

Korean Female Graduate Students' Experiences in the United States: Recognizing and Addressing Their Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The unique experiences of Korean female graduate students (KFGS) in the United States (US) have not received much attention or been discussed, although Korea has been one of the leading countries sending students to the United States. By examining literature regarding the experiences of KFGS studying and living in the United States, this paper reports the challenges they face (e.g., racial and gender discrimination, the model minority stereotype, and multiple roles as students and as wives and/or mothers) and the ways in which they respond to those challenges. This paper also urges one to conduct more research on the lives of KFGS to make them visible and heard in U.S. academia.

Keywords: coping strategies, discrimination, female students, graduate students, international students, model minority

In general, the United States (U.S.) is an inequitable place for higher education for women in terms of their college experiences and career outcomes, although women outpace men regarding the overall degrees granted (Dua, 2007). Prior studies reported the inequalities that women of color face in academia, but the voices of female Asian scholars have been relatively unheard in U.S. higher education because of a dearth of studies identifying and understanding their challenges and needs in the higher education system (Green & Kim, 2005; Yoon & Kim, 2018). Only a few studies have explicitly explored international female

Asian graduate students in the United States and reported their struggles as women, racial and ethnic minorities, and international students (e.g., Le et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2016). However, among other ethnic groups, the unique experiences of Korean female graduate students (KFGS) in the United States have not been much discussed although Korea was ranked as the third leading country in terms of sending students to the United States in 2019 and 2020, after China and India (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020; Lim, 2019). Further, the increase in anti-Asian violence and harassment during the COVID-19 pandemic has made Asian women in the United States especially vulnerable (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). Thus, there is a need to increase the visibility of and discussions about the life experiences of Asian women in the United States. The purpose of this paper is to examine literature¹ regarding the experiences of KFGS studying and living in the United States. This paper focuses particularly on reporting their challenges and the ways in which they respond to those challenges.

THE STATUS OF KOREAN WOMEN IN KOREA

Korea's traditional culture, strongly influenced by Confucianism, has shaped a patriarchal society, where Korean women must adhere to strict gender roles, a patrilineal family system, and a hierarchical social structure (Shim, 2001). Although Korean women have experienced improved social status (e.g., obtainment of equal rights, education opportunities, and greater social engagement) through modernization and globalization, such rapid social changes have not been able to completely erase the Confucian ideology in contemporary Korean society (Shim, 2001). Korean women continue to have limited career mobility compared with Korean men (Park & Shahiri, 2015). Small numbers of women are in leadership positions at major corporations and organizations, but often they are paid lower salaries than men who are at the same educational level (Park & Shahiri, 2015). Employed, married Korean women also frequently have dual roles in paid labor and domestic work as housewives and mothers (Yoon & Kim, 2018). Gender inequality is not much different in Korean academia because there are fewer career opportunities for female scholars.

Many KFGS choose to leave Korea to pursue graduate degrees in other countries because female Korean scholars often face traditional gender disparities in the academic job market (Green & Kim, 2005; Yoon & Kim, 2018). According to the Korean Education Statistics Service [KESS] (2020), female professors comprised only 27% of the total full-time faculty members in 2020. Most female scholars work in short-term, contract-based, non-tenure-track positions (Yoon &

¹ Papers reporting the experiences of KFGS, Korean female scholars, and other international female graduate students in the United States were reviewed.

Kim, 2018). Prior studies have reported that several KFGS decided to study in the United States because there were fewer professional career opportunities for women and insufficient recognition of women's abilities in Korea (e.g., Green & Kim, 2005; Lim, 2019; Yoon & Kim, 2018). However, KFGS experience additional challenges and different environmental pressures in the United States.

KFGS' CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES

The frequently identified difficulties for KFGS are language barriers and isolation, which are common issues for all international students (Green & Kim, 2005; Lim, 2019). Both are primary stressors for most international students because they are closely associated with academic success, psychological well-being, and social adjustment (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Often, students who were actively engaged in class in their home countries consider themselves inferior students in the United States because of a lack of English proficiency, and this may cause psychological stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Language barriers may also prevent students from interacting with their American peers and from being involved in cultural and social activities (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Moreover, international students often feel lonely and isolated because they have a low level of social support and engagement in the United States, which may significantly affect their quality of life (Yeh & Inose, 2003). In addition to these issues, there are other challenges that specifically KFGS face more than other international students.

In general, female Asian international students have "triple minority statuses as women, racial minorities, and foreigners" (Liu et al., 2016, p. 412). Racial and gender discrimination has, as expected, been identified as a challenge by KFGS in the United States (Green & Kim, 2005; Lim, 2019). Several KFGS reported that they had faced racial and gender stereotypes as Asian women (Green & Kim, 2005; Lim, 2019). KFGS are often considered and judged as stereotypical Asian women, who are submissive, dependent, unprofessional, cute, and quiet (Green & Kim, 2005). Other studies conducted with Chinese and Japanese female international students reported similar findings (e.g., Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Hsieh, 2006). These stereotypical images negatively affect not only students' daily lives but also their academic lives, such as their relationships with faculty members, classmates, undergraduate students whom they teach, and people whom they meet in professional settings such as conferences (Green & Kim, 2005).

KFGS must also deal with the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans, according to which all Asian Americans are hard workers, academically high-achieving students, and harsh instructors (Green & Kim, 2005). Coined by Petersen (1966), the "model minority" refers to the success of Asian immigrants in the United States, and it suggests that other minority groups should aspire to be like them. Clearly, this label cannot represent all Asian minority groups. In particular, it negatively affects students because of people's expectations of them as academic high achievers. The model minority myth becomes a burden on KFGS as well; some students feel pressurized to maintain the image of smart, hardworking Asian students (Green & Kim, 2005). In

addition, this widespread stereotype tends to overlook or even hide any discrimination and challenges that Asian women face in academia (Green & Kim, 2005).

KFGS' experiences seem to differ depending on their marital status. Married KFGS often have different motivations behind coming to the United States and experience additional difficulties compared with unmarried students. Some decide to study in the United States to stay with their husbands, who are pursuing academic degrees or work (Yoon & Kim, 2018). These married female students often struggle to balance their roles as students with their roles as wives and/or mothers because Korean women are unexceptionally responsible for housework and childcare (Yoon & Kim, 2018). Another situation is that of married Korean women coming to the United States with their children to obtain their own graduate degrees and improve their children's English fluency while their husbands stay in Korea alone (Lee, 2013). These women have difficulties playing dual roles as full-time graduate students and single, primary caregivers; however, they also feel some relief because they do not have to deal directly with traditional domestic obligations to their husbands and in-laws (Lee, 2013).

To cope with these challenges, KFGS have found helpful approaches for themselves because people naturally develop strategies to manage or overcome difficulties during the acculturation process (Green & Kim, 2005; Lim, 2019; Park et al., 2017). For example, students develop a support system by engaging in Korean or other Asian communities and attending extracurricular activities, social events, or a church regularly (Green & Kim, 2005; Lim, 2019). They also maintain supportive relationships with their academic advisors, family members in Korea, and classmates (Green & Kim, 2005).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS AND RESEARCHERS

Most higher education institutions in the United States have been offering various support programs for their international students (e.g., language, health and wellness, cultural adaptation, immigration, and accommodations support) (Le et al., 2016). However, some university programs are not very helpful for many international graduate students because the programs do not meet these students' specific needs; most support programs last for a short term and are more suitable for undergraduates (Lim, 2019). International student service providers and researchers need to do more research on students' various needs based on their race, ethnicity, culture, gender, age group, marital status, parenting, and degree program. Universities should also provide systematic, culturally responsive training for faculty members, particularly master's and doctoral student advisors, because their relationships with international graduate students are crucial to the students' academic achievement and successful acculturation (Le et al., 2016).

For KFGS specifically, there should be more studies on them because KFGS should no longer be "invisible and unheard" in U.S. academia (Green & Kim, 2005, p. 493). Recommended topics may include the mental health impact of anti-Asian racism on KFGS and the implications for their social lives and career plans;

tensions between KFGS and Korean Americans; and Generation Z KFGS' perspectives on traditional gender roles. More stories of KFGS need to be told, and their voices should be heard.

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