

Belonging beyond Borders

The Cultural Integration of Yemeni Refugees in Jeju

Soojeong Yi

Abstract: This article examines the acculturation of Yemeni refugees who arrived in Jeju, South Korea, in 2018 and their adaptation to Korean society five years later in 2023. Based on interviews conducted in 2024 with four Yemeni refugees and five Korean stakeholders, including government and private sector representatives, the article applies Ager and Strang's integration framework to analyse key factors influencing the refugees' settlement. The findings reveal that state intervention was minimal, while private organisations and individual efforts played a significant role in integration. Factors such as language acquisition, employment, social networks and visa stability were crucial in shaping their adaptation. This article provides insights into how Korea, encountering large-scale refugee arrivals for the first time, managed this challenge and offers recommendations for future refugee policies.

Keywords: Islam in Korea, migrant Muslims, Muslims in Korea, refugees, Yemeni refugees in Korea

In May 2018, 484 Yemeni refugees arrived on Jeju Island, a South Korean island located to the south of the mainland. Although the Refugee Act was already in place, public awareness of it was minimal (Kim 2019; Kim 2020). Korean society, which had neither anticipated nor previously experienced a large-scale influx of refugees from the Middle East, reacted with shock (Park 2019). The issue of refugee acceptance quickly became a topic of national debate, with increasing opposition to their settlement, leading to widespread societal confusion (Song 2019; Shin and Ma 2019, Hwang et al. 2022). As a result, the refugee screening process concluded with two individuals being granted refugee status, 412 receiving humanitarian stay permits, 56 being denied refugee recognition and 14 having their status revoked by the authorities (Ministry of



Justice 2018). In total, 414 individuals, including those recognised as refugees and those granted humanitarian stay permits, were permitted to remain in South Korea. According to data released by the South Korean government to the media, as of 5 December 2018, 251 of the 362 individuals who had received humanitarian stay permits in the initial round had left Jeju, while 161 remained on the island (*ibid.*). Since then, information regarding Yemeni refugees' specific locations, occupations and settlement patterns in Jeju has rarely been publicly disclosed. The only available data comes from media interviews conducted with individuals who voluntarily shared their experiences.

This article examines the social adaptation of Yemeni refugees who entered South Korea in 2018 and have been residing in the country for over five years. Specifically, using the analytical framework proposed by Alastair Ager and Alison Strang (2008), the article analyses the key factors influencing Yemeni refugees' adaptation to Korean society and the significant effects of these factors. Previous studies have primarily focused on the immediate social impact of Yemeni refugees' arrival in South Korea, particularly the intensification of social conflicts (Song 2019; Shin and Ma 2019; Hwang et al. 2022). In particular, research has emphasised public perceptions of refugee acceptance and the role of the media in shaping discourse (Hur and Yang 2024). Additionally, when the 2021 special contributors from Afghanistan arrived in South Korea, comparative studies were conducted to examine differences in the reception of Yemeni refugees and Afghan special contributors (Koo and Paek 2023). However, existing research has largely concentrated on the initial reception of refugees rather than the long-term adaptation process following their settlement. Therefore, this article provides valuable insights by addressing two key questions: (1) the capacity of Korean society to accommodate refugees five years after their arrival and (2) the major factors that have positively or negatively influenced the social integration of Yemeni refugees. Through this analysis, the article aims to suggest a more forward-looking and effective approach to refugee integration in South Korea.

Method and Methodology

This article analyses the social adaptation of Yemeni refugees in South Korea and the key mechanisms influencing this process, drawing on the concepts proposed by Ager and Strang for the social integration of migrants (Ager and Strang 2008, 2010). Among the theories most widely applied to the cultural adaptation of migrants are John W. Berry's acculturation theory (Berry 1997) and Ager and Strang's integration model. The primary reason for adopting Ager and Strang's framework is its emphasis on clear, comprehensive indicators for measuring integration, making it particularly suitable for capturing the multidimensional experiences of migrants over an extended period. While Berry's theory also provides valuable insights, Ager and Strang's framework

was selected because it better addresses the necessity of examining the accumulated life experiences of interview participants comprehensively and across multiple dimensions, rather than focusing solely on their individual cultural adjustments.

Ager and Strang emphasise the foundation of rights and citizenship, asserting that obtaining permanent residency or citizenship through naturalisation serves as the fundamental basis for successful integration (Ager and Strang 2008; 2010). According to their framework, acquiring permanent residency or citizenship enables refugees to access political, economic and social rights, as well as social services, equal to those available to native citizens. Therefore, transitioning from refugee status to permanent residency or citizenship is considered the most essential and foundational step towards achieving full social integration.

The facilitators promoting such integration include: (1) language and cultural knowledge, and (2) safety and stability. Language and cultural knowledge of the host society serve as both indicators and means of successful integration (Ager and Strang 2008; 2010). Accordingly, language and cultural education provided by the host country is essential for refugees, who often migrate involuntarily and unexpectedly. Alternatively, there should be good access to interpretation and translation services available within the society. Additionally, acquiring language and cultural knowledge facilitates mutual exchanges and understanding between immigrants and host country nationals. Safety and stability refer to conditions that enable immigrants to live securely and participate equally in society without being exposed to human rights violations such as racial discrimination, violence or other forms of societal harm.

Social connection includes three key dimensions: (1) social bridges, (2) social bonds and (3) social links. Social bridges refer to networks established between migrants and members of the host society. These bridges facilitate emotional interaction, foster mutual closeness and encourage engagement between immigrants and the local population (Ager and Strang 2008; 2010: 28–29). Such relationships create opportunities for migrants to settle into and actively participate in the broader society. Social bonds refer to connections formed among migrants from the same country to strengthen group solidarity. While bonding factors can vary – including hobbies, religion or personal interests – this article assumes religious activities centred around mosques to be the primary bonding factor, given that the vast majority of Yemeni refugees are Muslims. Such social bonds significantly contribute to migrants' psychological stability, self-esteem and identity formation. Lastly, social links denote connections between migrants and the institutions of the host country, particularly those facilitating access to resources or helping resolve challenges that migrants face at the national or institutional level.

Makers and means include (1) employment, (2) housing, (3) education and (4) health. In particular, employment serves as a critical indicator of economic integration, as it reflects migrants' participation in the host country's labour

market (Ager and Strang 2008; 2010: 28). Specifically, the degree of non-discriminatory treatment experienced by migrants within the labour market is widely recognised as an essential measure of social integration. Housing indicates whether immigrants integrate into society or become isolated, potentially forming segregated communities or ghettos, depending on their residential arrangements. Education is an important measure that can illustrate the relationship between migrants and the host society by examining whether equal educational opportunities are provided across different generations of migrants. Lastly, health is utilised to assess the level of social integration by examining migrants' ability to access healthcare services without facing language barriers or experiencing discrimination.

Using this theoretical framework, this article aims to assess the degree of adaptation and integration of Yemeni refugees into Korean society since their arrival in 2018. Researchers have suggested that the social integration policies implemented by Korean society to accommodate migrants are already systematically in place (Lee 2013). However, 2018 marked the first time that South Korea experienced a large-scale influx of refugees, as well as the first instance in which they entered and attempted to settle simultaneously. Therefore, by evaluating the extent to which Yemeni refugees have integrated, we can assess the effectiveness of South Korea's social integration policies for migrants. This analysis provides an opportunity to examine the country's overall capacity to accommodate migrants and the broader societal acceptance of refugees. Ultimately, this article seeks to verify Korean society's responsiveness and its integration system's functionality in handling unexpected refugee inflows based on real-life cases.

To this end, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of nine participants in Jeju during September 2024. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were made aware that their narratives might be included in the final publication. In order to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, this article discloses only the minimal information necessary for the analysis. The interview process was carried out over the course of one month to ensure sufficient depth and comprehensiveness in the responses. Among the nine interviewees, four were Yemeni refugees who had been residing in Jeju, while the remaining five were government officials and private sector representatives actively involved in assisting Yemeni refugees in their adaptation to Korean society. The details of the interview participants are presented in Table 1 for reference. However, due to concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality, specific personal information that could potentially reveal the identities of the interviewees has been deliberately omitted from this article. It should be noted that the Yemeni participants in this study represent only a small fraction of the total number of Yemeni refugees who arrived in Jeju. Although efforts were made to enhance the credibility and validity of the study by incorporating additional accounts from individuals within the participants' broader Yemeni networks, the limited sample size

Table 1. The list of interviewees and basic information on them. Created by the author.

	Occupation	Nationality	Residence	Age group
A	Junkyard worker	Yemen	Jeju	30s
B	Restaurant worker	Yemen	Jeju	30s
C	Unemployed	Yemen	Jeju	50s
D	Chef	Yemen	Jeju	30s
E	Government officer	Korea	Jeju	50s
F	NGO worker	Korea	Jeju	50s
G	Nun	Romania	Jeju	40s
J	Junkyard owner	Korea	Jeju	60s
I	Restaurant owner	Korea	Jeju	40s

remains a constraint. Nevertheless, the value of this study lies in its documentation and analysis of these individuals' lived experiences, however few in number. Moreover, the Korean stakeholders selected for interviews were individuals who played a central role in the initial reception and ongoing integration of the Yemeni refugee community. Their continued involvement and influence further enhance the significance and reliability of the research findings.

Lived Realities of Yemeni Refugees in Korea

Navigating Legal Identities: Rights and Citizenship

In fact, the rate of refugee recognition in South Korea is relatively low (Hong and Kim 2019). If an individual is formally recognised as a refugee and granted a refugee visa, they may also be eligible to obtain permanent residency, depending on their specific circumstances (Son 2013). However, in the case of Yemeni refugees who arrived on Jeju Island, the majority were not granted official refugee status but instead received one-year extension visas under the humanitarian stay permit system (Kim 2018). While this status has allowed them to legally reside in South Korea, it does not provide long-term security, leaving their residency status unstable. This instability arises from the ambiguous nature of the humanitarian stay permit, which was originally designed as a temporary measure but, in practice, has been granted to individuals remaining in South Korea for extended periods. In other words, if a refugee arrives in Korea without having made prior preparations for an abrupt and life-altering migration, and is subsequently denied official refugee status, they are left with limited options. Without access to permanent residency or citizenship – both of which are essential for full social integration – these individuals remain in a

state of precarity. Because of these challenges, a significant number of Yemeni refugees who were granted humanitarian stay status have expressed a strong desire to change their visa type to a more stable status. At the end of one interview, when asked about his future plans, A responded as follows:

A: I want to continue living in Korea. So far, I have had no major issues while living here, and I truly enjoy being in Korea. If I could fulfil my dream, I would like to return to Saudi Arabia for a period, marry a Yemeni woman, start a family, and then come back to Korea to build a stable life. Ultimately, I hope to obtain permanent residency in Korea, which would allow me to settle here long-term and fully integrate into society.

In contrast, D's case was different, as he had married a Korean woman and obtained a more stable visa. During the interview, D expressed a sense of security and satisfaction, emphasising that his visa status was the most stable among Yemeni refugees in Korea. He explained that his wife was not a humanitarian resident and that he was legally residing in Korea under a marriage visa. D and his wife were married and at that time operated a Yemeni restaurant on Jeju Island. Reflecting on the visa situation for Yemeni refugees, he shared the following perspective.

D: Yemeni refugees want to live in Korea with a sense of stability. However, their visa status remains highly precarious. Of course, beyond visa issues, not everyone is in an ideal situation regarding language proficiency, employment or overall adaptation. Yet one of the most challenging aspects they face is the way people perceive them. Yemenis are not animals in a zoo; they are simply individuals trying to live their lives here. I hope people come to understand that, depending on their circumstances, some of them may eventually become Korean citizens – legally, just like us.

A arrived in Korea in his late twenties and is now in his early thirties. He currently lives alone, and one of his life goals is to marry a Yemeni woman and obtain permanent residency in Korea. Of course, this reflects an individual aspiration rather than the actual feasibility of acquiring permanent residency. However, there are those who believe that Yemeni refugees who have settled in Korea should eventually integrate and establish themselves as members of Korean society. For this to become a reality, key factors such as resolving visa uncertainties, facilitating changes in visa status and granting permanent residency or citizenship must be addressed.

Language, Culture and the Making of Everyday Life

To examine the role of language and cultural knowledge in promoting social integration, it is essential to consider how Yemeni refugees acquired these skills. The case of the special contributors from Afghanistan in 2021 provides a useful comparison, as these individuals received systematic language

education from the early stages of their resettlement in Korea (Yi 2022). In other words, the South Korean government implemented structured resettlement education at the national level for forcibly displaced migrants from Muslim-majority countries. However, Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island did not receive such institutional support. Most critically, this was the first instance in which a large group of refugees had entered Korea in this manner, and at the time, no formal system was in place to provide collective language education for them. As a result, the responsibility for language instruction fell largely on private organisations. F and G, for example, are members of an organisation that has been closely collaborating with the government to provide education and assistance to Yemeni refugees since their arrival on Jeju Island.

Q: How was Korean language education conducted in Jeju and Yemen?

G: Korean language education was primarily provided through private initiatives. We established Korean language classrooms and offered instruction to those who wished to learn. However, most individuals did not receive language education for an extended period. Many left to seek employment, which often disrupted their studies. When they later returned to Jeju Island, some re-enrolled in Korean language classes and resumed their studies. Despite these challenges, everyone recognises the importance of learning Korean.

The lack of systematic Korean language education and direct entry into the workforce posed a significant obstacle to successful social integration. Both A and C entered Korean society without receiving formal language instruction. However, their experiences differed considerably. A secured a job at a small junkyard business on Jeju Island, whereas C was employed at a large industrial company in Mokpo. Since A worked in a small business, he was able to learn the job under the direct supervision of his employer while gradually acquiring Korean language skills. Additionally, his former boss, H, was particularly supportive and accommodating towards immigrant Muslims, which facilitated his adjustment. In contrast, C had a markedly different experience. He was trained by a manager who was supportive of neither Muslims nor foreigners, making the learning process significantly more challenging. Moreover, age was another critical factor influencing their adaptation. A, who arrived in Korea in his late twenties, found it relatively easier to learn a new language and acquire job-related skills. However, C, who migrated in his fifties, faced greater difficulties in adapting to both a new language and a different work environment.

Q: How did you learn Korean?

A: I often went to the cathedral – the one where the organisation supporting Muslim immigrants provided Korean language education – to learn Korean. In addition, I learned a great deal from my boss, who was very patient and supportive. Thanks to his guidance, I was able to pick up the language quickly. Now, I can even order food at a restaurant over the phone and then go there to eat. I do not experience any significant difficulties living in Korea.

A had already established relationships with several restaurants he frequently visited, to the extent that he could communicate with them by phone and place orders with ease. The interview itself was conducted in Korean, and A demonstrated a level of proficiency that allowed for smooth and effective communication throughout the conversation. In contrast, C struggled with both Korean and English and had to conduct the interview in Arabic. After living in Mokpo for some time, C eventually quit his job and returned to Jeju Island. Frustrated by his limited Korean proficiency, he decided to make a concerted effort to learn the language properly. With no viable option to return to his home country, he viewed Jeju Island as a place where he could restart his life. When asked the same question about his language learning experience, C responded as follows.

C: When I first started working, the first thing people said to me was not my name, but an expletive – ‘fucking bastard’. In Yemen, I was a journalist. I wrote articles for newspapers and books. Naturally, when I came to Korea, I had to start working in a factory, but I struggled to adapt. Instead of patiently teaching me, people would briefly demonstrate a task and expect me to follow along. If I couldn’t do the job correctly right away, they would curse at me. Now, five years later, the only Korean words I have truly mastered are insults. I couldn’t continue living like that, so I quit my job and moved to Jeju Island. Now, I attend church and have started learning Korean again. Back in Yemen, I was fluent in English, but now, I have forgotten everything. I want to speak English again, but I can’t even say a single word.

When C was asked what he lacked most when settling in Korea, he cited the lack of language education.

C: If I had been a little more proficient in Korean, I would have been able to express myself better, and my work situation might have been different. Of course, I could have practised more and made an effort to learn on my own, but I had no one to guide me on where to go for Korean language education or how to study effectively. If a structured system had been in place, I believe I would not have ended up unemployed. Still, I have no regrets. I plan to take some time to reflect and eventually find my path forward in life.

C was attending Korean language classes at the same church where A had previously studied. G was responsible for teaching Korean at the church. When asked about the importance of Korean language education for refugees, G responded as follows.

G: Korean language education is the most essential factor for individuals who have settled and are living in Korea. There is a significant difference in both life satisfaction and the overall settlement process between those who have received proper Korean language education and those who have not. However, many people do not know where to access Korean language education or how to enrol in such programmes. Finding this information is not easy, either. Yet, without sufficient Korean proficiency, it is difficult to navigate life in Korean society. One must be able

to speak Korean to visit city hall for official documents, seek medical assistance at a hospital or even shop at a supermarket. The further one moves from urban centres, the more challenging the situation becomes. In environments where there is a high concentration of foreigners, such as refugee communities, the most critical aspects of integration are language acquisition and socialisation education.

Language is widely regarded as the most crucial factor in facilitating migrants' adaptation to a new society (Esser 2006). Accordingly, in recent years, both the United Kingdom and France have adopted language proficiency as a key measure of migrants' social integration and have implemented policies to strengthen language assessment (UK Visas and Immigration 2025; Willsher 2025). However, it is essential to recognise that refugees do not migrate by choice but rather out of necessity. Given this reality, language education should be supported at a societal level to ensure their successful integration.

Perceptions of Safety and the Search for Stability

The additional questions I posed to the Yemeni refugees in Jeju were: (1) Do you feel safe living in Korea? and (2) Do you believe you can receive assistance from the authorities if you encounter a dangerous situation while living in Korea? These questions aimed to assess their sense of safety and stability, both of which are key facilitating factors for successful integration into a new society. Yemeni refugees A, B, C and D all responded affirmatively to these questions.

Q. Do you believe you can receive assistance from the police if you encounter a dangerous situation in Korea? Do you consider Korean society to be safe?

B. Yes. I know that if something dangerous happens in Korea, I can contact the police.

Q. What do you think is the most concerning aspect of living in Korea?

B. I have never felt unsafe in Korea. I have always considered it a safe country. However, I know that when we first arrived, many people did not welcome us. As a result, I was aware that the police were closely monitoring us.

When Yemeni refugees first arrived in South Korea, they were widely perceived as a potential threat (Sung and Cho 2019). Several factors contributed to this perception, one of the most significant being that the majority of the refugees were young men. This reflects a broader societal prejudice, as they were viewed as dangerous primarily because they were young men arriving in groups, rather than families or women (Jun 2020). This bias illustrates one of the underlying discriminatory tendencies within society. The Yemeni refugees themselves were also aware of how they were perceived. According to G's testimony, many deliberately avoided gathering in groups during the day to minimise social scrutiny, opting instead to move around at night when fewer people were present.

Although they generally felt safe within Korean society, they did not feel entirely secure from the judgement and prejudice they encountered upon arrival. However, as they gradually dispersed across the country and integrated into their new communities, the initial strong public perception of them as a threat began to fade. Over time, the social attention directed towards Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island diminished. As they became more settled, they started to experience a sense of security and stability within the structured framework of Korean society. This shift in perception and lived experience ultimately fostered a growing desire for deeper social integration.

Weaving Social Worlds: Bridges, Bonds and Links

The Yemeni refugees in Jeju maintained social bonds in various ways, with religious engagement being one of the most common. Given that most of them identified as Muslims, they frequently attended mosques and musallahs to practise their faith in Korea. However, religious practice extended beyond mere worship; it served as a crucial means of fostering a sense of community among individuals who shared similar social, cultural and religious backgrounds. Through these gatherings, they not only upheld their religious identity but also reinforced their collective sense of belonging and social support.

Q: Do you practise any religion in Korea? How do you meet with your friends? Do you primarily associate with Yemeni friends?

A: I usually go to the musallah in downtown Jeju, where I can meet many Muslim friends. Of course, I do not interact only with Yemenis; I also get along well with friends from the Philippines.

D: The musallah in downtown Jeju is quite far, so we built a musallah inside our restaurant. Many of our close friends and Muslims in the area come here to pray. It is not necessary to dine at our restaurant – anyone is welcome to come and pray. Additionally, when people who have moved to the mainland [the Korean Peninsula] return to Jeju, they always visit our restaurant. This place feels like our second home.

As such, the Yemeni refugees in Jeju arrived in Korea with diverse backgrounds and experiences, yet they actively built new social bonds through communication and interaction. However, Islam was not a unifying factor for everyone. When asked the same question, C responded as follows.

C: I'm not a Muslim. [The interviewer was surprised, and the interviewee laughed as he continued his answer.] In Yemen, I lived as if I were a Muslim because of my family and societal expectations. However, I do not have strong personal beliefs or attachments to Islam. In that sense, I appreciate Korea. Here, people do not concern themselves with my religious identity, and I can live my life freely, regardless of religion. Even though I am not a Muslim, I maintain good relationships with my Yemeni refugee friends as well as my Muslim friends. Whether or not I am Muslim is not an important issue.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice of Korea has been implementing a social integration programme, actively facilitating the creation of social links. Yemeni refugees have been accessing information related to these social links and integrating them into their daily lives, largely with the support of private organisations and through their own networks of information exchange from the early stages of their resettlement.

Employment and Education: Pathways to Belonging

E has been at the forefront of efforts to help Yemeni refugees in Jeju settle in Korea since their initial arrival. As a public official responsible for immigration, E was working in the same department when the Yemeni refugees first entered the country. At the time, the Korean government faced widespread criticism for its lack of systematic support. Given this, I asked E for their perspective on the issue.

E: Since this was the first time we had encountered such a situation, there were limited areas where the government could intervene or provide assistance. The most significant support the government could offer was job placement. To address this, our department reached out to companies in the Jeolla region near Jeju and successfully organised a job fair. Businesses facing labour shortages were able to hire workers, and Jeju, which lacked the capacity to accommodate all the Yemeni arrivals, was able to alleviate some of the strain.

In addition to legal procedures, the Korean government implemented a humanitarian assistance programme for Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island, primarily by facilitating employment opportunities. Gaining employment through this programme enabled the refugees to achieve self-reliance, which can be regarded as both an indicator and a means of social integration (Dicolen and Sanchez 2016). Once employed, Yemeni refugees gradually developed skills in their respective fields and transitioned between jobs as they progressed in their careers. However, the acquisition of these skills varied depending on the type of job they initially obtained, leading to individual differences in their professional development.

A: The work I do at the junkyard is quite simple. However, I want to stay in Korea for a long time and build a life here. I also hope to start a family. Therefore, if possible, I would like to acquire additional skills, such as welding, and pursue more specialised work.

As a result, when employment security was directly linked to personal skill development, individuals were able to integrate into society more efficiently and effectively. Conversely, when skill development was slow, employment security became less stable, making social adaptation more challenging. Employment security plays a crucial role in ensuring long-term stability for migrants, as it not only provides financial independence but also facilitates

deeper engagement with the host society. In particular, economic activity enables migrants to establish stronger social networks, contributing to their overall integration into the community.

Economic participation is a fundamental aspect of social integration, as it allows migrants to become active members of society rather than remaining on its margins. Therefore, facilitating employment opportunities, such as through job fairs, is essential in helping refugees secure jobs suited to their abilities and circumstances. These efforts ultimately support not only individual refugees but also the broader stability and cohesion of Korean society by promoting self-sufficiency and reducing economic dependency.

Some individuals may choose to pursue education once they achieve economic stability. One notable case involved a single father who arrived in Korea with his children, who successfully enrolled in and completed his education within the Korean public school system (based on interview with G). This demonstrates that migrants in Korea have access to education without discrimination, ensuring equal educational opportunities regardless of their background. Such inclusivity in education plays a crucial role in facilitating the effective adaptation and integration of migrants into Korean society.

However, in the case of Yemeni refugees, many had already completed their public education before arriving in Korea as independent adults. As a result, there were inherent limitations in using this case to assess the accessibility and impact of Korea's public education system for newly arrived refugees.

Spaces of Home: Housing and Health

Yemeni refugees often preferred to work for companies that provided housing, a preference that was not unique to them but common among many migrant workers facing similar challenges (Lozanovska 2019; Tong et al. 2020). Since securing independent housing can be difficult, many migrants relied on company-provided accommodation as a practical solution.

Additionally, Yemeni refugees in Korea tended to reside in areas where other migrants also lived. They primarily settled in neighbourhoods with affordable housing or near their workplaces. In some regions, their residential areas were distinct from those of the mainstream population. However, this separation did not necessarily indicate social isolation from Korean society. Rather, it was largely a cost-saving measure, and their adaptation and integration into society continued despite the spatial separation.

C mentioned that he had lived in company-provided housing while working in Mokpo. Meanwhile, some refugees who had stayed in Jeju for an extended period, with the assistance of F and G, signed joint housing contracts, allowing them to live together in shared accommodation.

F: Finding a place to live was also a significant challenge. When people heard the term 'Yemeni refugee', they often expressed reluctance to offer help. Additionally,

since it was not feasible for one person to live alone in a large house, we had to share accommodation. However, this arrangement was difficult, as conflicts often arose – either because housemates had disagreements or because the living conditions were poorly managed. Moreover, the stark contrast between the living environment in Korea and that of Yemen further contributed to these challenges.

As a result, the resolution of housing difficulties was closely linked to social connections. Those with well-developed social networks were able to secure stable housing more quickly, while individuals with weaker networks faced significant challenges in finding suitable accommodations.

Similarly, access to healthcare was generally available to those who actively contributed to Korean society, as the government grants humanitarian status that includes residency rights and medical insurance benefits for individuals engaged in economic activities. Consequently, most interviewees reported experiencing little to no difficulty in accessing healthcare services. However, the challenges they did encounter were primarily related to language barriers. In particular, difficulties arose when they struggled to articulate their symptoms due to limited Korean proficiency or were unable to follow medical instructions accurately.

Social Integration of Yemeni Refugees in Korea

This article draws on Ager and Strang's (2008) indicators of integration framework to analyse in-depth interview data collected from four Yemeni refugees currently residing in Jeju and five Korean stakeholders who have worked closely with them. The analysis was structured around the framework's four core dimensions – foundations, facilitators, social connections, and means and markers – with each dimension's subcomponents guiding both the design of the interview protocol and the interpretation of the responses.

For instance, under the foundations dimension, the article has assessed the legal stability and long-term settlement prospects of Yemeni refugees based on their visa status, refugee recognition, and potential for acquiring permanent residency or citizenship. The facilitators dimension focused on experiences related to language education, the process of language acquisition, and perceived safety and security. Notably, the absence of state-sponsored language programmes and the reliance on civil society organisations for language support contributed to disparities in early integration experiences.

In the social connections dimension, the article examined the types of relationships Yemeni refugees formed within Korean society. These included social bonds through Muslim communal life centred on mosques and musallahs, social bridges developed through workplaces and civil society engagement, and social links established with governmental and non-governmental institutions. The presence and strength of these networks were found to directly affect other aspects of integration, such as housing stability and employment continuity.

Finally, the means and markers dimension assessed tangible indicators of integration such as employment, housing, healthcare and education. Employment security, for example, was closely tied to opportunities for language development and skill acquisition, while access to public education and healthcare services varied significantly depending on legal status and language proficiency. Cases where participants received support from churches or NGOs showed more rapid progress in securing basic necessities such as housing contracts and health insurance registration.

By analysing these dimensions not in isolation but as interrelated factors, this article seeks to offer a nuanced and experience-based account of the integration trajectories of Yemeni refugees in Jeju. As a result, a comprehensive examination of the adaptation of Yemeni refugees in South Korea reveals a complex picture of migrant integration, the overall process and the efficiency of settlement within South Korean society. The elements within the analytical framework proposed by Ager and Strang (2008, 2010) are not independent variables but rather interconnected components that influence one another dynamically. In other words, when one factor is successfully addressed, it facilitates the resolution of others in succession. Conversely, when a particular element becomes problematic, the broader indicators of social integration weaken progressively.

Nonetheless, Yemeni refugees have continued to maintain their social networks and build stable lives in Korea, even after five years. Many have reached a stage where they no longer require additional government or private sector assistance. Based on the feasibility of the indicators assessed through the conducted interviews, Yemeni refugees in South Korea appear to be effectively progressing towards long-term settlement and integration.

However, several considerations must be addressed before drawing definitive conclusions. First, this article is based on in-depth interviews conducted with a relatively small sample of participants. Given the practical constraints that make a comprehensive census unfeasible, the article inevitably had to focus on a limited number of cases. Consequently, there remains the possibility – however small – that the findings disproportionately reflect positive integration experiences. Therefore, a cautious and critical approach is necessary when interpreting the cases of Yemeni refugees who appear to have integrated successfully.

From this perspective, the most significant issue is that the overall support and assistance for Yemeni refugees in Jeju was primarily provided at the private level. This conclusion can be drawn from the interviews with E, F and G mentioned earlier. At the time, the government was constrained by concerns over negative public opinion, which resulted in refugee support being almost entirely delegated to private organisations. This assistance was not limited to systematic aid but also extended to individualised support, such as securing accommodation and providing meals (Oh 2018).

As a result, it remains uncertain whether systematic government support would be feasible in the event of a similar refugee influx in the future.

Additionally, this situation suggests that the government's response mechanism may fluctuate depending on shifts in public sentiment. Fortunately, the case of the Yemeni refugees in Jeju has set a meaningful precedent within Korean society, serving as a foundation for the government to establish a more structured and systematic support framework, as demonstrated when the special contributors from Afghanistan arrived in Korea in 2021 (Yi 2022).

Korean society has already established a foundational system that facilitates the adaptation and integration of migrants. This was clearly demonstrated in the case of the Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island. However, to ensure the stability and long-term effectiveness of this system, it is essential for public institutions to take a leading role in its implementation and management. Additionally, expanding access to information is crucial so that all migrants can fully exercise their rights and navigate the integration process more effectively.

With Korea experiencing a rise in migrant populations due to rapid demographic decline, this trend is expected to continue (Kim and Chung 2024). Furthermore, the increasing instability of global affairs raises the likelihood that Korean society will need to accept more refugees in the future. Given these circumstances, Korea must acknowledge the growing presence of migrants from diverse backgrounds and actively develop and implement policies that facilitate their successful integration into society.

Conclusion

The process of social adaptation among Yemeni refugees in Jeju exhibits a complex dynamic, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges they have encountered in South Korean society. Based on Ager and Strang's integration framework, this article highlights the critical role of language acquisition, employment, social networks and visa stability in shaping long-term refugee settlement. While some refugees successfully achieved self-sufficiency, the lack of structured government support in the initial settlement phase placed an excessive burden on private organisations and individual efforts.

One of the key findings of this article is that the absence of systematic language education and clear pathways to permanent residency has hindered the full social integration of Yemeni refugees. Although some individuals established businesses or developed local networks to facilitate their settlement, others experienced economic instability and social isolation due to language barriers and administrative challenges. The cases analysed in this article underscore that individual resilience and community support alone are insufficient to ensure comprehensive integration.

Additionally, this article reveals the strong correlation between public opinion and government policy. In addressing the Yemeni refugee issue, the South Korean government adopted a cautious stance, providing only limited intervention. As a result, refugee support predominantly relied on the efforts of

private organisations, demonstrating how migration policies can be significantly influenced by public sentiment.

Moving forward, South Korea must develop a more coherent refugee integration policy that moves beyond reactive and short-term measures towards a structured, long-term approach. Expanding language education programmes, clarifying the pathways to permanent residency and fostering greater interaction between refugees and host communities will be essential in facilitating sustainable integration. As South Korea experiences demographic shifts, including declining birth rates and an ageing population, the establishment of a comprehensive framework for refugee accommodation and social integration will be crucial in maintaining social cohesion and fulfilling the country's humanitarian responsibilities.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2024S1A5C2A02046241).

Soojeong Yi is currently an Academic Research Professor in the Sogang Euro-MENA Institute at Sogang University in Seoul, Korea. She received her BA in Arabic Studies and her MA in Cultural Anthropology (Islamic Art History) from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS), Seoul, Korea. She was also awarded her PhD in Middle Eastern–African Studies (Islamic Studies) from HUFS. Since 2018, her studies have focused on Muslim migrant minorities in Korea and Europe. Email: sooislam86@gmail.com

References

- Ager, A. and Strang, A. (2008), 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2: 166–191, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>.
- Ager, A. and Strang, A. (2010), 'Refugee Integration: Emerging Trends and Remaining Agendas', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23, no. 4: 589–607, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feq046>.
- Berry, J. W., and Sam, D. L. (1997), 'Acculturation and adaptation'. *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology*, 3, no 2: 291–326.
- Dicolen, E. D. and Sanchez, N. (2016), 'Multicultural Family Support Centers (MFSCs) in South Korea: Promoting Harmony and Cultural Integration', *International Journal of Education and Learning* 5, no. 2: 57–70, <https://doi.org/10.14257/IJEL.2016.5.2.07>.

- Esser, H. (2006), *Migration, Language and Integration* (Berlin: WZB).
- Hong, J. H. and Kim, E. H. (2019), 'A Review of Refugee Policy in South Korea', *Crisisonomy* 15, no. 4: 47–62, <https://www.earticle.net/Article/A354642>.
- Hur, J. and Yang, J. (2024), 'South Korean Newspaper Coverage of Yemeni Refugees: Analysis of Topics and Sentiments Using Machine Learning Techniques', *Asian Journal of Communication* 34, no 1: 57–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2023.2257230>.
- Hwang, T., Yoo, J. and Kim, H. (2022), 'Analysis of Changes in Domestic Public Opinion before and after the Yemeni Refugee Crisis in Jeju: Focusing on Sentiment Analysis Approach using Deep Neural Network' [in Korean], *Korean Public Administration Review* 56, no. 2: 127–166, <https://doi.org/10.18333/KPAR.56.2.127>.
- Jun, E. (2020), "Accidental Solidarity in the Essentialization of the Other": The Gendered Politics of Ban Damunhwa and Anti-Refugee Sentiments in South Korea' [in Korean], *Economy and Society* 125: 360–401, <https://doi.org/10.18207/criso.2020..125.360>.
- Kim, C. Y. and Chung, S.-H. (2024), 'Demographic Transition in South Korea: Implications of Falling Birth Rates', *Clinical and Experimental Pediatrics* 67, no. 10, <https://doi.org/10.3345/cep.2023.01599>.
- Kim, J. (2020), 'The Problem of Refugee Awareness in Korean Society' [in Korean], *Tamra Culture* 65: 7–37, <https://doi.org/10.35221/tamla.2020..65.001>.
- Kim, J. (2019), 'The Improvement of the Current Refuge Act' [in Korean], *Legal Theory & Practice Review* 7, no 2: 37–59.
- Kim, S. (2018), 'Issues with the Humanitarian Stay Permit System and the Need for the Establishment of Complementary Protection Status' [in Korean], presented at 'Living in Korea as a Refugee', 19 September 2018, hosted by National Human Rights Commission of Korea, <https://www.humanrights.go.kr/base/board/read?boardManagementNo=24&boardNo=7603296&searchCategory=&page=12&searchType=total&searchWord=%EC%99%B8%EA%B5%AD&menuLevel=3&menuNo=91>
- Koo, G. and Paek, Y. (2023), 'Muslim Refugees in South Korean Society through the Hospitality: A Comparative Study of Yemen Refugees and Afghanistan Special Contributors' [in Korean], *Space and Environment* 33, no. 3 (2023): 8–49, <https://doi.org/10.19097/kaser.2023.33.3.8>.
- Lee, S. (2013), 'Study on the Social Integration Policy for Immigrants: Application to the Social Integration Analysis Frame of A. Ager and A. Strang' [in Korean], *Journal of Social Science* 24, no. 3: 161–185.
- Lozanovska, M. (2019), *Migrant Housing: Architecture, Dwelling, Migration* (New York: Routledge).
- Ministry of Justice (2018), 'Final Announcement of the Screening Results for Yemeni Asylum Applicants in Jeju' [in Korean], 17 December, <http://immigration.go.kr/bbs/immigration/214/438650/artclView.do>.
- Oh, K. (2018), 'Jeju Yemen: The Reality of Yemeni Asylum Seekers' [in Korean], *BBC Korea*, 28 June, <https://www.bbc.com/korean/news-44632261>.
- Park, S. (2019), 'Yemen Refugees in Jeju Island and Moral Panic in South Korea in 2018' [in Korean], *Journal of Human Rights Studies* 2, no. 2: 1–46, <https://doi.org/10.22976/JHRS.2019.2.2.1>.

- Shin, Y. and Ma, D. (2019), 'Two Faces of "Yemen Refugee" Represented in South Korean Media : A Critical Discourse Analysis of <Chosun Ilbo> and <Hankyoreh>' [in Korean], *Journal of Media Economics & Culture* 17, no. 2: 31–80, <https://doi.org/10.21328/JMEC.2019.5.17.2.31>.
- Son, C. S. (2013), 'Human Rights of Refugees: Focused on Visiting Right and Guest Right', *Journal of Ethics Education Studies* 32: 203–219.
- Song, Y. (2019), 'Yemenis' Asylum Application in Jeju and Discourse of Refugees' [in Korean], *Journal of Education for International Understanding* 14, no. 2: 9–38, <https://doi.org/10.35179/jeiu.2019.14.2.9>.
- Sung, Y. and Cho, J. (2019), 'The Risk of Terrorism by Refugees and Police Response: Focused on Yemen Refugees in Jeju Island' [in Korean], *Journal of the Korean Society of Private Security* 18, no. 1: 97–128.
- Tong, De, et al. (2020), 'Migrant Housing Choices from a Social Capital Perspective: The Case of Shenzhen, China', *Habitat International* 96, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2019.102082>.
- UK Visas and Immigration (2025), 'Prove Your English Language Abilities with a Secure English Language Test', 5 March, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/prove-your-english-language-abilities-with-a-secure-english-language-test-selt>.
- Willsher, K. (2025), 'France's Language Tests for Foreigners Seeking Citizenship Defeat French People', *Guardian*, 14 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/14/french-citizens-would-fail-language-tests-for-foreigners-seeking-residency>.
- Yi, S. (2022), 'Acceptance of Migrant Muslims by the Consensus in Korea: Based on Afghan Special Contributors in the Educational field in Ulsan', [in Korean], *Journal of Diaspora Studies* 16, no. 1: 145–178, <https://doi.org/10.22735/JODS.2022.16.1.145>.