

# Factors influencing labour migration of Korean women into the entertainment and sex industry in Australia

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## ABSTRACT

*Since the early 1990s, an increasing number of Korean women have migrated overseas to find work in the entertainment and sex industry. Over this time Australia has become one of the key destinations for these women. This paper explores recent patterns of migration of Korean women into Australia and their experience of working in the Australian entertainment and sex industry. Informed by the findings of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 21 Korean workers, this paper identifies various pull and push factors that may contribute to migration flow of Korean women into the Australian entertainment and sex industry. With the primary factor underlying their decision to be financial, that is the capacity to earn more money, other influential factors are related to the global trend of internationalisation of employment; the increased internationalisation of Korean culture; established networks of international employment; the use of an effective means of recruitment; economic conditions in Korea; Australian immigration laws; the relatively more constraining Korean legal regime governing operation of the sex industry; and the demand in Australia.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, an increasing number of Korean women have migrated overseas to find work in the entertainment and sex industry. Over this time Australia has become one of the key destinations for these women. Investigations by government and law enforcement agencies in Australia observe that a significant number of Korean nationals have worked, both lawfully and unlawfully, in the sex industry in Australia. The Attorney-General's Department confirmed that, between 1 March 2004 and 31 March 2007, 530 Korean nationals were found working lawfully in the sex industry in Australia and 135 Korean nationals were found working unlawfully in the same industry (e-mail communication, 2007). A government report on non-Australian citizens working in the sex industry over a twelve-month period in 2004/05 shows that the top nationality in this category was South Koreans (Australian National Audit Office, 2006, 75). The record also shows that Working Holiday (WH) visas were the most favoured visa class for these Korean sex workers (208 holding WH visas out of the 244 cases identified). In the financial year 2004-05, 222 South Korean WH visa holders were encountered working lawfully in the Australian sex industry, with 16 found in New South Wales. In the financial year 2003/2004, 63 South Korean WH visa holders were found working lawfully in the sex industry, with 52 found in NSW (ANAO, 2006).

Despite the growing number of Korean women working in the Australian sex industry, due to the often stigmatised nature of their work, very little is known about the nature of their migration or their life and work in Australia. This research explores recent patterns of migration of Korean women into Australia and their experience of working in the Australian entertainment and sex industry. Specifically, it identifies key "pull" and "push" factors of migration flow of Korean women to Australia and explores various aspects of their living and working conditions in Australia.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The paper is the result of analysis of data related to Korea women working in the entertainment and sex industry in Australia collected between February 2007 and April 2008. It is based on three distinct forms of information: (i) quantitative information derived from survey questionnaires answered by 21 Korean women who worked or have been working in the entertainment and sex industry in Australia, (ii) qualitative information derived from in-depth interviews with 21 Korean women, (iii) data collected from interviews and written communications with 13 informants government/non-government organisations and the industry, which had extensive knowledge about and experience of working with Korean sex workers in Australia. Relevant secondary source materials, including articles in the Korean and Australian media, academic publications and government and NGO reports, were also used.

Due to the nature of the work the women did, gaining access to Korean women working in the entertainment and sex industry in Australia was not easy. Two strategies were used to allow the researcher to approach potential interview participants. Firstly, organisations that were supposed to have a high level of contact with sex workers in Australia were contacted and asked to help with the recruitment of potential interview participants. They were asked to make initial contact with potential interviewees, using their established contact with Korean workers. Some organisations agreed to distribute leaflets to their Korean service users requesting participants. Korean community organisations were also used as a contact point to Korean women. Secondly, advertisements on community papers and internet websites were used to approach a broader group of Korean women working in Australia. As a result, a small number of women responded to the leaflet and advertisements and agreed to participate in the interviews. Snowballing methods were also employed with each interviewee being asked if they could suggest other potential interviewees at the end of the interview.

## 3. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The women interviewed worked in a range of workplaces including karaoke bars, room salons (hostess bars), massage parlours and brothels. Each type of establishments had different sets of working hours and conditions. They were willing participants in the industry and many were lured by job advertisements, readily available on the internet, which often exaggerated the benefits of a move into the industry. Also despite their legal status (the majority had a working holiday visa that allowed them to work up to 20 hours a week), they were, in many cases and to different extents, victims of deception, exploitation, control and illegal activities. They were often vulnerable to verbal abuse and other controlling behaviour by their brothel owners, managers, and/or madams which were often enforced through a long list of house rules related to being late, absent or quitting without due notice. These rules were often subject to changes at employers' discretion. More than half the women felt that they were deceived about their eventual working conditions and found their working conditions to be either worse or much worse than what they expected or heard. This was particularly the case among karaoke and room salon workers. Even though it was not directly 'sex work', being unknown to most outside the Korean community, including Australian service providers and authorities, their work usually had a sexual aspect. To outsiders operators generally inferred that they were only expected to provide routine waitress style services. This had the effect of making essentially invisible in the Australia labour market. With most officials unaware of their real role these workers fell outside existing legal structures, and in this study we found

they were more likely than sex workers to be subject to exploitation and poor working conditions.

Interviewees frequently revealed during their interviews that Korean employers were more likely than employers of other ethnicities to, in different ways, control their employees through withholding (referred euphemistically as "managing") their earnings, or dictating to women their working times and the fees they charged. Despite their various social and health needs, many women had little information about the mechanisms or sources of support they could access and only received or expected to receive limited support from informal sources such as from other friends in the industry, customers or family in Korea. The research also found that the existence of brokers in Korea connected to employers in Australia; friends or colleagues already employed in Australia; and the availability of a visa that allows visa holders to work, namely the Working Holiday scheme, facilitated their entry into the Australian sex and entertainment industry.

In addition to having to deal with abuse, disrespect and maltreatment by the employers and/or customers, these women from Korea often encountered difficulties when attempting to access health and other services. They said that there was a lack of external sources of support in general with several reports of a relative poor quality of life and suffering from feelings of social isolation. How well these women coped with difficulties and problems tended to be contingent on various other factors including the existence of friends doing the same work nearby; various individual characteristics such as individuals' personality; the short and long term personal goals of individuals; the relative value they placed on the money earned from their work; the degree to which they felt that had control over their situation; and religious beliefs.

#### 4. CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF THE INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT OF KOREAN WOMEN INTO AUSTRALIA

In this research, Korean women's movement to and employment in the Australian entertainment and sex industry was always the result of their voluntarily choice. In-depth interviews with these women, however, suggest that their choice has been influenced by various forces, both structural and situational, at play. Although economic necessity was often the primary motivation, there was a diversity of economic, social and individual circumstances shaping their motivation. In most cases, women did not have one single reason but a combination of many reasons that led them to come to Australia and find a job in the sex and entertainment industry: for better employment prospects; for better income; to obtain a new life experience; to learn English; to extend their study abroad; to support family members back home, to pay off personal debts; or to gather capital for starting their own businesses. This suggests that the importation of Korean women into the Australian entertainment and sex industry cannot be attributed to a single factor but to many interrelating factors and that it should be understood within the context of interconnected economic, social, cultural and political realities.

Their migration dynamic in particular reflected the interplay of 'push' factors and 'pull' factors. Push factors may include negative aspects that make them leave Korea such as: economic motives; the trend of global movement; increased internationalisation of Korean culture; economic conditions in Korea; and the relatively more constraining Korean legal regime governing operation of the sex industry. Pull factors may include positive aspects that induce them to come to Australia such as: established networks of international employment and their use of effective means of recruitment; immigration laws and prostitution laws in Australia, and the demand in Australia. In fact, these factors

are closely related to each other to have compound impact on Korean women's migration into the Australian entertainment and sex industry.

#### 4-1. Economic motives

In all cases of Korean women interviewed in this study, the major motivation for their involvement in the Australian entertainment or sex industry was usually economic necessities, although also influenced by social and individual circumstances. The social reality that entertainment or sex work could earn more money than other work available to them might also have influenced their choice of work in Australia. Although, in most cases of the women, data was not available to indicate the socio-economic level of their family in Korea, the women were not necessarily from the lowest-income families in Korea and it was not necessarily poverty but economic necessity that played the most significant role in their entering into the industry in Australia. For various reasons depending on the individual situation, all the women wanted to make money more than they could do from doing other work. All agreed that it was all about money. Priority was on making as much as possible as fast as possible. Some had to earn their living or support their families back home. Others needed to earn large sums of money to take home or to finance particular goals, such as more study, paying off personal debts, or gathering capital for starting their own businesses or for the lease/purchase of an apartment. Half of 10 sex workers interviewed were financing or had financed their study in Australia through their work. With little language and more limited job options in Australia, many women were easily placed in economic difficulty, which pressured them to turn their eyes to entertainment or sex work as it was one of the fast and available ways in which they could earn their living. As one karaoke worker put:

"When working at a restaurant, I could hardly afford to pay the rent. Although I worked eight hours a day, seven days a week, there was always no money left for me. Then I got involved in this work in a hope to make money little easily. Now I can afford to send some money to my parents (W, 24, karaoke worker)".

The fact that such work paid more than many other jobs available to them as well as offered comparatively flexible working hours might have functioned positively on their decision to enter the industry. They all agreed that money was the major attraction that pulled and kept them into the industry. Sex-related workers, in particular, often believed that this was the only way to improve their material position. One woman claimed that growing up in a poor family often increased these women's likelihood to become economically and emotionally needy and attracted to luxurious life style that sex work could offer. She explained:

"Except for some, most of working girls are from a relatively poor family. They do this work only for money. For all that, there're some girls who rather spend their money on luxury shopping. But I understand them. They may be trying to get what they were never able to get (M, 29, brothel worker)".

After all, it was money that made them enter and remain in this line of work. As another put:

"My initial intention was to work just for two weeks in order to earn money for my enrolment in college. But the money that I could earn from this job made me continue to work for more than a year. For anyone who wishes to start this work, I'd like to advice to think twice (C, 25, room salon worker)".

#### 4-2. The trend of globalisation and internationalisation in Korea

The overriding trends of globalisation and internationalisation in Korea might have impacted on the increasing importation of Korean women into Australia. One of characteristics of the process of globalisation and internationalisation in Korea is that it has led to an increase in the numbers of Koreans venturing overseas to travel, study, in particular to learn English (Shin, 2003). Many women in this study indicated that one reason they came to Australia was to have the opportunity to travel around in a new country and learn English. A small percentage did not have a sex work experience back in Korea but willingly choose to enter the Australian industry as it gave them the opportunity to experience a foreign country. Fuelled by the spirit of adventure, they often perceived and described their involvement in the Australian entertainment or sex industry to be a short-lived and auxiliary part of their global exploration.

Their movement to Australia, in fact, corresponds with a fast-growing global trend since the 1980s, that is feminised labour migration especially in the sex industry (Gallin, 2003). This trend has often thrived on a structural process of chain migration in which individuals who have already found employment in the overseas market arrange for their friends or colleagues in the home country to follow (as explained by Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998, 247). For the majority of the women in this study as well, friends with an experience of working in Australia were an important source of job information and a motivating force in their coming to and employment in Australia (see Table 1). With the help of friends already in the Australian industry, many said they were able to get enough information about possible risks before they came to Australia. By the same token, they were well aware of the need not to be controlled by employers by making contracts or receiving advance money but to choose employers that adhered to good practices.

**Table 1: Information source of employment in Australia**

	Work type		Number of women
	Karaoke and room salon workers	Sex workers	
Internet(broker)	5	4	9
Friends/colleagues	6	5	11
Community magazines	0	1	2
Total	11	10	21

#### 4-3. Established networks of international employment and the use of an effective means of recruitment

International employment networks based in Korea and the use of an effective means of recruitment may have played a significant role in the entry of Korean women into the Australian entertainment and sex industry. As outlined earlier, various media articles have reported that established organised networks between organisers in Korea and operators in Australia are heavily involved in small/medium-scale operations that legally or illegally recruit and bring in Korean women into Australia. These networks have developed effective recruiting techniques. Publicising tempting job offers through the use of various channels, from advertisements in the press to posting blogs on the internet, they have been able to take advantage of modern technology to achieve their goal. The use of internet, in

particular, offers recruiters a user-friendly, fast and anonymous means of recruiting accessible to a broad group of women.

Interview findings also suggest that there were a large number of recruiters in Korea who were working as agents for Australia-based Korean recruiters of entertainment and sex workers. To maximise their business profit, many of the Korean business owners and madams in Australia seemed to be linked to these agents in Korea and form a group of organisers to bring in women. These people usually formed a small group of organisers (e.g. two or three people) rather than a large organised crime group as their importation of the Korean women into Australia did not necessarily require illegal activities such as the production of fraudulent documentation. According to the interview data, a group of organisers often included one or two females, typically madams. These madams seem to play an important role in advertising and making contact with the women. One woman, working as a massage parlour madam, explained:

“The recruitment of the workers is usually the responsibility of the madam. I use this particular internet website based in Korea to recruit Korean girls. I constantly put an ad on it. If I successfully bring in a girl, I get \$1,000 per person from the business owner. Brokers get the same amount (D, 28, massage worker)”.

Many women were lured by job advertisements that exaggerated the benefits of working and living in Australia. One woman said:

“Overstated advertisements are really responsible. They say you can earn \$2,000 a week and you’re given a free airline ticket if you work more than six months. If you’ve been in the industry for many years and become an old face, it sounds worthwhile as it’ll at least give you an opportunity for overseas travel (R, 22, karaoke worker)”.

#### 4-4. Economic conditions in Korea

The economic conditions in Korea represented by the economic downturn and increasingly limited employment options for young people might be another push factor. Interviews with many women indicated that the economic downturn in Korea (especially since the Asian economic crisis or in Korea the so-called IMF crisis in later 1990s) was pushing more and more women to migrate overseas in search of work and take up employment in the sex and entertainment industry. Many women suggested that the decline was concentrated at the low-price end of the market, which may be responsible for their coming to Australia. One karaoke worker explained:

“The new laws might have had some impacts. But it is business as usual. The depressed economy rather led many customers to tighten their pockets. And the business got more and more competitive. Competition amongst girls got keener and keener. The top 10% of girls earn an extremely high income when the rest struggle to survive. The gap in their incomes sometimes becomes as big as more than 100 million won a month. For me, things are rather better here in Australia (S, 25, karaoke worker)”.

Related to economic downturn another push factor may be the growing unemployment rate among young people in Korea. According to a recent OECD report (Organisation for Economic co-operation and Development, 2007), the employment rate of young people in Korea remains relatively low, at 27% in 2006, compared with the OECD average of 43%. It is also reported that increasingly young Koreans are taking on "non-regular" positions (e.g. part-time or fixed-term jobs) with none of the security or benefits offered in regular employment (Fifield, 2008). In addition, with the world’s highest rate of higher education

enrolment<sup>1</sup>, unemployed college-educated young people account for more than one-third of unemployed youth in Korea today (Bae and Song, 2006). It has also been argued that in Korea higher educational qualifications may not necessarily offer a substantial advantage in the labour market in Korea (Bae and Song, 2006). This circumstance means a more limited range of employment opportunities are available for young women like those in this study. With or without higher educational qualifications, many women in this study were previously engaged in low-paid work and often found it difficult to support themselves in Korea. Some faced difficulties in obtaining employment elsewhere before they entered the sex and entertainment industry. Under this circumstance, many women in this study sought opportunities for overseas employment and found them in the Australian entertainment and sex industry as they could more easily avoid detection of their work from family and friends.

#### 4-5. Immigration laws (WH visa)

Australia's Working Holiday (WH) visa may be also important in influencing the influx of the Korean women into the Australian sex and entertainment industry. Australia allows Korean women to come on a working holiday visa and work as a sex worker. Unless there is a breach of visa conditions or any indication of sexual slavery or people trafficking, Australian law enforcement agencies are not required to take any action against sex workers on WH visas. Korea is one of the main source countries of working holiday makers in Australia. In this study as well, the majority of women also came to Australia on working holiday visas. They often referred to easy access to visas and work permit under the working holiday makers program (e.g. internet application and no requirement for language test) as a reason for their choice to come to Australia. One said:

"Compared to U.S. and other countries, it is very easy to get a visa for travel to and work in Australia due to Working Holiday visa. Some countries like Japan and Canada, although also offering WH visa, require some kinds of language test (H, 28, brothel worker)".

A recent audit report on visa management in Australia (ANAO, 2006) indicates that recent government attempts to prevent temporary residents from working in the sex industry did not progress due to the legality of sex work in Australia. In Australia, there is still a discussion about the need to review elements of the WH visa arrangements in Australia, which can be abused by migrant sex workers, business operators or traffickers. The Australian government, in particular, suspects a link to an organised racket trading in sex workers using the WH visa (ANAO, 2006). Oppositions such as the Sex Workers Association, however, say that banning foreigners on temporary visas from working in the sex and entertainment industry in Australia could result in stimulating the growth in the illegal brothels and underground sex trade (Han, 2007). They say that, even without the WH visa scheme, many women would come and work illegally in Australia.

#### 4-6. 2004 new anti-prostitution laws in Korea

Another push factor behind Korean women's entry into the Australian entertainment and sex industry may be the more constraining legal regime governing operation of the sex industry under the new anti-prostitution laws in Korea. While the illegality of sex work has been reinforced in Korea, sex work is largely legal in Australia<sup>2</sup>, even for migrant workers with a temporary work permit. A dramatic increase in the number of Korean

<sup>1</sup> The higher education enrolment rate, as in 2006, reaches 70% and around 80 % of high school girls enrol the higher educational institutions in Korea (Kim, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Prostitution itself is not illegal in Australia whereas laws regarding brothels vary according to states. In some states, brothels are regulated by local council planning laws while they are illegal in others.

nationals who received WH visas since 2004 may reflect the growing number of sex workers who entered Australia as an effect of the 2004 new anti-prostitution law in Korea. One explained; "It [the new law] in fact made many working girls come to Australia. Although there are a lot of businesses still operating, it certainly became little harder to make money there [in Korea] (M, 29, brothel worker)".

More notable with the new law, is that it seems to have an impact not only on the women only but also on the business operators, presumably those who might have been forced out of Korea as a result of the new anti-prostitution law. Research findings suggest that they often set up a business in Australia and brought in work practices as well as the women from Korea. In media reports seen earlier, Korean victims of sex trafficking were usually found in Korean-owned/operating businesses, which were suspected of having connections to the sex trade, organized crime and human trafficking operations.

#### 4-7. Demand in Australia

The increasing importation of Korean women into the Australian entertainment and sex industry is in part attributable to a growth in demand for sex and entertainment related services provided by Asians, which is closely related to the flourishing of Asian-style entertainment and sex-related businesses (e.g. karaoke bars, room salons, massage parlours, brothels) during recent decades in Australia. This growth may in part be attributed to the growth in Asian immigration into Australia. There are other signs that there is strong demand for Korean sex workers. We reviewed the advertisements for adult services that featured in a local community magazine in Sydney, called 'Central' issued on 12 December 2007. We found that 70% of the 20 advertisements offered sexual services from Asian females and of them, over 40% mentioned Korean women or more commonly they used the term "girls". One anonymous source from the industry (a man who identified himself as a Korean brothel employee and gave an account of the industry) estimated that over 60 % of the sex businesses in Sydney were owned by Asian-Australians (mostly Chinese and a small number of Koreans), of whom many were former sex workers themselves. He said:

After three to four years in business, these women get to learn how easily the business makes money and, in some cases, start their own business. This has facilitated a rapid increase of Asian businesses in the sex industry in Australia. Men tend to shop around and seek new faces, which has also contributed to the expansion of the industry (telephone interview, 2007).

In Australia, concerns have arisen that the proliferation of Asian brothels has resulted in a huge supply of imported illegal labour (Clennell, 1999; Orhant, 2000). The supply of Korean women into the Australian entertainment and sex industry can also be explained in part by the profitable nature of bringing Korean women into the industry. One key informant said that an increasing number of Asian-run businesses hire Korean women (usually on temporary visas) and regularly place ads for workers in Korean on the internet, or in newspapers or community magazines. In the case of Korean employers, young Korean women may be preferred as they share a common language and cultural background. However, their temporary visa status and often their limited knowledge of standard industry practices in Australia, may mean that they less pay and poor working conditions that local employees and are thus a source of greater profits.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Many people, particularly those with little exposure to or knowledge of the sex and entertainment industry, may be inclined to judge Korean women in this industry as being

at best opportunistic and at worst morally questionable. Even when they get to learn about the plight of these women, many may still blame the women for "choosing" to put themselves in such a situation. But "choice" must be placed in a complex context. These women might have made such decisions in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, their choice may be between a host of undesirable options. Others are doing the best for themselves and /or those they support. As a society we should stay focussed on how best we can protect these women from abuse and exploitation and ensure their basic human rights and welfare.

Through findings drawn from survey questionnaires, in-depth interviews and secondary data, this research generate not only greater understanding of the difficulties and problems that Korean entertainment and sex workers experience in Australia but how Australian and Korean policy makers and community services organisations can best design and target services to support them. Through its capacity to combat the spread of deceptive or abusive conduct legal and community services and support can be a key way of protecting the rights of migrant sex workers and reducing the risk of them becoming further marginalised. What is required will be a concerted and coordinated effort at all levels from policy makers and law, migration and health related government agencies to community service organisations and other NGOs and individuals within the community.

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## Section B: Non-Refereed Papers

# Global Korea: Old and New

Proceedings of  
The Sixth Biennial Conference  
Korean Studies Association of Australasia

The University of Sydney, Australia

9 - 10 July 2009



Edited by Duk-Soo Park

## Editor's Notes

This book contains the proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Biennial Korean Studies Association of Australasia (KSAA) Conference: *Global Korea: Old and New*, held at the University of Sydney 9-10 July 2009. After its establishment in 1994, the KSSA launched its first conference in 1999 at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. As a result, this event marks a decade since the founding of the KSAA Conference, commemorated by the return of the conference to its city of origin.

The theme of the conference, *Global Korea: Old and New*, was chosen to reflect not only various issues related to globalisation and the current development of 'new' Korea but also to meet the demand for academic investigation of how 'old' Korea related to the rest of the world.

As you know, recently the Republic of Korea has been dramatically transformed by modernity and faced many challenges associated with such change. The majority of papers presented at the Conference, which appear in this volume, concern issues associated with globalism, as well as topics that delve into both old and contemporary Korea. Some papers examine global Korea from past perspectives, while others advance a vision and philosophy for the future based on Korea's current situation.

Thanks to the initiative of our first KSAA Conference organiser, Dr Chung-Sok Suh of the UNSW, this Conference has a valued tradition of not only requiring presenters to submit full papers to the conference organiser but also of offering them the opportunity to submit their papers for publication in the proceedings prior to the Conference. The five previously published proceedings have advanced Korean studies and provided a strong academic foundation for future research. All the proceedings represent the time, effort and intellectual rigor of experts who cherish Korea and Korean studies, and establish a strong benchmark for additional academic scholarship. Since the 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial KSAA Conference, held at the Curtin University of Technology in Perth under the guidance of Dr Kyu Suk Shin, conference organizers have produced refereed conference papers that have been published in the form of Conference proceedings. This makes the Conference more valuable to academics and researchers worldwide since refereed conference papers have the same standing as papers published in professional journals.

This time, 32 papers underwent the review process at the request of authors. The double-blind peer review process began in late April. Each paper was sent to two referees in the field without information on the author's identity. Referee comments were relayed to the authors. The authors of the 20 papers selected for publication then made appropriate revisions or corrections to reflect issues raised by the referees. Final versions appear in Section 1: Refereed Papers. Section 2 contains 26 non-refereed papers and other material presented at the Conference. In each section, papers are listed in alphabetical order based on the field of study and the author's name.

Topics addressed by the papers in this volume include:

**Anthropology:** There is an intriguing paper on an aspect of old Korea: an anthropological and archaeological study of the relationship between early Mongols and ancient Koreans.

**Art history:** Two papers discuss modernity in Korean art since the late *Chosŏn* dynasty.

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