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Skilled Migrants and Their Encounters with Care and Employment Regimes: Childcaring among Highly Skilled Female Migrants from Korea in Germany

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Abstract: By analysing the childcaring experiences of female skilled workers from South Korea (hereafter, Korea) in Germany, this paper maintains that the challenges in labour market participation for highly skilled women, and especially those with children, should be understood in the context of their encounters with similar and different care and employment regimes between their home and host countries. On the theoretical level, this research confirms the argument that the migration of highly skilled workers should be contextualized not from a neoclassical perspective in which the maximization of economic profits takes priority, but from an institutional point of view in which social and cultural norms, practices, and policies in both the home and host societies are taken into consideration. Specifically, through a series of in-depth interviews conducted with skilled female migrants from Korea, this paper highlights the significance of taking the function of similar and different caring and employment regimes into account in explaining the challenges faced by highly skilled migrant women in labour market participation. On the empirical level, this paper sheds light on the migration experiences of skilled women from Asia as well as the (dis)integration processes of newcomers from third-national countries in Germany, with a focus on female migrants from Korea.

Keywords: care and employment regimes; highly skilled female migrants; childcaring; Korea; Germany



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1. Introduction

In today's knowledge-based societies, countries have become highly reliant on highly skilled workers since they lead innovation and provide nations with global competitiveness (Burmam et al. 2018). In this line, the global 'race for talent' (e.g., Shachar 2006) to attract the "best and brightest" immigrants has become one of the immediate agendas for industrialized economies (Cerna 2009). For the EU, which has lagged behind other traditional destination countries of highly skilled workers such as the USA, Canada, and Australia, attracting highly skilled workers has become one of the most pressing concerns.

In fact, skilled migrants "represent an increasingly large component of global migration streams" (Iredale 2001, p. 8). In particular, among increasingly skilled workers, around one-third of highly skilled migrants to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries come from Asia. Moreover, there is evidence that among the highly skilled, females are more eager to migrate than males (Widmaier and Dumont 2011). Despite the delays in measures introduced to attract skilled migrant workers due to an active migration policy in place since the early 2000s, the ratio of educational migrants as well as skilled migrants from Asia in Germany has increased. In particular, the ratio of female skilled migrant workers from East Asia in Germany has increased to a striking extent (Kwon 2019a). This tendency shows the need to examine how this newly emerging migrant group is (dis)integrated into the labour market in the EU.

Despite the increasing mobility of highly skilled female migrants, research on highly skilled women in migration studies is lacking (Meares 2010; Yeoh and Willis 2005). Since low-paid female migrant workers have filled the gap in reproductive labour as care

providers as a result of the increase in women's waged work in Europe, the contribution as well as the working conditions of low-skilled female workers such as care and domestic workers within different care, migration, and employment regimes in Europe has stood at the centre of the discussion (e.g., [Hellgren 2015](#); [Williams and Gavanas 2008](#)).

From the limited research on highly skilled female migrants, most of the existing studies point out the growing working burden in the context of increasing domestic responsibility ([Aure 2013](#); [Cooke 2007](#); [Ho 2006](#); [Purkayastha 2005](#)) and the fewer opportunities in accessing the labour market as a consequence ([Kofman 2000](#)). The literature on highly skilled female migrants provides great insights in better understanding the fact that "highly skilled migrants are not homogeneously 'privileged'" ([van Riemsdijk and Wang 2017](#), p. 4) but that social markers such as marital status, age, and race/ethnicity play a significant role in these migrants' participation in the labour market. Yet, since the existing literature has failed to explain the mechanism of the challenges and obstacles that highly skilled women face in the configuration of their labour between the productive and reproductive spheres in detail, especially in the management of childcare, it appears as if women's increasing responsibilities in the domestic sphere as well as their marginalization in the labour market are "natural" outcomes of migration.

Against the backdrop of previous research, this paper aims to explore how the mobility of skilled migrant women involves a process of encountering and exploring similar and different care and employment regimes between their home and host societies, with a particular focus on highly skilled female migrants from Korea, which is one of the non-EU states in question. Also, this paper aims to empirically demonstrate that the social norm of considering childcare as primarily a women's responsibility remains robust, regardless of variations in care and employment regimes. As a result, unequal gender relations persist even among highly skilled migrants. Due to the decreasing skilled labour force, the number of new migrants from non-EU member states has been on the rise in recent years in Germany¹. This research adapted in-depth and semi-structured interviews as a means of gaining partial insights into people's actions and thoughts. The next section begins with a literature review on highly skilled female migrants from Asia and a description of the increase in the number of young skilled workers from Korea in Germany. It is followed by an explanation in Section 3 of the trajectories of childcaring and employment regimes in Germany and Korea. Section 4 explains the data and methodologies. The encountering of Korean migrant working mothers with similar and different employment and care regimes will be discussed in the following section. In the conclusion, the findings and implications of the research will be discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. From Care Providers to Care Seekers: Highly Skilled Female Migrants from Asia

Regarding migration and childcare regimes in Europe, low-skilled females such as care/domestic workers have traditionally stood at the centre of the discussion (e.g., [Hellgren 2015](#); [Williams and Gavanas 2008](#)). More specifically, when it comes to female migrants from Asia, the transnational experiences of low-skilled female workers such as domestic workers ([Heyzer and Wee 1995](#); [Huang and Yeoh 1996](#); [Parreñas 2001](#); [Pratt 1997](#)) and care workers ([Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001](#); [Kingma 2007](#)) have attracted plenty of scholarly attention in migration as well as feminist studies in general. Even though this body of literature has effectively explained the economic contributions of low-skilled female migrant workers from Asia to the global labour market, it has been pointed out that the stereotypical view of Asian women as care providers has led to the marginalization of other experiences of female migrants from Asia, such as highly skilled workers ([Raghuram and Kofman 2004](#)). Moreover, the literature overlooks how migrant women are (dis)integrated into care regimes not as care givers, but as care seekers.

Among the limited number of works on skilled female migrants from Asia and family management, most studies shed light on the interrelations between the strengthening gender role of skilled migrant women as family managers in migration and the hinderances

that they face in the labour market as a result. In particular, when it comes to childcare, previous research testifies to a loss of domestic support from domestic care services and extended family members (Ho 2006; Man 1997; Salaff and Greve 2004; Yeoh and Willis 2005) as well as the lack of an available care system in the host societies (Purkayastha 2005). These issues can have severe consequences for the career development of these women, such as through ‘de-skilling’, ‘feminization’, ‘re-domestication’, and ‘compromise careers’ (Meares 2010).

Previous research on the interaction between childcare and the participation of skilled female migrants in the labour market is insightful since it highlights how the focus on highly skilled workers should be shifted from seeing them as “economic agents” to seeing them as social, cultural, and political agents who belong to various categories of race/ethnicity, class, nationality, marital status, and gender (Bailey and Mulder 2017; van Riemsdijk and Wang 2017). These studies address a critical question on neoclassical theory, according to which the transnational mobility of skilled migrants is perceived as highly free, fluid, and the result of individual decision-making. Moreover, previous research on the family management of highly skilled workers demonstrates the importance of taking both individuals’ own life-courses and the connected lives of highly skilled workers into account (Bailey and Mulder 2017; Kōu and Bailey 2014).

Even though previous research has contributed to a better understanding of the gendered nature of family management within skilled migrant households and the difficulties that professional migrant women face in the labour market, discussion of childcaring is still lacking. Moreover, the caring practices as well as the strategies of professional migrant women should be analysed using a different framework from those of undereducated migrants. For instance, childcaring among skilled migrant women should be contextualized within the care and employment regimes of the host society, since highly skilled migrants as well as their linked movers have easier access to obtain rights to work, reside in the host country in the long term, and apply for a permanent visa (Bailey and Mulder 2017). Their circumstances are often different from low- and semi-skilled migrant groups, “whose access and entitlements to rights and services are extremely limited” (Pearson and Kusakabe 2012, p. 153). As a result, transnational childcaring practices are more prevalent among low-skilled female migrant workers (e.g., Adem 2021; Ukwatta 2010; Waruwu 2022).

In this sense, this research resonates with the arguments made by Geddes (2003), who maintains that “the relationship between migration and welfare needs to be broken down into more specific consideration forms of migration and types of welfare state” (p. 152). Moreover, previous research on the childcare practices of highly skilled female migrants typically underlines the importance of formal and informal institutional support, such as having easier access to caregiving oneself. However, the processes behind how skilled migrant women interact with the care and employment regimes in the host society and the mechanisms of how these encounters with similar and different childcare and employment regimes shape the lives and working practices of highly skilled female migrants is yet to be discussed. When considering that the EU has attempted to attract highly skilled workers from non-EU countries in recent years, we should pay more attention to how migrants with diverse types and backgrounds of migration encounter care regimes in Europe. This study attempts to address this oversight by focusing on the childcaring practices of highly skilled female migrants from Korea in Germany and the challenges they face as working mothers due to both discrepant development trajectories in childcare and employment regimes and similarities in gender role expectations in the home and host societies.

2.2. “Newcomers” from Korea in Germany: The Growing Number of Young Skilled Workers

When it comes to studies on Korean migrants in Germany, mining workers as well as care-workers from Korea who migrated to Germany during the 1960s and 1970s through the guestworker (Gastarbeiter) program have stood at the centre of the discussion. In the meantime, through the introduction of a migration policy designed for skilled workers in Germany, the sociodemographic landscape for newcomer Koreans has dramatically

changed. Given the lack of research on Korean newcomers in Germany, [Kwon \(2019a\)](#) provides a good overview of the trends and features of newcomers from Korea based on statistical data collected between 2004 and 2018. According to this research, Korean immigration increased by 75.4% between 2004 and 2018. Moreover, it is noteworthy that most of the mobility between 2004 and 2018 involved young people aged between 15 and 35 years old, which comprised 44.3% of the Korean migrants. Young individuals who have coined the term “Hell Chosun” to express their dissatisfaction with the demanding, competitive, and difficult aspects of living in Korea ([Shen 2019](#)) have initiated a trend of lifestyle migration to Scandinavian and EU countries since the 2010s. These young migrants are driven by the desire to escape the pressures associated with constant self-improvement, long working hours, hierarchical organizational cultures, the absence of a robust social welfare system, and the growing social inequality prevalent in Korea ([Abelmann et al. 2009](#)). Furthermore, skilled professionals with families have also embraced the concept of “work–life balance” and endeavoured to secure access to a stable social welfare system by engaging in transnational mobility towards EU countries. Notably, Germany has emerged as an attractive destination for young Korean job seekers, ranking first in Europe and third among Western nations, trailing only behind the USA and Canada, according to a survey conducted by the [Human Resources Development Service of Korea \(2020\)](#).

In particular, the growth of economic participation rates among female migrants from Korea is significant, with an increase of 472% from 316 (out of the total 6089 Korean female migrants) in 2006 to 1810 (out of 12,135 Korean female immigrants) in 2018. This increase is astounding when considering that the increase rate in female migrants’ participation in the female labour market was 183.9% (2077 out of 20,963 in 2006 to 2895 out of 41,515 in 2018) among migrants from China and 65% (1383 out of 7669 in 2006 to 2585 out of 10,765 in 2018) among migrants from Japan during the same period. This increasing share of female skilled migrants from East Asia is also reflected in the statistics for Blue Card² holders in Germany: 34.8% of the Blue Card holders from China are female, along with 21.1% of those from Korea and 10.8% of those from Japan. This result matches the global trend: [Dumont et al. \(2007\)](#) provide statistical evidence showing that female migration to OECD countries has expanded and particularly that the migration of highly skilled women has increased in recent years ([Kwon 2019a](#)). Of course, the number of the female migrant workers from Korea is not significant in terms of the absolute number in the whole migrant landscape in Germany, in which most migrants come from Europe in a broader sense (69.3%), while the ratio of the Korean migrants among all migrants in Germany is only 0.3% as of the end of 2020 ([Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung](#))³. However, when considering that previous research has focused on migrants from conventional sending countries in Europe, this research has a significant meaning in the sense that it highlights the experiences of migrants from one of the newcomer countries. Furthermore, it is meaningful to focus on young migrants from East Asia since they are expected to be positioned as a future potential labour force in Germany. In 2020, the number of students from Korea ranked as the 14th largest among foreign students in higher educational institutions in Germany. Meanwhile, students from China constituted the largest group, accounting for 10.8% of the total foreign student population in the country ([Statistisches Bundesamt \(German Federal Statistical Office\) 2021–2022](#)).

When it comes to the transnational mobility of young Korean women, the study of young Korean migrant women in conventional migration destinations for Koreans so far, such as the UK and Canada, provides great insights in understanding the motivation, gendered desire, and settlement process of young Korean female migrants. [Kim \(2010\)](#) has explored the gendered desire to become a “global citizen”, which is reflected in the transnational mobility of young Korean women in the UK. [Kim \(2005\)](#) discusses the desire of young Korean women to engage in transnational mobility as a negotiation strategy to handle patriarchal cultural norms in Korea. Even though these studies provide great insights into understanding the push factors of transnational mobility among young Korean women, most of the studies highlight the transnational experiences of young single women

since their interviewees mainly include educational migrants. The increase in youth migration, including student migration, demonstrates the importance of considering the life-courses of young people who are on the verge of “adulthood”. The migration process is interconnected with the life-courses of these migrants as well as their linked movers (Bailey and Mulder 2017). This study attempts to deepen our understanding of the work–life management of Korean female professionals in Germany by focusing on the childcaring experiences and challenges within (in)formal institutional childcaring practices in the German context.

3. The Institutionalization of Childcaring and Employment Regimes in Germany and Korea

In this section, we will overview the development trajectories of childcaring and employment regimes in Germany and Korea to understand the background of the challenges and obstacles that working mothers from Korea in Germany face.

3.1. Family Policy Reforms and the “Standardization” of Employment Patterns among Working Mothers in Germany

Between the end of WWII and 1990, under the socially conservative welfare state, women in West Germany were expected to take responsibility for unpaid caring work, while men were positioned as full-time workers. Joint taxation for couples (Steiner and Wrohlich 2004), a lack of formal care for young children (Rosenfeld et al. 2004), longer and low-paid parental leave entitlements (Lauer and Weber 2003), and the continuity of social norms through the institutionalization of the male breadwinner-centred employment system and social welfare system (Gottschall and Schröder 2013) have all been considered factors which reinforced the traditional gender roles of married women within the family and led to the passive labour market participation by mothers with children in West Germany (Adema et al. 2017). On the other hand, the extensive provision of public childcare facilities in East Germany encouraged mothers to return to the labour market more quickly and made them more likely to work as full-time workers than their counterparts in West Germany. As a result, women in East Germany achieved gender equality in the labour market, even though gender relations were not fully equal in terms of the income gap, career opportunities, and gender roles at home (Rosenfeld et al. 2004).

In this line, the German family policy, especially in West Germany, has been categorized as “supported familialism” (Hook 2015), in which families have been expected to take responsibility for social risks as well as family management such as caring for children and the elderly. Among other factors, women were positioned as caregivers. Under these circumstances, the interrelations between caring and women’s participation in the labour market have been intensively discussed (e.g., Boll 2011; Ziefle 2004). Consequently, since the late 1970s, there have been family policy reforms aimed at achieving a harmonious equilibrium between work and family responsibilities. These reforms have been implemented to encourage the reintegration of mothers into the labour market and enhance opportunities for parental care, subsequently fostering a better balance between parental employment and family life management. A noteworthy example can be observed in West Germany, where the introduction of maternity leave entitlement (Mutterschafturlaub) in 1979 enabled mothers to take up to six months of leave while ensuring their subsequent return to work. Additionally, the enactment of the Federal Parental Leave Benefit Act (Bundeserziehungsgeldgesetz) in 1986 allowed for parental leave of up to 10 months following childbirth, which could be claimed by either parent. Owing to the incremental amendments made to this Act throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the duration of parental leave was extended to encompass up to 36 months (e.g., Gangl and Ziefle 2015; Vanella and Deschermeier 2019).

Moreover, at the so-called the “Crib Summit” of the federal government in 2007, state and local governments agreed to create care availability, so that 35% of children under the age of three could be cared for either in a day-care centre or by a childminder. When it comes to parental leave, there was a paradigm shift from the flat-rate to income-related reimbursement in 2007. Furthermore, regarding the expansion of the provision of formal

care for younger children, the Day-care Expansion Act (Tagesbetreuungsausbaugesetz (TAG)) was introduced in 2005, in which children under the age of 3 were guaranteed to be placed in childcare if parents were already in employment, education, and job training programmes. Moreover, the Child and Youth Welfare Act (Kinderförderungsgesetz (Kifög)) was introduced in 2008, in which a place in a childcare facility was guaranteed as a legal right from 1 August 2013. As a result, 28.8% of under-threes in the former West Germany and 51.3% of those in the former East Germany attended a daily-care centre as of 2017 (Federal Statistical Office 2018). This development within the span of a decade is tremendous when considering that 10% of under-threes in West Germany and 41% of those in East Germany attended a day-care system in 2007 (Federal Statistical Office 2014). Stahl and Schober (2018) maintain that the German family policy model, which was previously labelled as “supported familism” (Hook 2015), should be re-classified as “optional familism” since it is now a combination of familistic support, such as joint taxation and long job-protected leave, and de-familist elements, such as shorter but relatively well-paid parental leave and an entitlement to formal childcare for young children.

In fact, the participation in the labour force of women aged between 15 and 64 in Germany has dramatically improved from 58% in 1990 to 75% in 2019. When considering that the average female labour force participation for the same year was 65% in OECD countries and 68% in the EU, this labour participation rate by women in Germany is significant. As of 2015, the increased rates of employment for women between 2000 and 2015 in Germany marked the third-largest increase among OECD member countries (Adema et al. 2017). The increase in labour force participation among women in Germany has been one of the main contributors in decreasing unemployment rates in Germany.

Yet, there has also been an increasing share of low-paid and non-regular employment. These jobs have largely taken up by married women who work as part-timers (Eichhorst 2015). Rosenfeld et al. (2004) showed that the employment model for the family in East and West Germany converged toward the arrangement of “male-breadwinner/female part-time worker” since the reunification of the country. Konietzka and Kreyenfeld (2010) also argued that there is no evidence of an increase in the dual breadwinner family in Germany since the increasing participation of mothers in the labour force has been led by an increase in part-timer mothers based upon the analysis on changes to mothers’ employment over almost 30 years of micro-census data between 1976 and 2004. Instead, the full-time employment of mothers has actually reduced during this period. Trappe et al. (2015) further confirm that, even though the labour participation of West German women has gradually increased since reunification, the employment pattern of East German women has adjusted to the West German pattern.

According to the OECD Family Database in 2019, 51% of working mothers aged between 15 and 64 and with at least one child aged 0–14 were employed as part-timers in Germany. The rate of working mothers with part-time employment in Germany is much higher when considering that the average rate in the EU is 19% and 25% in OECD countries over the same period. Furthermore, an additional set of data corroborates an identical trend. According to the Family Report in 2020 published by the German Ministry of Family, Seniority, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (Ministry of Family, Seniority, Women and Youth) 2020), the rate of working mothers with children under 18 increased in Germany from 60% to 69% in 2018. However, most working mothers worked as part-timers. Even though the rate of full-time working mothers remained almost the same, decreasing from 26% in 2006 to 25% in 2018, approximately 75% of mothers with children aged under 18 worked as part-time workers. Among them, working mothers with 20–28 working hours made up the majority throughout the whole period between 2006 and 2018. Gangl and Ziefle (2015) also pointed out that the societal norms of “making a good woman” in childcare policy have been further strengthened in Germany. Among other things, their study maintains that the extended entitlements to parental leave have weakened mothers’ commitments to work and strengthened the “norm” regarding mothers’ role as carers in Germany. The authors further argue that the

increasing generosity of leave entitlements have had a negative impact on the return of mothers to full-time employment.

In the meantime, [Hank et al. \(2004\)](#) showed that the informal caring system is regarded as one of the most significant caring practices by mothers in West Germany. In discussing the increasing significance of informal social networks in childcaring, their study points out the lack of formal institutional caring opportunities for working mothers, such as a day-care infrastructure for toddlers and school-aged children as well as the availability of full-time care services in West Germany. Given the insufficient provisions of a public caring system in Germany, mothers have relied on “patchwork” childcare arrangements where several people join in ([Kreyenfeld and Hank 2000](#)). In particular, in West Germany, despite the continuous governmental efforts, the lack of access to public childcaring facilities has led to the increased involvement in childcaring of informal social networks, such as family, kinship, and friends. The results of the survey of [Bien et al. \(2006\)](#) demonstrate the importance of the informal caring social network for mothers in Germany: approximately one-third of respondents in the surveyed research replied that they rely on grandparents for childcare.

3.2. Neoliberalizing Labour Market and Caring Regimes in Korea

In the meantime, in Korea, the caring system has been drastically marketized through private caring institutions and the introduction of domestic caring workers from the global market ([Park et al. 2020](#)). The institutionalization of childcaring practices in Korea is closely related to the demands from the increasing number of double-earner young households as well as long working hours under the neoliberalizing labour market reforms after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and 1998. By 1999, the participation of married women in the labour market had surpassed that of unmarried women. Due to the slowly collapsing, but also strongly persistent, male breadwinner ideology, and despite the persistently low labour market participation of women, the labour force participation rates among married women have increased from 48.8% in 2009 to 57.6% in Korea in 2019, even though there have been no drastic changes for single women during the same period ([Yoo 2021](#)). In particular, the rates of double-earner households with small children have increased: the rate households with children aged between 7 and 12 increased from 54.2% in 2018 to 54.8% in 2019 and the rate of double-earner households with children aged under 6 also increased from 50% to 51.4%. Even though there are disparities in the average working hours per week between fathers, with 41.1 h, and mothers, with 38.1 h, the average number of working hours of working mothers in Korea is much longer than their counterparts in Germany, in which mothers most commonly work between 20 and 28 h per week. This is closely related to the long working hours in Korea. The average yearly number of working hours in Korea in 2020 was 1908, which was the fourth longest sum of hours among OECD countries after Colombia, Mexico, and Costa Rica. Conversely, the average was 1332 hours in Germany.

The general changing trend in working practices among working mothers in Korea is also closely related to the country’s drastic changes in childcare policies. As a response to the low birth rate, the Korean government enacted the Basic Law on Low Birth in 2005. The First Basic Plan (2006–2010) aimed to lower income standards to expand the scope of childcaring. The Second Basic Plan (2011–2015) was established to reduce the burden of childcaring, expand childcaring facilities, and offer support to the operation of workplace nursing facilities. The Third Basic Plan (2016–2020) aimed to establish a private babysitting quality control system as well as to promote the expansion of the private care service market ([Park et al. 2020](#)). Japan and Korea have both introduced a universal care system for children, making childcaring in these two countries the most institutionalized systems in Asia. However, the Korean government has made a much faster and bolder move in responding to the care crisis than Japan ([Estévez-Abe and Kim 2014](#)). For instance, the public expenditure for childcaring in Korea, which had previously lagged behind comparable OECD member states, has outperformed these countries since 2005.

The institutionalization of public caring facilities since 2005, as well as the enormous expansion of marketized private caring facilities, has strengthened the “de-familialism” in caring in Korea. Moreover, the marketization of childcaring has broadened caring opportunities for full-time working mothers. As a result, the care regime has developed towards “liberal familialism” (Ochiai 2009; Ochiai 2014), in which families purchase caring from the global market to fulfil their familial duties in Korea. In this way, working mothers have been positioned as “care consumers” since private caring opportunities have been broadened in Korea (Chon 2018).

In the meantime, despite the institutionalization of childcaring, it is a well-known fact that the participation rate of women in the labour market in Korea is one of the lowest in OECD member countries. For instance, the participation of women in the labour force stood at 60% as of 2019, which ranked 31 out of 35 OECD member states. The dropout rates from the labour market after marriage by females is still high today, and this M-shaped labour market participation pattern continues to exist in Korea. The significant reason behind the heavy reliance on family members, especially mothers, for childcare is their low labour market participation rates. This has led to the enduring stereotype in Korea where women are predominantly viewed as primary caregivers. Sung (2003) argues that Korean married women who are part of the workforce encounter a “Confucian welfare state”. In this context, traditional Confucian beliefs clash with ideas of increasing gender equality concerning women’s roles both in the family and the workplace. In addition, the childcaring support provided by informal familial networks is still prevalent in Korea (Jeon and Walker 2022). Despite the rising demand for childcaring facilities, grandparents remain the primary sources of care in Korea (Lee and Bauer 2013).

4. Data and Methods

In total, 22 female Koreans in their 20s and 30s who had been working in Germany were interviewed in the period from May to October 2020. The interviewees were limited to workers who had lived in Germany for longer than one year. The research participants were recruited through an advertisement in the online community for Korean migrants in Germany as well as snowballing methods.

All of the interviewees, who are referred to in this article using pseudonyms, are in employment either through the Blue Card scheme or by possessing a visa which is equivalent to the working visa for skilled migrants. In total, 14 out of the 22 informants work in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) sectors, while the remainder work in non-STEM sectors such as financing, advertisement, and the education and service sectors. Overall, 15 out of the 22 participants hold a graduate degree (14 master’s degree and 1 PhD degree) and 7 of them have a bachelor’s degree. All of the interviewees had foreign experiences through study abroad ($N = 15$), internships ($N = 1$), frequent business trips as well as working abroad ($N = 4$) and travels ($N = 2$), before they joined the German labour market. Overall, 15 out of the 22 informants were married and 10 of them had children aged between 1 and 13. All interviewees lived in West Germany as of the time when they were interviewed.

I adapted semi-structured and in-depth interviews. This method is appropriate for this research topic since it facilitates the amalgamation of structured interrogations and open-ended discourse, enabling interviewees to elaborate on their responses to the posed questions (Kwon 2019b). In-depth and semi-structured interviews “do not offer researchers a route to ‘the truth’ but they do offer a route to partial insights into what people do and think” (Longhurst 2009, p. 580). I interviewed the participants for a one and half or two hours and conducted the interviews in Korean. Most of the interviews were recorded with the participants’ agreement and all of the interviews were transcribed for analysis. Regarding the interviewees who did not consent to recording, I tried to note some keywords during the interviews and restructure them into sentences after the interviews. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, most of the interviews ($N = 20$) were conducted either via online communication or over telephone. Two in-person interviews were undertaken during the

relaxation of the lockdown measures in Germany, adhering to the guidelines set forth by the German federal government, which included the mandatory use of masks. Unlike the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which a series of restrictive policies, such as the cancellation of large events, nationwide school closures, and extensive contact limitations, were implemented in March 2020 in Germany, a gradual easing of restrictions on individual mobility and social distancing began after the first set of measures were introduced in April 2020 (Khailaie et al. 2021). This easing of restrictions allowed me to conduct the face-to-face interviews.

5. Findings: Encountering Similarities in Gender Roles and Exploring Differences in Care and Employment Regimes

5.1. Exploring the Welfare State: Childcaring by the State? Mothers as Major Caregivers

Many of the interviewees had a good overview on the childcaring system in Germany and positively illustrated the work–life balance in childcaring in Germany. Suhee, who works in a supply department of a German company, described her pregnancy:

“In Germany, pregnancy is a private decision. You can make a decision when you would like to plan pregnancy, when the baby would be delivered, and when you would like to take parental leave and so forth. It was a great experience for me to be able to concentrate on myself, my baby, and my family about planning pregnancy and childbirth. It would have not been possible if I had worked in Korea. In Korea, about pregnancy you should usually consult with your boss, since the schedule of the business will be prioritized rather than your family planning.”

In addition, in the Korean context, paternal individuals who choose to take leave anticipate and encounter potential penalties in terms of promotions or evaluations (Hong 2018), and the workload in childcaring and unpaid labour are concentrated among women (Lee 2022). In this context, Miji evaluated the sociocultural acceptance of parental leave and a high participation rate by male partners in childcaring in Germany:

“In Korea, fathers are reluctant to take parental leave because it could harm the career track eventually, therefore, it is very unusual for fathers to take a long-term parental leave to participate in childcaring. My husband took 6 months of parental leave which was very helpful for me to return to work and to share the experience in childcaring with my husband, which would be most unthinkable in Korea where mothers are expected to take the whole burden in childcaring.”

Sujin, who works for an advertisement company, praised the job opportunities provided for working mothers and the acceptance of various working forms in Germany:

“I reduced my working hours for my daughter. And I see how happy she is in the kindergarten. I am very satisfied with the welfare system for working mothers in Germany which guarantees the return to the job after birth and enables working mothers to reduce working hours.”

In the meantime, the entry into the welfare system also meant a learning process for Korean migrant working mothers. First of all, they realized that the childcaring in a welfare state is not “given” by the state, but “organized” within the family in Germany. Jihyun, who works as a single designer in a car company, described the general employment practices of German mothers in the company and her misunderstanding of the role of the state and family in the welfare system as follows:

“I am the only woman in our team who is employed as [a] full-time worker. All women, especially German working-mothers with small children in our company, go back home at 2 or 3 o’clock in the afternoon to take care of their children. I think that it is great that ‘going-back-home-earlier’ working and childcaring practices of working mothers are socially accepted in Germany and most of the male colleagues accept it as an unavoidable reality for working mothers. At the

same time, it is a new for me, since I have thought that Germany is a welfare state in which childcaring will be organized by the state, not by mothers."

Aram, who works as an IT expert in an IT company, discussed the increasing number of Koreans in the same sector who come to Germany and their false understanding on the welfare system.

"I have been trying to support Korean job seekers through Korean community so that they could settle down in Germany more smoothly. If I ask them the motivation of the migration, many of them answer that they have been attracted to the welfare system in Germany. It is the particularly the case if they have children. You know, Germany is well-known in Korea as one of the well-organized welfare states and as a country which provides good environments for childcare and children's education. However, many of them think that welfare state means that the state will take care of everything in childcaring in free of charge, which is a big misunderstanding."

In addition to the stereotyped image of Germany as a welfare state, the understanding of the advancement of the welfare system in childcaring in the context of "free" childcaring might originate from the recent governmental universal "free" childcare services in Korea which have been given to parents with children under 5 years old since 2013 as a means to respond to the world's lowest fertility rate.

Furthermore, for Korean migrant working mothers, it served as a learning process to discover that the childcare system within the German welfare state model is built upon the foundation of the male breadwinner model. In this model, mothers are designated as the primary caregivers, reflecting unequal gender roles in childcare in Germany. This is the case despite fathers' significantly higher involvement in childcare and the more harmonized work-life balance observed in Germany compared to Korea. Suhee also described the "standardized" working patterns of working mothers in Germany:

"I see many of cases in my company that mothers reduce their working hours and there is an atmosphere that it is taken for granted not only by the company but also by mothers which was a bit shocking for me because I have thought that women could work like men equally in Germany.

In addition, the gendered norms and practices in childcaring in Germany were perceived by some interviewees whose motivation to migrate to Germany was based on gender equality in achievement of career development. Aram, an IT expert, described her work and childcaring experiences:

"I explain my life in Germany to my friends who are interested in [the] welfare system in Germany, when I am asked how [the] life as [a] working mother is: It is possible for women to catch two goals, namely having 'work and life' in Germany, but I think that it is not accepted if you are willing to achieve more than that, pursuing advancement in [a] career despite a generous governmental support."

As the interview data in this paper indicate, childcaring for working migrant mothers does not mean a smooth integration into the welfare system, but rather represents a struggle and an exploratory process to grasp the "hidden" norms and practices in childcaring and working. In particular, under the "standardized" "male-breadwinner/female part-time worker" welfare model in Germany, it was a learning process in finding that the institutionalization of care is still wedded to the conventional "familialism-based" approach in Germany (Bünning 2017) and that the "similar" gender norms and orders which exist within the "Confucian welfare state" (Sung 2003) play a significant role in childcaring not only in the home country but also in the host country.

5.2. "Incomplete Patchwork": The Lack of an Informal Social Network

The interviews with Korean migrant working mothers in Germany indicate that they realized that the "similarities" in childcaring regimes exist not only in gendered norms and practices in childcaring, but also in the significance of informal childcaring social networks.

Despite some progress in childcaring policy in Korea, childcaring is heavily dependent on family members, and women's role as carers remains a persistent stereotype in Korea (Park et al. 2020). In this context, childcaring by informal social networks, particularly childcaring from grandparents, is essential for working mothers in Korea (Ahn and Choi 2019). Heejin, who works as an IT expert and who married a German citizen, explains her childcaring practices as follows:

“My mother-in-law helps me a lot. Especially organizing pick-up of the children from the care centre in the afternoon is very important, since it does not usually match with the working hours, if you work fulltime in Germany. I am blessed, because my mother-in-law is German and she lives nearby the kindergarten. But I cannot imagine how difficult it would be for other mothers without help from family members.”

In particular, in the Korean context, where childcaring practices from maternal grandparents for their adult daughters are positioned as common cultural norms (Jeon and Walker 2022; Ko and Hannk 2014), the lack of informal caring provision from the maternal parents was often mentioned in the interviews. For instance, Sohee, who is employed by a car company, explains the lack of kinship support in childcaring in Germany:

“I sometimes cry due to the difficulties of the childcaring, because it is so hard for me to live as a working mother in Germany without any support from my parents or relatives. My husband is very supportive in childcaring. On the weekends he spends the entire time with our child. But the caring system from family members on a daily basis during workdays is lacking here. I wish that mother could live nearby, so that I could ask help for childcaring sometimes. I just have to wish that my son will get sick only on weekends, not weekdays, because I have no one here to ask for caring.”

As the interviews demonstrate, this heavy dependence on a family-centred informal social network for childcaring is one of the obstacles for migrant skilled workers who work on a fulltime basis and have no such family-caring networks. The lack of an informal social network for childcare among highly skilled female migrants has also been the subject of several studies (Ho 2006; Salaff and Greve 2004). In particular, the lack of informal networks for childcare among skilled female migrants from third-national countries in the EU has significant consequences since they have little access to informal social networks, differing from conventional migrant groups such as those from Turkey, Italy, Spain, Greece, and the former Yugoslavia, who primarily depend on informal caring networks through extended ethnic groups (Bünning 2017).

5.3. (Un)marketization of Childcaring and Expected Gender Roles

Even though the integration into the childcaring and employment regime for migrant working mothers meant an encountering of “similarities” in gendered order as well as expected gender roles in the host society as the interviews have demonstrated so far, it also meant an encountering with different practices and norms in childcaring. The universal childcaring service for parents with children under 5 years old has been prevalent since 2013; however, it means outsourcing to market-based childcare facilities (Lee 2022). In addition to the prevalence of the childcaring system for early-age children, there is a growing tendency for mothers to send their young children to childcaring facilities at an early age in Korea. Along with the increased participation rate of mothers in the labour force, the prevalent culture of long working hours in the workplace, the increasing significance of early childhood education, and expanding sociocultural pressure to provide professional and structured learning opportunities for children from an early age have led to a decrease in the resistance to sending children to day-care centres. In particular, in light of the increasing prevalence of institutionalized childcaring opportunities in Korea, Korean working mothers have become accustomed to sending their children to caring facilities at an early age.

Due to this discrepancy in development trajectories as well as an orientation in child-caring policies between Germany and Korea, the different practices and norms around the “proper” role of the day-care centre for small children has created much confusion among skilled Korean women, who have been compelled to fundamentally rethink what “good” working mothers should be. Heejin, who works as an IT expert in a German car making company and has a 7-year-old daughter, described her experiences regarding childcaring as follows:

“I came back to my workplace when my daughter [was] 8 months old, which German mothers usually would not do. I think that it was possible since I am a Korean mother. You know, it is not seldom that working mothers go back to [the] workplace earlier and send their children to [the] day-care centre much earlier in Korea. It is kind of a practice which is widely accepted. Therefore, I thought that I have to return to work as soon as possible after birth. When I look back [at] these early days, I am regretting that I did not take enough time for my daughter when she was a little baby. If you look around German working mothers, they take enough time to take care of their children, especially when they are under three years old. Looking at the caring practices of German mothers, I started [to] ask myself whether I am good enough as a mother, you know?”

After long consideration, Heejin has abandoned working as a full-time worker and has taken a part-time position, like other German working mothers with small children usually do. This interview also indicates that being a migrant working mother causes a much greater struggle in finding “appropriate” mothering practices which are “naturally” accepted in host societies due to the different childcaring and employment practices.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The EU has endeavoured to attract skilled workers in earnest in recent decades. Yet, when it comes to its caring and migrant regimes, care/domestic migrants have mainly been highlighted in the discussion. Moreover, they have been positioned not as citizens who are potential consumers but as care producers in the debates about care and migration regimes (Williams and Gavanas 2008). Against this background, this paper demonstrates that more attention should be paid to the increasingly diverse types of migration as well as the diverse integration process into the welfare system from different migrant groups, such as highly skilled migrants, in the discussion of caring and migration regimes in the EU. The limited view of migrants either as a “threat” or as a “rescue” in relation to welfare states, which is based upon demographic and economic perspectives, prevents a better understanding of the future labour market, welfare, and migration trends (Geddes 2003). In particular, among other welfare-related issues, this paper draws special attention to childcaring, since childcaring as well as children’s education are among the most critical elements which strongly influence migration, settlement, and the return migration of skilled workers (Kōu and Bailey 2014; Mazzucato and Schans 2011). When considering that the share of student migrants is on the increase in the EU (Knerr 2015), and that they will become future participants in the labour market, further and special attention should be paid to the life-courses of young migrants as well as the linked movers.

As discussed in this paper, Germany and Korea have strong commonalities in their development of women’s participation in the labour force and in caring regimes. Both societies have witnessed a steadily increasing number of working mothers, and their governments have attempted to increase social investment aimed at expanding childcaring opportunities in order to actively respond to the decreasing birth rate and encourage women’s economic activities. Both countries also exhibit similarities in that the family remains significant as a manager for caring as well as social risks. Most importantly, both societies share a strong commonality in terms of expected gender roles in childcaring; women stand at the centre of childcaring as well as family risk management. In the meantime, whereas childcaring regimes have improved for part-time employment mothers due to the “standardized” employment arrangement of working with children in Germany,

the growing number of double-earner young households as well as the practice of long working hours under the rapidly neoliberalizing capitalist system since the Asian Financial Crisis have resulted in the expansion of the privatized and marketized childcaring system in Korea.

Most importantly, the interviews in this research provide empirical evidence of how the careers of highly skilled migrant women involve a continuous struggle around the boundaries between productive and reproductive labour, and family-life management is still a greater challenge for highly skilled female immigrants than their male counterparts (Cooke 2007). This paper further shows that migration, especially when involving women with children, is a process of exploring, interacting with, and negotiating with care and employment regimes in the newly given cultural and institutional settings, with a particular focus on Korean working mothers in Germany. In addition, this paper shows that the exploration, navigation, and negotiation process around “good” mothering practices undertaken by migrant working mothers in the host society reflects the struggles concerning “discrepancies” in caring practices and social norms for becoming “good” mothers on the one hand, while, on the other hand, this means that migrant women share fundamental “similarities” with local women when it comes to persistent gender norms regarding women’s roles as primary carers in both the home and host societies and their endeavours to become ‘good’ mothers. Bailey and Mulder (2017) point out that gender norms in countries of origin function as one of the strong push factors for highly skilled migrant women to drive them to leave their home countries, yet the mobility of highly skilled women leads to further encounters with other forms of gender norms in the host society. In the end, this paper provides empirical evidence showcasing the enduring strength of the social norm that perceives childcare as predominantly a duty of women, irrespective of differences in caregiving and employment systems. Consequently, this leads to the continuation of imbalanced gender dynamics, even among highly skilled migrants.

On the theoretical level, this research supports the conventional argument that the migration of highly skilled workers should be understood not from a neoclassical perspective in which the maximization of economic profits has priority, but from an institutional point of view in which social and cultural norms, practices, and policies in both the home and host societies are taken into consideration. Specifically, by focusing on the exploration, navigation, and negotiation processes undertaken by migrant working mothers, this study tries to broaden the discussion to address the challenges and obstacles that migrant women face in their interactions with care and employment regimes.

In sum, by exploring the different developmental orbits in employment and childcaring regimes as well as the similar gender roles in childcaring in the two countries, this paper explains the process of skilled women’s encounters with employment and childcaring regimes in both their host and home countries and the mechanism of (dis)integration among skilled workers in the labour market who encounter both similarities and differences between the home and host societies. These results demonstrate the need for further investigation concerning how the welfare regimes in the EU interact with the (dis)integration of skilled workers from non-EU states, whose welfare regimes are shaped by similar or different socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural settings.

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Notes

- ¹ According to Fuchs et al. (2018), despite projecting a considerable increase in immigration levels in Germany, the overall impact of net migration effects is expected to be modest. They further highlight the importance of implementing active labour market policies to bolster domestic manpower reserves, while also developing a long-term immigration policy that aligns with the needs of the labour market.
- ² In 2012, the majority of EU states initiated the issuance of the EU Blue Cards, aiming to integrate highly skilled workers into their respective labour markets. The EU Blue Card program allows highly skilled third-country nationals with a job offer to both work and reside in EU member countries, offering the possibility of renewal. Germany, along with several other EU member states, became part of the Blue Card scheme in 2012. Since then, Germany has consistently been the leading recipient country of EU Blue Card holders.
- ³ <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/61631/auslaendische-bevoelkerung-nach-staatsangehoerigkeit/> (accessed on 17 July 2023).

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