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Socio-Political Integration of North Korean Refugees in South Korea: Challenges and Inclusion Policies

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Introduction

The phenomenon of defections from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the subsequent resettlement of refugees in the Republic of Korea is of significant importance on both political-institutional and socio-cultural levels. Over the past few decades, tens of thousands of North Koreans have come to South Korea. This has forced the South Korean government to turn a constitutional principle—the automatic citizenship granted to compatriots from the North—into real actions of inclusion and integration. This process is both a challenge and an opportunity. It requires dealing with the tensions that come from differences in language, culture, and socioeconomic status. At the same time, it gives people a chance to think about what national identity means and what the future holds for the unification of the peninsula. In this sense, the presence of North Korean refugees functions as a “mirror” for South Korean society, highlighting both its capacity for solidarity and its latent prejudices.

The objective of this research is to examine the legal and institutional framework regarding the integration of North Korean refugees while simultaneously evaluating the tangible impacts of public policies and initiatives advocated by civil society. The focus is on the evolution of legislation and the definition of refugees' legal status, the roles of public institutions, NGOs, and support centers in the reception and integration process, and the effects of these measures on refugees' living conditions, particularly regarding the labor market, education, psychological well-being, and social perception. This kind of cross-disciplinary view helps us understand not only the successes but also the problems and limits of current policies.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach, supplemented by relevant quantitative data. The analysis relies on official documents from the Ministry of Unification and the Korea Hana Foundation, augmented by academic research, NGO reports, and previously gathered secondary testimonies. This triangulation enables the linkage of normative and institutional dimensions with the socio-cultural aspect, providing a critical analysis of integration dynamics.

There are three chapters in the work. The first one looks at the history of North Korean defections by looking at how many people left, the legal and institutional framework, and how public opinion changed. The second part looks at the Republic of Korea's policies for integrating immigrants, paying special attention to the roles of Hanawon, the Hana

Centers, and the main NGOs that work in this area. The third chapter looks at how the proposed measures will affect real life, focusing on jobs, social networks, education, and mental health. It then makes some suggestions for how to make current policies better.

1. NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS

1.1 History and numbers of defections

The first people to leave North Korea did so in the years right after 1945. At that time, the border between North and South was still relatively porous, and hundreds of thousands of people used this to leave the North. According to estimates, there were between 456,000 and 829,000 migrants before the war¹. The Korean War started in 1950 and ended a few years later with a cease-fire. It didn't completely stop these movements, though. Even though it was very dangerous to move around during the war, it is thought that between 400,000 and 650,000 people were able to leave the North and find safety south of the 38th parallel².

The situation changed dramatically when the war was over. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the 38th parallel turned the border into a wall that was almost impossible to cross. It was guarded around the clock and had mines and electrified fences all over it. In these circumstances, trying to escape to the South was nearly impossible and very dangerous. After the 1950s, some people were still able to cross the border, but during those decades, defections were still rare and mostly involved military personnel, government officials, or members of the political and technical elite. For Seoul, these arrivals were mostly important for political and propaganda reasons. They were welcomed as "returns to their rightful homeland" and were often seen as good sources of information³.

In the middle of the 1990s, things changed a lot when North Korea went through one of the worst crises in its recent history. The regime lost important resources when the Soviet Union stopped giving them money and trade with socialist countries. Natural disasters like the floods of 1995–1996 and the droughts of 2000–2001 made the already weak agricultural system even worse⁴. The result was a terrible famine known as the

¹ Andrei Lankov, *Bitter Taste of Paradise: North Korean Refugees in South Korea*, *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 106-8 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23418172>

² Ivi, 108

³ Ivi, 109

⁴ Eunkoo Lee and Brendan Howe, *North Korean Refugee Integration Policy in South Korea: Human Security Challenges*, *Asian International Studies Review* 22, 1 (2021): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2667078X-bja10004>

Ardous March (1994–1999), which killed an estimated 2 to 3.5 million people⁵. Thousands of North Koreans fled to China to escape an emergency of this size, creating a flow of people leaving that had never been seen before.

Starting in 1998, defections started to go up steadily. In the years before them, only a few hundred people had come, but within a few years, the numbers had grown to thousands. From 2002 to 2011, the number of new defectors coming to South Korea each year ranged from 2,000 to 3,000, with the highest number in 2009, when 2,914 new defectors arrived⁶. During that time, the phenomenon became more organized, and the South Korean government had to come up with laws and institutions to help people settle in and become part of society.

However, this good trend changed quickly when Kim Jong-un became leader in 2012. Escape became much harder because of stricter internal controls, harsher repression, and closer cooperation with Chinese authorities⁷. As a result, fewer people came to the country over time. The Covid-19 pandemic made things worse. North Korea's borders were almost completely closed, which led to an unprecedented collapse. Only 229 people came to the country in 2020, 63 in 2021, and 67 in 2022⁸. A slow recovery didn't start until 2023, when there were 196 entries, and 236 in 2024⁹. The Ministry of Unification's most recent data shows that by June 2025, 34,410 North Koreans had come to South Korea¹⁰.

Along with the change in numbers, the last few decades have also seen a big change in the types of people who defect. Since the 2000s, women have made up most of the new arrivals, with percentages over 70%, 89% in 2024, and even 97% in the first half of 2025¹¹.

In this context, the increasing numerical and social importance of defections necessitates an examination of their legal framework, beginning with the legal status accorded to North Korean refugees and the distinctive automatic citizenship process established by the Republic of Korea.

⁵ Ibidem

⁶ Ministry of Unification, “Number of North Korean Defectors Entering South Korea”, in Policy on North Korean Defectors, under South-North Relations, [Accessed 17/09/2025] https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/

⁷ Lee & Howe, op. cit., p. 68

⁸ Ministry of Unification, “Number of North Korean Defectors Entering South Korea”

⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ Ibidem

¹¹ Ibidem

1.2 *Legal status and automatic citizenship*

The way North Koreans are treated when they come to the Republic of Korea is different from how other countries treat people from North Korea. This is because of Seoul's political and constitutional view of the peninsula. People coming from North Korea are not considered foreigners like other refugees. They are full-fledged South Koreans. The ROK legal system is very much based on this idea. Article 3 of the Constitution says that "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands"¹² and Article 2 says that ordinary law should decide who is a citizen¹³. The main idea is that North Korea is not seen as a separate country, but as part of a single national body. This means that, at least in theory, the people who live there are not seen as foreign migrants but as citizens of the Republic of Korea.

Case law has also made this idea clearer. The Supreme Court's decision on November 12, 1996 (Yi Yongsun case, 96Nu1221) said that a North Korean person cannot be called a foreigner in South Korea because they automatically become a South Korean citizen¹⁴. In 2000, the Constitutional Court confirmed this position, saying that national identity includes all of the peninsula, which also includes people who live in the DPRK¹⁵. This has strengthened the idea that South Korean constitutional law gives North Koreans citizenship, not through a naturalization process.

This approach is linked to the Nationality Act of 1948, which said that citizenship could only be passed down through the father's line¹⁶. This meant that only children with a South Korean father could become citizens; children with a South Korean mother and a foreign father could not. The reform of June 14, 1998, which made the paternal and maternal lines equal for the purposes of *ius sanguinis*, fixed this imbalance¹⁷. To address prior circumstances, an additional amendment on December 19, 2001, instituted a transitional provision enabling individuals born between June 14, 1978, and June 13,

¹² Constitution of the Republic of Korea, art. 3, [Accessed 17/09/2025] https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?lang=ENG&hseq=1

¹³ *Ibidem*

¹⁴ Supreme Court of Korea, Yi Yongsun case (96Nu1221, November 12, 1996), in A. Wolman, *The South Korean Citizenship of North Korean Escapees in Law and Practice*, *KLRI Journal of Law and Legislation*, 4(2), 2014, p. 228

¹⁵ Constitutional Court of Korea, decision 97Hun-Ka12 (August 31, 2000), in Wolman, 2014, p. 228

¹⁶ Law Library of Congress, Nationality rule between December 20, 1948, and June 13, 1998 <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/l1/lglrd/2021700361/2021700361.pdf> [Accessed 17/09/2025]

¹⁷ *Ibidem*

1998, to a South Korean mother, to obtain citizenship through declaration within specified timeframes¹⁸. As a result, almost all North Koreans can now be considered South Korean citizens *ab origine*, with a few exceptions, such as those who were naturalized in North Korea without Korean ethnic origins or who voluntarily acquired the citizenship of a third country¹⁹.

In addition to this constitutional and legislative framework, a special law called the Act on the Protection and Settlement Support of Residents Escaping from North Korea was passed in 1997²⁰. The goal of this law is twofold: first, it aims to ensure that North Koreans who come to the South receive economic and social support to help them fit in; second, it aims to control who can get protection by setting rules for who can be excluded and how to do so. According to Article 2, a "North Korean defector" is "a person who has residence, lineal ascendants and descendants, spouses, workplaces, etc. in the area north of the Military Demarcation Line [...], and who has not acquired any foreign nationality after escaping North Korea"²¹. Article 9, on the other hand, lists the reasons why someone might not be protected, such as committing serious common crimes, being involved in terrorism or drug trafficking, "false defection", living in a third country for a long time, and, most importantly, choosing to become a citizen of another country²².

This creates an important distinction: on the one hand, all North Koreans can get South Korean citizenship; on the other hand, legal and economic protection is only available to some people and can be taken away in certain situations. In essence, without protection and subsequent civil registration, citizenship is rendered ineffective: refugees are unable to acquire a family register, a national identification number, or access the services and benefits available to citizens. Many studies have pointed out the difference between formal and effective citizenship. They talk about a "nominal nationality" that must be realized through an institutional process.

This internal peculiarity is different from how international law treats North Koreans. They are not automatically recognized as South Korean citizens outside the peninsula, but they do fit the definitions of a refugee set by the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol. A refugee is someone who fears persecution and cannot get protection

¹⁸ Law Library of Congress, Temporary measure for a person born between June 14, 1978, and June 13, 1998

¹⁹ Wolman, *op. cit.*, p. 234

²⁰ North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act, [Accessed 17/09/2025] https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=60748&type=part&key=1

²¹ *Ibidem*, art. 2

²² *Ibidem*, art. 9

from their home country²³. Within this framework, North Koreans can invoke alternative protection rights in the States Parties, predicated on the systemic human rights violations they endure in their homeland²⁴. In this situation, the assumption of South Korean citizenship can be a problem because it is seen as a sign that there is another way to protect the country. This creates a clear contradiction: while abroad, being a citizen of the Republic of Korea can make it harder to get international protection. However, in South Korea, the same status means being recognized as a citizen²⁵, but it requires an institutional process to become effective.

Citizenship is formally guaranteed, but it is still closely linked to political judgments and control mechanisms. It establishes full membership in the national community, but how it is put into practice depends on procedures and conditions that are closely tied to how South Korean society sees and understands the presence of newcomers.

In this context, public opinion has formed its evaluations at the convergence of national identity, the recollection of division, and media narratives. North Koreans are legally citizens, but in everyday life, they are often still seen as "different," somewhere between the South Korean "we" and the figure of the migrant. The long-standing institutional separation, with minimal everyday interaction, has cultivated enduring interpretative frameworks that emphasize accent, linguistic usage, gestures, and domestic practices. The media have been a big part of this process. For a long time, talk shows and entertainment shows have focused on stories of escape and trauma, or on everyday life that shows cultural distance. This has made a mixed picture where ethnic closeness and practical estrangement coexist²⁶.

1.3 Changing public perception

In the early years of the partition, when mostly Northern elites moved to the South, the main image was of educated people with relational capital and marketable skills who

²³ Lee & Howe, North Korean Refugee Integration Policy in South Korea: Human Security Challenges, p. 69

²⁴ Ivi, p. 70

²⁵ Ivi, p. 71

²⁶ Kyung Hyo Chun, "North Korean Defectors as Cultural Other in South Korea: Perception and Construction of Cultural Differences", *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, no.1 (2022): 191, 194

spread anti-communist ideas and gave people information that was thought to be useful²⁷. In that context, integration seemed less of a problem and even socially valuable. Later, during the crisis of the 1990s, the social makeup changed. It was no longer just a few "elite individuals," but thousands of people from working-class backgrounds who had trouble getting a job, finding a place to live, and learning new skills. They brought real needs to the South and took longer to adjust. This change in society changed how people saw the public image, from the "informed exile" to the "refugee in trouble," which was linked to welfare needs and longer times to adjust²⁸.

The media has also played a big part in this change. Since the 2000s, talk shows and entertainment formats have made stories of escape and readjustment (with a strong female presence) very visible. This has helped to "humanize" refugees, but often in ways that are too dramatic: biographies broken up into emotional episodes, a focus on suffering or "exotic" details of daily life in the North, and a language of "respectability" that measures integration based on how well someone fits in with the tastes and times of urban South Korean society²⁹. This narrative grammar has two main effects: on the one hand, it makes things less strange; on the other, it makes stereotypes stronger (the heavy accent, the assumed naivety, the struggle to "keep up"), which makes people think that the problem is the person or "their culture" instead of the situation³⁰. In practice, the term "cultural difference" becomes a catch-all term that lets groups and organizations off the hook: if the "culture" of the other is the problem, the people who come are mostly responsible for making things better.

This ambivalence has been clear in opinion polls over the past few years. Before the inter-Korean thaw in 2019, less than a third of South Koreans wanted to "welcome all" North Koreans who wanted to move to the South. About half of the sample wanted to only accept some North Koreans, and the number of people who thought new arrivals should not be accepted anymore grew, but they were still in the minority (over 14%)³¹. The motivational profile is not monolithic: during times of high economic anxiety, people see refugees as competitors for housing, jobs, and welfare; during times of military tension, security rhetoric comes back to the front; and during times of relaxation or when

²⁷ Andrei Lankov, "Bitter Taste of Paradise: North Korean Refugees in South Korea", *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 109

²⁸ Ivi, p. 111

²⁹ Chun, op. cit., pp. 185-187 / 191-195 / 200-202 / 208

³⁰ Ivi

³¹ Lee & Howe, op. cit., pp. 80-81

there are sympathetic media stories, the humanitarian framework of "compatriots in difficulty" comes back³².

³² Ivi, p. 80

2. STATE INTEGRATION POLICIES

2.1 Main laws and regulatory framework

According to the constitutional principles of national unity, South Korea sees North Koreans who have fled as citizens of the Republic of Korea. Article 3 of the South Korean Constitution says that the whole Korean peninsula is part of the national territory³³. This means that North Koreans who come to the South are entitled to South Korean citizenship once they have gone through the necessary steps. Because of this, the South Korean government has made a complicated set of rules to protect and help North Korean refugees settle in.

The Special Act on the Protection of North Korean Defectors (Act No. 1053) was passed as early as 1962, when Park Chung-hee was in charge³⁴. This law, which was changed in 1978 (Law No. 3156), gave a lot of help to the few North Koreans who were able to escape to the South at that time. These were mostly well-known people or people who were useful for propaganda. Every defector was eligible for a large amount of financial aid and benefits, including a cash payment that varied based on how "important" the defector was, as well as extra rewards for those who gave sensitive information or valuable military equipment³⁵. For instance, in 1983, a North Korean pilot who defected with a MiG-19 fighter jet got an incredible reward of 1.2 billion won, which was about 480 times the average South Korean annual salary at the time³⁶. In addition to money, refugees were given free housing (with apartments that they could own) and the chance to go to college at schools of their choice. These were not common benefits in South Korea in the 1960s to 1980s³⁷. For a while after they got there, each defector also had a personal police escort. The official reason for this was to protect them from being kidnapped or retaliated against by the North, but in reality, the police were there to help them with their daily tasks³⁸.

³³ Constitution of the Republic of Korea, art. 3, [Accessed 17/09/2025] https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?lang=ENG&hseq=1

³⁴ Lankov, op. cit., p. 117

³⁵ Ibidem

³⁶ Ibidem

³⁷ Ibidem

³⁸ Ivi, pp. 117-118

This initial phase, in which defectors were few and politically useful, changed significantly with the start of the Arduous March. As the number of defectors from different social backgrounds increased, their propaganda value changed. Furthermore, due to its “sunshine policy” of dialogue with North Korea, the South Korean government became more cautious in encouraging defections. It feared that a large number of people fleeing could irritate Pyongyang and make peaceful reconciliation more difficult³⁹. For this reason, in 1993, the law was amended to reduce aid to North Korean refugees⁴⁰. The old special law of 1962 was repealed and new regulations were introduced. The first was Law No. 4568 of June 1993, the second an expanded version (Law No. 5259) of July 1997⁴¹. The latter forms the main part of the current “Act on the Protection and Support of Settlement of Residents Fleeing from North Korea,” which is still the law that guides policies for the integration of North Koreans into South Korea. This 1997 law (which has since been amended several times) significantly reduced the economic benefits that new arrivals could obtain⁴². The initial subsidy was cut, and special bonuses were either taken away or limited, except in cases of high-value desertions. The total amount integration allowance was about 20 to 30 million won until the early 2000s. From 2004 to 2005, it was set at 10 million won for a single-person household, which was about one-third of the previous amount⁴³. This amount was (and still is) paid in part right away when they arrived and the rest in installments over the first few years of life in the South⁴⁴. At the same time, special bonuses (much lower than in the past) were still only available to defectors of certain value, like soldiers with important equipment or information. The 1997 law set a theoretical maximum of 250 million won for these bonuses⁴⁵. The reasoning behind these changes was twofold: first, to make the support system more stable and standardize it because there were more people using it; second, to make the benefits package less appealing to discourage a mass exodus from the North, in line with the inter-Korean dialogue policy of the time⁴⁶.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 113

⁴⁰ Ivi, p.118

⁴¹ Ibidem

⁴² Ibidem

⁴³ Ibidem

⁴⁴ Ibidem

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 119

⁴⁶ Ivi, p.118-119

The law as it stands now, which has been updated several times, spells out in detail the conditions under which North Korean defectors can get help and protection⁴⁷. The law says that a "North Korean defector" is anyone from the North who wants to be accepted under the protection of the Republic of Korea but has not yet become a citizen of another country⁴⁸. The law says that it is the South Korean government's job to help refugees adapt as quickly as possible to all aspects of life, as political, economic, social, and cultural⁴⁹. The law gives the Ministry of Unification the main job of doing this. The Minister of Unification is in charge of making policies and plans for help and integration, working with other government agencies that are involved⁵⁰. The law says that a special government council must approve a three-year "General Plan" for protecting and settling refugees, as well as annual plans for putting the plan into action⁵¹. This is how policies are changed and updated on a regular basis to meet the needs of refugees as their numbers and needs change. For instance, the Ministry of Unification started two Three-Year Plans in 2015. The first one (2015–2017) was about making people less dependent on the government for money, and the second one (2018–2020) was about making settlement assistance better⁵². More recent changes to the rules have added to some protections. For example, in 2021, the definitions of "persons to be protected" were changed to include groups that had not been included before, like children of refugees born outside of North Korea. In 2025, an amendment was passed that got rid of the age limit (35 years) for refugees who want to get university study subsidies, so older defectors can now get help with their studies⁵³.

2.2 *The role of institutions: Hanawon and other entities*

When defectors arrive in South Korea, security authorities take them into custody to find out who they are and what they want⁵⁴. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) runs

⁴⁷ North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act, [Accessed 17/09/2025] https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=60748&type=part&key=1

⁴⁸ Ibidem, art. 2(1)

⁴⁹ Ibidem, art. 4-2(1)

⁵⁰ Ibidem, art. 4-3(4)

⁵¹ Ibidem, art. 4-3(1)

⁵² Lee & Howe, op.cit., p.73

⁵³ Joon Ha Park, "South Korea Revises Support Program for North Korean Defectors to Expand Aid", NK News, February 12, 2025, [Accessed 17/09/2025] <https://www.nknews.org/2025/02/south-korea-revises-support-program-for-north-korean-defectors-to-expand-aid/>

⁵⁴ Chun, op. cit., p. 195

a secure reception center where this takes place, together with other agencies such as the National Police Agency and the Ministry of Unification (MOU)⁵⁵. This center, also known as the North Korean Refugee Protection Center, conducts a thorough joint interrogation of each new arrival to ensure that there are no spies or infiltrators and to obtain useful information about North Korea⁵⁶. This screening phase usually lasts a few weeks. During this time, refugees are kept separate from the outside world for security reasons, but they are treated well and receive food, shelter, and basic medical care⁵⁷. Refugees from North Korea proceed to the next stage of active integration only after a special inter-ministerial committee has decreed that they are “protected persons” under the law⁵⁸.

North Koreans who pass the first screening are sent to Hanawon, the main government training and adaptation center. Hanawon (하나원) is a residential school in Anseong, about 50 miles south of Seoul, that opened in August 1999. Its official name is the Center for supporting the adaption of North Korean Defectors⁵⁹. The Ministry of Unification runs this closed facility, where refugees go through an intensive orientation program on life in South Korea that lasts about 12 weeks (about three months)⁶⁰. Hanawon is a "bridge" between life in North Korea (or the long years of escape and dangerous stay abroad) and life in modern South Korea. During these weeks, the people who are taking part learn the basics of how a free market society and a democratic state work. For example, they learn how to open a bank account, use money and credit cards, shop in a supermarket, or take public transportation⁶¹. About half of the curriculum is about civic and cultural education. This includes learning about the language (updating on modern South Korean vocabulary, which is different from North Korean vocabulary in many ways), the customs and traditions of South Korean society, democratic values, a general overview of the national legal and administrative system, a review of common Korean history, and the differences that have come up over decades of division⁶². The other half is basic training for work and life skills, like how to use computers, home economics and cooking lessons using South Korean foods, driving lessons, and the chance to get simple

⁵⁵ Ibidem

⁵⁶ Ibidem

⁵⁷ Lankov, op. cit., p. 119

⁵⁸ *North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act*, art. 8(1), [Accessed 18/09/2025] https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=60748&type=part&key=1

⁵⁹ Lankov, op. cit., p. 119

⁶⁰ Chun, op. cit., p. 195

⁶¹ Ibidem

⁶² Lee & Howe, op. cit., pp. 74-75

work certificates⁶³. Hanawon also provides medical care and psychological support. Doctors and counselors work there and do thorough medical exams on all new arrivals (many of whom are suffering from chronic malnutrition, untreated illnesses, and/or physical trauma) and start the process of helping these new arrivals stabilize their minds. They help refugees deal with the trauma of persecution, torture, trafficking, or the difficult experience of escape. The Hanawon center also pays attention to religious and community life. It has a small Christian church and a Buddhist temple where people can worship, and it offers optional spiritual activities. Over the years, many refugees have found comfort and a sense of community by joining religious groups after moving to the South, especially Protestant churches⁶⁴.

At the end of the 12 weeks, Hanawon "graduates" take part in a closing ceremony and then move to local communities to begin a new chapter in the Republic of Korea⁶⁵. The Ministry of Unification (통일부) works with local governments to find housing for each family (usually a low-income rental apartment)⁶⁶. At this stage, other institutions take over support after Hanawon. The Hana Centers, which are common at the regional level, are the most important of these. These are local help centers, located in every province or large city. There are now 25 of them across the country, and their job is to help refugees during the difficult time of settling into their new communities⁶⁷. At the Hana Centers, new arrivals continue to receive extra training (about 50 hours of further integration courses) that focuses on practical aspects of local life, such as “job training, cultural experiences, legal assistance, and language education”⁶⁸.

Alongside Hanawon, the Korea Hana Foundation (남북하나재단) plays a key role. The MOU set up this public non-profit organization in 2010. The Act on the Protection and Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors set it up to help North Korean refugees fit in with South Korean society⁶⁹.

The main goal of the foundation is to help refugees settle down in a stable way while also working toward the goal of unification. Understanding, acceptance, rights, and

⁶³ Lankov, op. cit., p.119

⁶⁴ Ibidem

⁶⁵ Chun, op. cit., p. 195

⁶⁶ Lee & Howe, op. cit., pp. 73-74

⁶⁷ Ivi, pp. 74-75

⁶⁸ Ivi, p-75

⁶⁹ Korea Hana Foundation, “Who We Are”, [Accessed 18/09/2025], <https://www.koreahana.or.kr/home/eng/contents.do?ptSignature=OnrvtOekxiPklgsn74dfsSUjqKLwEqtaejJkGegirok%3D&menuPos=2>

responsibilities are some of its core values. It also looks at how effective and valid actions are based on reliable sources. Some important ways to run things are to help refugees become more self-sufficient and skilled, to help South and North Koreans understand each other better and talk to each other more, and to see refugees as valuable resources for a future unified Korea⁷⁰.

The Korea Hana Foundation (KHF) runs a number of programs that are specifically designed to meet the needs of different refugees. First, it helps people move right away by giving them settlement helpers, starter kits for their new homes, and vouchers to buy electronics. Second, it has a structured Employment Assistance program with one-on-one support, the Future Happiness Bank Account project to help people build wealth, and plans to start social enterprises in Korea that will help everyone. Third, it helps with education (Education Assistance) by giving out scholarships, making educational videos in English, and setting up pre-university courses through alternative schools and afternoon study rooms where young refugees can grow up in a stable environment. Finally, it encourages social integration by making videos and ads about the lives of refugees and spreading them through the media. This is meant to close the psychological gap between South and North, share success stories, and get groups of university students involved in the reception process as active participants⁷¹. The KHF also does research and studies. Since 2011, it has been doing yearly surveys of North Korean refugees to find out how they are doing in terms of work, income, education, health, and happiness. This information is used to see how well policies are working and to suggest ways to improve them⁷². The Employment Support Center, which the Foundation started in 2012, is another project that helps refugees become more self-sufficient and able to support themselves⁷³.

2.3 *The role of NGOs and civil society*

Along with the government, South Korean civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play a big role in helping North Korean refugees settle in.

⁷⁰ Ibidem

⁷¹ Ibidem

⁷² Lee & Howe, op. cit., p. 75

⁷³ Ibidem

Saejowi (새조위) is one of the most well-known and active NGOs. Saejowi is a non-profit, non-political and non-religious group based in Seoul that was started in 1988 to help bring the country together in the hopes of reunification⁷⁴. Over time, the organization has broadened its areas of intervention. It focuses on healthcare and psychosocial support for North Korean refugees. It also provides psychological counseling to help people deal with trauma and stress⁷⁵. Thus, Saejowi's contribution is particularly recognized in the area of mental health and well-being, bridging the gap where public facilities are sometimes unable to offer long-term psychological support to refugees experiencing severe relationship problems related to culture shock, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder, for security or privacy reasons. North Korean defectors themselves are providing this psychosocial support because, as Saejowi itself notes, “the people who are best equipped to help North Korean refugees are North Korean refugees themselves”⁷⁶, highlighting that, alongside professional support, the contribution of fellow refugees plays a particularly important role in the integration process. In addition to healthcare, the NGO also prioritizes public awareness and education, supporting campaigns to increase public knowledge of the predicament of North Korean refugees.⁷⁷ Lastly, Saejowi tries to get people involved in the Korean reunification movement, especially people who have left North Korea. The group runs initiatives that help South Koreans and North Korean defectors talk to each other openly.

Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) is another very active NGO. It is an international non-profit group that works with the North Korean people to help them become free. LiNK helps North Korean refugees get to freedom by using a secret route that is about 3,000 miles long and starts in northeastern China and ends in Southeast Asia. There, people are processed so they can safely travel to South Korea or the United States⁷⁸. The whole trip has a high risk of arrest and forced return, but the network of local partners works to protect the refugees' safety and dignity. LiNK helps people start new lives after they are free⁷⁹. They help these refugees even after they get to South Korea by offering resettlement programs with a more holistic approach that boosts refugees' self-efficacy

⁷⁴ Saejowi, “About Us,” [Accessed 18/09/2025] <http://www.saejowi.org/>

⁷⁵ Saejowi, “Healthcare,” in *Our Work*, [Accessed 18/09/2025] <http://www.saejowi.org/>

⁷⁶ Ibidem

⁷⁷ Ibidem

⁷⁸ Liberty in North Korea, “Refugee Rescues” in *Our Work*, [Accessed 17/09/2025] <https://libertyinnorthkorea.org/refugee-rescues>

⁷⁹ Liberty in North Korea, <https://libertyinnorthkorea.org/refugee-rescues> [Accessed 17/09/2025]

by doing more than just giving them material resources. Increasing self-efficacy enables people to plan their short- and long-term goals and confront present obstacles with more awareness and confidence. By doing this, refugees not only gain useful skills for adjusting to their new society, but they also strengthen their ability to withstand adversity and PTSD, laying a better basis for their future⁸⁰.

Helping to settle refugees in the ROK is also PSCORE (People for Successful Korean Reunification), a non-profit non-governmental organization based in Seoul⁸¹. It was established in 2006 by Young-Il Kim, a former North Korean soldier who fled his country with his family and settled successfully in South Korea. By resolving possible roadblocks to the process and assisting North Korean refugees in adjusting to life in South Korea, the NGO strives for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. PSCORE is the only non-governmental organization that focuses solely on human rights issues in North Korea and has distinguished itself since its founding as an active and critical voice condemning the Pyongyang regime's violations of human rights.

The organization promotes human rights and democracy initiatives, runs educational and mentoring programs, and engages in national and international public awareness campaigns in order to fulfill its mission. PSCORE even offers "teaching workshops" for former North Korean instructors who have moved to South Korea to help them adapt their teaching skills to the new setting⁸². The NGO has been able to participate in multilateral human rights forums since 2012 thanks to its special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Additionally, it offers North Korean refugees in China emergency aid via safe and discrete channels.

The organization's work encompasses a number of complementary areas: on the one hand, it helps refugees become self-sufficient and directly contribute to the process of reunification; on the other hand, it creates information networks to inform the world about North Korea's violations of human rights, thereby promoting international collaboration. Additionally, in order to create a new generation of involved global citizens, PSCORE encourages South Koreans and refugees to assume leadership positions in the public and

⁸⁰ Liberty in North Korea, "Refugee Resettlement" in Our Work, <https://libertyinnorthkorea.org/refugee-resettlement> [Accessed 17/09/2025]

⁸¹ PSCORE, "About Us", <https://pscore.org/about-us/> [Accessed 17/09/2025]

⁸² PSCORE, "Interview with Saejowi," interviewed by Esther Ra, posted August 11, 2021, PSCORE, <https://pscore.org/interview-with-saejowi/#:~:text=We%20also%20hold%20workshops%20with> [Accessed 18/09/2025]

private sectors, supports democratic participation, and advocates for social and political reforms in the North⁸³.

2.4 *Support tools: subsidies, housing, training*

The South Korean government has set up a system to help North Korean refugees settle in by giving them a wide range of concrete support tools. The goal is to help new arrivals become economically self-sufficient and socially included. The steps include everything important in life, like getting help with money, finding a place to live, getting vocational training and a job, and getting access to welfare, education, and mental health support.

On the subsidy side, the MOU gives a basic resettlement subsidy of KRW 8 million to single-person households, which is the starting point for the first period of adjusting to a new socioeconomic situation⁸⁴. This main subsidy is added to by a maximum incentive of KRW 25.1 million for people who complete vocational training, get recognized certifications, or find stable work⁸⁵. The goal is to encourage people to invest in building skills that will help them find work. People who are 60 or older, have a physical or mental disability, are getting long-term medical care, are children born in third country, or are children of single parents can also get extra benefits of up to KRW 15.4 million to help with health, care, or other needs⁸⁶.

Along with this financial help, there are also specific steps being taken to help with housing. In fact, housing is guaranteed as part of resettlement policies. The government directly arranges rental apartments for new arrivals and gives each household a housing subsidy of KRW 16 million⁸⁷.

At the same time, vocational training and jobs are given special attention because they are seen as important for becoming self-sufficient. The Ministry of Employment and Labor pays for vocational courses in the public system⁸⁸. The government also gives

⁸³ Ibidem

⁸⁴ Ministry Of Unification, *Settlement support for North Korean defectors – Support for North Korean Defectors*. Government of the Republic of Korea, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/whatwedo/support/ [Accessed 18/09/2025]

⁸⁵ Ibidem

⁸⁶ Ibidem

⁸⁷ Ibidem

⁸⁸ Ibidem

employers money to hire refugees, equal to half of the hired refugee's salary (up to KRW 500,000 per month), for up to four years for those who came to South Korea before November 29, 2014⁸⁹. There are also 65 employment centers across the country that can help with career advice and finding a job that fits your needs⁹⁰. Along with these main measures, there are also other tools, such as employment protection and placement programs for people who want to become farmers⁹¹.

Education is also a form of government support because it is seen as a way to help people move up in society and fit in. The North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act offers targeted support. Article 24 states that "The Minister of Unification may provide persons eligible for protection with support necessary for education in consideration of their age, academic capability, and other educational conditions, as prescribed by Presidential Decree"⁹². Moreover, Article 24-2 says that "The Minister of Unification may establish and operate a preparatory school for North Korean defectors within settlement support facilities in order to support entrance into a general school of adolescents who defected from North Korea (referring to the children of North Korean defectors who were born in third countries, including those who were admitted to settlement support facilities with their fathers or mothers), following consultation with the Minister of Education"⁹³.

So, refugees can get special admissions, easier school transfers, and full tuition waivers for middle schools, high schools, and public universities. But at private colleges, at least half of the tuition is paid for⁹⁴. This is especially important because, in the South Korean education system, getting into elite universities is a goal that both parents and students work hard to achieve. Parents spend more than a third of their family's income on their children's education, and students spend a lot of time preparing for this goal. Getting into the best colleges and universities has a huge symbolic and practical value. It gives you access to alumni networks that can help you get a job, find a better marriage partner, and make connections that will help you live a middle-class lifestyle. Some well-known universities have been and still are somewhat generous in letting North Korean

⁸⁹ Ibidem

⁹⁰ Ibidem

⁹¹ Ibidem

⁹² *North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act*, art. 24, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=60748&type=part&key=1 [Accessed 18/09/2025]

⁹³ Ivi, art. 24-2

⁹⁴ Ibidem

refugees in, but in recent years, they have become more picky about who they let in because so many of these students drop out⁹⁵.

The welfare and healthcare measures that make up the support package are just as important. The Basic Livelihood Security Program (BLSA) is available to refugees, which guarantees them a certain level of economic support. People in the most vulnerable group (Tier 1) get free healthcare, while others get temporary breaks from having to pay into the national healthcare system. An innovative measure pertains to social security: refugees aged 50 to 59 at the time of the protection decision are permitted to enroll in the national pension⁹⁶.

Also, social support and counseling are important parts of the help system because they add relational and emotional support to material measures. The Ministry of Unification gives each family unit one or two settlement assistants and sets up a network of employment support workers who work in 65 different centers⁹⁷.

⁹⁵ Tara O, "The Integration of North Korean Defectors in South Korea: Problems and Prospects," *International Journal of Korean Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2011), pp. 157-158 https://icks.org/data/ijks/1482460255_add_file_7.pdf [Accessed 18/09/2025]

⁹⁶ Ibidem

⁹⁷ Ministry Of Unification, *Settlement support for North Korean defectors – Support for North Korean Defectors*. Government of the Republic of Korea, [Accessed 18/09/2025]

3. THE IMPACT OF POLICIES ON THE LIVES OF REFUGEES

The purpose of this chapter is to look at how South Korean government policies affect the social and political integration of North Korean refugees in real life. In the preceding chapter, we analyzed the institutional mechanisms employed by the Seoul government, including the Ministry of Unification and the Hanawon center, as well as the primary housing, training, and employment assistance initiatives. In this part, though, the focus is on the real results of these actions and how they change refugees' daily lives, especially in terms of work, school, and social life. Instances of discrimination and marginalization will also be examined, as they persist as significant impediments to complete integration within South Korean society.

The selected methodology is primarily qualitative, augmented by quantitative data when accessible and pertinent. The emphasis on the qualitative aspect arises from the fact that the issue encompasses not only numerical indicators but also social significances, collective representations, and life trajectories. The research utilizes diverse sources: firstly, official South Korean government documents, including the Ministry of Unification's integration plans, annual reports, and statistics from the Korea Hana Foundation; secondly, reports from local and international non-governmental organizations, which frequently present a more critical perspective than the official narrative; thirdly, Korean and international academic studies that have methodically analyzed the conditions of North Korean refugees, focusing on employment, education, and social discrimination. Secondary interviews, which are testimonies that have already been gathered and published by researchers, NGOs, or institutions, are another useful methodological tool. While these sources cannot supplant original fieldwork, they facilitate the augmentation of quantitative data and theoretical analyses with the direct testimonies of refugees.

It is crucial to emphasize that this analysis exhibits specific structural limitations. First, the inability to conduct original interviews with refugees complicates the comprehensive understanding of the profundity of their subjective experiences; the dependence on secondary sources inherently introduces an interpretive filter. Second, while government statistics are useful for showing general trends, they may be biased in favor of policies

that work well and against those that don't. Finally, the situation of refugees is not the same for everyone. Differences in age, gender, education level, and region of origin create very different situations, making it hard to make generalizations that apply to everyone.

Even with these problems, the chosen method makes it possible to get a broad and critical view of how South Korean policies have worked, thanks to the use of official sources, independent reports, and recent scholarly literature. The results that come from the next sections paint a mixed picture. The measures taken have, on the one hand, provided a basic level of economic and social security, allowing refugees to find housing, go to school, and get jobs. On the other hand, there are still major structural problems: refugees often have to take low-paying, dangerous jobs, have trouble adjusting to the education system, and are still seen as "different" from the rest of the population. To put it another way, the current system has only made the minimum conditions for inclusion; it has not yet turned those conditions into full and lasting integration.

3.1 Employment and integration

The integration of North Korean refugees into South Korean society is most evident in the labor market. Having a job is not only a way to make money, but it is also a way to be part of society, feel good about yourself, and belong. So, the results of the job market are an important way to measure both the progress refugees have made and the problems they still face in building stable lives in the host society.

3.1.1 The labor market of North Korean refugees: recent indicators and trends

The labor market is one of the most concrete tests of how well North Korean refugees can fit into South Korean society. Access to stable and dignified employment constitutes not merely a source of income, but also an essential avenue for social inclusion, recognition, and the cultivation of community bonds. The Ministry of Unification and the

Korea Hana Foundation's statistics for the years 2020 to 2024 show some important trends that show both progress and ongoing weaknesses.

The labor market indicators showed signs of recovery after the pandemic caused a contraction. The labor force participation rate, which was 60.1% in 2020, rose to 64.1% in 2024. At the same time, the employment rate went up from 54.4% in 2020 to 60.5% in 2023 and stayed at 60.1% in 2024. The unemployment rate went from 9.4% in 2020 to 4.5% in 2023, then went back up to 6.3% in 2024⁹⁸. These data present a nuanced scenario: refugees have seen a general enhancement since the height of the health crisis; however, their susceptibility to economic fluctuations and the cyclical characteristics of the labor market are still apparent, as indicated by the deteriorating metrics in 2024.

By comparing the data to national data, we can get a better idea of where refugees stand in relation to the rest of the population. In that year, 69.4% of South Koreans aged 15 to 64 were employed, and 2.8% were unemployed⁹⁹. This shows a big gap: refugees are still less likely to have jobs and more likely to be unemployed, even though there are programs in place to help them fit in. The gap is not just a number; it also shows that North Koreans are still seen as outsiders in South Korean society.

The gender aspect is very important. In 2024, the unemployment rate for women refugees was 7.7%, while it was only 3.1% for men¹⁰⁰. In the same year, 2.8% of women in the country were unemployed, which is different from this¹⁰¹. Refugee women thus encounter a dual disadvantage in comparison to both South Korean nationals and male refugees. There are many reasons, such as the responsibilities of caring for others and family that make it hard to work for pay, the fact that most jobs are in low-skilled and high-turnover fields, and the fact that skills learned in North Korea are not recognized. All of these things make it harder for women to find stable jobs and make them more likely to lose them when the economy changes.

⁹⁸ Ministry of Unification, *Policy on North Korean Defectors – Economic Activities of North Korean Defectors ('20–'24)*. Government of the Republic of Korea, last updated 2024 https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/ [Accessed 19/09/2025]

⁹⁹ OECD, *Employment Outlook 2024 – Country Notes: Korea*. Estimates employment rate (ages 15–64) at 69.4% and unemployment at 2.8% https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/06/oecd-employment-outlook-2024-country-notes_6910072b/korea_dec630ce/636e4c7a-en.pdf [Accessed 19/09/2025]

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of Unification, “*Policy on North Korean Defectors – Economic Activities of North Korean Defectors ('20–'24)*,” Government of the Republic of Korea, last updated 2024 https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/ [Accessed 19/09/2025]

¹⁰¹ Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF). *Women's Employment and Unemployment (Ages 15–64)*, 2024 https://www.mogef.go.kr/eng/lw/eng_lw_f002.do [Accessed 19/09/2025]

Another factor is how age and migration cohort affect things. Official statistics don't always give separate data, but surveys by the Korea Hana Foundation and some recent studies show that younger refugees, especially those between the ages of 15 and 29, have a harder time moving from school to work than their South Korean peers¹⁰². Additionally, refugees who have just arrived tend to have bigger gaps in their employment, which tend to get smaller only over time and as they become more integrated into the host society. This shows that there is no one "profile" of a North Korean refugee and that age, gender, and length of stay in South Korea have a big effect on job conditions.

Overall, the indicators for the labor market show that people are only partially integrated. On the one hand, refugees have made real progress in getting jobs, thanks to both institutional support and the economy's recovery after the pandemic. But there are still big gaps between the levels of the country, and there are still some areas of vulnerability, especially among women and younger refugees. The fact that the unemployment rate among refugees is more than twice that of South Koreans shows that getting a job is still not easy or stable.

These findings pose a fundamental question: a rise in employment rates does not inherently signify complete integration. It is imperative to inquire about the types of employment available to refugees and whether these facilitate avenues for social mobility or, conversely, restrict them to marginal and precarious roles. The next section will look at the main job sectors, contract stability, and chances for professional recognition. It will focus on the qualitative side of work.

3.1.2 The quality of employment: between precarity and limited mobility

Labor market indicators offer a preliminary assessment of North Korean refugees' employment participation; however, a comprehensive understanding of their integration process necessitates an analysis of job quality. Just having a job doesn't mean you'll be included; it all depends on the type of work you do, how stable the contract is, how much you get paid, and how likely you are to move up in the world. Evidence gathered from

¹⁰² Korea Hana Foundation, *Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea (2021–2024)* <https://www.koreahana.or.kr/home/eng/resources/research/index.do?menuPos=17> [Accessed 19/09/2025]

2020 to 2024 indicates a situation characterized by ongoing difficulties and minimal opportunities for enhancement.

Recent data show that most refugees work in low-skilled and labor-intensive fields, like construction, food service, logistics, and personal services. More than half of the people who answered the Korea Hana Foundation's 2024 Settlement Survey said they worked in manual or unstable jobs, often with temporary or part-time contracts¹⁰³. In contrast, only a small number of people were able to get qualified jobs or work for the government, where pay and job security are usually better. The structural instability of the jobs available to refugees elucidates their heightened susceptibility to cyclical fluctuations, exemplified by the employment decline of 2024.

Wage differences show another big gap. The Korea Hana Foundation's 2024 Settlement Survey found that the average monthly income of refugees in 2023 was 2,457,000 won, which is much lower than the national average for that year¹⁰⁴.

It is even harder to deal with the fact that North Korea's educational credentials and skills are not recognized. Many refugees come with work experience or academic credentials, but these do not always match up with what South Korea needs. This leads to a kind of structural de-skilling that makes refugees start from the bottom and take jobs that are much less than what they are capable of. The Hana Foundation's survey found that more than 60% of refugees thought their skills were not being recognized enough, which made them feel frustrated and left out¹⁰⁵.

The Ministry of Unification promotes training and reintegration programs that are funded by the government, but their effects seem to be limited. A lot of this training is about basic skills and fields that are already full of workers, and it doesn't offer any really unique paths that could help people move up in society. Furthermore, the brevity of these programs and their inadequate alignment with labor market requirements hinder the conversion of training into tangible opportunities. This gap is clear because many refugees who took government courses still couldn't find jobs that matched their new skills¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p. 59

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 61

¹⁰⁵ Korea Hana Foundation, *Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea* (2024) <https://www.koreahana.or.kr/home/eng/resources/research/index.do?menuPos=17> [Accessed 19/09/2025]

¹⁰⁶ Daily NK, "Inadequate Training, Unrealistic Expectations", August 21, 2010, Daily NK, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/inadequate-training-unrealistic-ex/> [Accessed 19/09/2025]

Overall, the picture that comes out is one of quantitative integration but not qualitative integration. Refugees have gradually become more involved in the job market, but the jobs they do get are still mostly unstable, low-paying, and don't offer many chances for advancement. When looking at qualitative factors like wages, stability, and mobility, the difference between the two populations becomes even clearer. This is already clear in labor market indicators. In other words, economic integration is still only partial and incomplete. This could lead to a type of "marginal integration," where refugees are included in the productive system but are in structurally subordinate positions.

This situation has serious effects on society and politics. Refugees can't build stable identities or feel like they belong in the host society when they have unstable and unsatisfying jobs. Work experience can turn into a source of frustration and make people feel even more alienated instead of being a special way to include people. In the subsequent chapters, it will be essential to link this economic facet with the social and cultural dimensions of integration, to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies in converting labor market participation into authentic belonging.

3.1.3 *Discrimination in the workplace*

One of the biggest problems with integrating North Korean refugees is the discrimination they face when looking for work and while they are working. These barriers manifest not only through formal exclusions but also through pervasive prejudices that affect hiring decisions and daily interactions in the workplace.

An analysis in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* says that the way the resettlement system is set up, even though it was meant to promote inclusion, makes refugees look like "low-skilled" people. This, in turn, makes people less likely to trust each other during the application process and more likely to "forget" about them when choosing candidates for technical or specialized jobs¹⁰⁷. The study, grounded in comprehensive ethnographic research, explicitly indicates that numerous refugees perceive themselves as "ignored when applying for jobs" due to prejudice, correlating

¹⁰⁷ Jennifer Hough, "The Contradictory Effects of South Korean Resettlement Policy on North Koreans in South Korea," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 20 (2022), p. 2 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2123436> [19/09/2025]

this phenomenon with a public narrative that depicts them more as welfare recipients than as individuals possessing valuable human capital¹⁰⁸. In other words, the institutional reputation that comes with being a recipient of special measures—people who get them—often leads to a bias against (supposedly) low competence when an employer looks at CVs and applications.

The problem doesn't stop there once it's in a productive context. Recent qualitative research demonstrates that linguistic and presentational factors, such as pronunciation and certain expressions deemed “non-standard”, can incite professional devaluation or suspicion, directly impacting role assignments and job stability. In a 2024 study on refugee entrepreneurs, one interviewee reported receiving criticism for her North Korean accent while working in telemarketing; customers confused her speech with that of Joseonjok and even suspected attempts at voice phishing. The incident, which caused her to change how she pronounced words so that she wouldn't be noticed, is shown as a typical example of how people have to change to avoid being stigmatized at work¹⁰⁹. These micro-dynamics—the “adjustment” of speech, the self-censorship of origins, and the fear of being labeled—have macro effects on the quality of the work experience. They break down trust, make it harder to get customer-facing jobs, and make slower and less important career paths more common.

This image is also mirrored in official surveys. The Settlement/Integration Surveys conducted by the Korea Hana Foundation, despite not consistently differentiating data by stage (recruitment versus workplace), illustrate prevalent perceptions of discrimination and bias in the evaluation of refugees' professional competencies¹¹⁰. These things have an effect on both callbacks for interviews and relationships at work. Qualitative analyses of these surveys particularly emphasize the persistent theme of differential treatment associated with speech, behaviors, and perceived “attitude.” Some employers and coworkers see these markers as signs of a supposed lack of full professional adequacy, which can affect job classification, contract length, and chances for advancement.

¹⁰⁸ Ivi, pp. 2, 8

¹⁰⁹ HaeRan Shin, “North Korean Female Entrepreneurs in South Korea,” *IPUS Review* (Seoul National University, Institute for Peace and Unification Studies), 2024, p. 68
https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/05/04_HaeRan-Shin.pdf [19/09/2025]

¹¹⁰ Korea Hana Foundation. *Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea* (2022–2024 editions). Data and analysis on perceptions of discrimination and the evaluation of skills, used here as official corroboration of qualitative evidence <https://jubileecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/CSW-70-ROK.pdf> [19/09/2025]

Discrimination in job searching and the workplace works like an invisible selection process: it keeps qualified people from getting jobs at the application stage and, once they do get a job, it can make relationships less dense and recognition within teams less frequent. Refugees are in a state of "suspended integration," meaning they are officially part of the labor market but are often funneled into areas with low visibility, low pay, or high turnover. They are also forced to use mimicry strategies, either linguistically or biographically, to avoid being stigmatized. There are two effects. Quantitative indicators, such as employment and unemployment rates, often fail to correlate with qualitative mobility. Conversely, employment sustainability is precarious, as any disruption, be it a customer complaint, a supervisor change, or a reorganization, can resurface underlying biases, placing the refugee worker in vulnerable situations once more.

To lessen these effects, policies for labor integration can't just be about hiring incentives or general training courses. They need to work on both the demand and the workplace environment. This is the only way that public policies' training and incentives can realistically lead to career paths instead of just being limited to risky ways to get in.

3.2 Social Networks, Belonging, and Perceptions of Difference

The integration relies not solely on employment or service access but also on the quality of daily relationships and the sense of belonging. Still, language differences, stereotypes, and symbolic barriers make it hard to interact with South Koreans, which keeps co-nationals in closed networks. These mechanisms have a direct impact on both chances for social inclusion and mental health.

3.2.1 Barriers to social integration

The social integration of North Korean refugees in South Korea is significantly influenced by the quality and density of their daily relationships. Recent evidence

presents a contradictory scenario: while overall life satisfaction and engagement with services have risen, relational barriers endure, steering networks towards homophilous structures (such as family and co-nationals) and restricting access to “weak ties” with the host population, adversely affecting both the sense of belonging and interpersonal trust¹¹¹. For instance, 16.1 % of people in South Korea said they had been "discriminated against or looked down upon" in their lives in 2023. More than 72% of the people who thought about why this was happening said it was because of cultural differences in how people talk to each other. 45.5% said it was because of negative stereotypes about North Korean refugees, and 16.4% said it was because they thought they didn't have the right professional skills¹¹². These numbers show that things are getting better compared to past years, but they also show that interactional filters are still at work in everyday situations like neighborhoods, services, public transportation, and casual meetings, not just in the workplace or in school.

A significant component of these filters functions via linguistic markers. Even though North and South Koreans speak the same language, recent studies show that differences in accent, vocabulary, and intonation still serve as "ethnic indicators" of difference, leading to suspicion, paternalism, or subtle forms of devaluation¹¹³. Refugees frequently employ strategies of "linguistic adjustment" to mitigate relational friction and "remain unnoticed." These dynamics are based on a deeper level: the social label of "North Korean refugee" tends to last over time and override the many different personal identities. This is why, as the literature itself points out, even people who say they are "South Korean" are often still treated as "other"¹¹⁴.

This disparity between self-presentation and social attribution has direct consequences for network formation. Many interviewees downplay how close they are to other refugees in public stories, but in real life, they rely heavily on informal support networks among people from their own country, where they get information and

¹¹¹ Kyung Hyo Chun, “North Korean Defectors as Cultural Other in South Korea: Perception and Construction of Cultural Differences,” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, n. 1 (2022), pp. 196-200

¹¹² Michael Lee. “Defectors from North Happier, More Employed than Before.” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 27, 2023. (Data from KHF 2023: 16.1% reported experiencing discrimination/condescension; 72% cited communication/cultural differences, 45.5% negative stereotypes, 16.4% perceived lack of competence) <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2023-12-27/national/northKorea/Defectors-from-North-happier-more-employed-than-before/1945694> [19/09/2025]

¹¹³ Chun, “North Korean Defectors as Cultural Other,” pp. 199–200

¹¹⁴ Ivi, p. 193

resources they trust more¹¹⁵. This dynamic leads to a type of "protective homophily," which helps refugees become stronger and deal with their vulnerabilities, but it is not enough to create the bridging social capital that is needed to increase opportunities, trust, and civic belonging. Without stable heterogeneous ties, the risk is network segregation: a dense but short-range web of connections (family, fellow refugees, co-nationals) and a sparse set of long-range links (South Korean neighbors, associations, community groups).

The perception of “difference” cannot be elucidated exclusively through linguistic attributes or variations in quotidian practices. On a deeper level, some of what people are saying about North Korean refugees still sees them as "cultural others." This creates a divide between being close to and far away from them, which goes along with the idea of a single nation¹¹⁶. This portrayal, rather than being neutral, may cause refugees to perceive their situation as a “cultural” issue instead of attributing it to selective social scrutiny and behaviors¹¹⁷. The media have helped to strengthen this framework by sensationalizing personal stories and suffering on talk shows and entertainment shows. This has reinforced images of victimization or North Korean "authenticity" that create distance instead of closing it¹¹⁸. The spread of stereotypes, such as those about supposed communication problems, poverty, or always being in need, makes it okay for people to act with distrust, pity, or social surveillance in everyday life, which can be seen in looks, comments, or invitations to "speak properly." All of these things together have an effect on the social capital of refugees.

Qualitative testimonies gathered in recent years demonstrate the translation of these mechanisms into micro-relational dynamics. For instance, one refugee interviewed in Seoul said that people changed how they treated her as soon as she told them where she came from. The conversation went from normal to one full of suspicion and disdain¹¹⁹.

In conclusion, the gathered evidence suggests that social inclusion is impeded by nuanced yet enduring relational barriers—such as accent, communicative codes, and expectations of conformity—that cultivate predominantly homophilous networks and a perceived “difference” that persists despite a common language and history. These

¹¹⁵ Soim Park, Jennifer A. Wenzel, and Pamela J. Surkan, “How Do North Korean Refugees in South Korea Utilize Social Support to Cope with Acculturative Stress?” *SSM – Mental Health* 4 (2023): Article 100272, p. 5 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2023.100272>

¹¹⁶ Jennifer Hough, “The Contradictory Effects of South Korean Resettlement Policy on North Koreans in South Korea,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 20 (2022), p. 3 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2123436> [19/09/2025]

¹¹⁷ Chun, “North Korean Defectors as Cultural Other,” 189–200

¹¹⁸ Ivi, p. 194

¹¹⁹ Ivi, p. 203

dynamics, bolstered by previously discussed discursive frameworks and stereotypes, not only constrain opportunities for civic engagement and the cultivation of bridging social capital but also directly influence daily experiences, the sense of belonging, and self-esteem. The subsequent subsection is positioned at this level, concentrating on psychosocial outcomes such as acculturative stress, loneliness, subjective well-being, and coping strategies. These will be exemplified through testimonies and secondary interviews to demonstrate how the relational mechanisms discussed here manifest as tangible effects on individuals' lives.

3.2.2 *Psychological well-being, cumulative stress, and the impact of interventions*

Recent literature and institutional sources converge on the notion that the psychological burden of North Korean refugees is cumulative: traumatic experiences and deprivations in the home country, risks and vulnerabilities during escape (often in China or other third countries), and finally acculturation in South Korea, characterized by the expectations and pressures of a highly competitive environment. The latest evidence allows us to characterize this trajectory as cumulative: Large-scale clinical-epidemiological studies indicate that, upon resettlement in the South, refugees encounter a markedly elevated risk of stress-related disorders relative to the general population—especially post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and anxiety disorders; additionally, problematic alcohol consumption is more prevalent¹²⁰.

In the first few months after they arrive, the transition through Hanawon and access to the network of Hana Centers serve as a "bridge" between their lives before they moved and their lives in the South. Reports from press visits to Hanawon in 2023 show that about "30%" of new arrivals say they are anxious and have other mental health problems because they have been deprived for a long time and are living in hiding in China. To

¹²⁰ Lee, Rugeyeom; Sang Min Lee; Minha Hong; In-Hwan Oh, et al. "Assessing Mental Illness Risk Among North Korean Refugees and Immigrants Resettled in South Korea." *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 10 (October 19, 2022): 7, accessed [20/09/2025] <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2797475>

help with these weaknesses, the center offers psychological counseling and follow-up care after discharge¹²¹.

The local level has also seen improvements in the public support infrastructure. The Korea Hana Foundation (KHF) runs a "Comprehensive Consultation Call Center" and a "Psychological Support Center," both of which are part of the Hana Centers' initial assistance services. These services include individual case management, group programs, and referrals to specialists.³ These measures do not completely eliminate post-migration stress, but they establish pathways to care (entry points, guidance, continuity of assistance) that are essential for engaging individuals who are often hesitant to seek mental health services due to cultural factors or stigma.

Recent academic research provides a clearer picture of the scope and nature of psychological distress among North Korean refugees. An analysis based on national health insurance data, published in JAMA Network Open, estimated hazard ratios of 3.10 for major depression, 2.27 for anxiety and panic disorders and 1.85 for alcohol use disorders, compared to the South Korean population¹²². These outcomes, concentrated in conditions most sensitive to environmental stressors, highlight that the post-resettlement phase is not simply a period of recovery after escape, but a critical juncture where identity renegotiation, economic vulnerability, and relational adaptation intersect.

Relational and community dimensions function as amplifiers or mitigators of psychological burden. Evidence from 2023 indicates that, among female refugees, neighborhood cohesion influences the relationship between acculturative stress and loneliness: in neighborhoods perceived as cohesive and supportive, loneliness diminishes and the likelihood of post-traumatic growth escalates¹²³.

In terms of policy, this means that clinical interventions work better when they are part of supportive social environments, like close-knit communities, local groups, and helpful neighbors, instead of being given to refugees as "isolated services." This point is in line with what the literature says about how well community-based and hybrid (public-NGO) approaches that combine perceived safety, advocacy, and early engagement work.

¹²¹ Michael Lee, "Defectors Open Up about Hopes, Concerns at Hanawon," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, July 10, 2023, accessed [20/09/2025] <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/07/10/national/northKorea/Korea-defector-Hanawon/20230710190953511.html>

¹²² Lee et al., op. cit., p. 4

¹²³ Hokon Kim et al., "The moderating role of neighborhood social cohesion in the mediation effects of the loneliness between acculturation stress and post-traumatic growth among female North Korean defectors," *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): pp. 4, 5 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-43741-3> [20/09/2025]

Qualitative studies on refugee women and their pathways to care provide additional insight; a 2024 analysis in the *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* reveals that help-seeking is frequently non-linear, fluctuating between avoidance due to fear of stigma, sporadic utilization of formal services, and a preference for environments deemed “safe” (NGOs, confidential counseling, peer groups). Mental health literacy and trust in the system are important factors: when there are informal and non-judgmental ways to get help, people are much more likely to get treatment and stay in it¹²⁴. In other words, public policies can only work if there are low-threshold, culturally competent care settings that make people feel less bad about being labeled as mentally ill and meet needs before they become long-term.

The media's reports of female refugees' public testimonies add to the numerical data by giving us a better idea of what they went through. At a press event at Hanawon in July 2023, one participant said that her time in China was like "an underground existence" that made her "anxious" and "afraid of strangers." Another participant said that she was "cautiously optimistic" about her future in the South, but she also heard warnings from other refugees about how "harsh" the social environment is¹²⁵. These voices, although anecdotal, correspond with clinical data indicating a higher prevalence of stress-related disorders and with qualitative analyses of help-seeking behaviors, illustrating a transition in which mental health care is a fundamental component of integration.

Overall, the effects of policies and programs can be seen on three levels that are all connected. First, in terms of access: one-stop service desks, hotlines, and dedicated psychological centers (KHF/Hana Centers) make it easier for people to get care by removing logistical barriers¹²⁶. Second, in terms of continuity and appropriateness: when services are combined with NGOs and community spaces, people are more likely to get involved, especially women. Studies on neighborhood cohesion and help-seeking patterns show that this leads to better subjective outcomes, such as less loneliness and better

¹²⁴ Minjeong Wee, Jieun Lee e Kyungjae Lee, “Health-Seeking Patterns of Female North Korean Defectors in South Korea for Mental Health,” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 12, no. 1 (2024): 79–80 https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/05/05_HyeSeung-Wee-et-al.pdf

¹²⁵ Michael Lee, “Defectors Open Up about Hopes, Concerns at Hanawon,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, July 10, 2023, accessed [20/09/2025] <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/07/10/national/northKorea/Korea-defector-Hanawon/20230710190953511.html>

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*

health¹²⁷. Third, in terms of prevention, finding psychiatric risk factors early on—something that has been documented at the national level—makes it possible to create stepped-care treatment pathways and targeted social protection measures. This lowers the psychological burden on the whole integration process¹²⁸.

3.3 Educational and training impacts

Education is one area where South Korea's policy architecture has had a clear impact on how North Korean refugees can integrate, but there are still problems with the goals and actual results not matching up. In recent years, the number of children and young adults with a North Korean background who are enrolled in the regular school system has grown. This is in line with the growth of economic support and guidance measures, such as special university admissions, tuition exemptions or reductions, tutoring, and counseling. Nonetheless, the group's demographic makeup, the disparity between North and South Korean curricula, linguistic variations (accent, vocabulary), and frequently disjointed biographical paths persist in influencing academic performance, school retention, and postsecondary options.

To better understand these dynamics, it is useful to begin with the changing profile of the student population. In recent years, the number of children and young adults from North Korean refugee backgrounds enrolled in South Korea's regular school system has increased, alongside expanded forms of financial assistance and academic guidance. Nevertheless, the group's demographic composition, the divergence between North and South Korean curricula, linguistic differences (accent and vocabulary), and often fragmented biographical trajectories continue to shape academic achievement, school retention, and postsecondary pathways. A 2023 study reported that in 2022 there were 2,061 North Korean refugee students enrolled across elementary, middle, high, and alternative schools in South Korea, underscoring both the scale of their presence and the

¹²⁷ Minjeong Wee, Jieun Lee e Kyungjae Lee, "Health-Seeking Patterns of Female North Korean Defectors in South Korea for Mental Health," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 12, no. 1 (2024): 79–80 https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/05/05_HyeSeung-Wee-et-al.pdf

¹²⁸ Lee et al., "Assessing Mental Illness Risk Among North Korean Refugees and Immigrants Resettled in South Korea"

need for differentiated forms of support¹²⁹. These challenges manifest particularly in primary education, where teachers and staff must balance literacy or re-literacy interventions for students with disrupted schooling, language integration for those born in China or other countries, and identity-support initiatives for children born and raised in South Korea within refugee families. Recent literature suggests that these disparities translate into uneven outcomes: while some students successfully pursue higher education, others struggle with cumulative learning gaps and the complexity of navigating the South Korean school system¹³⁰.

The impact of policies on upper secondary education and university access is ambiguous. On one hand, allowing refugee students to benefit from "special admissions" and lower or free tuition has opened up more opportunities for them. This is in line with the deeply held South Korean belief that a college degree is necessary for stable entry into the job market. However, the inherent characteristics of these preferential channels can cultivate— as qualitative research indicates— perceptions of “privilege” among South Korean peers, resulting in labeling effects and a sense of symbolic vulnerability among the beneficiaries themselves¹³¹.

Institutional sources confirm that the need for guidance and support has grown. In its most recent Settlement Survey 2024 summary report, the Korea Hana Foundation (KHF) found that more than six out of ten refugee parents said that "difficulty in following their children's learning" (64.4%) was one of the main problems they faced when it came to care and upbringing. Almost one in five of these parents asked for stronger support for development and education¹³². This is an indirect sign that the current measures (like scholarships and tutoring, which were already talked about in Chapter 2) need to be looked at not just in terms of how well they are provided, but also in terms of how well

¹²⁹ Hagyun Kim and Kwanghyuk Kim, “North Korean Refugee Students’ Strategy of School Engagement and Its Impact on Identity in South Korea: ‘Aspiration towards an Inter-Korean Identity through a Process of Being One of Them,’” *Multicultural Education Review* 15, no. 4 (2024): p. 291 <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2024.2323700> [20/09/2025]

¹³⁰ Hagyun Kim and Kwanghyuk Kim, “North Korean Refugee Students’ Strategy of School Engagement and Its Impact on Identity in South Korea: ‘Aspiration towards an Inter-Korean Identity through a Process of Being One of Them,’” *Multicultural Education Review* 15, no. 4 (2023): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2024.2323700>

¹³¹ Jennifer Hough, “The Contradictory Effects of South Korean Resettlement Policy on North Koreans in South Korea,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, n. 20 (2022): pp. 4923-4924 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2123436> [20/09/2025]

¹³² Korea Hana Foundation (KHF), summary communication on the *Settlement Survey 2024*, December 27, 2024: among the problems related to children’s upbringing, “difficulty in following their learning” 64.4%; requests for support: “financial assistance” 55.3% and “development/education support” 17.4% <https://www.koreahana.or.kr/home/kor/board.do?act=detail&idx=18983&menuPos=57> [20/09/2025]

they can actually make up for the disadvantages that students face in regular school settings.

Policies and programs have had different effects, even after mandatory schooling. The Hana Centers and their partner organizations have added more remedial courses, counseling, and programs to help students move from school to work. For example, PSCORE still offers mentoring and one-on-one tutoring (especially in English) that can help students get into college or other postsecondary programs¹³³.

Recent qualitative studies at the micro level elucidate the actual utilization of such resources by students. A 2024 study of 17 North Korean refugee women reveals that numerous individuals employ a strategy of "being like them," characterized by mimicry and school involvement intended to reduce the visibility of their origins. This method can boost self-esteem and foster positive connections with classmates and educators; however, it underscores the enduring implicit expectations of adherence to the South Korean model, potentially transforming tools intended for inclusion into systems that encourage "conditional inclusion"¹³⁴.

In this context, institutional support's role is not just to "add resources," but also to make pedagogical and organizational settings that can recognize the variety of paths that people take (like being born in a third country, having to stop going to school, or starting college late) without putting them in deficit-based frameworks.

A significant challenge persists in the assessment of outcomes. Official statistics allow us to count the number of students in a school and describe their makeup and distribution by grade level. However, it is much more difficult to measure completion rates, successful transitions to higher education, and the actual "added value" of support measures in a systematic way. Currently, the most substantial evidence is either descriptive-administrative (KHF) or qualitative (academic studies), whereas data regarding dropout rates and postsecondary success are dispersed across various ad hoc surveys or working documents. Still, indirect signs like the rising need for help from families, the growing number of students in upper secondary school, and the rising number of people born in third countries make it clear where action should be taken:

¹³³ PSCORE, "Education Program," PSCORE: People for Successful Korean Reunification <https://pscore.org/our-work/education/> [20/09/2025]

¹³⁴ Haryun Kim and Kwanghyuk Kim, "North Korean Refugee Students' Strategy of School Engagement and Its Impact on Identity in South Korea: 'Aspiration towards an Inter-Korean Identity through a Process of Being One of Them'," *Multicultural Education Review*, published online March 4, 2024, p. 9

personalized support for transitions, help with language and curriculum, more investment in teachers' skills in multicultural settings, and more involvement with families.

Simultaneously, the discursive impact of educational policies can be identified. The creation of preferential channels and scholarships (previously addressed in Chapter 2) has been instrumental in reducing access barriers. However, if not effectively communicated and integrated within the overarching framework of equity policies, it may perpetuate narratives of privilege that, especially at the university level, subject refugee students to the risks of stigmatization. Ethnographic fieldwork has gathered testimonies indicating that the “exceptionality” of admission pathways and support mechanisms elicits suspicion or self-censorship when individuals discuss their own advantages, resulting in stress and a reduction of social networks on campus¹³⁵.⁸ Reducing this symbolic friction is an important part of how policies affect education. This means improving public communication, training for academic and administrative staff, and mixing up student activities and groups so that "special" access doesn't mean "special" belonging.

3.4 *The limits of government integration policies*

Even though South Korea has made progress and used a variety of tools, its policies for integrating North Korean refugees show structural problems that affect the main areas of intervention and make the measures less effective. These deficiencies pertain not only to the quantity of resources allocated but, more importantly, to the efficacy of policies in generating sustainable, coherent, and authentically inclusive pathways.

In terms of jobs, hiring incentives and training programs have led to more people working, but they haven't made sure that the conditions for integration are good. Institutions have primarily concentrated on brief training programs, frequently restricted to low-skilled sectors, which inadequately correspond to the genuine demands of the market and neglect refugees' individual aspirations. This leads to job paths that are limited to low-paying, marginal areas with no chance for advancement or social mobility. Also, the fact that North Korean qualifications aren't fully recognized leads to a lot of underemployment and frustration, since many refugees have to take jobs that don't match

¹³⁵ Hough, op. cit., pp. 4923-4924

their skills. There are also cultural and language barriers: things like accent, behavior, or communication style can become signs of "difference" that, in hiring practices or workplace settings, can lead to discrimination that is more or less clear. Consequently, even when job placement occurs, professional trajectories are often unstable, disjointed, and marked by elevated turnover rates.

Likewise, psychosocial support policies are hindered by an excessively clinical-institutional perspective. Hanawon and other local centers offer counseling and orientation services, but because of where they are and how they are set up, refugees don't feel like they are in their everyday lives. This makes it harder for refugees to get help and makes a gap between what they really need and what institutions offer. Also, most of the help is given during the first phase of resettlement. When refugees leave Hanawon and have to deal with the challenges of living on their own, the level of support tends to drop, which is when new problems with work, social relationships, and feeling like they belong arise. The stigma surrounding mental health in South Korea is another problem: many refugees don't want to use official services because they don't want to be labeled, so they rely on informal networks or non-governmental organizations instead. Even the social networks that institutions promote mostly stay within refugee communities, which makes it harder for people to connect with people from different backgrounds in South Korea. The lack of "bridging" social capital slows down the process of inclusion, keeps people feeling isolated, and hurts their mental health.

In terms of education, policies have definitely made it easier for people to get into schools and universities, but they still don't do enough to make a difference over time. Special admissions, scholarships, and tutoring programs are some of the support tools that have been put in place, but they are often put in place without enough thought about how they will really affect learning, reduce inequalities, and help people get jobs. There are still gaps in the curriculum and language, and only some of them are being fixed. As a result, refugee students are still at a disadvantage compared to their South Korean classmates. Additionally, institutional responses are generally uniform, whereas the refugee population is markedly heterogeneous; students originating from North Korea, youths reared in third countries, or offspring of refugees born in South Korea possess distinct educational and social requirements. Policies, on the other hand, have not given this diversity enough thought, and they still offer standardized pathways. Additionally, there are dynamics of stigmatization associated with mechanisms of preferential access to university; although these measures aim to promote inclusion, they inadvertently

exacerbate perceptions of privilege and subtle forms of symbolic exclusion. Families have a hard time keeping up with their kids' schoolwork, and teachers don't get enough training in intercultural competence and trauma management. This makes the educational responses even more broken and uneven.

In conclusion, it is evident that the shortcomings of South Korea's integration policies arise not from a complete lack of resources or investment, but from the disjointed nature of interventions, their insufficient adaptability to the unique needs of refugees, and the absence of a genuinely inclusive and sustained strategy. Policies too often only look at the short-term phase of resettlement and don't follow refugees in the medium and long term, when the problems related to finding work, making friends, and doing well in school become more difficult and important.

3.5 *Proposals for improving policies*

Given the limits of current measures and policies, it has become clear in recent years that South Korea needs to completely rethink how it integrates North Korean refugees. Current measures, while providing significant support during the initial phase of arrival, inadequately address long-term challenges, including unemployment and underemployment, barriers to higher education, unresolved psychological trauma, linguistic and cultural discrimination, and social isolation. To stop these limits from becoming structural exclusion, we need to switch from a temporary, welfare-based approach to one that is participatory and empowering, one that can value the refugees' own resources and goals.

One area where this change seems especially important is in jobs and recognizing skills. Even though South Korean law officially recognizes experiences and qualifications gained in North Korea, many refugees are unable to secure employment commensurate with their skills due to the absence of clear criteria and expedited processes for credential verification by public entities¹³⁶. To solve this problem, it would be helpful to set up a system like the "European Qualifications Passport for Refugees" that the Council of

¹³⁶ Shin Ha, Hui Ran Choi, Jong Koo Lee, and Yo Han Lee, "Challenges Experienced by North Korean Refugee Doctors in Acquiring a Medical License in South Korea: A Qualitative Analysis," *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions* 39, no. 2 (2019): 112, 117-18 https://journals.lww.com/jcehp/fulltext/2019/03920/challenges_experienced_by_north_korean_refugee.6.aspx [21/09/2025]

Europe supports. This system would use structured interviews and other ways to evaluate qualifications and work experience even when documents are missing¹³⁷. Germany has also set up the Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bildungswesen (ZAB), which gives expert evaluations of foreign qualifications so that they can be compared to German degrees¹³⁸. Proposing the creation of an independent organization in South Korea, based on these models, to assess and validate North Korean qualifications within a set time frame, while providing bridging modules for recognized discrepancies, appears to be a tangible measure. Also, the introduction of an inclusive apprenticeship system, where supervised practical training and study are combined (like in Germany with programs like Integration through Qualification)¹³⁹, along with tax breaks for businesses and ongoing training programs, could help people find jobs that are right for them. Also, supporting the creation of mixed social enterprises, with refugees and South Koreans as co-founders in new fields like the green economy or digital services, is in line with international practices that encourage economic, entrepreneurial, and social participation. This is not yet common for North Korean refugees, though.

These comparative experiences should also be included in education to make suggestions more believable. In many countries, there are academic mentorship programs for refugees or immigrants that have helped them adapt, feel more confident, and do better in school. For example, a recent study on peer mentoring programs for refugee women found that they made them more ready for work, more empowered, and more connected to the host community¹⁴⁰. Another example is a school program in four high schools where refugee and local students were paired with volunteer mentors. The evaluation showed that the students were more motivated to do well in school and did better

¹³⁷ Council of Europe, “*European Qualifications Passport for Refugees – Recognition of Refugees’ Qualifications*,” webpage, accessed [21/09/2025], Council of Europe <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications>

¹³⁸ ZAB (Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bildungswesen), “*Expert Assessment*,” Central Office for Foreign Education, accessed [21/09/2025] <https://www.kmk.org/zab/central-office-for-foreign-education/expert-assessment.html#:~:text=What%20is%20an%20expert%20assessment,qualification%20and%20its%20German%20equivalent>

¹³⁹ Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR), “The Network ‘Integration through Qualification’ (IQ)”, accessed [21/09/2025], <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/network-integration-through-qualification-iq>

¹⁴⁰ Shelley Gower, Zakia Jeemi, David Forbes, Paul Kebble, and Jaya A. R. Dantas, “Peer Mentoring Programs for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Refugee and Migrant Women: An Integrative Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 19 (2022): pp. 9, 15 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191912845>

overall¹⁴¹. It makes perfect sense for South Korea to suggest similar structures, such as academic mentorship where South Korean students tutor refugees, dedicated university guidance centers, and bridging courses to fill in gaps in the curriculum and language. This is especially true if it is done with the creation of specific teaching materials, glossaries, and intensive courses for cases of double marginalization.

Psychological well-being cannot remain a marginal area. Experiences in different countries demonstrate that peer support groups, mentoring, and creative therapeutic activities (art, music) increase resilience and improve the mental health of refugees and young migrants¹⁴². For example, in the United States, "Trauma-Informed Youth Mentoring" programs have made kids better at school and helped them deal with stress, feel better about themselves, and get involved with other people¹⁴³. In South Korea, suggesting community clinics that work with multidisciplinary teams, peer resilience programs where stabilized refugees act as counselors, and art and music therapy activities could help close the gap between need and provision. This would stop many traumas from going unexpressed or becoming chronic. It is very important for service providers to learn about the cultural differences in North Korean trauma. For example, Germany's IQ programs teach staff who evaluate credentials or provide services to migrants how to be culturally sensitive¹⁴⁴.

Discrimination based on language and culture is another big problem. In many international settings, classes on implicit bias, intercultural education in schools, and media campaigns that show positive experiences have all helped people accept each other more¹⁴⁵. Germany's Network IQ is a good example. It gives public office workers and officials who handle refugee applications professional recognition and intercultural

¹⁴¹ Subhash Koirala, Geberew Tulu Mekonnen, Bryce Deller, Gilbert Arinaitwe, Kevina Kezabu, Karen Swabey, and David Kember. "Implementing a Migrant and Refugee Mentoring Program through Action Research." *Heliyon* 10 (2024): pp. 3, 5 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e40470>

¹⁴² Filippos Barbaresos, Nelly Georgiou, Fotis Vasilopoulos, and Chrysovalantis Papathanasiou, "Peer Support Groups and Peer Mentoring in Refugee Adolescents and Young Adults: A Literature Review", *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* 14, no. 2 (April 2023): p. 4 <https://www.gjcpp.org/es/article.php?issue=45&article=284> [21/09/2025]

¹⁴³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Trauma Informed Youth Mentoring Program for Resettled Refugees," *Global Compact on Refugees*, <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/trauma-informed-youth-mentoring-program-resettled-refugees> [21/09/2025]

¹⁴⁴ Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR), "The Network 'Integration through Qualification' (IQ)" <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/network-integration-through-qualification-iq>

¹⁴⁵ Philipp Jaschke et al., "Mentoring as a grassroots effort for integrating refugees - evidence from a randomised field experiment," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 17 (2022): p. 4085 (abstract) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2058918>

training to help reduce systemic bias¹⁴⁶. For South Korea, implementing compulsory diversity training for educators, employers, and public officials, establishing an autonomous ombudsman's office to combat discrimination, and initiating public and educational campaigns that emphasize cultural and linguistic diversity would constitute viable and potentially efficacious measures.

Lastly, international programs have shown that creating mixed social networks and encouraging civic participation are two things that help people integrate very well. Research on "peer support groups and peer mentoring" among refugee adolescents has shown that sharing experiences with peers, particularly in educational or community environments, alleviates acculturative stress and enhances confidence and social engagement¹⁴⁷. Germany's Network IQ does the same thing: it offers mentoring, coaching, and skills assessments that go beyond formal recognition, helping refugees connect with the host community directly¹⁴⁸. So, South Korea would benefit from creating mixed cultural and sports clubs, joint local volunteer projects, neighborhood social incubators, and academic initiatives (service learning) that include refugees as co-protagonists as well as beneficiaries.

Of course, these steps need a strong institutional framework. The establishment of a permanent inter-ministerial commission on refugee integration, comprising essential ministries, NGOs, academic institutions, and refugee representatives, corresponds with strategies implemented in other nations that create public-private partnerships to harmonize migration and education policies. Similarly, programs like Sweden's Labor Market Integration schemes, which offer intensive help right after residence permits are given out and have good effects on employment¹⁴⁹, South Korea could also offer high-intensity labor market services in the important first few months, along with special funding and monitoring through certain indicators. The use of the integrated practices just described could be a key step in changing the integration system from a bunch of sectoral measures into a more natural and long-lasting plan.

¹⁴⁶ Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR), "The Network 'Integration through Qualification' (IQ)" <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/network-integration-through-qualification-iq>

¹⁴⁷ Barbaresos et al., op. cit., p. 5

¹⁴⁸ Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR), "The Network 'Integration through Qualification' (IQ)" <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/network-integration-through-qualification-iq>

¹⁴⁹ Matz Dahlberg, Johan Egebark, Ulrika Vikman, and Gülay Özcan, "Labor Market Integration of Refugees: RCT Evidence from an Early Intervention Program in Sweden" (2023): p. 3

There are still a lot of problems to solve, but these kinds of approaches would give North Korean refugees more chances to get involved, which would help both the individuals and the country's social cohesion.

Conclusion

The analysis has revealed that the Republic of Korea has established a multifaceted framework of laws and policies designed to guarantee North Korean refugees a fundamental level of economic and social assistance. Subsidies, training programs, educational benefits, and psychological support services have made it possible for people to integrate into the host society at a basic level. However, empirical evidence demonstrates that these measures have not yet achieved complete and enduring integration, exposing structural deficiencies that impact both the quality of life of refugees and the societal perception of their status.

The study has specifically identified three areas of paramount concern. First, the aspect of employment: despite quantitative indicators indicating a gradual rise in the employment rate, issues of job insecurity, underemployment, and the failure to acknowledge prior qualifications continue to impede social mobility. Second, in the area of social integration, language and symbolic discrimination, along with the fact that refugees often rely on support networks within their own communities, make it harder for them to build "bridging" social capital with South Koreans. Lastly, the educational and psychological aspect, which, even though the government has taken steps to help, still has a lot of students dropping out and a lot of stress.

Based on these findings, it is contended that inclusion policies must be reevaluated to adopt a more participatory approach, focusing not solely on protection but also on the augmentation of the individual and collective resources of refugees. A comparison with other experiences indicates the necessity to implement more efficient mechanisms for the acknowledgment of qualifications, tailored mentoring initiatives, and increased focus on psychological well-being as a fundamental prerequisite for inclusion.

It is important to note that this study has some limitations, mostly because direct interviews were not possible and the study had to rely on secondary sources. The evidence gathered, however, facilitates a critical and thorough evaluation of South Korea's policies, emphasizing both their merits and deficiencies.

Finally, the integration of North Korean refugees should not be seen only as a welfare issue. It should also be seen as a test for building a model of citizenship and national unity that includes everyone. Taking care of this situation is important not only for the refugees themselves, but also for the future of the Korean peninsula and the possibility of moving closer to real unification.

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