

# Discrimination of Immigrants in South Korea

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, the number of international marriages and labor migration has been rocketing in South Korea due to rapid economic development and government policies which aim to solve the marriage problem of rural bachelors (Constable et al. 104; Shin 62). In order to facilitate the smooth assimilation of these immigrants and present Korea as a modern cosmopolitan society, the government implemented a variety of campaigns. However, due to prolonged misunderstandings and national superiority as a member of a more developed country, immigrants living in South Korea constantly face discrimination from locals. In order to raise public awareness of Koreans and solve the discrimination problem, there is a need to unravel the discriminatory events against immigrants in Korea.

## Thesis Statement

At the family level, immigrants experience domestic violence based on ethnicity. At the community level, immigrants face unfair treatment from the mass media and other society members in employment, bullying in schools, and advocacy of stereotypes because of their origin, appearance, and unalignment of Korean pure-blood nationalism. At the national level, immigrants suffer from civil rights exclusion and unilateral, selective assimilation policy due to the disapproval of Korean identity.

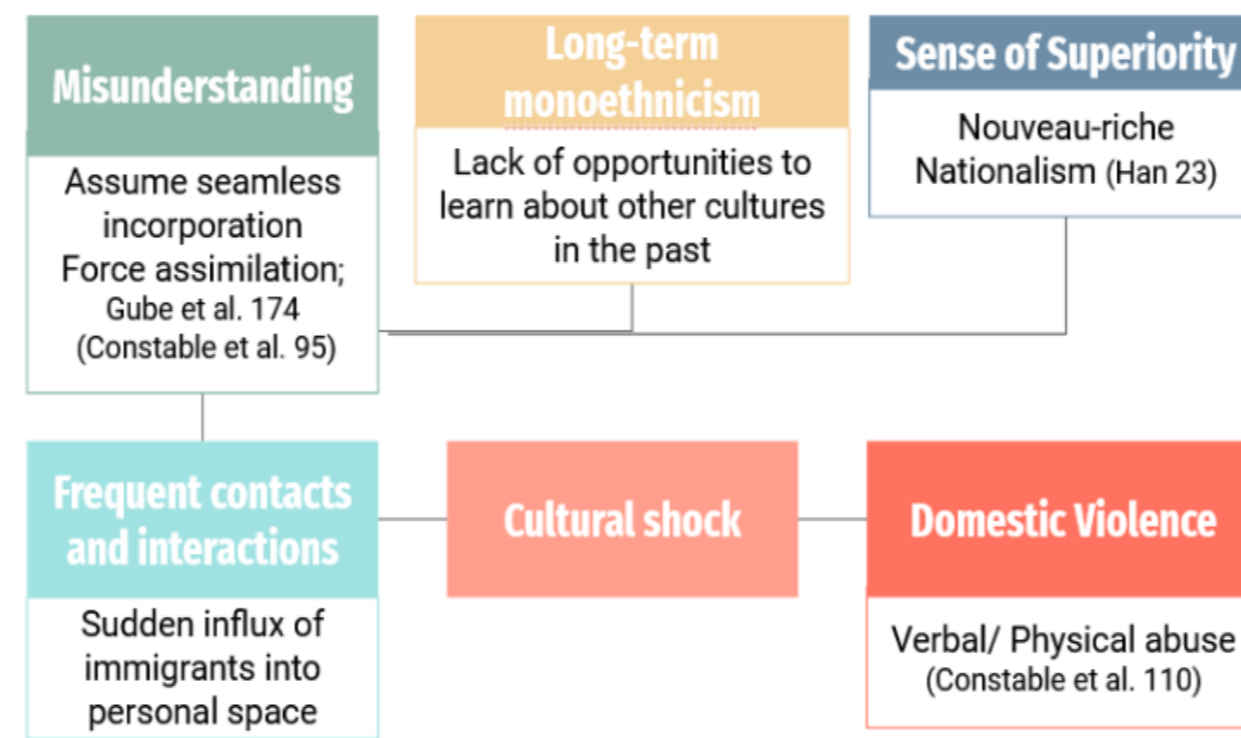
## Purpose and Methodology

This paper investigates the discrimination issues of immigrants for public discussion and demonstrates the current status of immigrant discrimination in Korea by delving into discriminatory events and factors immigrants encounter in South Korea through synthesizing statistics, ethnographic literature, book chapters, journal articles, and interview results.

## Key Findings

### At the Family Level

Since immigrants have different cultural backgrounds from Korean families, when migrants marry and live with their Korean family, cultural shocks or conflicts due to misunderstanding and contradictions of cultures and languages are inevitable. The inability to resolve cultural conflicts plus the prolonged disputes easily result in verbal or even physical abuse. In the 1990s, the Korean government promoted international marriages between the Chinese descendants in Korea or the Chosŏnjok as a way to solve the marriage problems and secure ethnic homogeneity or pure-blood nationalism at the same time. Since Chosŏnjoks presumably have a similar culture to that of Koreans, families believe that migrants can incorporate into their families seamlessly and force unilateral acceptance (Constable et al. 95; Gube et al. 174). On the other hand, as most of them come from less privileged countries like China, Vietnam, the Philippines, etc. with lower socioeconomic status and education levels, nouveau-riche nationalism makes Koreans gain a sense of superiority over them (Han 23). In Nicole Constable et al.'s piece, Yonjae's mother-in-law said to Yonjae that her Chinese nationality should account for all her wrongdoings. Yonjae also received a daily onslaught of insults and false accusations of being lazy and dirty from family members cited as the cause of the problem (93-96). In the familial context, interactions are more frequent, resulting in more acute exclusion and xenophobia.



### At the Community Level

#### 1) Workplace discrimination

It is challenging for migrants to secure a job because they are often discriminated against in the workplace. Usually, migrants can only access to lower positions and limited employment options which can be demonstrated by the following cases. Migrants may receive unnecessary "physical tests", make to work overtime without penalty payment, or get paid less than the minimum wage (Han 71-72; Lee 61). The jobs accessible are usually informal, unstable work, as they move from one employer to another employer frequently, making them live in precarity and vulnerable to financial problems. Regarding promotion, migrants are prevented from such opportunities as they are viewed as "eternal novices" and some Koreans reckon that these foreign workers take away local jobs (Han 69).

#### 2) Schools

Children of migrants also experience bullying and marginalization in schools because of their nationality, such as name-calling. For example honhyŏl (mixed blood), Amerasians (offspring of Americans and Asians), kkamdungi or blacky (Han 107; Lee 63-64). These names not only illustrate the blood-based superiority of Koreans but also stereotypes toward foreign-born kids or mixed-race kids.

#### 3) Mass Media and Neighborhood

There is a handful of reports about farmers who invest to marry wives got dumped after their partners gained permanent residence and claim these engagements as marriages solely for Korean citizenship instead of sincere commitment (Constable et al. 85). Reporters also stress multicultural children as children of underprivileged Korean men and migrant women from less developed nations and advocate the logic of marginalization results in economic and political burden on Korean society (Shin 70). These biased reports influenced the rest of the population and make them feel immigrants are economically and culturally inferior with impure motives. Not only the media is creating discriminatory claims, but the Korean population also used to judge immigrants through outwardly shown cultural practices like clothes, skin color, ethnicity, place of origin, food, language, etc. (Gube et al. 170). Figures show that 40% of Koreans do not want to have foreign neighbors and immigrants are seriously discriminated against in the neighborhood with a score of 3.17 out of 4 (4 is the most serious) (Cho and Lim 57; Kim et al. 2).

### At the National Level

#### 1) Exclusion of Civil Rights

Since the recognition of one's membership by the nation-state can be illustrated by the citizenship offered, and citizenship is the boundary drawn to decide who to be included or excluded, these rights become fundamental proxies to examine discrimination in society (Choo 6). As shown in the figure below, migrants are treated unfairly with barriers preventing from being recognized, especially labor migrants as Koreans reckon them as stealing away job opportunities (Gube et al. 164). In such a way, due to the lack of legal protection which symbolize national recognition, the bargaining power of the migrants is limited, resulting in ignorance of migrants' civil rights such as the right of property management, voting, labor rights including health insurance, compensation, minimum wage, etc. (Choo 132; Constable et al. 108; Gube et al 168; Han 49).

#### 2. Selective Unilateral *Damunhwa* Policies

Scholars describe the *damunhwa juui* in Korea as a "differential exclusionary model" as policies engage foreign brides only with limited aspects (Choo 2; Han 47). The Korean government does not include migrants such as non-Korean grooms who can produce merely non-Korean families hence not contributing to Korean society, and labor (Constable et. al 108). Scholars also question the government's understanding of multiculturalism since assimilation of migrants is unilateral and major efforts focus on the adaptation of newcomers into the local society only. Meanwhile, education to eliminate discrimination from Koreans and cultivate embracing attitudes towards foreign culture is scarce, making the incorporation the sole responsibility of immigrants. The distinct interpretation of multiculturalism also prohibits the promotion of the core value of respecting human rights instead of focusing on tangible elements like ethnic food and costumes in the *damunhwa* campaigns, which also reduces the effectiveness of *damunhwa* policies (Gube et al 171; Han 49).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper delves into discrimination at the family, community and national level and immigrants suffer from domestic violence, unfair treatment, bullying, stereotypes, exclusion of civil rights and forced unilateral assimilation. Research suggests that the Korean government should re-examine multiculturalism in Korea and set up anti-racial discrimination laws to relieve the discrimination problem.

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