 비해 다중적인 어려움을 안고 있다. 여성이라는 이유 때문에 성적폭행과 놀림을 당하며 임금차별도 겪고 있다. 외국인 근로자들의 직장에 대한 경험은 부정적이지만 한국교회에 대한 경험은 상당히 긍정적이다. 그들은 한국교회에서 제공하는 다양한 종교적 및 사회적 프로그램을 통하여 직장에는 경험하는 자신들의 어려움과 고민을 해결 받고 있다.

주제어: 외국인여성근로자, 한국교회, 차별, 폭행, 선교

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the experiences of Asian women migrant workers with their work and Korean churches. Since women and men migrant workers have much of their social and religious experiences in common, this thesis presents their shared experiences. In doing so, first, it explores the social and theological contexts of why they come to Korea and Korean churches. Second, it examines their experiences with their work and Korean churches, respectively, and then, compares them. Third, based upon these aforementioned arguments, it investigates the gender-related experiences of Asian women migrant workers.

For this research, first, I refer to the books and journals dealing with the various issues of migrant workers in Korea. Second, I use my own survey data conducted in 2008 with 253 migrant workers from Hwa Won, Nam San, Pyong Hwa and Koo Min churches in Daegu. Third, I employ my own pastoral experience with migrant workers in a local church.

As I carried out my ministerial responsibilities of preaching, conducting Bible studies, visiting them, and counselling them in a local church in Downtown Daegu for about three years, I naturally developed a research interest in their experiences with Korean society and churches. Additionally, being trained in sociology of religion, especially in the field of immigrants and their religious

activities, I wanted to understand why migrant workers come to Korean churches. Lastly, it is my hope that this research helps Korean society understand strangers among us and learn to live with them as our neighbors.

## **2. Social and Theological Contexts**

### **1) Social Context**

As Korea has achieved economic development, as the table shows below, it has witnessed an increasing of migrant workers from other Asian countries. Several social factors have drawn migrant workers to Korea. First, since Koreans have gained high academic achievements, they have avoided low-paying labor intensive jobs, especially in small and medium-size manufacturing industries characterized as "3D," that is, "Dirty, Dangerous, and Difficult."

Second, while labor movements in the 1980s have given workers wage increase and improved working conditions, they have brought financial burdens onto many corporations who, then, have started to automate their facilities and move their factories to other Asian nations such as China and Vietnam for cheaper labor free of labor disputes. Small and medium-size companies have, however, not been able to relocate their sites or to hire Korean workers.

This labor shortage has led the Korean government to come up with the Industrial Trainees Program to import workers from overseas

(Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 23-24). The Korean government also has had to look for workers from other nations due to low-birth rate and aging population (Hye Kyung Lee, et. al, 2002: 48).

〈Table 1〉 The Number of Foreigners by Nation, 2008

Nation	Total	Documented	Undocumented	Percentage of Undocumented
China	556,517	463,307	93,210	17.3%
Vietnam	84,763	68,914	15,849	18.7%
Thailand	45,198	30,852	14,346	31.7%
Mongolia	32,206	18,534	13,672	42.5%
Philippines	46,894	33,849	13,045	27.8%
Uzbekistan	21,569	13,195	8,374	38.8%
Bangladesh	12,165	3,965	8,200	67.4%
Indonesia	29,913	24,444	5,469	18.3%
Pakistan	10,068	6,553	3,515	34.9%
Sri Lanka	15,717	13,110	2,607	16.6%
Nepal	6,737	4,443	2,294	34.1%
India	6,732	4,732	2,000	29.7%
Myanmar	3,730	2,126	1,604	43.0%
Cambodia	7,578	6,878	700	9.2%

At the same time, the circumstances of the countries of migrant workers have pushed them look for jobs in other countries. First, the low employment, low wages and political instability of their own countries have forced them to turn to other nations for viable

employment (Hae Kun Yoo, 2003: 30). For example, since Korea's GNP is considerably higher than that of their country, they choose Korea to achieve their economic stability and mobility (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 24).

Second, the 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Olympic games have given an international attention to Korea as a land of opportunity and have attracted migrant workers to Korea (Hae Kun Yoo, 2003: 30 Dong Hyun Kim, 2004: 1) The popularity of Korean mass media productions also has helped other Asians dream a Korean dream and come to Korea. Migrant workers have been familiar with Korean television dramas, songs and movies. As mentioned above, these pull and push factors are closely related to the increasing number of migrant workers in Korea.

## (1) Overview of Korean Government's Policy for the Importation of Foreign Labor

### A. The Industrial Trainee Program

Effective in 1991, the Industrial Trainees Program (ITP) started with three goals in mind. First, Korean companies stationed overseas was to train their foreign employees in Korea, and then have them work in their native countries. Second, having trainees could indirectly help Korean manufacturers with their labor shortage. Third, ITP could transmit advanced technology to developing countries (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 25-26).

In the beginning, ITP allowed the training period to be extended

up to two years. In 2000, ITP was changed to Training Employment Program that would consist of two years of training and one year of working. In 2001, it was again changed to one year of training and two years of working in 2001 (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 28).

Basically, ITP showed the nature of Korean government policy concerning the importation of foreign labor. Migrant workers should not be employed as regular workers, but as trainees. In 1993 and 2001, there were 67,000 and 330,000 industrial trainees in Korea (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 1).

However, ITP presented a few serious problems. As the second table shows, the most serious problem of all was the increase of undocumented workers. ITP did not have legal systemic measure to protect industrial trainees from exploitation. Since their trainee status did not allow them to benefit from labor laws, pension plans, medical insurance, and accident compensation, they could be easily exploited. Even if they were put into regular work, they only got paid for their apprenticeship. Industrial trainees worked along with other workers, but did not get fully compensated for their labor (Sun Hee Yoon, 2006: 240). Accordingly, many industrial trainees left their designated sites and became undocumented.

Furthermore, when they did not have enough money to take home at the end of their contract and to pay their debt incurred from coming to Korea, they became undocumented to stay in Korea and make more money. To come to Korea, they paid a lot of money to their brokers or agencies. They also became

undocumented when they found out that undocumented migrant workers made more money than they did. This was another reason why many migrant workers became undocumented (Soo Il Kim, 2004: 84).

<Table 2> Statistics of Undocumented Migrant Workers by the Ministry of Justice (Person, %)

Year	Documented(%)	Undocumented(%)	Total(%)
1991	599(1.4)	41,877(98.6)	42,476(100)
1992	4,945(7.0)	65,528(93.0)	70,473(100)
1994	28,328(37.0)	48,231(63)	76,559(100)
1997	69,052(31.8)	148,048(68.2)	217,100(100)
1999	46,814(25.7)	135,338(74.3)	182,152(100)
2001	102,672(27.0)	255,206(67.1)	380,169(100)
2003	295,323(68.1)	138,056(31.9)	433,379(100)
2005	287,534(61.4)	180,792(38.6)	468,326(100)
2008	958,377(82.7)	200,489(17.3)	1,158,866(100)

The violation of their human rights was another leading cause of the increasing number of undocumented migrant workers (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 29). For example, they were forced to live in inadequate housing. There were also some incidents that, to prevent them from leaving their work sites, their employers interned them or took away their passport.

These problems finally led the Korean government to confront the issue of undocumented migrant workers. In the process, it had to deal with the pressures of non-government agencies and of

international organizations advocating the human rights of migrant workers. In consequence, the Korean government came up with the Employment Permit System to compliment the shortcomings of the Industrial Trainee Program.

#### B. Employment Permit System

Effective since 2004, Employment Permit System (EPS) has given permission to manufacturers to employ migrant workers (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 85). First, manufacturers submit the purpose and nature of their employment needs to the government for consideration. When they receive government approval, they can give migrant workers one-year contracts that are renewable up to three years. After three years, workers have to leave Korea and come back for two more years of employment.

Since EPS requires manufacturers to list work hours, wage, paid holidays, and vacation, it gives migrant workers necessary legal protection. At the same time, as EPS requires manufacturers to demonstrate their effort to hire Korean workers for one month, it does not take away jobs from Koreans. ITP and EPS were carried out side by side until they merged as one system in 2007 (Jong In Paek, Jae Young Seol, 2007: 854). Both by ITP and EPS demonstrate the Korean government's effort to solve the labor shortage problem without having migrant workers stay permanently in Korea (Hwang, 2008: 41). When they finish their contract, they must go back to their countries.



## 2) Theological Context

Korean churches demonstrate undying passion for overseas missions. They claim that, since Western countries such as the United States of America and Canada introduced Christianity to Korea over one hundred years ago, it is Korea's turn to impart Christianity to unbelieving nations and tribes. Making disciples of all nations is the great commission that Korean churches have to carry out. According to the Korea World Missions Association, 17,697 Korean missionaries resided in 168 countries as of 2007. Next to the USA, Korea has the highest number of missionaries overseas (Young Hwan Park, 2002: 158).

In this theological context, Korean churches direct their attention to migrant workers (Hwang, 2008: 53). They see the increasing number of migrant workers as a new opportunity to execute their mission work right in their own backyard without having to leave Korea. In particular, when Korean churches meet migrant workers from communist and socialist countries such as China and Vietnam and from Islamic and Hindu countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, they see them as God-sent for their foreign mission work (Jung Woon Suh, 2002: 65).

Because most Korean churches focus on the proselytization of non-Christian migrant workers, they launch a very serious program of converting them to Christianity. They can transmit Christianity to migrant workers in Korea, who will, then, take it to their home

land. They can also plant new churches in the native places of their converts and start worldwide missions there.

According to Le Vinh Phuoc, who pastors Vietnam Church in Anyang, Korean Christians can reach out to the Vietnamese migrant workers at their doorstep and transmit Christianity to them. When they go back to Vietnam, they will impart their newly adopted religion to their people (Phouc, 2008: 100).

Additionally, Korean churches have biblical mandates for their missions for migrant workers. Exodus Chapter 23 says, "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt." As the people of Israel were once aliens in Egypt, they should not mistreat aliens in their land (Eun Jin Woo, 2003: 57). According to this scripture, Korean churches have to welcome migrant workers and extend hospitality to them.

Genesis Chapter 1 says, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Since human beings were created in God's image, they should be treated with love and respect (Young Kwon Kim, 2007: 64). This scripture commands Korean churches to receive migrant workers as their brothers and sisters equally created in God's image.

With this theological background in mind, Korean churches demonstrate three distinctive patterns in their missions for migrant workers. The first pattern is proselytization. It mainly focuses on the conversion of migrant workers and their born-again experiences. Most Korean churches employ this pattern (Yun Kook Han, 2003: 47).

Since this pattern tries to convert migrant workers to Christianity, it tends to ignore their culture and religion and only regards them as the subjects of making them Christian believers. Its priority on the conversion of migrant workers does not allow Korean churches to take up the various human rights issues of migrant workers.

The second pattern is employed by non-governmental organizations with Christian spirit. It concentrates on the advocacy of the human rights of migrant workers. By dealing with various work-related problems such as unpaid or underpaid wages, pensions, medical treatment and industrial disaster compensation, this pattern addresses the practical problems of migrant workers. The third one is the combination of the first and second patterns.

### **3. Experiences of Migrant Workers**

#### **1) Work Experiences**

When migrant workers come to work in Korea, they face numerous difficulties. First, they face language and cultural barriers. Most migrant workers are not equipped with the necessary Korean language skills and Korean cultural knowledge to work and live in Korea. Even if they study Korean language and culture prior to their arrival in Korea, they feel they cannot function fully in Korean society (Sun Hee Yoon, 2006: 249).

According to my own survey, when I asked migrant workers, "How is your Korean?", only 16.6% thought that their Korean

language proficiency was good or very good.<sup>1)</sup>

〈Table 3〉 Korean Language Proficiency

	Very good	Good	Average	Bad	Very Bad
Percentage (100)	2.4	14.2	39.9	32.0	11.5
Frequency (253)	6	36	101	81	29

To make matters worse, most Korean employers and co-workers do not understand the culture and language of migrant workers. Mostly, they do not have respect or appreciation for them either. This lack of mutual understanding and interaction creates cultural misunderstanding, conflicts, and even physical violence between the two groups. It also exposes migrant workers to work-related hazards. When they cannot understand simple instructions in Korean, they have to risk their safety (Hwang, 2008: 40).

Additionally, Korean work ethics and culture can cause a lot of stress for migrant workers. When they are always asked to work, "fast, fast," they often feel exploited and dominated. An interview with a migrant worker says that, when his employer always shouts at him, "fast, fast" and sometimes, hits him on his head, he just

1) In 2008, I conducted a survey with migrant workers in Hwa Won, Nam San, Pyong Hwa and Koo Min churches in Daegu. They came from China (61%), Philippines (34%), Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and others (5%). Their age was 20s (30%), 30s (53%), 40s and the rest (17%). They consisted of male (66%) and female (34%). The length of their residency in Korea was 1-5 years (89%). 64% of them were married and left their families back home. 29% of them were single. Only 7% of them were with their families.

wants to quit working and go back home (Hye Ok Ryu, Hyun Chul Lee, 2009: 470).

One survey with 203 migrant workers from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, and Bangladesh also validates this. 70% of them say that their lives in Korea are very difficult or difficult (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 56). They name discrimination against foreigners (42%), cultural differences (23%), and inability to communicate (11%) as the main reasons for their difficulties (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 27).

According to my ministerial experience, even if they want to learn Korean language and culture, they do not have time. When they arrive in Korea, they are not given time to adjust to their new environment, but they are put into work right away. Besides, as they are often asked to work overtime, at night or on weekends, they cannot plan their schedule to explore and learn about Korean society. When they do not work, they spend time resting, meeting their friends, shopping, and running personal errands. This lack of leisure time and meaningful social contact can be very stressful for them.

Second, migrant workers suffer from physical violence and verbal abuse from their co-workers and employers (Soo Il Kim, 2004: 91). According to one research, for example, 59% of them have experienced verbal abuse and physical violence from their employers and co-workers, and 50% of them have had multiple experiences as such (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 76).

When migrant workers cannot understand instructions or cannot

work as instructed, they are slapped on the face or on the back. They encounter naming calling such as an idiot, "Babo." Even though they are adults, they are often treated as children. They are also humiliated when they are made fun of for their country being underdeveloped or for their physical appearance or skin color.

Third, migrant workers experience wage discrimination. They get paid less than their Korean co-workers. Even when they work overtime, at night, or holidays, they do not get paid accordingly. Even if they get dumped on with work by their co-workers, they cannot really complain and have to work (Yoon Jung Huh, 2007: 119-120).

Since migrant workers work in a very stressful environment, as shown above, they often have health problems such as dizziness, hyper-tension, and high-blood pressure. However, their tight work schedule does not allow them to seek necessary medical treatment, and thus their health becomes seriously compromised. Since they are separated from their families, they also have to suffer from homesickness, loneliness, and anxiety. Migrant workers are allowed to stay in Korea only for the duration of their employment and they cannot bring their families to Korea.

These difficulties can be much worse for undocumented workers. Without any legal protection, they are on their own, they are at the mercy of their employers. The intensity of their mental stress and the constant threat of deportation can expose them to physical and mental illnesses (Hae Kun Yoo, 2003: 37).

## 2) Experiences of Asian Women Migrant Workers

The number of Asian women migrant workers has been gradually increasing, making up 30% of the entire population of migrant workers in Korea. Women migrant workers have to confront three-fold discrimination in their work places due to their nationality, different skin color, and gender (Kuk-Yom Han, 2008: 74). That is, in addition to the aforementioned experiences of migrant workers, they have to deal with other forms of mistreatment and discrimination because of their gender.

The most serious problem that women migrant workers have to face is sexual harassment and violence at work. According to 2002 report on the human rights of women migrant women, 21,1% of women experienced sexual violence and 30,4% of them experienced being groped (Kook-Yom Han, 2002: 43). This is also supported by Kwon's research where 54% of his female respondents experienced sexual harassment and violence at work (Soon Jong Kown, 2003: 78).

In my own ministry, I have met women migrant workers who experienced sexual advancement or unsolicited physical contact by Korean male superiors. I also have met my parishioners who complained about wage discrimination. They get paid less than men migrant workers or Korean workers. Han's research also substantiates my first hand experience in that women migrant workers suffer from the double bondage of being migrant workers and women (Kook-Yom Han, 2009: 586). Their experiences are much more

harsh than that of their counterparts.

### 3) Church Experiences

As discussed above, migrant workers can be compared to ghosts in Korean society. They work, as other Koreans do, but without the protection and rights as workers. Since the majority of migrant workers are undocumented, they cannot benefit from labor laws, medical insurance, and accident insurance (Hae Kun Yoo, 2003: 11). Furthermore, since most migrant workers work in small and medium-sized companies, they cannot receive the social and medical services they need from their employers (Hae Kun Yoo, 2003: 61).

To fill this void, non-governmental organizations and religious organizations step in and play the role of social welfare agencies for migrant workers, especially for undocumented workers. According to various studies, Korean churches play most active roles for migrant workers, both documented and undocumented (Hae Kun Yoo, 2003:12 Young Kwon Kim, 2007: 65; Eun Sook Won, 2001: 62).

As Jin-soon Kim's survey attests to this in the table below, 27 of them were religious organizations out of 45 non-governmental organizations working for migrant workers.

〈Table 4〉 Types of organization

	Religious organizations	Social welfare agencies	Health and medical organizations	Human rights organizations	Non-governmental organizations
Number	27	10	2	4	2



The survey by the Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development also had a similar outcome. 118 organizations out of about 200 organizations advocating the rights of migrant workers responded to this survey and 98 of them were Christian organizations (Young Kwon Kim, 2007, 65).

As shown earlier, Korean churches are armed with their passion for worldwide mission and biblical mandates to love aliens and to cater to their specific needs. Consequently, they become inviting to migrant workers and play the roles that Korean society and government cannot play. This is the primary reason that migrant workers come and knock on the doors of Korean churches. They seek Korean churches to have their practical and religious needs met.

In general, those who come to Korean churches are more satisfied with their lives in Korea than otherwise (Soon Jong Kwon, 2003: 58 Jin Soon Kim, 2004: 25). Especially for undocumented migrant workers, as mentioned above, they can be mistreated and discriminated against in many aspects. Thus, their need to get in touch with Korean locals becomes greater than otherwise (Phuoc, 2008: 94).

Phuoc claims that Vietnamese migrant workers change their attitudes toward religion as they move from a socialist country to a democratic one. Whereas they used to think that Christianity was a bad religion in Vietnam, they see its merits in Korea. They receive various forms of assistance from Korean churches when they encounter troubles and needs beyond their means to cope with. Therefore, free from religious persecution, many of them accept Christianity (Phuoc, 2008: 95).

My own research data of 2008 also supports this. When I asked them how helpful Korean churches were to them, they said that Korean churches were helpful to them. More than 80% of them were happy with Korean churches.

〈Table 5〉 Help of Korea Churches

	Very helpful	helpful	Average	not helpful	not helpful at all	total
Percentage	34.8	45.5	9.9	2.0	7.9	100
Frequency	88	115	25	5	20	253

This survey outcome shows a contrast between how unsatisfied they are with Korean society and how satisfied they are with Korean churches. As they are unsatisfied with their working conditions, they are equally satisfied with many roles that their Korean churches play for them.

As my research indicates in the table below, Korean churches perform various functions for migrant workers and become indispensable to their lives.

While migrant workers are more satisfied with the religious services of Korean churches than the social, legal, and practical services of Korean churches. As mentioned earlier, this is closely related with the fact that most Korean churches focus on the conversion of migrant workers. Additionally, this also shows that Korean churches are not equipped to deal with non-religious matters, and that they are reserved about directly getting involved with the human rights issues of migrant workers as religious organizations.

〈Table 6〉 Functions of Korea Churches

	(% , Number)					
	Very satisfactory	Satisfactory	Average	Unsatis factory	Very unsatis factory	Total
Worship	43.9(111)	36.8(93)	12.3(31)	0.4(1)	6.7(17)	100(253)
Bible study	33.2(84)	39.9(101)	16.2(41)	0.4(1)	10.3(26)	100(253)
Fellowship	33.2(84)	32.4(82)	19.8(50)	0.8(2)	13.8(35)	100(253)
Korean culture and language	27.7(70)	39.9(101)	19.8(50)	2.4(6)	10.3(26)	100(253)
Field trips	24.1(61)	41.9(106)	20.6(52)	0.8(2)	12.6(32)	100(253)
Counseling for personal problems	26.1(66)	35.2(89)	23.7(60)	1.2(3)	13.8(35)	100(253)
Work- related counseling	24.5(62)	33.2(84)	23.7(60)	2.4(6)	16.2(41)	100(253)
Counseling for legal problems	26.1(66)	31.6(80)	24.5(62)	1.6(4)	16.2(41)	100(253)
Medical services	31.6(80)	32.0(81)	20.9(53)	1.6(4)	13.8(35)	100(253)
Shelter	19.0(48)	29.6(75)	22.1(56)	2.4(6)	26.9(68)	100(253)

#### 4. Conclusion

This thesis investigates the experiences of migrant workers, especially, Asian women migrant workers, with their work and Korean churches. Whereas the majority of them are not satisfied

with their employment, they are satisfied with their Korean churches. While pursuing their Korean dreams at work, they turn to Korean churches to have their religious and non-religious needs met.

Korean churches' commitment to worldwide missions and migrant workers' needs correspond with each other. On the one hand, Korean churches express their passion for overseas missions by ministering to migrant workers. In so doing, they cater to various social, cultural, legal, medical, and religious needs of migrant workers. On the other hand, migrant workers receive many forms of assistance from Korean churches and, at the same time, fulfill Korean churches' missions for making all nations Jesus' disciples. As much as Korean churches need migrant workers, migrant workers need Korean churches as well. Consequently, the experiences of migrant workers are closely interwoven between their experiences of work and the mission-oriented Korean churches.

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<Abstract>

## The Work and Church Experiences of Asian Female Migrants in South Korea

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This research explores the experiences of migrant workers within Korean society and Korean churches. In particular, this research investigates the experiences of women migrant workers that are directly derived from their gender. Since the 1990s, the Korean government has imported labor from other nations due to a labor shortage and low birthrate. As of 2009, there were about 450,000 documented and 200,000 undocumented migrant workers in Korea. They experience language barriers, cultural differences, physical and verbal violence, and so on. Women migrant workers experience sexual harassment and violence as well. However, they experience many programs that address their religious and social needs. In consequence, while their experience with their work is negative, their experience with their Korean churches is positive.

**Key words:** women migrant workers, discrimination, violence, mission, Korean churches