

The Cognitive Dissonance on Refugees in South Korea: The Case of the Influx of Yemeni Refugees on Jeju Island

Suk Young Myung(University of Hawai'i at Mānoa)*
Won Geun Choi(Kyung Hee University)**

Abstract

The influx of Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island sparked controversy in South Korea in 2018. Considering the remarkable contribution to UNHCR from the private sector, it was a completely disappointing response discouraging refugee protection. This research emerges from the point that Koreans showed contrasting attitudes to the influx of refugees in 2018. How can we explain this disparity, and what explains the strong and massive public resistance against the acceptance of refugees? This research argues that the Yemeni refugee crisis was rapidly politicized and spread out to society with crafted fears from social security threats and hysteric multiculturalism backlash caused by the cognitive dissonance between what is real and what is imagined for refugees.

Keywords: South Korea, Yemen, Refugee, Multicultural Backlash, Cognitive Dissonance, Crafted Fear

* The First Author

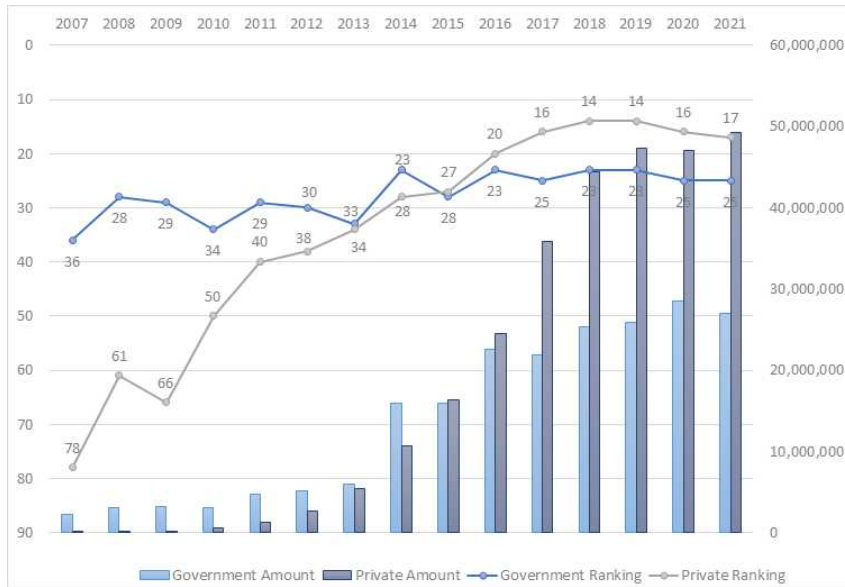
** The Corresponding Author

I. Introduction

South Korea is one of the few state parties to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention) and its 1967 Protocol in Asia.¹⁾ Furthermore, South Korea legislated the Refugee Act in 2012, the first independent refugee act in Asia. Therefore, South Korea has been known for its successful institutionalization of refugee protection, despite critics of its strict Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure and limited socio-economic assistance. However, the most extraordinary contribution of South Korea comes from the private sector donating to the UNHCR(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) As presented in <Figure 1>, the Korean government's contribution to UNHCR grew ten times in the last decade, from 2.2 million USD in 2007 to 25.8 million USD in 2019. However, Korea's private sector, mainly composed of ordinary people, has recorded tremendous success in the same period. The amount increased from about 50,000 USD in 2007 to 47.3 million USD in 2019, almost 90 times. As a result, the country's donor ranking skyrocketed from 78 to 14 by the end of 2019. The remarkable increase in financial contributions from ordinary people of South Korea seems to reflect their positive attitude toward global burden-sharing. However, this naive anticipation was critically challenged in 2018.

1) Only six countries, Cambodia, China, Japan, (the) Philippines, South Korea, and Timo-Leste, officially ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol in Asia.

<Figure 1> South Korea's Contribution to UNHCR (Government and Private Sector)
(USD)



Source: UNHCR

A few hundred Yemeni asylum-seekers arrived on Jeju Island, through Malaysia, in early 2018. Yemeni refugees could enter South Korea through the visa-exemption policy on the island which has been applied to most foreign visitors since 2002 to promote its tourism industry. Then, 552 applied for refugee status by June 2018. The unexpected influx of Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island has sparked a bitter controversy on refugee issues in South Korea. On the one hand, the Korean government did not allow Yemeni refugees to leave the island and terminated the visa exemption for Yemen nationals. On the other hand, the government and civil society tried to provide emergency assistance, including local job opportunities,

accommodation, and medical screening. Then, about six months later, only two of them were granted refugee status, 412 received humanitarian status, 56 were rejected, and 14 waived their application at the end.

The inflow of Yemeni refugees has a few eruptive points, such as an extreme unbalance in gender ratio and fake news stimulating hatred. Therefore, more than 700,000 petitions sought to revoke the acceptance of refugees, recording the largest number of participants at that time. Following the fevered petition campaign, South Korea was divided into two sides, online and offline, to support or object to refugees. However, considering the remarkable increase in institutionalization and the private sector's contribution to UNHCR, the backlash was a thoroughly disappointing and deflating result.

This research emerges from the point that Koreans, who seemed to lead the legal institutionalization of refugees in Asia and have made substantial contributions to UNHCR from the private sector, showed contrasting attitudes to the influx of refugees in 2018. The more interesting point is that women and the young generation, the most globalized and right-sensitive groups in Korea²⁾, led the anti-refugee campaigns. How can we explain the disparity between the heartfelt contribution to UNHCR and the fierce resistance to the reception of refugees in South Korea? What explains the sharp and massive public resistance against Korea's refugee policy? This research argues that the Yemeni refugee crisis in 2018 was rapidly politicized and spread out to society with Islamophobia. This results from multiculturalism backlash and hysteric oppositions caused by

2) According to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, a group of women in 20–30s is the most sensitive to the human rights violations. "National Human Rights Commission of Korea", *Annual Report 2021*, Seoul: National Human Rights Commission, 2021.

the cognitive dissonance between what is real and what is imagined for refugees and fears of social security threats.

This research applies a qualitative content analysis to explore social response, more particularly the massive backlash, to the influx of refugees in Korea. First, this research collects data from online sources, including the Presidential Office Petition Board, searching trends and online community postings in Naver and Daum, the top two web portals in numbers of visitors in South Korea³⁾, and national survey results. Second, news coverage from May to October 2018 in major Korean newspapers, such as the most conservative Chosun Ilbo, by utilizing Big Kinds, domestic news platforms in South Korea, are carefully examined and analyzed. These qualitative data are meaningful in that they manifest people's actual tones and reactions to Yemeni refugees on Jeju, which are not well revealed in quantitative analysis.

This article consists of five chapters. The next chapter provides a brief historical and political background of hosting refugees in Korea. The chapter also explains the theoretical background to understand the phenomenon of rejecting refugees in South Korea. Chapter 3 lays down the key findings of this research. The authors explain the development of the explosive backlash against Yemeni refugees in South Korea with various sources, including online petitions in the Korean Presidential Office Petition Board, national survey results, and Internet searching trends and activities. Chapter 4 analyzes the features of the fear against refugees in Korea. This chapter asserts that most anti-refugee discourses in Korean society are manipulated and biased. The last chapter is the conclusion of this article.

3) Statista, "Most popular Online Properties in South Korea August 2021, by Number of Unique Visitors." 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/388348/korea-visit-web-properties/> (Accessed 19 August, 2022.)

It urges the Korean government and society to approach the global and national concerns over the refugee crisis more comprehensively.

II. Backgrounds

1. Refugee Protection in Korea

In 1992, South Korea signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol when it became a member of the United Nations as a result of the end of the Cold War. The institutionalization of the international refugee law was completed when Korea ratified them in 1994. However, the practical implementation started in the twenty-first century when South Korea recognized its first refugee in 2001. This section explains the brief historical and political backgrounds of Korea's refugee policy development.

South Korea was identified as one of the countries of origin of refugees due to the Korean War in the 1950s and the political persecution under authoritarian regimes in the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, South Korea has also accommodated some exiles from Communist countries due to its geopolitical position.⁴⁾ Furthermore, a number of Indochinese boat people have also reached South Korea during the Indochinese Refugee Crisis in the 1980s. However, the South Korean government only provided a temporary stay while the government facilitated their resettlement to third countries. Most of the PRC's political exiles during the Cold War were immediately transferred to either the

4) Chung, In-Seop, "Korean Practice on Refugee Reception." *Seoul International Law Studies*, Vol. 16, 2009, p.198.

Republic of China (or Taiwan) or the United States (USA)⁵⁾ In the case of Indochinese refugees, the South Korean government denied responsibility for refugee protection while considering them as economic migrants or victims of disasters.⁶⁾ For instance, South Korea established a refugee camp for Vietnamese refugees. However, they had to renew the “temporal permission for emergency landing” every month during their stay.⁷⁾ Then, the South Korean government resettled most Vietnamese refugees to Western countries; thus, the last group of boat people was sent out to New Zealand in February 1993, just a month before the 1951 Refugee Convention took effect in March 1993. The South Korean government still sought to avoid accepting refugees within their legal framework.⁸⁾

Unfortunately, the non-admission policy was continued even after the formal institutionalization of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Since the South Korean government began to conduct the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) in 1994, the number of asylum-seekers applying for refugee status has continuously increased. However, no asylum-seeker was recognized as a refugee until 2000, while the non-admission policy faced a turning point in 2001. During this time, the South Korean government recognized its first conventional refugee after becoming a member of the Executive Committee (ExCom) of the UNHCR in 2000.⁹⁾ As a result, the number of refugee status applications and recognition has kept increasing since then.

5) Chung, In-Seop, Ibid. p.200.

6) Chung, In-Seop, Ibid. pp.203-4.

7) Chung, In-Seop, Ibid. p.203.

8) National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, “The Minute of the 9th Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee Meeting at the 159th National Assembly Session.” Report No. 9. 1992. <http://likms.assembly.go.kr/record/mhs-60-010.do#none> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

9) Chung, In-Seop, “Korean Practice on Refugee Reception,” p. 225; Park, Jong-Il, et al., “Increasing Refugees and Transforming Nation-States: Transformation of Immigration Policies in Korea.” *Democracy and Human Rights*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2013, p.225.

Additionally, South Korean authorities often grant humanitarian statuses rather than refugee statuses to asylum-seekers. The humanitarian status is defined as a legal status to allow an extended stay in case of disease, natural disaster, war-like, or other humanitarian crisis. However, Korean government authorities utilize the status to avoid the political burdens of recognizing refugees in the context of continuing the non-admission policy.

In response to the rapidly increasing number of asylum-seekers, the South Korean Parliament legislated the Act on the Status and Treatment of Refugees and Others (Refugee Act) in 2011. The Refugee Act changed the national refugee policy from security being grounded to human rights by fully implementing international refugee laws in its domestic legal framework.¹⁰⁾ The higher success of implementing international refugee norms in Korea appears primarily due to the contributions from the civil society network.¹¹⁾

Nevertheless, the South Korean government's motivation to protect refugees remains a window dressing behavior for its international reputation and national security concerns.¹²⁾ Despite the original intention of the Act, the Korean government continued its security-based practices in implementing the Act. For example, the number of asylum-seekers increased even faster after the Refugee Act's enactment in 2013. However, the number of refugee status recognition rates remains far less. According

10) Schattle, Hans and Jennifer McCann, "The Pursuit of State Status and the Shift toward International Norms: South Korea's Evolution as a Host Country for Refugees." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2014, pp. 317-337.

11) Flowers, Petrice R., "Failure to Protect Refugees? Domestic Institutions, International Organizations, and Civil Society in Japan." *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2008, pp. 333-361; Schattle and McCann, 2014. *ibid.*

12) Hong, Kun Sik and Whi Chang, "Mismatch between Institutionalization and Internalization of International Norms in South Korea: Legislation and Norm Entrepreneur," *Discourse 201*, Vol 24, No. 1, 2021, p. 20.

to the South Korean refugee NGO, the number of recognition of refugee status has been steady.¹³⁾ Thus, the recognition rate remains around 3%, even lower than the average rate before the Refugee Act.¹⁴⁾ The low recognition rate of refugee status is a consequence of the strict interpretation of the refugee definition in the RSD procedures, along with a simplified review in a short period. However, the most critical flaw in South Korea's refugee policy is the absence of systematic social integration procedures. Refugee advocacy groups highlighted that the Korean government does not pay attention to the integration programs for Korean nationals, while refugees are required to attend social integration programs. Hence, it disturbs social and cultural assimilation.¹⁵⁾

Unlike most other Asian states, South Korea has successfully institutionalized its international refugee law by ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention and the legislation of its Refugee Act. However, the implementation of its international refugee protection was initiated by political elites such as bureaucrats, civil society activists, and experts, while most public acknowledged the refugee crisis out of their daily concerns. Therefore, the refugee policy has focused on changing legal frameworks and institutional settings rather than cultural assimilation, public awareness, or social integration. Thus, significant concerns in international refugee protection, such as global burden-sharing of refugees' rights, were largely undermined in Korean society and media.

13) NANCEN (Refugee Rights Center), "Number of Refugees in South Korea, December 31, 2021.", 2022, <https://nancen.org/2256> (Accessed 19 August, 2022).

14) NANCEN, *Ibid.*

15) Min, Jeewon and Eunchoong Cho, "South Korea's Refugee Policy and Implementation Since the 2013 Refugee Act: Trial and Error." *IOM MRTC Issue Brief Report*, No. 2017-17, 2017. https://www.mrtc.re.kr/business/business02_5.php?admin_mode=read&no=420&make=&search=&s_url= (accessed 27 May 2020).

2. Theoretical Frameworks on Anti-Refugee Sentiment

According to Allport, an attitude can be defined as a state of readiness or a set of beliefs/behaviors that affect an individual's response to every situation or object based on experiences.¹⁶⁾ In other words, it is formed by experience and beliefs and is an important variable affecting human behavior.

When there is a discrepancy or inconsistency between our beliefs and what we actually see, people tend to remove this discrepancy because they find it uncomfortable and have an incentive to seek consistency in their behaviors and attitudes. This can be explained by the concept of cognitive dissonance, which can be defined as a psychological discomfort that occurs when an individual maintains two or more psychologically inconsistent beliefs or attitudes simultaneously.¹⁷⁾ This theory is one of the most representative theories that explain changes in people's attitudes and behaviors to resolve the discomfort caused by dissonance concerning self-affirmation, one of the most basic motives of humans.¹⁸⁾ It has been mainly dealt with in social psychology and business administration.

The theory basically focuses on finding out under what conditions cognitive dissonance occurs on the premise of a situation of perceived inconsistency between attitude and behavior. Many scholars have found that cognitive dissonance can lead to good behavior. For example, an experiment manifested that the group who experienced cognitive dissonance

16) Allport, Gordon W., "Attitudes." In Carl. M. Murchison, ed., *Handbook of Social Psychology*. Worcester: Clark University Press, 1935, pp. 798-844.

17) Festinger, Leon, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, 1957.

18) Harmon-Jones, Eddie and Judson Mills, *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotaltheory in Social Psychology*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1999, pp. 3 ~ 21.

was more altruistic than the control group. This is because people have generally tended to approve of public matters.¹⁹⁾ Therefore, it can be understood that cognitive dissonance occurs when one recalls one's experience contrary to past attitudes.

On the other hand, Koreans' hostile attitude toward Yemeni refugees on Jeju shows that cognitive dissonance may work oppositely. Koreans have taken a compassionate attitude toward refugees through the weak and poor images portrayed by the media; however, they have turned to an exclusive attitude after the sudden influx of Yemeni refugees on Jeju and the discrepancy between their existing recognition of refugees and what they really see. They distort reality to their advantage rather than acknowledging discrepancy when one's belief or conviction turns out wrong.

A negative attitude toward refugees also can emerge from dichotomous thinking, which categorizes “me” and “others.” In many Western countries, concerns over the spread of multiculturalism and the influx of refugees have intensified recently. The “multiculturalism backlash” has begun with the concern that multiculturalism might reduce the unity between the state and society.²⁰⁾

The negative attitude toward Yemeni refugees on Jeju stemmed from the recognition that they were Muslim rather than refugees. Since September 11, Muslims have been easily regarded as people forming terrorist groups. Mass media also broadcasted the scene of Muslims' negative images, such

19) Stone, Jeff, et al., “When Exemplification Fails: Hypocrisy and the Motive for Self-integrity.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 1997, pp. 54–65.

20) Levey, Geoffrey B., “What is Living and What is Dead in Multiculturalism.” *Ethnicities*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2009, pp. 75–93; Vertovec, Steven and Susanne Wessendorf, *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies, and Practices*. Oxon: Routledge, 2010.

as atrocious killings by terrorist groups and deep-rooted misogynic customs. It seems that anti-refugee sentiment can be connected with a liquid fear.²¹⁾ Antipathy against Yemeni refugees on Jeju was more intense and broader when it was revealed that most of them were Muslim men rather than miserable victims who deserve to be protected.

III. Ambivalent Attitudes towards Refugees

As stated above, South Korea has been relatively favorable toward refugees in both institutionalization and practical support via UNHCR global-burden sharing. In particular, the amount of financial contribution of the South Korean government and private sector toward UNHCR increased ten times and 90 times each compared to 10 years ago. The donor ranking of the Korean government improved from 36 to 23, and that of the Korean private sector skyrocketed from 78 to 14 by the end of 2019.

These results manifest that South Korea takes a less exclusive attitude toward refugees. However, the public opinion on the refugee issues in South Korea began to go in the opposite direction when about 500 Yemeni refugees arrived on Jeju Island in 2018. The influx of Yemeni asylum-seekers caught the media's attention due to many reasons. The group used the visa exemption, which is generally applied on Jeju Island, to promote its tourism industry. Most of them arrived through Malaysia, not directly from Yemen. Also, the majority of the group were young adult males. Particularly, there were 504 males and only 45 females. For

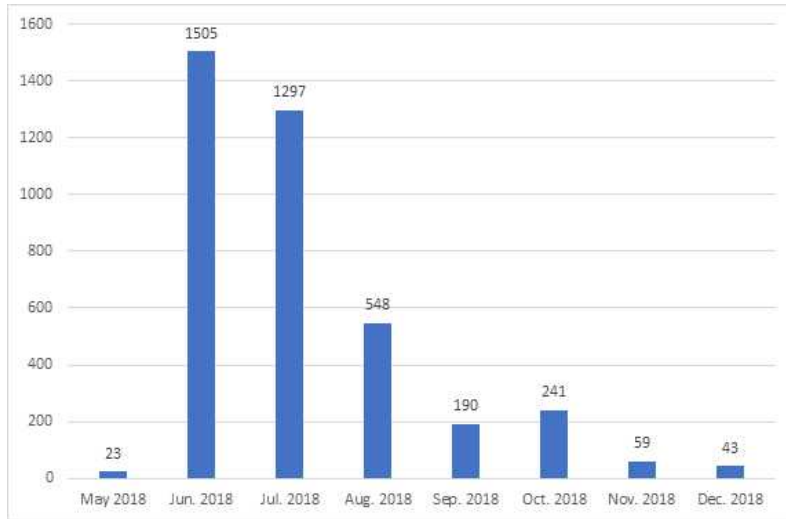
21) Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

these reasons, anti-refugee groups considered Yemeni refugees as economic migrants or fake refugees, not war victims, by exploiting the loophole in the immigration system. Therefore, their acceptance of them sparked controversial debates and quickly spread online. The first petition in the Presidential Office Petition Board, “Please refuse to accept refugees on Jeju.” However, the petition was deleted by the presidential office by reason that it included racist phrases.²²⁾ On June 18, as soon as another petition was opened under the title “I make a petition to repeal and amend the Refugee Act and abolish visa waiver program due to illegal refugees on Jeju Island,” over 700,000 people took part in its signing.

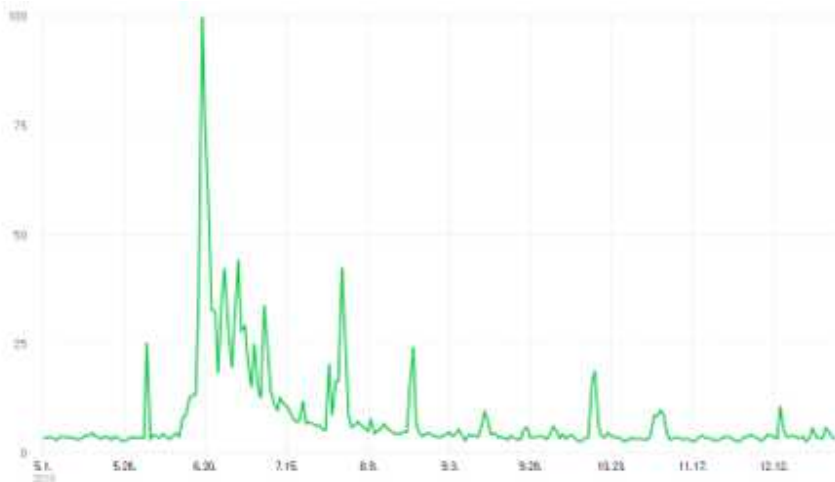
Figure 2 shows how Korean society has sensitively reacted to Yemeni refugees. There were about 4,000 online petitions related to Yemeni refugees on Jeju and most opposed accepting refugees. Although their entry began in 2016, and Korea Immigration Service excluded Yemen from visa-free countries from June 1, 2018, news reports about Yemeni refugees on Jeju started in May 2018, and it is considered that there was a time lag in spreading to the public. Therefore, June has marked the climax with over 1,500 petitions, and over a thousand petitions were resented for two consecutive months after that.

22) Yang, Won-Mo, “Another Petition for ‘The Abolishment of Refugee Law’ already Exceeded 200-Thousand: Obvious Incitement to Hatred.” *Hankookilbo*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201806181465361271> (Accessed 26 May 2020).

<Figure 2> Numbers of Online Petitions, May-Dec. 2018



<Figure 3> Searching Trends on Yemeni Refugees in Naver, June-Dec. 2018



Furthermore, the controversy over Yemeni refugees also emerged in both compressed and explosive forms. Figure 3, an analysis of the search trend of Yemeni refugees Naver, a top web portal in South Korea, reveals that an explosion of interest in this issue reached a peak in June – considering the tremendous and intensive searching volumes.

The online conflicts on Yemeni refugees spread to the offline space as rallies between the pros and cons were held at the same time and location. On June 30, both anti-refugee and pro-refugee protests were simultaneously held at Gwanghwamun, the center of Seoul. The pro-refugee group pointed out that humanitarian aid for refugees is necessary. On the other hand, the anti-refugee group called for more robust security for nationals with slogans that read: “Fake refugees out,” “Citizens come first,” and “repeal Refugee Act and visa waiver program.” The anti-refugee group has steadily held more than 20 gatherings across the country.

After granting humanitarian status to most refugees rather than retaining them under refugee status, a new chapter of the debate on refugee issues has started in Korean society. The refugee issues were minor and insignificant before, but they became one of the most controversial issues across the realm of politics and society.

According to a survey in July 2018, only 8% of females and under 10% of their 20s and 30s have agreed to accept Yemeni refugees. In other words, young generations showed more hostility toward the Yemeni refugees than over 60s group, usually considered the most conservative age group.²³⁾ It was a striking contrast result from the young generations in the world. The World Economic Forum Global Shapers Annual Survey in

23) Gallup Korea, “Gallup Korea Daily Opinion 314,” 12 July 2018, <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=937> (accessed 8 June 2020).

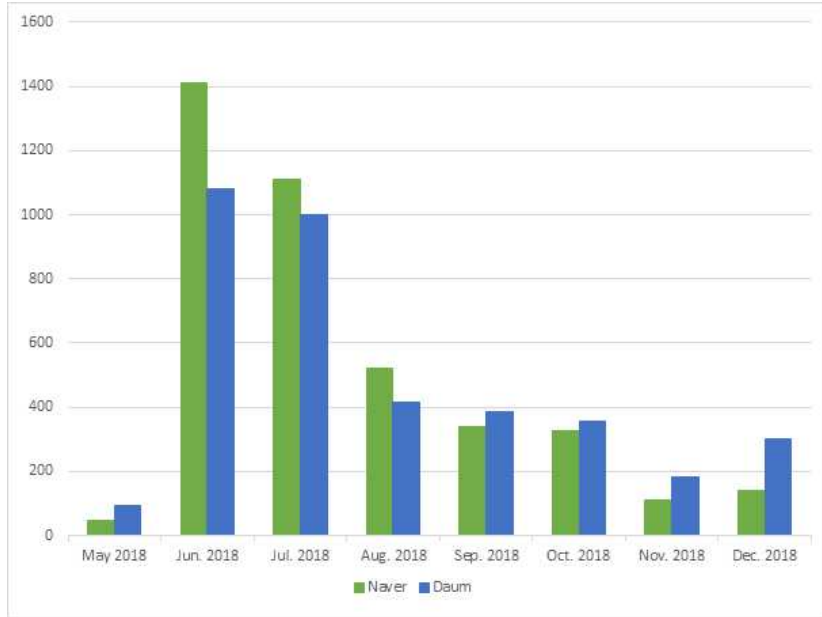
2017 shows that three of four in 18–35 year old would accept refugees into their countries,²⁴⁾ On the other hand, almost 70% of young generations in South Korea opposed accepting Yemeni refugees. The more interesting thing is that young people showed a more favorable attitude toward refugees than older people in a similar previous survey. Nearly 60% of young generations can accept refugees as neighbors, compared to only 45% of people in their 60s and older in the survey in 2015.²⁵⁾

The controversy over Yemeni refugees flared up, especially among online communities. As shown in Figure 4, more than 4,000 posts related to the Yemeni refugee issue were posted in Naver and Daum, the two largest portal sites in Korea. The highest figures were drawn in June and July.

24) Mohamed, Charmain, “World Leaders Have Failed Refugees. Can Ordinary Citizens Teach Them a Lesson?.” *World Economic Forum*, 31 Aug 2017. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/08/world-leaders-refugee-crisis/> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

25) Ahn, Sang-Su, et al., *The 2015 Study on Multicultural Acceptability in Korea (2015–55)*, Seoul: Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, http://www.mogef.go.kr/mp/pcd/mp_pcd_s001d.do?mid=plc503&bbtSn=701835 (accessed 20 May 2020).

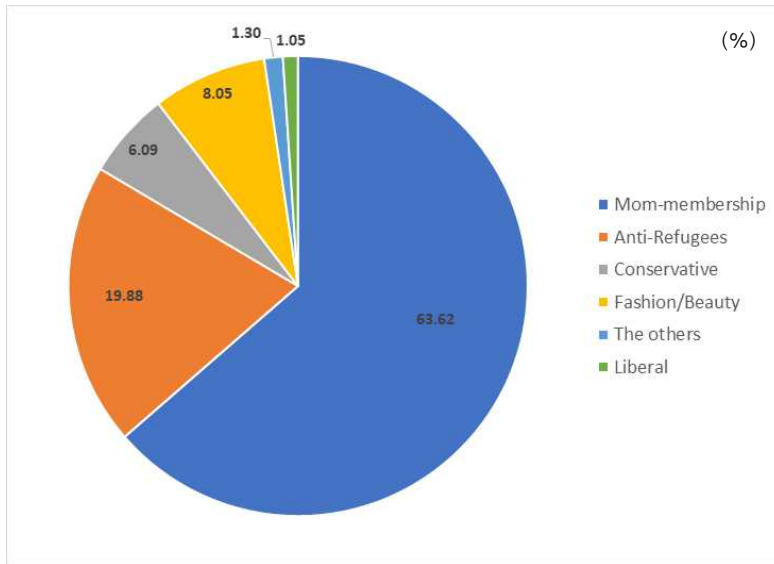
<Figure 4> The Number of Posts in Major Web Portals Naver and Daum



(Search date: January 20, 2020)

Interestingly, as Figure 5 reveals, more than 60 % of the posts were centered on female-oriented Mom-membership online communities, which are called the “Mom-café.” in Korea. As a result of analyzing postings from May to June 2018 in randomly chosen ten mom cafes in Naver and Daum, this research found that more than 80% of them contained anxiety and concerns about accepting Yemeni refugees on Jeju. The number of postings in mom-café was more than about three times anti-refugee online communities and ten times conservative ones.

<Figure 5> Percentages of Posts on Yemen Refugees in Online Communities



(Search date: January 20, 2020)

Moreover, many posts expressed concerns and fears regarding the Yemeni refugee issue as below:

“Every time I read news articles about the Yemeni refugee on Jeju, it makes me feel nervous and agitated. Muslims have a religion without human rights or democracy; especially, they enjoy rape games, and women are treated worse than animals. It is so terrible as a mother with a daughter. (···) I’m even more worried that there are only 40 women, and the rest are robust men. I wonder if these people, who dressed up with brand shoes, are real refugees or not.”²⁶⁾

or combined. Although the percentage of Muslims is small, the image of Muslims is generally represented as terrorist groups by the media through incidents such as the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the kidnapping and murder of a Korean civilian in Iraq in 2004, and the South Korean hostage crisis in Afghanistan in 2007. Therefore, negative perceptions of Muslims have been influential in Korean Society.

In particular, Islamophobia in Korea is taking place amid ignorance and unconditional hatred toward Muslims. A recent survey on Yemeni refugees shows that nearly 70 % of Koreans have no background in Yemen's political situation.²⁷⁾ However, most participants still expressed negative opinions toward Yemeni refugees.

Moreover, based on fear and hatred toward Muslims, the most disturbing thing is that some media outlets even create groundless reports and fake news concerning Muslims. These include the news that purchasing halal food will help ISIS buy weapons or the news that Korea will become Islamic if the Muslim population exceeds 5% of the entire Korean population. The rumors that create fears regarding Islam have been steadily reproduced repeatedly in Korean society.²⁸⁾ These kinds of fake news and rumors have further spread an aversion to Yemeni refugees.

Based on negative images, ignorance, and the reproduction of fake news, Korea's attitude toward Muslims is being transferred from a defensive formation to an aversive one. Their previous hostilities showed passive form, but they have even strengthened the same in terms of range and

27) Jung, Hanwool, "Korean Cognition of Yemen Refugees," *Hankook Research Yeron in Yeron* 8, 4 March 2019, Available at https://www.hrc.co.kr/InfoCenter/Project_View.aspx?boardkey=kproject119&listpageno=15&listsearchtext=&rnd=2 (Accessed 27 March 2020).

28) Kim, Nami, *The Gendered Polytechnics of the Korean Protective Right: Hegemonic Masculinity*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

intensity.

Similar to Muslim cases, refugees in Korea have remained vulnerable to manipulated images. The refugee policy in South Korea has been initiated by political elites such as bureaucrats, members of parliament(MPs), lawyers, and civil society activists. Thus, Korean society could not have the opportunity to reach a consensus or to learn any lessons despite its experiences in hosting refugees. As a result, social imaginations about refugees have constructed a distinction from reality.

South Korea has already hosted more than 30,000 refugees from the Northern part of the Korean peninsula since the 1990s. North Korean refugees are identified as Korean nationals, and, according to South Korea's constitution, these are called "defectors." However, as a result of the Cold War politics, North Korean "defectors" were described as victims of poverty, political and religious marginalization, or state failures. The victimized imaginary was then reflected in understanding refugees in Korean society.

Furthermore, the understanding of refugee is mismatched with the legal definition of the international refugee law to many Koreans. For instance, many Koreans considered refugees to exist only on the other side of the world. An online survey conducted in 2013 by *Hankyure 21*, a national weekly news magazine, reveals the misunderstanding of Koreans. In the survey, 33% of Koreans were not aware that refugees live in Korea. Moreover, 47% of Koreans thought that refugees mostly came from Africa, the region described most often in poverty porn.²⁹⁾ Also, the survey of the

29) Eom, Ji-Won, "Hyeom-o-si-seol doen nan-min-ji-won-sen-teo (Refugee assistant center treated with aversion)," *Hankyure21*, vol. 981, 19 October 2013. http://h21.hani.co.kr/arti/special/special_general/35506.html. (Accessed 17 May 2020).

Migration Research and Training Centre conducted in 2019 shows “poor”, “war”, and “poverty” are most popular descriptions regarding refugees amongst Korean people.³⁰⁾ These indicate a superficial understanding of refugees largely widespread in Korean society.

The public perception of refugees is also heavily influenced by the media. The South Korean media, along with humanitarian agencies or NGOs, created an image of a refugee that is contradictory to the definition of the refugee in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees are often described as poor, weak, and immature children in an uncivilized or underdeveloped environment. For example, UNHCR’s Korean website often uses images of refugees on its main page, but most pictures describe refugees as helpless children. The images of refugee children have a severe gap when the media shows actual pictures of Yemeni refugees.

When Yemeni refugees appeared to the public, it practically disclosed a critical gap between what is real and what was imagined. For example, the Chosun Ilbo revealed images of Yemeni refugees, mostly young or adult males. Refugees are also often described as people using smartphones on their hands, getting information from social media, and actively seeking their pathways to Jeju Island via commercial flights. The existing perception of refugees caused cognitive dissonance when Korean society faced refugees in their neighborhoods. The misconceptualization of refugees as poor, weak, and immature children led to the non-acceptance of Yemeni refugees in Korea. Therefore, it stimulated a question about “genuine refugees” in Korea. Unfortunately, some media outlets and members of the public fell into a confirmatory bias instead of changing

30) Jang, Juyoung, et al., *Perceptions and Attitudes towards Asylum Seekers and Refugees in South Korea* (MRTC Researc Report Series, No.2019-03), Goyang: Migration Research and Training Center, 2019.

their original perceptions. Some scholars highlighted that conservative media exaggerated the discourse of “fake refugees” based on age, gender, the use of smartphones, and the ability to buy air tickets rather than using a “boat” among Yemeni refugees.³¹⁾ To many Koreans, refugees should not be adult males with the financial ability to work or access the Internet and social media using their smartphones. With this image, they do not seem to be like victims who are the object of help and charity. Therefore, the anti-refugee group defined the Yemeni refugees as “fake refugees.”

2. Fears of Identity Struggle

A sense of belonging based on history and cultural heritage affects the relationship between citizens and immigrants. This sentiment can be called ethnic identity or national identity. Ethnic identity is often described as a development of an essential human need that provides a sense of belonging and historical continuity.³²⁾ However, it can turn up in the opposite direction as well. It can not only strengthen the solidarity of their own group but also exclude others from their group. Therefore, ethnic identity is a complex mechanism of ambivalent attitude, embrace, and exclusion.³³⁾ It refers to identifying within-group people, but at the same time, keeping a distance from the out-group.

Fears about refugees, which call for the discrimination and exclusion of

31) Shin, Ye-Won and Ma, Dong-Hoon, “Two Faces of Yemen Refugee Represented in South Korean Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Chosun Ilbo and Hankyoreh,” *Journal of Media Economics & Culture*, Vol. 17, 2019, pp. 31–80.

32) Charlesworth, Rosalind, *Understanding Child Development*. Albany, NY: Delmar Thomson Learning, 2000.

33) Hjern, Mikael, “National Identities, National Pride and Xenophobia: A Comparison of Four Western Countries.” *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1998, pp. 335–347.

outside people with the slogan, “Citizens come first,” brought about anti-refugee sentiments in Korean society. Based on the indirect experience and social imagination, the crafted fears of the destruction of identity led to antipathy and disgust toward Yemeni refugees.

The media and anti-refugee groups have positioned themselves as dominant anti-refugee discourse producers by stimulating fear. For example, a conservative newspaper incited the exaggerated identity struggle by citing an interview with an official: “the average number of people who applied for refugee status is 71 per day recently; if this trend continues, they will reach 127,000 in three years.”³⁴⁾ The specific figures by an official could create worry and identity crisis. One of the anti-refugee groups also mentioned the identity crisis of the Korean society threatened by “illegal refugees” as below:

“We are afraid. Our precious traditional values, cultures, and ideologies would be lost or corrupted by refugees; they reject our traditional culture, insist on their own culture, and transplant it into our society; our identity would be disappeared with their forced transformation and distortion of our society and precious culture.”³⁵⁾

Korean society has developed various psychological strategies to preserve ethnic identity. However, in the Yemeni refugee crisis, it is a concern that these strategies would be connected to real action, such as marginalizing

34) Park, Sung-Woo, “Yemeni Refugees, It's Only the Beginning.” *Chosun Ilbo*, 5 July 2018. https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/07/05/2018070501334.html (Accessed 27 May 2020).

35) The People's Solidarity against Illegal Refugees, “Official Statement for Media Distribution,” 1 July 2018. https://blog.naver.com/the_public_of_korea/221310153871 (Accessed 23 April 2020).

strangers or repatriating them.

3. Fears of Safety and Sexual Violence

As cited above, xenophobia based on binary thinking and fear makes strangers from the outside a threat to law and security. This perception has been shown in the Yemeni refugee debates in South Korea when the public generalized all Yemeni refugees as a threat or potential criminals who can commit terrorist attacks or sexual violence. It was intensified with a concern-filled attitude of mass media and social media without any filters. Fears of terrorism and sexual violence have brought about the development of prejudice against refugees.

In the beginning, anti-refugee groups reproduced and inflated fears of insecurity. The most active anti-refugee group stated emphasized worries about security issues, assuming that Yemeni refugees are potential threats.³⁶⁾ A conservative newspaper also highlighted safety concerns and fears. For instance, Chosun Ilbo raised concerns such as, “Who will arrest Yemenis if they commit crimes without reporting their address and run away?”³⁷⁾ This article was written based on assumptions that have not even arisen yet, thus exaggerating fears about the unpredictable future.

Another conservative newspaper also reported an interview with a scholar who argued that the people’s safety concerns are reasonable and that the refugee issue should not be covered by human rights. In other words, it tried to reframe the current refugee issue as a debate between

36) The People’s Solidarity against Illegal Refugees, Ibid

37) Kim, Jeong-Hwan, “74% of Yemeni Asylum Seekers were Allowed Humanitarian Stay.” *Chosun Ilbo*, 18 October 2018. http://https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/10/18/2018101800156.html. (Accessed 22 April 2020).

people who advocate refugees' rights and those who support citizens' rights. Moreover, it argued that Korean society needs to find a way to resolve and alleviate the fear rather than saying it is groundless.³⁸⁾

Most of the fears or concerns related to the Yemenis are based on exaggerated information and groundless facts – in particular, the possible sexual violence. Islamophobia focuses on describing Muslim men as oppressing females or committing sexual abuses, thus suppressing women's rights.³⁹⁾ There are indeed social issues related to females in the Islamic world, such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, and honor killings.

Increased concerns about sexual violence rapidly mixed with the Islamophobic discourse and fake news. Some groups have contributed to the rapid politicization of refugee issues related to women's safety. For example, "the manual for marriage with Korean women," which describes Muslim migrant workers as a vanguard for Islamic globalization, was spread online.⁴⁰⁾ These rumors were reproduced in different ways and then combined with security and safety discourse. The hostile atmosphere toward Yemeni refugees increased after the proliferation of rumors that the death of a missing woman on Jeju Island was connected to the crime committed by a Yemeni – which was not true at all.⁴¹⁾

As a result of the increasing fears of women concerning their lives and

38) Ha, Jonn-Ho, "Concern over National Security...Refugee issue is Not a Matter to be Covered by Human Right." *Joonangilbo*, 7 August 2018, <https://news.joins.com/article/22864462> (Accessed 25 April 2020).

39) Kim, Dong-Moon, *Why Do We Hate Islam?* Guri: Seonyul, 2017.

40) Kim, Nami, *The Gendered Polytechnics of the Korean Protective Right: Hegemonic Masculinity*.

41) Yoon, Min-Hyuk, "Evidence Tells Loss of Footing, but Some Pointed Out Refugees as Criminals," *Chosun Ilbo*, 3 August 2018, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/08/03/2018080301039.html (Accessed 29 June 2020).

safety, some feminist groups agreed to refuse entry to refugees. A scholar who studies European Islamophobia and feminism called it “Femonationalism.” Here, the far-rightists and neo-liberalists utilize feminist themes such as feminist human rights and anti-sexual violence in anti-Islamic campaigns.⁴²⁾ Another scholar also argued that Protestant rightists in South Korea have already produced and spread Islamophobic discourse based on the themes and concepts of feminism. Based on these fears, they considered themselves guardians who could protect Korean women's human rights and safety from Muslim men.⁴³⁾

Many women showed high vigilance against young Yemeni Muslim men because this fear is connected to structural gender discrimination and misogyny in Korean society. According to Koo, their fear seems to be an extension of the usual fear felt by women who suffered murder at Gangnam Station in 2016, the MeToo movement, and the mass rallies against illegal filming.⁴⁴⁾

V. Conclusion

The arrival of Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island in 2018 has brought about unexpected and fierce resistance from the young and female groups. Over 700,000 people participated in the signing to oppose the Yemeni refugees, and pro-/anti-refugee groups likewise held rallies continuously.

42) Paris, Sara R., *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

43) Kim, Soo-Wan, “Reporting Frame Analysis on IS (Islamic State): Content Analysis of Chosun and Hankyoreh Daily Newspapers.” *The Journal of the Institute of the Middle East Study*, Vol. 33, 2016, pp. 107–140.

44) Koo, Ki-Yeon, “Our Naked Face of Refugee Issues: Islamophobia and Refugee Problem in South Korea.” *Creation & Criticism*, Vol. 46, 2018, pp. 401–412.

As Yemeni refugees flocked to Korea, the public awakened the emotions of fear and hatred in Korean society caused by the cognitive dissonance between what is real and what is imagined for refugees. They took the refugee issue as a threat to social security. The refugee issue was rapidly politicized and spread out to society with Islamophobia. In particular, it is astonishing that Koreans who seemed to have relatively favorable attitudes toward refugees in diverse domains showed contrasting attitudes, especially in women and youth groups, to the influx of refugees in 2018. They rejected accepting these refugees as members of Korean society. This research argues that multiculturalism backlash and hysteric oppositions toward the refugee issue have been crafted amid ignorance and unconditional hatred. After Koreans had faced the cognitive dissonance between what is imagined and reality, they opposed accepting young-adult male refugees using smartphones and social media. This is because refugees in Korean society are often described as poor and weak children in an underdeveloped environment. Moreover, such a perspective is further fueled by negative images of refugees crafted by fake news from the conservative media, and the extreme rhetoric from anti-refugee groups, which provokes imagined fears of identity struggle, security, and sexual violence.

The refugee issue was largely considered a tragedy that exist only on the other side of the world before this incident. Considering that one of the biggest concerns over the refugee issue in Korean society is the threat to social security, it is irresponsible to emphasize global responsibility and throw the blame on concerned people. It is time for the government, politicians, civic groups, and academia to carefully discuss how to resolve this complicated problem through practical measures.

- Ha, Jonn-Ho, "Concern over National Security...Refugee issue is Not a Matter to be Covered by Human Right." *Joonangilbo*, 7 August 2018. <https://news.joins.com/article/22864462> (Accessed 25 April 2020).
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국문요약

난민에 대한 한국 사회의 인지부조화: 제주 예멘 난민 사건을 중심으로

명석영(하와이대학교)

최원근(경희대학교)

2018년 제주도에서 발생한 예멘 난민 사태는 한국에서 난민정책을 둘러싼 치열한 갈등을 유발하였다. 지난 10여년 사이 한국의 민간부문은 UNHCR에 대한 재정적 기여를 크게 늘리면서 국제사회의 난민보호의 책임분담의 중요한 행위자로 주목받아 왔다. 이런 점을 감안할 때, 2018년 예멘 난민에 대한 일부 시민사회의 반대운동은 한국사회의 난민에 대한 기대와 배치되는 충격적 사건이었다. 이 연구는 이런 간극과 한국사회의 난민 수용에 대한 강력한 대중적 저항을 어떻게 설명할 수 있는지 모색하고자 시작되었다. 이 연구는 난민에 대한 현실과 이상의 인지부조화가 사회적 위기들과 다문화 정책에 대한 반발과 결합되어 근거 없는 공포를 조장하였으며, 이로 인해 급속하게 정치쟁점화 되는 기제로 작동하였다고 주장한다. 그러나 한편으로는 이런 사회적 경험을 통해 정부, 정치권, 시민사회와 학계가 한국 사회의 난민보호를 진지하게 성찰하는 기회로 작용하고 있음을 강조한다.

주제어: 한국, 예멘, 난민, 다문화, 인지부조화, 공포

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