

Immigrants as ‘New’ Precariats in the Korean Immigration Policy Regime

Navigating Identity, Rights, and Governance

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Chapter 4

‘Precarity’ as Structural Conditions and Its Gendered Dynamics in Immigration

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This chapter delves into the structural conditions that amplify the precarious circumstances experienced by immigrants, intersecting with the differential allocation of rights based on the precarious identity of immigrant groups. The concept of precarity commonly denotes a condition induced by political factors wherein certain populations face deficiencies in social and economic support networks, making them disproportionately vulnerable to harm, violence, and mortality (Butler, 2009). Within discussions on the precariat, precarity is predominantly associated with the labor market, tracing its emergence from the shift from stable, lifelong employment in industrial capitalist and welfare-state economies to temporary, insecure, and low-paying jobs in the globalized service and financial economy.

This book, however, focuses on a distinct subset of the precariat—immigrants—and expands the discourse beyond the confines of the labor market. It is essential to recognize that the structural conditions of precarity encountered by immigrants, as the ‘new precariat’ in the context of international migration, extend beyond formal employment settings to encompass private domains. Particularly in the Korean context, specific immigrant groups, notably marriage migrant women, play a pivotal role in shaping precarity within the complex dynamics of everyday life. This encompasses various conditions ranging from family dynamics to spousal relationships and interactions with extended family members. The dual and intricate identities assumed by marriage migrant women, concurrently as workers and wives (and potentially mothers and daughters-in-law) contribute to a nuanced manifestation of precarity.

The Global Forces Shaping Immigration and Precarity

As a new precariat, immigrants experience the most direct and intrinsic condition of precarity through international migration. Typically, migration is driven by factors such as domestic labor shortages, fiscal pressures from aging populations, and humanitarian imperatives. A systematic examination of migration drivers through various theoretical foundations (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; Lee, 2011; Massey et al., 1993) reveals several influencing factors, as depicted in Table 4.1.

First, demographic dimensions, including low birth rates and aging populations, prompt immigration due to changes in family size and structure. Second, economic

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Table 4.1 Drivers of International Migration

| <i>Driver dimensions</i> | <i>Driving factors</i> | <i>Driver dimensions</i> | <i>Driving factors</i> |
|--------------------------|---|----------------------------|---|
| Demographic | Population Dynamics Family Size and Structure | Security | Conflict, War, and Violence Political Situation, Repression, and Regime Transitions |
| Economic | Economic and Business Conditions Labor Markets and Employment Urban/Rural Development and Living Standards Poverty and Inequality | Politico- institutional | Public Infrastructure, Services, and Provisions Migration Governance and Infrastructure Migration Policy and Other Public Policies Civil and Political Rights |
| Environmental | Climate Change and Environmental Conditions Natural Disasters and Environmental Shocks | Socio-cultural | Migrant Communities and Networks Cultural Norms and Ties |
| Human Development | Education Services and Training Opportunities Health Services and Situation | Supranational | Gender Relations Globalization and (Post) Colonialism Transnational Ties |
| Individual | Personal Resources and Migration Experience Migrant Aspirations and Attitudes | | International Relations and Geopolitical Transformations |

Source: Czaika and Reinprecht (2022).

disparities between nations, manifesting as differences in wages and working conditions, further stimulate immigration. Third, policies and institutions favoring immigrants significantly influence migration decisions. Finally, environmental threats such as those posed by climate change, and unavoidable migration due to wars and violence are also critical drivers.

Rather than discussing these immigration drivers in isolation, it is more insightful to explore how these factors collectively exacerbate the precarity experienced by immigrants. Demographic challenges, for instance, can lead to increased demand for immigrant labor but might also result in precarious employment conditions due to inadequate policy support. Economic disparities, while drawing immigrants to higher-wage countries, can simultaneously expose them to exploitation and insecure job markets. Favorable immigration policies may facilitate entry but often come with stringent conditions that limit immigrants' rights and stability. Environmental and humanitarian crises force individuals to migrate under duress, further amplifying their vulnerability and precarity in host countries. Thus, a compound analysis of these drivers offers a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted precarity faced by immigrants.

Globalization and Neo-liberalism

International migration is a prominent manifestation of globalization, defined as the 'widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life' (Czaika & de Haas, 2014). Globalization transcends mere technological advancements, holding a central position in political and economic transformations.

First, technological advancements facilitate international migration by reducing constraints related to time and distance, thereby lowering associated costs. These advancements strengthen migrant networks and enable the maintenance of 'transnational ties' with families in the home country. The ease of international remittances further streamlines the decision-making process for individual migrants or households considering international migration (Faist, 2000; Vertovec, 2004). Additionally, the internet and other communication technologies provide access to information about previously unknown countries, stimulating the desire to seize new opportunities through international migration. The revolutionary development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) significantly enhances the feasibility of international migration.

Second, in the realm of political-economic dynamics, globalization plays a pivotal role in the political-economic dynamics that drive international migration. It reduces restrictions on the exchange of goods and capital between nations. The manifestation of globalization, embodied by the neoliberal economic paradigm of the 1980s, plays a role in fostering the worldwide adoption of laissez-faire economic principles, commonly known as neoliberalism. The implementation of market-centric neoliberal economic policies and the relaxation of regulatory frameworks have spurred the uneven movement of both capital and labor beyond national borders (Beneria et al., 2012). Essentially, globalization has disseminated principles such as 'market liberalization, privatization, and deregulation' on a global scale, facilitating the widespread acceptance of 'western liberal democracy' worldwide (Czaika & de Haas, 2014, p. 285). Consequently, labor migration from low-income to high-income countries becomes more pronounced.

The technological progress and political-economic changes propelled by globalization provide the foundation for active cross-border exchanges encompassing not only capital and trade but also abstract ideas, ideologies, culture, knowledge, and power structures (Castles & Miller, 2009). Additionally, the flows of 'people' across borders become catalysts for international migration. As world system theory contends (Massey et al., 1993), international migration is a natural outcome of the development process under capitalist systems, and the expanded socio-cultural and economic interdependence symbolized by globalization forms the basis for substantial migration.

This activation of international migration is further fueled by labor market disparities between high-skilled and low-skilled workers in advanced countries, inequality and lack of opportunities in developing countries, and market liberalization and deregulation driven by economic globalization. In this way, technological advancements, changes in political-economic systems, and the spread of neo-liberal

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market economies contribute to the globalization of migration. This phenomenon, described by Salt (1992) as a situation where 'all countries now engage in migration systems growing in size and complexity and producing an increasing diversity of flows' (Czaika & de Haas, 2014, p. 285), affects even traditionally homogeneous nations like Korea, transforming them into 'new immigration countries'.

However, the globalization of immigration, while inducing global reorganization, also exacerbates the precarity of immigrants. Immigrants fulfill the demand for unskilled precarious workers in receiving countries, often being employed extensively in the underground economy or informal sectors. Those engaged through outsourcing experience temporary employment characterized by high flexibility in hiring and firing. Subcontractors, seeking to minimize costs, exploit illegal immigrants by taking advantage of their vulnerable status to perpetrate labor exploitation, such as poor working conditions and lack of welfare provisions. The realization of global capitalism, driven by globalization and the neo-liberal economic system, is indisputably rooted in immigrant labor. These circumstances collectively contribute to macro-level conditions of precarity, involving instability, uncertainty, and various forms of risk, entwined with the identity of immigrants as a new precariat.

Economics of Choice

According to neoclassical economics (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Massey et al., 1993; Todaro, 1976), a significant driving force behind international migration is the disparity in opportunities, such as wages and working conditions, between countries. This theory posits that labor migration is a critical aspect of economic development, with rational individuals seeking to maximize their income. Differences in labor demand and supply between nations naturally result in wage disparities, prompting individuals to move from places with lower wages to those with higher wages.

What is particularly intriguing is that immigration forms and conditions vary based on the attributes of an individual's human capital. Generally, low-skilled workers migrate internationally in pursuit of higher wages when their home country faces low labor demand and lower wages. In contrast, high-skilled workers, possessing abundant human capital, such as managers and technicians, seek higher returns that match their skills and qualifications. Neoclassical economics distinctly categorizes international migration into two types: migration for higher wages and migration for higher capital returns.

The decision to immigrate for higher wages and a better quality of life inherently implies a level of vulnerability among international migrants. Hosting countries, including South Korea, primarily attract immigrants from economically challenged, underdeveloped nations. Therefore, the status of the country of origin is directly linked to the structural vulnerability of international migrants. Another intriguing aspect is how neoclassical economics' explanation of immigration reveals differences in vulnerability within immigrant groups. Despite appearing similar to international migrants, those seeking higher wages (low-skilled

workers) and those pursuing higher capital returns (high-skilled workers) experience fundamentally different levels of precarity, particularly in terms of social exclusion. This highlights the discriminatory distribution of vulnerability within immigrant groups.

The neoclassical economics approach to the drivers of immigration has, however, faced criticism on several fronts (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). First, it fails to account for cases where individuals do not choose to migrate despite economic opportunities or poor living conditions. Consequently, the decision to immigrate should be viewed not merely as a response to wage differentials or differences in quality of life but as an exercise of subjective self-determination (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). Second, the individualistic methodology of neoclassical economics is limiting. It assumes that individuals are the primary decision-makers, while in reality, migration decisions are often influenced by families and households. This perspective aligns with the new economics of immigration, which considers broader social and familial contexts in migration decisions.

From Rational Choices to Household Decisions

The New Economic Theory of Immigration, in contrast to neoclassical economics, conceptualizes immigration as a collective decision made by households rather than individuals. This perspective acknowledges the influence of family ties and social externalities on immigration decisions (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). According to this theory, the household's decision regarding immigration involves not only the incentive to maximize wages but also the motivation to minimize various constraints and risks faced by the family (Stark, 1991; Taylor, 1986).

In the New Economic Theory of Immigration, families are viewed as rational economic agents who strive to enhance their overall economic well-being by strategically allocating resources among family members. When the domestic labor market or economic system fails to provide adequate income and economic security for the family, some members may engage in local economic activities while others may choose to migrate internationally to regions with more favorable labor conditions or wage structures. This international migration can positively impact the family economy through remittances, which in turn influence the family's decisions regarding further migration (Beneria et al., 2012). Essentially, international migration, driven by the rational decisions of households, serves as a strategy for families to mitigate potential constraints on their productive activities and minimize economic risks.

Both Neoclassical economics, which interprets international migration as the rational choice of individuals, and the New Economic Theory of Immigration, which views it as the rational choice of families, implicitly acknowledge the vulnerability of international migrants. Both theoretical frameworks assume that individuals or families would not opt for international migration if conditions, including wages, in the country of origin were satisfactory and stable.

Dual Structure in the Labor Market

If the aforementioned theories are decision-making models, then the dual labor market theory posits that the demand for immigrant labor in industrial societies is the primary determinant of international migration. According to this theory, international migration is not primarily driven by push factors such as low wages or high unemployment rates in sending countries. Instead, it is a consequence of the persistent and inevitable demand for immigrant labor in receiving countries.

The factors encouraging international migration in receiving countries, as identified by Massey et al. (1993), include structural inflation as a significant pull factor. This suggests that wages are not solely determined by the interaction of labor supply and demand but also reflect social standing. Expectations about social status and the insistence on wage adjustments to align with such status are intensified by influences such as labor unions and government regulations. Notably, wage increases for entry-level or lower-tier workers necessitate subsequent wage hikes for higher-tier positions, leading to persistent and structural inflation.

In this context, employers face challenges in circumventing structural inflation by hiring domestic workers for entry-level or lower-tier positions. However, by employing immigrant workers who are often more willing to accept lower wages, employers can effectively manage the issues posed by structural inflation. This practice results in the formation of a dual labor market characterized by distinct wage and labor conditions.

Within the framework of structural inflation and other influential factors, workers are motivated to seek upward mobility within occupational hierarchies. Consequently, native workers tend to avoid the lowest-tier jobs, which necessitates the employment of immigrant workers in these roles. Furthermore, the decision-making process for immigrants considering international migration involves more than just evaluating wages and job positions in the labor market; it also includes a comparative analysis of living standards between the host country and their country of origin. Since the sending countries of immigrants are predominantly underdeveloped, the prospect of higher living standards in receiving countries often drives migration decisions, even if it means accepting lower wages and less desirable positions. As a result, employing immigrants in the lowest-tier jobs becomes a strategic approach to address both motivation-related challenges for native workers and issues arising from structural inflation.

In summary, the establishment of a dual labor market emerges as a viable strategy to address structural inflation and motivation-related problems. This bifurcated labor market consists of a core and a periphery, with the periphery characterized by low wages, precarious employment conditions, suboptimal working environments, and a lack of social security. Immigrants are predominantly employed in low-wage, unstable, and undesirable 3D jobs within the peripheral labor market, roles that domestic workers typically avoid. These patterns act as structural determinants that exacerbate the precarious conditions faced by immigrants (Brady & Biegert, 2017; Branch & Hanley, 2017).

Feminization of Immigration: A New Layer of Precarity

Gender Dynamics in the Service Industry and Dual Labor Market

The increased precarity experienced by immigrants, particularly as a new precariat, is intensified by a structural condition known as the feminization of immigration. The feminization of migration has received relatively scant attention in discussions related to international migration. Both the New Economic and Neoclassical economics perspectives, which were discussed earlier as driving forces of immigration, fail to consider the gender perspective or the specificity of women's experiences. These perspectives perceive female immigrants, like their male counterparts, within the same category of immigration and view female migration as a result of individual and household rational decision-making. Consequently, they are limited in explaining structural issues surrounding immigration and gender relations. Moreover, the international division of labor in reproduction, where reproductive labor transcends national borders through female immigration, remains beyond the scope of consideration.

As the feminization of immigration has progressed rapidly, it poses new challenges for policymakers and scholars studying the migration process. Consequently, there has been a demand for a perspective that integrates immigration and gender. Since the 1980s, the proportion of female immigrants has continuously increased in the West, and in Korea, female migration has surged since the 1990s. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), as of 2008, women constitute 50% of immigrants, growing at a faster rate than male immigrants (Human Development Report, 2009, UNDP, p. 2). Regionally, Europe and Oceania have seen female immigrants surpassing male immigrants since the 2000s (53.4% and 51.3%, respectively). In the Philippines, as of 2005, 65% of international immigrants were female, while in Indonesia, the figure reached 79%. Brazil and the Dominican Republic, in 2001, showed that 70% of total immigrants were female, indicating that female immigration dominates in many countries.

Moreover, recently, women increasingly choose immigration not merely as 'family dependents' but as independent workers, taking on the role of remittance senders (Beneria et al., 2012; Human Development Report, 2009, UNDP, p. 25; Piper, 2008). This phenomenon, where women constitute a higher proportion of international migration, is precisely the feminization of immigration—a result of the complex interplay of migration, gender, and globalization.

When examining the feminization of immigration from a gender perspective, several interconnected issues arise (Lutz, 2010). First, at the macro level, the feminization of international migration is associated with the transition to post-industrial societies and changes in labor demand. Second, at the meso level, gender stereotypes and the global care chain are linked to the roles primarily undertaken by female immigrants in host countries. Third, at the micro level, family roles and the specific roles of female immigrants are essential considerations. All these issues contribute to the identity of immigrants as a new precariat. In particular, unlike male immigrants, female immigrants experience a profound structural condition of 'precarity'. This structural condition of precarity underscores that immigration is a gendered issue.

The macro trends in the feminization of immigration are closely linked to the transition to post-industrial societies and changes in industrial structure. A post-industrial society signifies a shift from production and manufacturing centered around factories to a society emphasizing interpersonal services and relationships. This shift is driven by the expansion of the service industry. The transition from manufacturing to the service industry has transformed household activities such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning—traditionally provided within homes—into market-based services, thereby reducing dependence on physical labor. These changes have led to the expansion of service industries related to childcare, education, and care, which are characterized by low wages, low positions, and limited opportunities for advancement.

As noted in the Dual Labor Market Theory (Brady & Biegert, 2017; Branch & Hanley, 2017; Massey et al., 1993; Piore, 1979), addressing the structural inflation and motivational problems inherent in the development of a capitalist economic system necessitates workers willing to engage in the less desirable conditions of the service industry. Care work, traditionally associated with women, has predominantly employed women in the service industry before marriage, before the birth of their first child, and after completing childcare (Beneria et al., 2012). The concentration of women in the service industry is influenced by the stereotypical perception that caregiving is primarily a woman's role. This horizontal skewing toward labor related to housework, caregiving, emotions, and service provision has resulted in the feminization of care-related service industries, exacerbating various forms of gender disparities, including wage gaps between men and women in the labor market.

Care Commodification and Global Care Chain

The acceleration of industrial changes and the commodification of care work have predominantly employed women, aligning with traditional gender stereotypes, in care-related service industries. These industries typically consist of relatively low wage and challenging labor conditions, primarily comprising entry-level workers. However, relying solely on domestic female workers for entry-level care positions has become unsustainable. As women's education levels have risen and their participation in the labor market has become more active, more women are pursuing higher positions and careers with greater social prestige rather than remaining in entry-level positions in care work.

Additionally, the increase in single-person households and heightened instability in men's labor market participation have expanded the role of women as primary earners. These changes have led to a decreased domestic supply of entry-level workers and an increased demand for immigrant workers to perform care work traditionally undertaken by women. Consequently, there has been a growing need for female immigrants to substitute for domestic female workers previously employed in the service industry (Chammartin, 2002; Massey et al., 1998).

In a similar context, the rapid expansion of women's labor market participation in developed countries has led to a deficit in the traditional domestic care work that women used to provide exclusively. Despite this change, the insufficient increase

in men's participation in domestic care work—referred to as the 'incomplete revolution'—has exacerbated the care deficit or care crisis (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Furthermore, the failure of family friendly policies and childcare facilities to keep pace with increased female labor market participation has necessitated the resolution of the care deficit through alternative labor sources, thereby driving the demand for female immigrants. The rapid increase in the elderly population due to aging has also resulted in a surge in care demands for the elderly. Thus, the feminization of migration is closely linked to women's economic activity in developed countries (GCIM, 2005), forming a global care chain connected to the receiving country's care economy (Hochschild, 2000). In this context, international female migration is filling the care deficit in receiving countries, and the care work undertaken by immigrant women is seen as an extension of their traditional family roles (Parreñas, 2001).

In many countries, female international migration is primarily concentrated in domestic labor and care work (Chammartin, 2002; Piper, 2008). While the degree may vary by country, men are predominantly employed in skilled professions such as IT and science, whereas women are mainly employed in service occupations such as domestic work, nursing, or caregiving. For instance, in Japan, female temporary migrant workers are predominantly employed as entertainers (Lee, 2011). In essence, the international migration of women represents an increase in the commodification of care work on a global scale.

A particularly noteworthy aspect related to the global care chain and the feminization of immigration is the rise of marriage migration among women (Lee, 2011; Piper, 2008, 2015; Won, 2019; Won & Jeong, 2014). International marriages between migrant women and men in countries like Korea have become a solution to the difficulties faced by men in rural communities. These international marriages are common in Asian countries, including Vietnam and the Philippines, where women from less developed countries marry men from more developed countries such as Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Lee, 2011). The paths observed in international marriages in Asia are diverse (Piper, 2015). Some women initially aimed for temporary residence through labor migration but strategically married rural men for a more secure visa status. Conversely, others came with the intention of marriage but entered the labor market to send remittances to their home countries, sometimes engaging in disguised marriages. The most common scenario involves immigrating for marriage and serving as domestic caregivers for their husbands and their families. Thus, female migration is multidimensional and complex compared to male migration.

The Structural Precarity of Immigrants in Korea

As previously discussed, the structural conditions that drive female immigration underscore the necessity of addressing the unique challenges encountered by female immigrants. These challenges encompass their disproportionate representation in low-wage care work, the influence of gender stereotypes, and the implications of marriage migration. Consequently, the structural conditions that contribute to the distinct precarity of female immigrants, in contrast to their male counterparts, may

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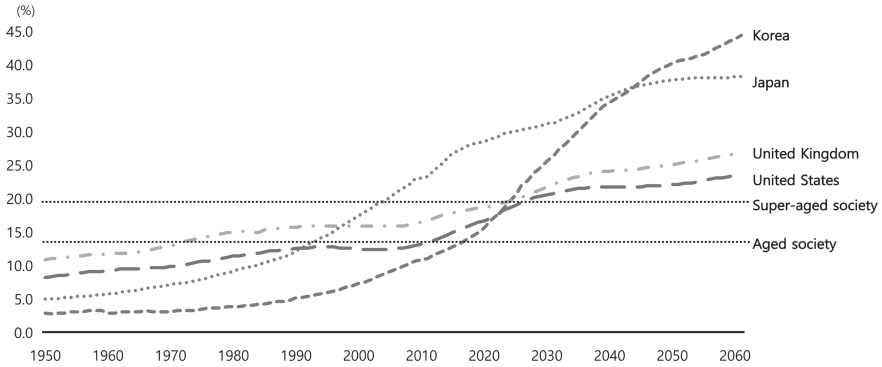


Figure 4.1 Projection of Aging Population (Ratio of Aged 65 and Over)

Source: OECD Population and Population Projection data, <https://data-explorer.oecd.org/>

manifest differently within the specific regional context of Korea. Thus, it is imperative to conduct a thorough examination of the precarity experienced by female immigrants in Korea to fully understand and address their unique circumstances.

Labor Squeeze and Inflows of Lower-Skilled Immigrants

One primary factor influencing Korea's transition into a new immigration state is the demographic shift, characterized by low birth rates and an aging population, leading to labor shortages. Korea has one of the fastest-aging populations in the OECD, with a fertility rate of 1.2 children per woman since 2013, the lowest in the OECD. The share of the population aged 65 and above is projected to surpass 20.6% by 2025, indicating a rapid progression into a super-aged society.

This aging trend outpaces other OECD countries, emphasizing Korea's unique situation. As depicted in comparative analyses (Figures 4.1 and 4.2), Korea's

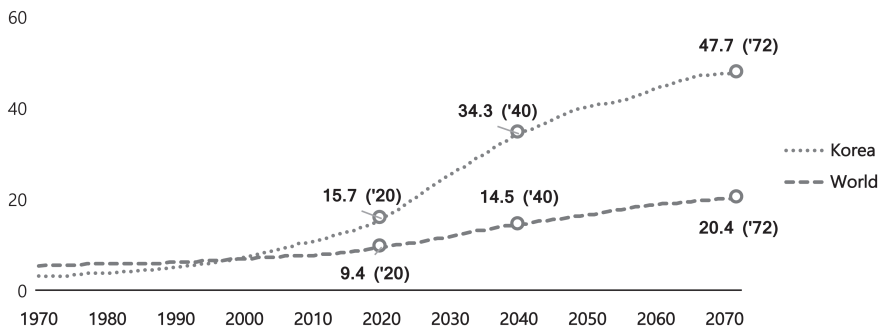


Figure 4.2 Projection of Aged Population Proportion (Unit: %)

Source: National Statistics Office (2022), Population Projection and Summary Indicators.

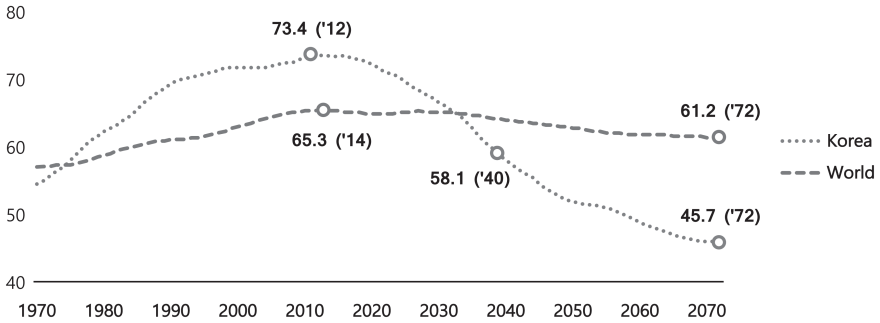


Figure 4.3 Projection of Working Population Proportion (Unit: %)

Source: Statistics Korea, Population Projections and Summary indicators, and UN, World Population Prospects (2022)

demographic shift shows a stark increase in the elderly population. Specifically, compared to 11 OECD countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, Korea exhibited a demographic shift wherein the population aged 65 or older increased from 7% to 14% over a relatively short period. Subsequently, over the next 18 years, this proportion escalated from 14% to 20%, marking the most rapid aging progression among the 11 countries analyzed.

The decline in the share of Korea's working-age population, which reached 71.0% in 2022, represents a significant consequence of the country's ongoing demographic shift. This proportion is the highest among OECD countries. Projections for the years 2060 and 2072 indicate a further decrease in the working-age population to 49.7% and 45.7%, respectively, contrasting sharply with the global projection of 61.2% in 2072 (Figure 4.3).

Korea's demographic transition has necessitated the search for alternative labor sources, catalyzing the influx of immigrant labor. Currently, approximately 877,000 foreign workers are officially employed in Korea, constituting about 3% of the total workforce (National Statistics Office, 2023). This influx of immigrant labor is viewed as a pragmatic solution to address Korea's persistent labor shortages.

The issue of labor scarcity in Korea is exacerbated by domestic workers' reluctance to engage in low-wage, unstable employment, commonly referred to as 3D jobs. This aversion has been evident since the early 1990s, particularly affecting low-skilled manufacturing sectors. The problem has persisted, resulting in a surge of job vacancies in manufacturing, especially within small and microenterprises known for offering less favorable working conditions.

Interestingly, Figure 4.4 illustrates a consistent upward trajectory in university enrollment rates among both male and female domestic workers in Korea. This trend reflects an ongoing increase in educational attainment levels, which fosters aspirations for enhanced social mobility and improved positions within the labor market. Higher education levels often lead individuals to pursue further

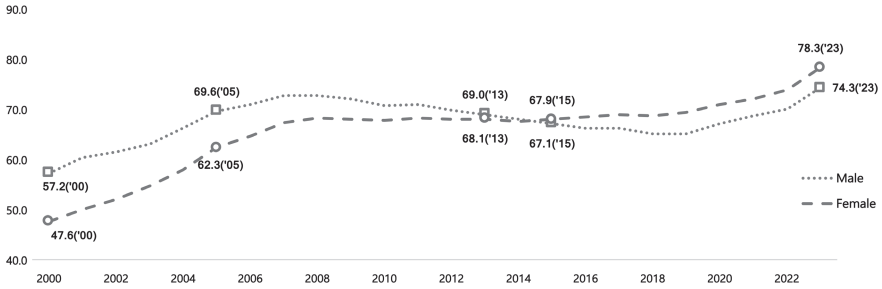


Figure 4.4 College Enrollment Rate

Source: Korean Educational Development Institute, Ministry of Education, Basic Education Statistics Survey and Statistics Korea, Population Projections and Summary indicators, <https://www.index.go.kr/unify/idx-info.do?idxCd=4245>

qualifications in hopes of securing positions in higher-quality, regular labor markets. This pursuit can exacerbate the gap between labor supply and demand.

Small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises in Korea face persistent challenges such as poor working conditions, long hours, and low wages, which contribute to chronic labor shortages. This situation creates what is termed the 'expectation gap', where the workforce's aspirations for better employment conditions and job quality do not align with the realities of available positions. Additionally, Korea experiences the highest turnover rate among OECD countries, highlighting the volatility of its labor market. In 2015, 30.9% of Korean employees had job tenure of less than 1 year, significantly exceeding the OECD average of 17.6%. The turnover rate is particularly pronounced in small firms, reaching a staggering 50.7% (OECD, 2018).

The intricate labor market dynamics described above have heightened the demand for immigrant labor in South Korea, particularly in sectors that rely on entry-level positions and 3D jobs often avoided by domestic workers, especially within small and medium-sized enterprises (Yoo, 2023). In response to this demand, the South Korean government has implemented several policy interventions aimed at managing and regulating the influx of low-skilled workers.

Key policies include the Industrial Training Program, the Employment Permit System (EPS), the Visiting Employment Program, the Working Holiday Program, and the Seasonal Worker Program (Kang, 2021; Lee J. et al., 2021). These programs govern the entry and employment conditions of low-skilled workers through specific visa categories such as Seasonal Labor (E-8), Non-professional Employment (E-9), Seafarer Employment (E-10), and Visiting Employment (H-2) (Yoo, 2023). For instance, as of 2016, approximately 85% of non-professional workers under the EPS (E-9 visa holders) were engaged in manufacturing and mining, with the remainder in agriculture and forestry. Similarly, under the Visiting Employment Program (H-2 visa holders), about 33% worked in manufacturing and mining, while 30% were employed in service industries such as retail, food services, and accommodation.

Overall, the number of lower-skilled immigrants in South Korea, concentrated in manufacturing, mining, and service sectors, is estimated at around 390,000, significantly outnumbering high-skilled immigrants, who total approximately 45,000 (Ministry of Justice, Korean Immigration Service). This demographic composition underscores the predominance of lower-skilled immigrants within South Korea's labor migration landscape (Lee J. K., 2012). China is the largest source country, accounting for approximately 30% of lower-skilled immigrants, followed by Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal, and Indonesia. In contrast, high-skilled immigrants primarily originate from developed countries such as the United States, India, and the United Kingdom (Ministry of Justice, Korean Immigration Service, 2021).

Care Crisis and 'Patrilineal Obsession'

Female Labor Participation and Care Crisis

As previously discussed, female international migration serves as a prevalent strategy across various receiving countries to mitigate labor shortages. The feminization of migration is evident in Korean society as well. The structural transformation of industries, particularly the growth of the service sector and the increasing commodification of care services, has significantly facilitated and promoted female international migration, and Korea is no exception to this global trend.

Analyzing the contribution of the service sector to South Korea's GDP over the past five decades (Figure 4.5) reveals a consistent upward trajectory. Starting at 43.8% in the 1970s, the service sector has shown steady growth, reaching 57.2% by 2000. This trend continued, with the sector's contribution increasing to 61.9% in 2008 and rising to 63.5% by 2022.

Simultaneously, although not yet at a satisfactory level, the economic participation of Korean women has gradually increased over the past four decades. Beginning at 42.8% in 1980, the labor market participation rate for women rose to 47.0% in 1990, further progressing to 48.8% by 2000, and reaching 50.1% by 2004.

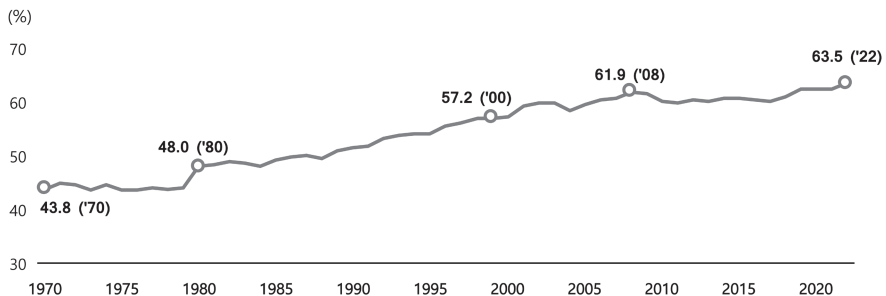


Figure 4.5 The Service Industry Proportion to GDP

Source: Bank of Korea, <https://ecos.bok.or.kr/>

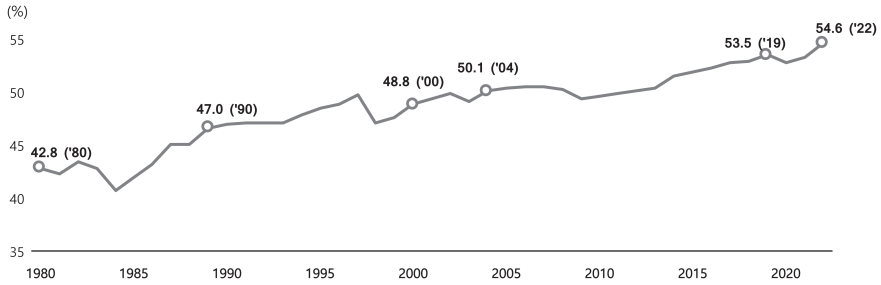


Figure 4.6 Female's Participation in Economic Activities in Korea (1980–2020)

Source: OECD, OECD. Stat, <http://stats.oecd.org/>

Despite remaining below the OECD average of 62% for women's labor market participation, this rate continued to climb, reaching 55% by 2022 (Figure 4.6). Concurrently, the proportion of Korean women employed in the service sector has also exhibited a notable upward trend. Over the past two decades, the percentage of women working in services has steadily increased, from 62.3% in 1995 to approximately 78.7% in 2008, with a further rise to around 82% by 2017.

This shift in Korea's industrial structure, marked by the expanding dominance of the service industry, has driven the increased participation of women in the labor market. Traditionally, caregiving responsibilities, primarily borne by women within households, have transitioned into market-based services due to the rapid aging of the Korean population. This demographic shift has intensified the demand for caregivers outside the household setting. Care work, historically undervalued in societal terms, is typically associated with entry-level positions characterized by low wages, low status, and limited career advancement prospects. These conditions have dissuaded many Korean women, who are now pursuing higher education and seeking socially prestigious careers, from entering the care sector. Consequently, recruiting domestic workers for entry-level care positions has become increasingly challenging.

The growing disparity between the demand for labor in the care sector and the available domestic workforce has led to a heightened reliance on female immigrants to fill these roles. This acceptance of immigrant care workers is closely linked to globalization, which has facilitated the movement of labor across borders, particularly in the context of international female migration (Chammartin, 2002; Massey et al., 1998; Won, 2019; Won & Jeong, 2014).

In the broader context of the feminization of migration, Korea exhibits distinctive characteristics. Unlike Western countries, where female immigrants often engage in diverse roles such as entertainers, sexual service workers, domestic workers, and semi-skilled service jobs, the feminization of immigration in Korea is primarily driven by marriage migration and childbirth (Piper, 2008, 2015; Lee, Y., 2011; Won, 2019; Won & Jeong, 2014).

As depicted in Figure 4.7, as of 2020, the distribution of non-professional foreign workers in Korea highlights a gender disparity: approximately 8.5%

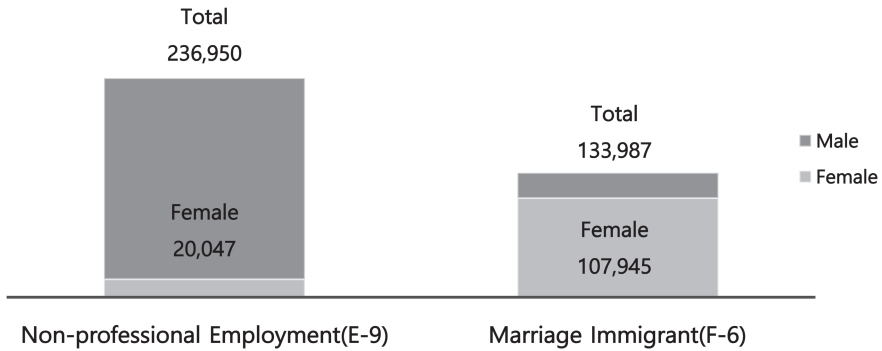


Figure 4.7 Gender Proportion of Immigrants: Non-professional Employment and Marriage Immigration

Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistics on Immigration and Foreign Residents (2022)

(or 20,000) are women out of approximately 230,000 total non-professional foreign workers, whose employment is contingent on specific prerequisites. Conversely, among around 133,000 marriage immigrants, whose migration is based on marital status requirements, over 80%, totaling more than 107,000, are women. This data underscores the prevailing notion in Korea where international migration is associated with men engaging in labor and women primarily migrating for marriage, emphasizing the significant role of gender in shaping migration dynamics.

This gendered pattern is further reflected in the distribution across different residence statuses. According to recent statistics (2022) from the Korean Statistical Office, male immigrants are predominantly found in categories such as overseas Koreans (20.3%), non-professional employment (19.2%), visiting employment (8.3%), visa exemption (7.9%), and permanent residency (6.6%). In contrast, female immigrants are more prominently represented in categories such as overseas Koreans (26.2%), marriage migration (10.7%), visa exemption (10%), permanent residency (9.5%), and cohabitation (6.9%). Excluding the significant proportion of overseas Koreans (Korean-Chinese) in both genders, non-professional employment and visiting employment are more common among male immigrants, while marriage migration holds a relatively higher proportion among female immigrants in Korea.

An intriguing aspect of the feminization of immigration in Korea is the exploration of employment fields beyond traditional service or care work for female immigrant workers. As highlighted earlier, the primary driver of female international migration in Korea has been the increasing demand for care workers, driven by the commodification of care work. However, an examination of the gender distribution in non-professional employment, as reported in the 2018 Immigration Status and Employment Survey, reveals significant gender disparities.

In industries typically dominated by male immigrants, such as manufacturing, women comprise a substantial proportion at 53.8%. Moreover, in sectors like agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, women represent 41.5% of the workforce.

Table 4.2 Gender Differences in Employment Rates Across Industries (Unit: %)

| | Total (number of persons) | Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries | Mining, manufacturing industry | Construction industry | Wholesale and retail, accommodation, and food services | Electricity, transportation, telecommunications, financial industry | Personal service, public service |
|--------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|--|---|----------------------------------|
| Female | 22,925 | 41.5 | 53.8 | 0.8 | 4.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Male | 238,997 | 9.3 | 84.1 | 3.8 | 1.0 | 0.1 | 1.7 |
| Total | 261,922 | 12.1 | 81.4 | 3.5 | 1.3 | 0.1 | 1.6 |

Note: Non-Professional Employment (E-9) only.

Source: 2018 Survey on Immigrants' Living Conditions and Labour Force, Raw Data.

Surprisingly, the percentage of female immigrants employed in traditional service industries such as retail, food services, and accommodation is only 4%. Additionally, nearly 70% of female immigrants with non-professional employment qualifications are engaged in simple manual labor, with minimal presence in service or sales positions. This stands in stark contrast to male immigrants, where skilled labor predominates at 61.8% (Table 4.2).

These findings challenge the conventional narrative that female immigrants in Korea are predominantly engaged in service-related sectors. Instead, they underscore the diverse roles that female immigrants occupy in the labor market, including significant participation in traditionally male-dominated fields like manufacturing and agricultural labor. This nuanced understanding highlights the multifaceted nature of female international migration in Korea, extending beyond the confines of caregiving and service work.

At first glance, the dynamics of female labor migration in Korea may appear disconnected from conventional drivers, such as the service industry's expansion and the commodification of care services. However, a closer examination reveals several compelling insights. First, the feminization of immigration in Korea, primarily driven by marriage migration, has shaped distinct patterns in female labor migration. Second, evidence suggests a notable concentration of female labor migration in the agricultural sector. Korea has struggled with chronic labor shortages in agriculture, exacerbated by the sector's decline amid shifts in industrial structure, which saw a 73.6% reduction in agricultural workers by 2021 compared to 1976.

In response to this persistent labor shortage, the Korean government has addressed the need for labor in the agricultural sector through measures such as the EPS for migrant workers. The substantial increase in female immigrant workers under the short-term employment (C-4) visa category, particularly since the full implementation of the foreign seasonal worker system in 2017, has played a pivotal role (Kim et al., 2019). This shift has resulted in a discernible division of labor market roles between male and female immigrant workers. While male immigrants

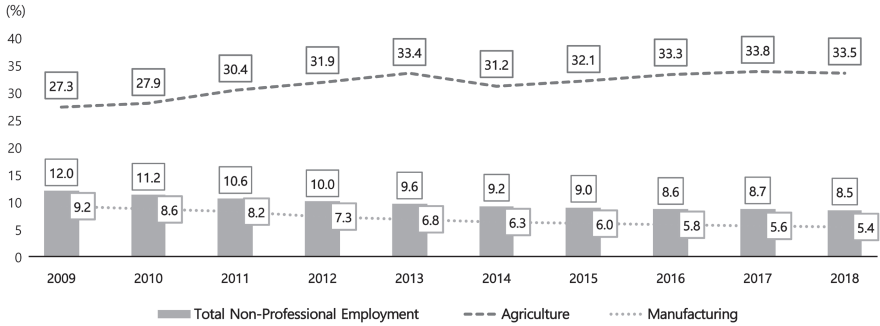


Figure 4.8 Female’s Proportion of Non-Professional Employment, Agriculture, and Manufacturing Industry (2009–2018)

Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistics on Registered Foreigners by Region

largely fill shortages in ‘male-oriented’ sectors such as manufacturing, female immigrants increasingly fulfill roles in the agricultural sector.

This gendered division in labor market participation is illustrated in Figure 4.8, which shows a decline in the share of female immigrants employed in manufacturing and a concurrent rise in their presence in agriculture over time.

The feminization of migration in Korea diverges from expectations tied to care services, primarily because women engaged in care work often operate within the informal, non-regulated sector. Traditionally, care roles for the elderly and individuals with disabilities were predominantly fulfilled by native women. However, as more women entered the formal labor market, gaps in care provision emerged. Consequently, there was a shift toward marketizing or socializing care services, particularly in welfare institutions and hospitals, to accommodate the expanding role of women in other sectors.

Despite these adjustments, Korea faces chronic labor shortages in elder and disability care due to rapid population aging. This shortfall has driven a growing demand for female immigrant workers in care roles. However, official statistics from the National Health Insurance Service (2022) indicate that as of January 2020, only 463 foreign workers were employed in elderly care facilities, constituting just 6% of approximately 73,000 caregivers. This discrepancy between demand and actual employment suggests significant underreporting, potentially due to these workers operating in unregulated, informal settings.

Research by Kim and Lee (2022a, 2022b) underscores that while there is a high demand for immigrant care workers, their formal inclusion in regulated sectors remains limited. Instead, a substantial portion of female immigrants are employed in the informal sector, where regulatory oversight and legal protections are often lacking. This situation highlights significant legal blind spots and reveals a gendered experience of precarious work among immigrant women. In essence, the concentration of female immigrants in informal care work underscores broader issues related to qualifications, regulatory frameworks, and the

formalization of their labor status. These dynamics reflect the gendered dimensions of precarity faced by immigrant women within Korea's evolving labor market landscape.

Facilitating Marriages for Rural Bachelors and Obsession with Patrilineage

The predominance of international migration for marriage involving women in Korea can be attributed to specific socio-cultural factors that have shaped the landscape of migration dynamics in the country. First, the expansion of women's participation in the labor market has played a pivotal role. With increased university enrollment rates and higher educational attainment among women, there has been a notable rise in their active engagement in the labor force (Lee, 2011). This demographic shift has coincided with a growing care crisis within Korean households. Traditionally, women have fulfilled primary roles in caregiving and domestic responsibilities.

However, as more women pursue careers outside the home, a noticeable gap has emerged in caregiving roles within families. This gap has been filled, to a significant extent, by immigrant women who migrate to Korea from developing countries, drawn into the expanding field of care work. This phenomenon mirrors global trends where migration patterns are influenced by economic disparities and demand for labor in developed countries. In the Korean context, another factor contributing to the predominance of female marriage migration is the emphasis on ethnicity. Ethnic return migrants from countries such as China and former Soviet republics have found employment in service sectors like domestic work and cooking (Lee, 2011). This emphasis on ethnicity intersects with gender dynamics, shaping the migration patterns of women who predominantly migrate for marriage and family related reasons.

Second, despite the increasing participation of women in the labor market, there exists a notable misalignment between the labor market dynamics, Confucian norms, and institutional disparities. Traditional Confucian gender ideologies prescribe distinct roles for husbands (Bogat Saram) and wives (An Saram). Wives are primarily assigned domestic responsibilities within the family sphere, while husbands are expected to fulfill roles outside the home (Gelb & Palley, 1994; Hirsch, 1988). This traditional division of labor has persisted despite modernization efforts and has contributed to institutional disparities that perpetuate gender inequalities in various spheres of life, including labor market participation and family dynamics.

Despite increasing female participation in the labor market, traditional Confucian gender norms persist in South Korea. Statistics from the National Statistics Office (2020) reveal a stark disparity in daily household labor hours: men spend an average of 48 minutes on domestic chores, whereas women spend an average of 3 hours and 10 minutes. This significant difference persists across single and double-earner households, with employed married women devoting approximately 2 hours and 24 minutes to domestic chores, nearly four times more than their male counterparts (National Statistics Office, 2020). This disparity underscores the tension between women's active engagement in the labor market and entrenched gender-role expectations rooted in Confucian values.

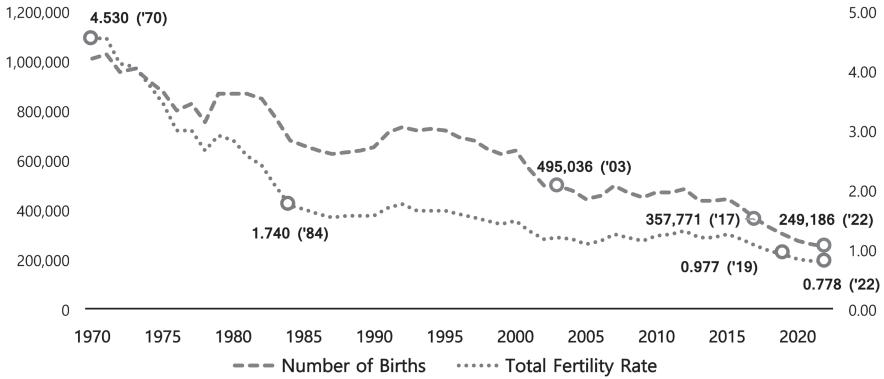


Figure 4.9 Number of Births and Total Fertility Rate

Source: Statistics Korea, Vital Statistics of Korea

The persistence of these gender norms has implications for women’s career trajectories, often resulting in what is termed the ‘motherhood penalty’. This phenomenon refers to the negative impact on women’s careers caused by the expectation that they will assume primary responsibility for household and childcare duties, which can lead to career interruptions and limited advancement opportunities (National Statistics Office, 2020). Consequently, many women in South Korea may delay or forgo marriage and childbirth in pursuit of career development, which in turn contributes to the country’s declining fertility rates. Figure 4.9 illustrates the steady decline in South Korea’s fertility rate since 1984, with the rate falling below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. By 2022, the fertility rate had dropped to 0.78, positioning South Korea among the OECD countries with the lowest fertility rates. This demographic trend poses significant challenges, including an aging population and potential future labor shortages that could impact various sectors of the economy.

Another factor contributing to the feminization of immigration, in conjunction with declining birth rates, is the emphasis on ‘patrilineage’, deeply rooted in Confucian family ideology. Traditional Confucian family structures prioritize paternal dominance, organizing the family under the father’s name (Chen, 2000). Despite societal advancements, this patriarchal perception persists, fostering a collective preference for the father’s lineage, or ‘patrilineage’.

The issue arises as advancements in education and active participation in the labor market have led to a widespread reluctance among Korean women to continue the ‘patrilineage’. This reluctance is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where men often adhere to traditional Confucian norms and face limited employment opportunities. As a result, many rural men encounter significant challenges in marriage and family formation, leading to a phenomenon known as the ‘marriage squeeze’. This term refers to an imbalanced sex composition within the marriageable population, which exacerbates difficulties for men in finding spouses.

The marriage squeeze is particularly acute for rural Korean men, who typically have lower incomes, lower social status, and more conservative patriarchal views. These factors collectively make it extremely challenging for them to find Korean brides, further perpetuating the societal issue of declining marriage rates in rural areas.

In response to the aforementioned challenges, the 'Rural Bachelor Marriage Project' was implemented in the mid-1990s. This initiative aimed to address the low preference of Korean women for rural areas by facilitating international marriages between Korean rural men and women from less developed countries, predominantly Southeast Asian nations. The project led to a significant increase in international marriages, with cases rising from 4,710 in 1990 to 11,605 in 2000, marking a 2.5-fold increase. Consequently, the proportion of international marriages to total marriages surged from 1.2% in 1990 to 13.5% in 2005, highlighting the project's substantial impact (National Statistics Office, Vital Statistics Annual Report). This trend has resulted in Korea consistently maintaining a high international marriage rate compared to other countries within the Confucian cultural sphere, such as Japan (6%) and Taiwan (10%) (Lee, 2011; National Statistics Office, 2022; Ullah & Chattoraj, 2023). The Rural Bachelor Marriage Project, therefore, not only addressed the immediate marital challenges faced by rural Korean men but also significantly influenced the demographic and social landscape of the country.

In this context, it is noteworthy that foreign brides overwhelmingly marry Korean men. In 2010, the ratio of Korean husbands to foreign wives was approximately 8%, while the ratio of Korean wives to foreign husbands was only 2.4%, indicating a significant disparity (Jones, 2012). Implicit in the 'Rural Bachelor Marriage Project' is the objective of producing a 'semi-Korean' child with the father being Korean. Essentially, international marriages in Korea have become a form of international division of labor in reproduction. In 2002, women accounted for 94.8% of marriage migrants; although this proportion has gradually decreased, it was still 85.9% in 2012 and 81.8% in 2020. The fact that married immigrant women constitute over 80% of the total married immigrants, maintaining a relatively stable pattern over time, underscores the collective preference for patrilineal descent, emphasizing the importance of the father's blood (Ahn, 2016; Won, 2008, 2019).

Examining the distribution of marriage migrant women's countries of origin, Vietnam holds the highest proportion, followed by China, the Philippines, and Korean-Chinese (Chosun-jok) (Ministry of Justice, 2020). This composition reflects a form of global hypergamy, wherein women from economically disadvantaged countries immigrate to nations with better living conditions through marriage, effectively practicing upward social mobility within their socioeconomic class (Jones, 2012). The predominance of marriage migrant women from underdeveloped countries contributes to their vulnerability, accentuating underlying causes such as economic disparities and societal pressures.

Government intervention in the feminization of migration, particularly focused on marriage migration, presents an intriguing aspect of the Korean context. From

the late 2000s to the early 2010s, local governments adopted proactive measures, providing financial support for international marriage costs to address population decline, the challenges posed by an aging society, and the difficulties faced by rural-residing men in marriage and family formation (Ahn, 2016; Won, 2008). Consequently, by 2007, over 60 local governments had implemented the policy of Sending Rural Bachelors to Get Married. Despite the risks associated with 'commodified marriages' facilitated by international marriage agencies, the government's involvement indicates that the collective preference for patrilineal descent played a significant role. This policy underscores the societal emphasis on maintaining patrilineal heritage, which has influenced government actions to support international marriages as a means of addressing demographic and social challenges.

This government-led international marriage model bears similarities to Japan's approach in the 1980s, where rural men were encouraged to marry Filipino women to address marriage issues (https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/901471.html). As noted in Chapter 3, the Korean government has proposed various policy alternatives and actively sought to integrate marriage migrant women, distinguishing them from other immigrant groups who are typically managed with the expectation that they will eventually depart. The identity of marriage migrant women as mothers and wives of Koreans forms the foundation for the Korean government's vigorous integration efforts.

Precarity of Immigrants and Its Gendered Dynamics in Korea

Precarity of Labor Immigrants

As previously discussed, the nature of immigrant labor in Korea exposes individuals to inherent precarity. Initially, the 'Industrial Training System' introduced in 1993 aimed to address labor shortages in 3D industries, but it resulted in significant challenges such as human rights violations and infringements on workers' rights. The transition to the 'Employment Permit System' (EPS) in 2004 sought to improve conditions for foreign workers (Son, 2018). However, despite its implementation, immigrant laborers continue to face substantial vulnerabilities. Key principles embedded in the EPS, such as prioritizing domestic employment and prohibiting permanent settlement (Choi, 2018), impose significant constraints on immigrant workers. The system's emphasis on short-term circulation, which prevents long-term settlement, complicates the perception of immigrant laborers as candidates for accommodation and integration. This highlights the heightened precarity of immigrant laborers compared to marriage migrant women.

Additionally, restrictions on workplace mobility under the EPS further exacerbate this vulnerability (Choi, 2018; Son, 2018). Despite recommendations from international bodies such as the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the International Labor Organization's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations to ease these restrictions, they persist under the current system. These limitations highlight the precarious

position of South Korean immigrant workers and call for policy reforms to address their systemic vulnerabilities.

This context elucidates the specific manifestations of precarity faced by immigrant laborers within this system. First, the vulnerability of immigrant workers in Korea can be discerned through the industries and sizes of enterprises in which they are employed. An examination of employment patterns by industry highlights a significant concentration of immigrant workers in the manufacturing sector, which remains consistently dominant compared to other industries (45.7% in 2017 and 43.9% in 2022). Following closely are service industries such as ‘Wholesale, Retail, Accommodation, and Food Services’ (18.5% in 2017 and 18.7% in 2022). Employment in the construction sector, categorized as a prominent 3D industry, also shows significant employment numbers (10.8% in 2017 and 12.2% in 2022). Second, the size of enterprises employing immigrants directly correlates with the vulnerabilities they face. As depicted in Figure 4.10 (Ministry of Justice, 2021), an examination of the ‘Employed Persons by Size of Enterprise’ reveals that approximately 70% of foreign laborers are employed in enterprises with fewer than 30 employees.

The distribution of businesses by size indicates that the segment comprising companies with 10–29 employees constitutes the largest proportion, accounting for approximately 28%–31% of the total. This is followed by businesses with 5–9 employees, which represent 21%–23% of the distribution, and microenterprises with four or fewer employees, comprising 18%–23%. In contrast, establishments with more than 300 employees make up only about 3% of the total foreign labor force.

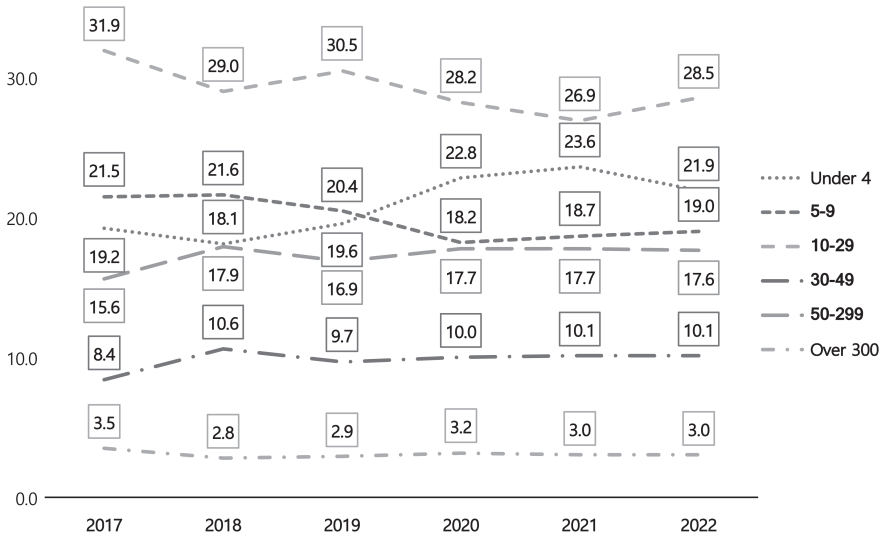


Figure 4.10 Proportion of Employment by Size of Enterprise (Unit: %)

Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistics Korea, 2018 Survey on Immigrants’ Living Conditions and Labour Force

Industries such as manufacturing, services, and construction, particularly within small-scale enterprises with fewer than 50 employees, commonly experience labor shortages. These shortages are due to low wages, unstable employment, and chronic wage arrears. This persistent labor mismatch is driven by domestic workers' reluctance to accept these conditions, leading to the necessity of employing immigrant workers.

According to a 2022 survey by the Small Business Federation, 90.6% of small and medium-sized enterprises cited difficulty in hiring domestic workers as the primary reason for employing foreign laborers. This difficulty has intensified in recent years, especially in the manufacturing, services, and agriculture sectors, with the percentage of firms reporting hiring challenges rising from 74% in 2020 to 91% in 2022—a 17% increase over 2 years. Despite their significant contributions to the Korean economy by supplying labor to small and medium-sized enterprises, immigrant workers remain vulnerable to numerous challenges, including legal ambiguities, insufficient legal protections, long working hours, low wages, chronic wage arrears, poverty, and racial discrimination.

Third, the precarity experienced by immigrant workers is exacerbated for illegal or undocumented laborers. Social biases against foreign immigrants, coupled with status-related disadvantages stemming from their undocumented status, compound issues such as poor working conditions and wage arrears. According to the Ministry of Justice (2022), the number of illegal residents in Korea as of 2021 was 411,270, representing approximately a 131.6% increase from 178,000 in 2012. These illegal or undocumented workers are predominantly employed in the construction sector, which is one of the representative 3D fields.

A survey conducted by Construction Workers Mutual Aid Association (2022) on the supply status and training demand of construction workers revealed that, out of approximately 350,000 foreign workers in the construction industry, only about 32,000 are legally employed, with the remainder estimated to be undocumented. This indicates that approximately 91% of foreign workers in the construction sector are undocumented. The high prevalence of undocumented workers in the construction industry is attributed to the chronic labor shortage and the inefficiencies in the foreign EPS, which does not fully address the unique needs of the construction sector. The EPS restricts workplace mobility, which is problematic in the construction industry where short-term employment and frequent site changes are common. This restriction on workplace mobility, which does not account for the construction sector's unique demands, inadvertently leads to the employment of undocumented workers, highlighting structural issues within the system.

Fourth, the occupational accident rate further illustrates the precarity of immigrant workers (Figure 4.11). According to the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (2022), the fatality rate among foreign workers, defined as the ratio of deaths per 10,000 workers, is 1.39 per 10,000, which is higher than the overall rate for domestic occupational injury insurance subscribers, at 1.09 per 10,000. Additionally, the accident injury rate, defined as the ratio of accident injuries per 100 workers, is higher among foreign workers at 0.87% compared

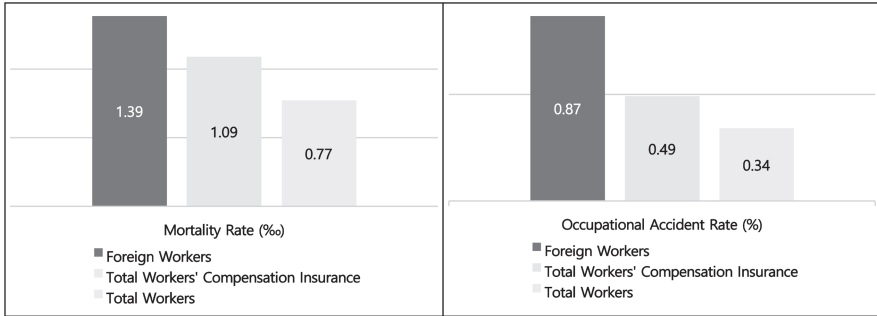


Figure 4.11 Occupational Accident Rate and Fatality Rate (2020)

Source: Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (2022), *The Occupational Health and Safety of Migrant Workers*

to 0.49% for domestic workers. While the number of domestic occupational accident fatalities decreased from 1,114 in 2010 to 855 in 2019, the number of foreign worker fatalities increased from 78 in 2010 to 104 in 2019. This high occupational accident rate among immigrant workers is attributed to several factors: their employment predominantly in small-scale businesses with poor working conditions and high risks, communication barriers, and limited access to injury prevention knowledge and information (Ministry of Labor, *Employment White Paper*, 2022a).

Finally, wage arrears further exemplify the vulnerability of migrant workers. According to available data from Hankook Ilbo and the Ministry of Labor (Hankook Ilbo, <https://m.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2023090516010005084>; Ministry of Labor), over 50% of migrant workers receive low wages, averaging between \$153.85 and \$230.77 per month, and experience chronic wage arrears. The total amount of wage arrears for migrant workers was \$769.23 million in 2019 and increased to \$923.08 million in 2022. Foreign workers involved in wage arrears number approximately 28,000, accounting for 12% of all victims of wage arrears. One reason for the increase in wage arrears among migrant workers is their employment in small-scale enterprises or their high level of employment instability, such as being employed illegally or without proper registration. For example, agricultural and fisheries businesses with fewer than five employees are not covered by the Wage Claim Guarantee Act, making it difficult for workers in these sectors to receive legal protection in cases of wage arrears. Additionally, resolving wage arrears often takes considerable time, which makes it difficult for workers to sustain their livelihood while awaiting resolution. Consequently, many workers return to their home countries without having received their unpaid wages before their visa or work permit expires. Furthermore, in cases of illegal residence, it is practically challenging to publicize or demand redress for wage arrears due to fears of deportation and punishment.

The Gendered Nature of Immigrant Precarity

Irrespective of gender, immigrants face precarity across various dimensions compared to domestic nationals. However, despite belonging to the same immigrant group, female immigrants experience distinct and more severe forms of precarity compared to male immigrants. These include disparate job opportunities, discrimination, poverty, human rights violations, labor exploitation, and sexual exploitation, including trafficking (Chammartin, 2002). The heightened vulnerability of female immigrants compared to their male counterparts stems from several dimensions.

First, this precarity pertains to the status dimension of female immigrants. Traditionally, female immigrants have been perceived not as independent immigrants but primarily as the accompanying spouses of male immigrants. Consequently, female immigrants have had lower social visibility than their male counterparts. This perception persists even when women immigrate as independent workers, leading to inherent vulnerabilities such as insufficient official immigration statistics. Moreover, female immigrants are typically employed in entry-level positions traditionally assigned to women, leading to greater precarity compared to men. Entry-level work poses a higher risk of discrimination, arbitrary employment terms, abuse, low wages, lack of social services, and poor working conditions. Despite governmental efforts to mitigate the informality and vulnerability of labor migration, achieving fundamental changes in the precarity of female immigrants, who are often in the lower echelons of the labor market, remains difficult. Given these circumstances, female immigrants face a 'double segregation' in the labor market compared to immigrant men (Beneria et al., 2012, p. 7). Female immigrants not only engage in more 'feminized' roles compared to native women in the receiving country but also participate in more segregated activities than their male counterparts.

The second dimension of precarity faced by female immigrants is their low visibility in the labor market. Female immigrants predominantly work in domestic and caregiving roles traditionally performed by women in the receiving country. The feminization of immigration has been driven by globalization, including the international division of reproductive labor (Parreñas, 2001) and the development of the global care chain (Hochschild, 2000). As a result, female labor immigrants predominantly find employment in the care and domestic work sectors.

Unlike male immigrants who work in public spaces, female immigrants primarily work in private settings, which reduces their public visibility. This low visibility exacerbates their precarity. Domestic care work often remains overlooked by labor laws due to its low visibility. Since domestic care work is performed mainly within households, it is not recognized as a traditional workplace, and household members are not officially recognized as employers. Consequently, despite being highly vulnerable to poor working conditions in these legal gaps, female immigrants face relatively little pressure for labor condition improvements. The invisibility of domestic workers decreases the focus on improving their labor conditions, such as achieving decent wages, good working conditions, necessary social security coverage, and labor protection (Chammartin, 2002, p. 46). This situation contrasts with

that faced by male immigrants, who are subjected to legal pressure to improve working conditions, particularly in more visible sectors like construction.

The third dimension of precarity for female immigrants is sexual exploitation rooted in gender roles. Female immigrants often face the additional risk of being coerced into human trafficking or sexual exploitation by illegal brokers (Cham-martin, 2002), which contributes to their involvement in the informal economy (Triandafyllidou, 2013). Such exploitation, which is difficult to quantify or trace, exacerbates their vulnerability, exposing victims to sex work and trafficking (Kem-padoo, 2007; Oso et al., 2022; Talleraas et al., 2022). Despite the challenges in identifying and addressing these issues, sex workers face high levels of stigmatiza-tion and operate under harsh conditions, often as undocumented migrants. Discus-sions about their plight are often less frequent compared to those about marriage or labor migrants, especially in countries where prostitution is illegal, such as Korea. Such invisibility complicates efforts to effectively combat sexual exploitation, re-ducing opportunities for legal protection and further increasing their vulnerability.

The multidimensional precarity experienced by female immigrants is particu-larly evident in the Korean context. As shown in Table 4.3, their vulnerabilities en-compass residency status, labor conditions, domestic violence, and sex trafficking, illustrating the diverse challenges they face. Furthermore, evidence shows that the vulnerabilities faced by female immigrants are worsening over time.

The Dual Challenges of Female Immigrants in Korea

The precarity experienced by female immigrants is multidimensional and closely linked to their roles as both wives and workers (Piper, 2015). Immigrant women often navigate the complex intersections of marriage, labor, and migration, some-times migrating first for employment and later marrying, or vice versa (Piper & Rocés, 2003). Consequently, the distinctions between female labor migration and marriage migration can blur, making it challenging to differentiate between in-ternational marriages arranged by brokers and instances of trafficking into such

Table 4.3 Types of Counseling for Female Immigrants on Danuri Helpline

| | 2007 | 2009 | 2011 | 2013 |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Domestic Violence | 1,674 | 4,205 | 5,744 | 9,931 |
| Marital Conflict | 4,600 | 8,452 | 9,350 | 16,590 |
| Family Conflict | - | 2,943 | 3,389 | 4,238 |
| Infidelity | - | 639 | 383 | - |
| Sexual Violence | 107 | 238 | 336 | 939 |
| Prostitution | 12 | 54 | 38 | 187 |
| Labor | 416 | 2,109 | 3,086 | 2,191 |
| Residence | 2,018 | 5,861 | 7,815 | 9,119 |
| Legal/Divorce Issues | 3,186 | 8,604 | 9,069 | 11,768 |

Note: Multiple counting.

Source: Danuri Helpline, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.¹

marriages (Jones, 2012). Recognizing the complexity of female immigrants' vulnerability shaped by the interplay of migration, labor, and marriage, this discussion explores their vulnerabilities within these contexts. Unlike male immigrants, female immigrants face various forms of oppression based on gender, race, ethnicity, and class, whether they are in roles as wives or workers (Oso et al., 2022, p. 125).

Precarity as Wives

In Korea, marriage immigrants seek new opportunities but also face new inequalities and challenges due to the difficult circumstances in their home countries. The challenges faced by marriage migrant women vary depending on their new husbands, their husbands' families, and the cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic contexts of the host country. These challenges are influenced by various forms of international marriage, including cross-border, transnational, and intercultural marriages (Jones, 2012; Ullah & Chattoraj, 2023).

One key challenge is the process of arranging international marriages through brokerage agencies. Data from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's 2020 International Marriage Brokerage Status Survey reveals that the average period from initial meeting to marriage is only 5.7 days. This brief timeframe raises concerns about whether foreign brides receive adequate and equitable information about their husbands and families (Jones, 2012). The disparity in brokerage fees, with Korean husbands paying an average of \$10,554 and foreign wives paying only \$531, suggests potential exploitation or commodification within Korea's international marriage industry.

In Korea, the majority of international marriage partners originate from countries with lower levels of economic development, such as Vietnam (83.5%), Cambodia (6.8%), Uzbekistan (2.7%), and China (2.3%). Women from these countries often face heightened precarity when entering marriages arranged through brokerage agencies. Brides introduced through these agencies frequently lack comprehensive information about their Korean spouses and families, leading them to assume caregiving roles within the household, especially for elderly or disabled family members, which can be akin to domestic work. Similar vulnerabilities arising from incomplete information about marriages arranged through agencies are also observed in Singapore (Jones, 2012). Interestingly, Korean-Chinese women, although marriage migrants experience lower vulnerability within households compared to women from other countries due to perceived ethnic similarities and fewer language barriers.

Another significant aspect of vulnerability for marriage migrant women through international marriage brokerage agencies is the age disparity between spouses. In Confucian cultures such as Korea, age is a crucial factor in shaping social power dynamics and influences various aspects of social interactions and hierarchies. In marriages between Korean men and foreign women facilitated by these agencies, Korean husbands are predominantly aged between 40 and 49 years (61.3%), followed by those over 50 years (20.6%), and those under 39 years (18%). In contrast, foreign wives are predominantly aged 19–24 years (46.3%), followed by

25–29 years (33.2%), and 30–34 years (14.2%). About 80% of foreign wives are in their twenties, and 8.3% are under 19 years old. This age distribution contrasts with marriages between Korean men and Korean women, where men aged 30–34 years make up the largest group (36.8%), and marriages involving women under 19 years old account for only 0.5% (National Statistics Office, 2019, Multicultural Population Statistics).

Similar age patterns are observed in Singapore, where 35% of men marrying foreign women are over 40, compared to only 10% of Singaporean women marrying men over 40 (Jones, 2012). These significant age differences between marriage migrant women and their husbands indicate the challenges these women may face in asserting their voices in crucial family decisions and their limited negotiating power within the household. Furthermore, the fact that 25% of Korean men marrying Vietnamese or Filipino women are remarried (Jones, 2012) suggests that their marital relationships may inherently involve inequality from the outset.

Another dimension of vulnerability is the perception of social stratification among immigrant women. Marrying Korean husbands who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, low-income families, or have low educational levels inherently carries risks for immigrant women. This vulnerability is evident in how marriage migrant women perceive changes in their social status after marriage. According to a survey conducted among 30,000 marriage migrant women residing in Gyeonggi Province, Korea's most populous province for immigrants (see Table 4.4), 31.9% of respondents felt that their situation worsened after marriage, while only 9% believed their status improved. Additionally, 16% of respondents felt they remained in the same lower socioeconomic class both in their home country and in Korea. The combined vulnerabilities from their home countries and the socio-economic challenges faced by their new husbands and families lead to a significant disparity between the expectations and the realities of seeking new opportunities and better living conditions through migration.

Domestic violence highlights the precarious situation faced by marriage migrant women. The decline in their social status often leads to economic insecurity

Table 4.4 Social Mobility before and after Immigration (Unit: %, Person)

| <i>Social class mobility path</i> | | <i>Count</i> | <i>Proportion</i> |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Downward Mobility | From Upper Class to Lower Class | 1,243 | 4.0 |
| | From Upper Class to Middle Class | 2,254 | 7.3 |
| | From Middle Class to Lower Class | 6,411 | 20.6 |
| Status quo | Keep Lower Class | 5,050 | 16.2 |
| | Keep Middle Class | 12,669 | 40.8 |
| | Keep Upper Class | 589 | 1.9 |
| Upward Mobility | From Lower Class to Middle Class | 2,262 | 7.3 |
| | From Lower Class to Upper Class | 96 | 0.3 |
| | From Middle Class to Upper Class | 501 | 1.6 |
| Total | | 31,075 | 100.0 |

Note: Perception of marriage immigrants.

Source: Park (2013).

and poverty, which also results in interpersonal violence, such as domestic abuse. Marriage migrant women face dual vulnerabilities: economic instability and violence. Thus, it is crucial to view their socioeconomic status and poverty within the broader concept of human security (Brush, 2013).

According to counseling data on the challenges faced by migrant women, domestic violence cases among marriage migrant women have steadily increased. Data from 2015 to 2021 show a significant rise in domestic violence counseling cases, indicating the prevalence of abuse among these women. Reported forms of domestic violence include severe verbal abuse (81%), pressure to conform to Korean lifestyle norms (41%), threats of physical violence (38%), and interference in financial matters (33%), among other issues (National Human Rights Commission of Korea, Survey on the Living Conditions of Marriage Migrants for Stable Residency, 2017).

Precarity as Workers

As workers, female immigrants experience precarious conditions that are deeply intertwined with gender relations and stereotypes. The challenges encountered by female immigrant workers often differ significantly from those faced by their male counterparts, reflecting broader gender-based vulnerabilities.

First, the labor market participation of female immigrants is notably lower compared to male immigrants. While the employment rate among male immigrants stands at 81%, which is comparable to rates in the United Kingdom and the United States and notably higher than in most Western European countries, the employment rate among female immigrants is only 51%. This figure is consistent with rates observed in the United States and many European countries (OECD, 2019). This discrepancy in labor market participation between female and male immigrants mirrors the gap observed between native women and men. Among immigrant women, 53.6% are engaged in non-economic activities such as childcare and housework, with over 90% of marriage immigrants assuming these responsibilities (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, National Multiculturalism Survey, 2019). Consequently, immigrant women face economic vulnerability due to their exclusion from economic activities. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced in Korean society, where unpaid work such as childcare and housework is undervalued. Marriage immigrant women, who undertake over 90% of domestic care work, are especially susceptible to these inherent vulnerabilities.

Second, the precarity of female immigrant workers is underscored by the concept of 'racialized labor'. In the labor market, female immigrants face dual vulnerabilities stemming from their identities as both 'women' and 'immigrants'. Beyond these dual vulnerabilities, their 'country of origin' further compounds their vulnerability, leading to labor market segregation based on nationality. For example, Korean-Chinese (48.3%) and Chinese (47.9%) immigrants are predominantly employed in retail and accommodation sectors. In contrast, Vietnamese (62.1%), Filipino (51%), and Cambodian (53%) immigrants are primarily concentrated in manufacturing industries. Additionally, Thai (40.3%) and Cambodian (53%)

immigrants show a relatively high concentration in the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors. These patterns illustrate how the labor market segregates female immigrants based on nationality, contributing to their heightened precarity in specific sectors.

The precarity faced by female immigrant workers varies significantly depending on their country of origin, leading to differences in exposure to poor working conditions across various sectors. According to the 2017 Survey on Working Conditions of Foreign Workers (Seol & Go, 2017), sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries exhibit varying degrees of vulnerability influenced by scale and sector-specific conditions. For instance, data from the Ministry of Employment and Labor's Survey on Labor Conditions by Employment Type in 2019 reveals that the highest proportion of low-wage female immigrants earning less than 1–2 million won per month are found in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries (70.4%), followed by manufacturing (51.9%) and service sales (43%). Furthermore, in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, businesses with fewer than 5 employees constitute 89.8% of establishments, indicating that smaller-scale enterprises generally offer lower employment stability, wage security, and social protections. This situation underscores the heightened precarity of Thai and Cambodian female immigrants, who are predominantly employed in these sectors. In conclusion, the precarity of female immigrant workers varies not only between male and female immigrant groups but also within the group of female immigrant workers themselves, highlighting the nuanced impact of country of origin on their labor market experiences.

Third, the precarity experienced by female immigrant workers often surpasses that of their male counterparts, particularly in terms of wages and the size of the businesses they work in. Approximately 52.5% of female immigrants earn wages ranging from \$770 to \$1,540 per month, with some working over 40 hours per week yet earning less than \$770 monthly. This stark reality highlights female immigrants as emblematic of low-wage workers who frequently face labor exploitation, particularly in sectors traditionally dominated by women. Moreover, the size of businesses employing female immigrants is a crucial factor influencing their vulnerability. While previous analyses have explored the overall distribution of immigrant workers by business size, this section focuses specifically on female immigrants (Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2022). Notably, 36% of female immigrant workers are employed in businesses with 10–29 employees, followed by those with fewer than 5 employees (34.2%) and those with 5–9 employees (15.5%).

In sectors where women are predominantly employed, such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, businesses with fewer than 5 employees comprise 89.8% of establishments. Similarly, in the retail, food, and accommodation sectors, over half of the employed female immigrants work in businesses of this small scale. These smaller enterprises often operate outside rigorous legal scrutiny regarding working conditions and show lower rates of social insurance participation, reflecting greater instability in social security. Data from the Ministry of Labor's Survey on Labor Conditions by Employment Type (2022b) highlight significant disparities in social insurance enrollment rates based on business size.

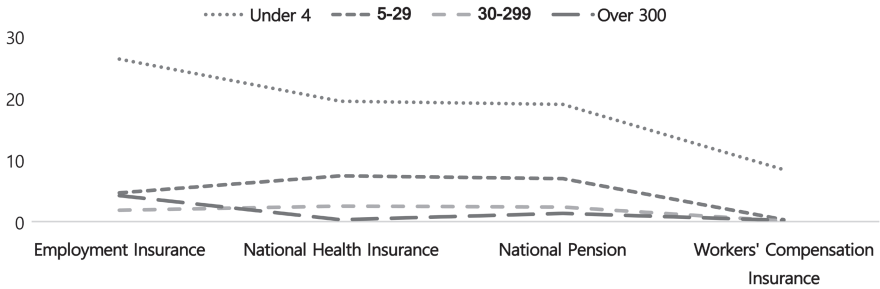


Figure 4.12 Non-Enrollment Rate in Social Insurance by Size (2022) (Unit: %)

Source: Ministry of Employment and Labor, Survey on Labor Conditions by Employment Type

As depicted in Figure 4.12, smaller-scale businesses consistently show lower enrollment rates across all major worker insurances—employment insurance, health insurance, national pension, and industrial accident compensation insurance. Particularly notable gaps are observed in enterprises with fewer than five employees. Since over 50% of female immigrant workers are employed in such small-scale businesses, their vulnerability becomes apparent. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by the fact that female immigrant workers are often employed in sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, and fisheries. These industries are commonly exempt from industrial accident compensation insurance coverage. Consequently, female immigrant workers in these sectors lack the protection typically provided by industrial accident compensation insurance, which adds to their precarious working conditions and absence of a safety net in case of workplace injuries.

Fourth, within the same immigrant group, there are notable differences in vulnerability between male and female workers. According to the Survey on the Status of Immigrants' Residence and Employment (National Statistics Office, 2022), female immigrant workers are disproportionately employed in small-scale businesses compared to their male counterparts. Specifically, over 50% of female immigrants work in establishments with fewer than five employees, while only 33% of male immigrants are similarly employed. Furthermore, within businesses characterized by low wages (earning less than \$1,540 per month), females constitute 55% of employees, contrasting with only 28% of males. This highlights a significant gender disparity in low-wage employment. The survey also reveals that 63% of female immigrant workers lack fixed-term employment contracts, indicating heightened employment insecurity compared to their male counterparts.

Social insurance coverage is another area of concern. Both male and female immigrant workers exhibit high rates of non-enrollment in employment insurance; however, the proportion is higher among females. Additionally, over 53% of female immigrant workers are employed in establishments not covered by occupational injury insurance, compared to 29% of males. This lack of coverage leaves female immigrants particularly vulnerable to workplace accidents. Economically, the income disparity is stark: a majority of female immigrants earn between \$770 and \$1,540 per

month, significantly lower than their male counterparts. Specifically, 67.2% of female immigrants fall within this income bracket, while only 31.7% of male immigrants do. Conversely, 61.2% of male immigrants earn between \$1,540 and \$2,300 per month, whereas only 32.6% of female immigrants earn within this range (Kim et al., 2019).

Disparities in education and training between male and female immigrant workers are significant, as highlighted by recent surveys (National Statistics Office, Survey on Foreign Employment and the Status of Immigrants' Residence and Employment, 2020). Specifically, only 19.9% of female immigrant workers receive education and training from employers or employer organizations, compared to 37.2% of male counterparts. In contrast, female workers often access educational resources through welfare centers (14.3%) or private academies (17.8%). Education and training are crucial for enhancing employability and improving labor market outcomes. However, the disparity in access reveals a systemic issue where female immigrant workers face fewer and less structured opportunities compared to their male counterparts. Male immigrants benefit from more consistent and organized training programs, while female immigrants encounter less systematic and lower-quality educational provisions. This gap in educational opportunities not only reflects the current precariousness of female immigrant labor market participation but also suggests potential future vulnerabilities, as limited training and development may hinder long-term career advancement and stability.

Note

- 1 Danuri Helpline serves as a comprehensive information call center dedicated to multicultural families, offering tailored services based on the settlement stages of immigrant women and the lifecycle of multicultural families. It provides counseling and emergency support specifically designed for immigrant women who are victims of violence.

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