1 Migrants in Korea and Multicultural Policies of Korea

Korea used to be a typical migrant sending country in the 1960s and 1970s. It sent miners and nurses to Germany, construction workers to the Middle East, and soldiers to Vietnam. In the late 1980s, Korea underwent a rapid economic growth followed by the development of labor movements. As a result, workers’ wages increased and 3D (Dirty, Difficult, Dangerous) industries began to suffer from labor shortages. The demand for cheap labor went up, and Korea started to import migrant workers from low-wage Asian countries. Now Korea is one of the major migrant receiving countries in Northeast Asia.¹

In 1992, Korea and China established diplomatic relations. After that, ethnic Korean Chinese people, who or whose ancestors had migrated to China during the Japanese colonial era, began to migrate to Korea and their number has grown since then. Around that time, the number of entries of migrant workers from Southeast Asian countries also began to increase.² Korean economy needed migrant workers badly, but there was a widespread belief that the settlement of unskilled migrant

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¹ As of 31st December 2010, the number of foreigners residing in Korea is 1.26 million (2.5 percent of all population). Among them, almost one million are long-term stayers and the majority of them (660,898 persons) are migrant workers. Since 2001, marriage migration has increased rapidly and there are 141,654 unnaturalized marriage migrants as of the same date. The number of international students, which is 87,480, is also going up fast.

² Out of 660,898 migrant workers, only 6.2 percent are professional or skilled workers, and the rest 93.8 percent are unskilled workers employed under the Employment Permit System (EPS), the Visitors’ Employment System (VES), or some other systems. Those who can be employed under the VES are ethnic Korean migrants and their proportion (42.8 percent, 282,622 persons) is the highest compared to those employed under the EPS.
workers would be a social burden for Korean society in general. Therefore, the Korean government decided to make its labor migration system a temporary rotation one, under which the long-term stay, family reunion, and settlement of migrant workers are not permitted. The social adaptation and/or integration of migrant workers were not taken into account in the process of policy making because they were considered as temporary sojourners who would or should leave the country soon.

However, in the early 2000s, the Korean government was forced to change its stance on migration policy as international marriages between Korean men and women from other Asian countries increased. Unlike migrant workers, marriage migrant women and their children were considered to live in Korea permanently, thus, their adaptation and integration into Korean society became a serious social issue. The Korean government started to implement social integration policies for them under the title of “Multicultural Policies”. Related acts, such as *Act on the Treatment of Foreigners in Korea* and *Support for Multicultural Families Act* have been legislated, and relatively large budget has been appropriated for the programs to support multicultural families compared to the budgets for other minority groups.

Nevertheless, multicultural policies of the Korean government have shown various limitations. Most of all, based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, they are patriarchal and assimilative in nature. Also, without an official organization responsible for overall administration of multicultural policies, different government agencies operate similar programs competitively.

*Support for Multicultural Families Act* defines the term “multicultural family” as a “family comprised of a married immigrant or a person who obtained permission for naturalization and a person who acquired the Korean nationality by birth.” By this firm definition based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, a family comprised of two immigrants or a family comprised of an immigrant and a person who acquired the Korean nationality by naturalization is not a “multicultural family.” In addition, the Act pays little attention to multicultural families of an immigrant man and a Korean woman. Multicultural programs designed to support multicultural families usually focus on Korean language and culture education, which represents the one-sided assimilation policies of Korea. One of the problems of such policies and programs is that they have been designed and implemented without taking opinions from multicultural families themselves. Moreover, by stigmatizing marriage migrant women and their children as a special group who need help, Korean multicultural policies are spreading prejudice against them to the public.

(26.9 percent, 177,546 persons) or other systems. Most ethnic Korean migrant workers are from China.