Aspirational Migration and Negotiated Belonging: Tajik Women, Faith and Gender in South Korea

Timur Dadabaev*, Manizha Rajabova, Abel Polese and Liam O'Farrell

Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, migration has become an integral part of daily life for many Central Asians. This includes internal, cross-border, short- and long-term migration, and sending and receiving remittances. To date, much of the literature on Central Asian migration focuses on low-skilled labour migration, irregular status and legal vulnerability, situating migrants within broader analyses of exploitation, stratified incorporation and migrant-worker regimes. While these dynamics remain important, recent migration research increasingly conceptualises mobility as an aspirational and capability-dependent process rather than a simple response to economic deprivation, emphasising how desires for education, autonomy, and future life possibilities shape migration trajectories alongside structural constraints. This article addresses these debates by examining the migration trajectories of Tajik women in South Korea, drawing on interviews with female migrants. We offer novel frameworks to the field of migration. Empirically, we illustrate that migration to South Korea is experienced neither as a straightforward route to emancipation nor as a condition of unrelenting precarity. Instead, women's narratives reveal a patterned coexistence of agency and vulnerability, opportunity and constraint. Theoretically, by showing that migration can generate meaningful improvements in women's lives without producing secure incorporation, legal permanence or full social belonging, we place the Capability Approach at the centre of the analysis, integrating insights from gendered migration theory, legal stratification, transnationalism and intersectionality. Our research demonstrates how female migrants experience capability expansion under conditions of conditional belonging.

Keywords: Migration, Female Migrants, Tajikistan, South Korea, Central Asia

Introduction

Migration debates have so far juxtaposed the paradigms of the 'age of migration' (Castles et al., 2014; Cresswell, 2006) and the 'age of involuntary immobility' (Carling, 2002), debating whether people now migrate more or less than they previously could. However, for many Central Asians, migration to Europe, North America or East Asia has long been an integral part of daily life. Interestingly, over the past decade, South Korea has emerged as an increasingly significant destination for skilled Central Asian migrants, opening novel research opportunities. Most of the literature on Central Asian migration has concentrated on the movement of low-skilled migrants within the region and to Russia (Abashin, 2014; Laruelle, 2013; Laruelle & Schenk, 2018; Urinboyev & Polese, 2016). This is unsurprising, given that Russia has absorbed approximately 90% of migratory flows from Central Asia (particularly Tajikistan), predominantly male migrants. Scholarship has also focused on state-led mobility schemes, labour migration (Dadabaev & Soipov, 2020) or the soft-power effects of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) (Chung, 2022; Lian, 2019; Kim, 2009; Kim & Kim, 2025). But far less attention has been paid to female migration from Central Asia, which this article sets out to explore. Research on gender and migration, as well as feminist approaches, offering different angles to Central Asian migration and how men and women experience this phenomenon differently are likely to offer distinct perspectives. Yet, such studies remain a minority (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022; Kasymova, 2008; Kholmatova, 2018), highlighting the need for research on individuals' narratives in this process, moving beyond merely *how many* but also the *who, why* and *how*.

* E-mail of corresponding author: dadabayev@uwed.uz ; dadabaev.timur.gm@u.tsukuba.ac.jp

Stemming from these considerations, the ethnographic exploration of female skilled migrants to South Korea here sets out to challenge the dominant narratives of linear integration and soft-power optimism, showing that aspirational migration produces not incorporation but negotiated belonging, where both opportunity and exclusion coexist. We present three key contributions to the literature on migration and belonging. First, our findings challenge the linear models of integration by demonstrating that inclusion does not necessarily deepen over time, even among highly educated migrants with competence in the local language of the target country. Second, it advances the concept of negotiated belonging to capture how female migrants actively recalibrate their moral, religious and gendered identities in response to simultaneous opportunity and exclusion. Third, by examining aspirational migration shaped by Korean soft-power imaginaries, the article shows how attraction to a destination society can coexist with – and even normalise – legal precarity and social distance, complicating optimistic accounts of cultural proximity and soft power. In doing so, the article contributes to a still limited body of research on Central Asian – particularly Tajik – migration beyond post-Soviet spaces, while advancing a conceptual framework suited to analysing forms of mobility other than linear models of integration.

This is particularly important given that, despite a growing body of literature on gendered migration, Tajikistan, and in particular Tajik women, have remained absent as an empirical category. Tajik emigration statistics are indeed male-dominated. Women choosing to migrate alone from Tajikistan are likely to face social pressures, stigma and other barriers not typically encountered by men (IOM, 2025b). In spite of these pressures, the figures are changing. The UN estimated (2024) the number of migrants living in Tajikistan was recorded at 276,777 individuals (43% male, 57% female) with an estimated 514,478 Tajik nationals residing abroad (57% males, 43% females). A notable increase (23%) in Chinese labour migration was observed from the first to the second half of 2024, linked to key industrial projects in Tajikistan. As of September 2024, a total of 547,205 citizens who had worked abroad had since returned to Tajikistan (73% males, 27% females), representing a 13% increase compared to the same period in 2023 (483,271).

All this makes even more urgent the need to explore voices from below and in particular from female migrants, which may be relevant to broader discussions on the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and its role in shaping perceptions of South Korea among youth in Central Asia.

Over the past decade, South Korea has gained prominence due to its expanding educational opportunities, institutional order, perceptions of personal safety and relative economic stability, alongside tightening labour markets and stricter regulations on migration in alternative destination countries in Europe and North America. Accordingly, a growing body of literature has widened the scope of South Korea-related research. Existing studies have documented the influence of K-pop and Korean dramas on cultural consumption, tourism and soft-power dynamics (Jang & Song, 2017; Putong et al., 2022; Sinaga et al., 2024), while more recent research has begun to explore links between Hallyu and educational migration (Park, 2024; Park et al., 2025). In Central Asia, scholars have primarily examined Hallyu as a cultural and geopolitical phenomenon, emphasising its resonance among youth and its role in shaping positive images of Korea (Bakytzhanova & Tuleshova, 2023). Yet, the implications of these cultural imaginaries for women's migratory decisions and post-migration experiences remain underexplored, a gap this article intends to close by connecting cultural attraction to the everyday negotiations of gender, faith, labour and belonging. Drawing on 8 in-depth qualitative interviews, whose methodology, approach and list of informants are detailed in Annex I, we highlight the contradictions of South Korea's migration and visa regimes as experienced by international female students. We show that, in spite of educational mobility offering pathways to opportunity, women's accounts point to widespread engagement in informal or semi-formal labour arrangements, often exceeding legal work-hour limits under student or jobseeker visas, for instance, involving cash-in-hand work. However, we contend that such practices reflect not only individual coping strategies but also structural tensions between aspiration, legality and economic survival – tensions that disproportionately shape migrant women's experiences.

Negotiated belonging under aspirational migration: a tentative framework

The emergence of gendered migration studies has raised the question of whether women's migration is a new phenomenon or has rather become more visible. Migration scholars have shown that women have always migrated in significant numbers yet were historically rendered invisible in policy and research frameworks, which assumed male breadwinners and dependent wives (Castles et al., 2014). The so-called feminisation of migration has been shown to reflect not only demographic change but also shifts in labour markets, global care chains and analytical paradigms (Donato et al., 2006). More recent reflections further interrogate the epistemological assumptions that shaped earlier migration research, emphasising the need to treat women as autonomous actors rather than as appendages to male mobility (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022).

Gender is now widely understood not merely as a demographic variable but as a structuring principle of migration. Mahler and Pessar (2001) conceive of 'gendered geographies of power', demonstrating how migration reorganises authority and social hierarchies across transnational spaces. Yuval-Davis (2006) similarly emphasises that gender operates within intersecting regimes of nationalism, belonging and citizenship. Rather than functioning as a standalone category, gender intersects with ethnicity, religion, class and legal status; an insight elaborated by Anthias (2013) in her work on translocational positionality.

This intersectional turn has highlighted how migration reshapes family roles, masculinities and intergenerational relations. Parreñas (2001, 2005) shows how transnational motherhood transforms care arrangements and moral expectations, while other researchers have approached gender in this context by exploring how men's masculinities shift under conditions of mobility (Datta et al., 2009). More recent work underscores how migration produces renegotiations of gendered expectations rather than their simple dissolution (Tutar Çınar, 2025). Together, this scholarship demonstrates that migration does not suspend gender norms, but instead relocates and reconfigures them across borders and shifts from questions of visibility toward analyses of power, intersectionality and how institutional policies produce precarity.

To date, migration from Central Asia has been studied primarily through economic, geopolitical and remittance-centred lenses. For example, research on Uzbek mobility has examined educational migration and youth aspirations (Dadabaev & Soipov, 2020). Research on Central Asian migration to South Korea has addressed labour incorporation, ethnic return migration and the experiences of low-skilled workers (Yun, 2022). However, these analyses tend to aggregate Central Asian migrants into a broad regional category, often obscuring national and gendered specificities.

Tajik migration in particular has remained marginal within broader migration literature with Tajik migrants clustered with other Central Asians or focusing on specific economic niches. For example, Ibañez-Tirado (2018) explores trade hierarchies and mobility in China, while other accounts – particularly in the policy literature – examine transnational marriages or labour migration dynamics (Sha, 2019; ICMPD, 2025; ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2018; IOM, 2025a, 2025b). Although these contributions provide important insights into mobility patterns, they rarely foreground women's lived experiences in East Asian destinations. As a result, the migration of Tajik women – particularly through educational pathways to East Asia – remains weakly theorised and poorly documented empirically. The literature base includes a recent IOM (2025B) report on the issue, and work on Tajik women in Russia (Kholmatova, 2018), and return migration to Tajikistan (Kholmatova 2021a, 2022b). There is also a somewhat wider research base on gender in the region more broadly (see Behzadi & Direnberger, 2020; Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016). However, the emphasis of relevant migration literature on labour, remittances and macroeconomic dependency often centres men (implicitly or explicitly) without addressing important questions about aspiration, identity and belonging among migrant women from the country. In particular, much of the existing work focuses on low-skilled labour migration and experiences of vulnerability, rather than considering how aspirational desires for education, autonomy and achievement shape migration trajectories alongside or beyond structural constraints (De Haas, 2010; Carling & Collins, 2018).

Migration flows to South Korea have primarily been analysed through policy and labour

frameworks, prioritising economic participation and legal status as primary indicators of integration. Less attention has been paid to aspirational migration shaped by global cultural flows, digital imaginaries and educational mobility. Moreover, analyses often treat integration as a linear process culminating in either incorporation or marginalisation. Such approaches risk obscuring forms of partial or negotiated belonging that do not culminate in full incorporation yet cannot be reduced to marginalisation. In this context, women entering through student visas occupy a particularly understudied position. Their largely under-documented trajectories blur distinctions between education and labour, temporary and long-term residence, and opportunity and constraint. To compensate, this study draws on the Capability Approach developed by Sen (1999) and further elaborated by Nussbaum (2000) as its conceptual framework. In the context of migration, the Capability Approach focuses not on income levels or legal status alone but instead on the freedoms that migrants have – what individuals can do and be in their lives. It is therefore valuable in contexts like the one studied here, where legal incorporation is incomplete or elusive but everyday life may nonetheless be experienced as meaningfully changed or transformative. It enables an analysis that moves beyond binary models of success or failure and instead examines how migrants navigate aspiration, constraint, autonomy and belonging within the structure of the environments they pass through. Eventually, this enables a broader understanding of migration as neither inherently empowering nor disempowering; instead, its significance depends on whether it expands or restricts the freedoms that individuals have access to. In contrast, the Capability Approach encourages focus on freedoms such as mobility, individual autonomy and agency, access to educational and professional opportunities, and the ability to plan for the future as indicators for measuring migrant well-being (Robeyns, 2005; Deneulin & Shahani, 2009; De Haas, 2010).

Analysis of female migrants' narratives: conceptual lenses

The concept of negotiated belonging is particularly useful for analysing educational migration to South Korea, where mobility is often framed through narratives of opportunity, meritocracy and cultural attraction (Park, 2024; Park et al., 2025; Fisseha & Park, 2026). For our informants, migration emerged not only as a strategic pursuit of education or employment but also an aspirational project shaped by cultural imaginaries associated with the Korean Wave, scholarship pathways and transnational success narratives. These imaginaries informed decisions to migrate, but they did not dissolve upon arrival. Instead, they interacted with restrictive visa regimes, informal labour practices and everyday experiences of social distance, producing a condition in which aspiration coexists with precarity (Chung, 2020).

Within this framework, belonging is neither fully granted nor entirely denied. Participant narratives reveal forms of functional inclusion without social membership (Hagan, 2006): women are embedded in educational institutions and workplaces yet remain symbolically marked as outsiders. Cultural familiarity – shared norms of hierarchy, respect for elders and collective practices – facilitates surface-level adaptation but does not translate into deeper social acceptance. Politeness and tolerance thus operate not as mechanisms of integration, but as boundary-maintaining practices that sustain distance while avoiding open exclusion.

Negotiated belonging also foregrounds the gendered dimensions of migration. Women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion are shaped not only by host-society boundaries but also by transnational gender norms that travel across borders (Pirtskhalava, 2025; Erdal & Ryan, 2018; Gupta, 2024; Salih, 2000). Within Korean society, participants encounter gendered assumptions that can frame migrant women as potential spouses rather than autonomous professionals (Kim, 2009). Within the Tajik diaspora, familiar expectations surrounding marriage, family and respectability are reproduced through moral questioning and surveillance (Kasymova, 2008; Borisova, 2024). Belonging, in this sense, is negotiated across overlapping normative orders, requiring women to balance autonomy with social legibility in both host and co-national contexts.

Faith and religious identity form a central axis of this negotiation. Migration disrupts socially regulated forms of religiosity rooted in Tajikistan's moral and political context (Stephan-Emmrich, 2010), creating space for reflection, distancing or renewed attachment. Rather than conceptualising religious change as linear secularisation or revival (Frederiks, 2015; Van Tubergen, 2013; Bugg, 2014),

this framework treats faith as reconfigured through practice, being shaped by labour conditions, social inclusion and gendered expectations. The women who participated in this research spoke about the distinction between inner belief and its outward expression, adapting their religious practices pragmatically while asserting control over moral self-definition.

Finally, the framework of negotiated belonging emphasises process over outcome. Migration does not culminate in integration, return or assimilation; instead, it produces ongoing adjustment, experimentation, recalibration and various forms of transnational practices (Sana, 2005). Agency is exercised not through radical rupture with inherited norms nor through full conformity to host-society expectations, but through incremental negotiation across shifting constraints (Pugh, 2018; Huot et al., 2014). By centring this process, we seek to move beyond binary accounts of women's migration as either emancipatory or oppressive and to highlight how belonging is lived, contested and reworked in everyday life.

Unlike concepts such as partial integration, segmented assimilation or lived citizenship (Kasinitz, 2025; FitzGerald, 2025; Kallio et al., 2020; Sobhy & Abdalla, 2024; Zhang, 2025), negotiated belonging does not assume progressive incorporation, stratified outcomes or claims-making vis-à-vis the state. Instead, it foregrounds belonging as a continuous, morally mediated process in which migrants manage visibility, aspiration and conformity across overlapping normative orders. In this sense, belonging is neither achieved nor denied, but strategically sustained through everyday recalibration.

Through this conceptual lens, the experiences of Tajik women in South Korea are not treated as exceptional or anecdotal, but as analytically generative. They illuminate how aspirational mobility, soft-power imaginaries, gendered norms and moral frameworks intersect to shape contemporary forms of migration in East Asia and beyond.

From imagined Korea to lived precarity

Idealised imaginaries of Korea persist even as migrants adapt to constrained and precarious realities. One of the most prominent themes emerging from the interviews concerns the relationship between expectations of South Korea prior to migration and the realities encountered after arrival. Participants repeatedly framed their experiences through comparisons between their imagined Korea and their lived experience of the country, often using the language of expectation, disappointment or recalibration. These expectations were shaped through a combination of limited prior knowledge, exposure to Korean popular culture, and mediated narratives circulating through social media and personal networks. Among the interviewees, experiences diverged along two broad patterns. A smaller group reported entering South Korea with few concrete expectations and, as a result, described their experiences largely in positive terms. For these women, the absence of idealised assumptions appeared to function as a protective factor against disappointment.

> *I got everything I wanted from Korea. I didn't have an 'expectations versus reality' situation; there was no disappointment. I had a rough idea of the country, and in fact, my expectations were more than met. I thought Korea would be a country with strong nationalism, and it really is (laughs).* (Interview 1, Nigora, online, 23 July 2025)

> *I had no expectations of this country, so I wasn't disappointed. I saw everything the country had to offer for the first time, and I didn't try to idealise it.* (Interview 3, Farangis, online, 31 July 2025)

For the majority of the participants, however, expectations were shaped – both explicitly and implicitly – by cultural imaginaries associated with the Korean Wave, particularly Korean television dramas. These women described a more ambivalent experience, marked by initial excitement followed by gradual recognition of social, emotional and institutional constraints.

> *Initially, people who come to Korea think everything is like in dramas. Like, everything is perfect. But that's just rose-tinted glasses.* (Interview 8, Shahzoda, online, 13 August 2025)

> *Don't expect much from this society. Many come with rose-tinted glasses about K-pop, Korean*

> *oppas, that someone will give you an umbrella when you're in trouble.* (Interview 2, Fatima, online, 24 July 2025)

The recurring reference to romanticised tropes from Korean dramas – such as the figure of the caring male character (oppa) or gestures of spontaneous kindness – imbues these narratives with a distinctly gendered dimension (Park, 2024). Popular Korean dramas, which are consumed predominantly by female audiences in Tajikistan, functioned as affective entry points to imagining Korea as a space of emotional warmth, safety and opportunity. While participants were often aware that the dramas did not fully reflect reality, their narratives suggest that such representations nevertheless shaped their expectations on a subtle but consequential level.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the influence of the Korean Wave on cultural consumption, tourism and youth identities (Jang & Song, 2017; Putong et al., 2022; Sinaga et al., 2024), while more recent studies have begun to explore its role in educational migration (Park, 2024; Park et al., 2025). In the Central Asian context, Hallyu has largely been discussed as a soft-power phenomenon influencing perceptions of Korea as a modern, attractive and cool country (Bakytzhanova & Tuleshova, 2023). The experiences of Tajik women in this study suggest that these cultural imaginaries do not disappear upon migration; instead, they are reworked through everyday encounters, often producing tension between aspiration and lived experience. Social media emerged as an additional, powerful mediator of expectations. Participants described Instagram and Telegram as key platforms through which information about scholarships, daily life in Korea and success narratives circulated. While these platforms provided practical support and motivation, they also contributed to idealised portrayals of life abroad.

> *Every third or fourth student who comes to Korea, especially girls, has a blog like 'One Day in the Life of a Tajik Girl in Korea.' … But that's not always realistic.* (Interview 3, Farangis, online, 31 July 2025)

> *Delete Instagram and don't compare yourself to others… A social media detox is essential, especially when you're feeling down.* (Interview 4, Gulya, online, 31 July 2025)

Beyond emotional and cultural recalibration, the disjuncture between expectations and reality was most sharply articulated in relation to work and legal status. Although the participants entered South Korea primarily through educational pathways, seven out of eight reported engaging in paid work during their stay. However, none transitioned to employment (E-type) visas. Instead, women described navigating the restrictive conditions of student (D-2), trainee (D-4) and jobseeker (D-10) visas, often exceeding legally permitted work hours through informal arrangements.

My work was considered part-time, but it wasn't really part-time… I worked from 9 to 6 and earned the minimum wage. (Interview 4, Gulya, online, 31 July 2025)

It was unofficial work. I was paid in cash because the account can be tracked. (Interview 1, Nigora, online, 23 July 2025)

These narratives point to a normalisation of exploitative labour practices as a strategy for economic survival. While educational migration was initially framed as a pathway to opportunity, participant experiences reveal a structural tension between aspiration and legality. This tension did not necessarily produce overt resistance; rather, it became embedded in everyday routines, shaping how the women understood risk, responsibility and self-reliance. The expectations of South Korea – whether shaped by popular culture, social media, or institutional narratives – are not simply confirmed or shattered upon arrival. Instead, they undergo a process of gradual renegotiation, in which aspiration persists alongside disillusionment, and opportunity coexists with constraint. This process forms the backdrop against which subsequent experiences of cultural proximity, social distance, discrimination and identity transformation unfold.

Cultural proximity, social distance and gender norms

By a mechanism of polite exclusion, cultural familiarity facilitates surface adaptation while sustaining durable social boundaries. This is an issue that has been previously discussed in the context of experiences of immigrant students (Wiltgren, 2020; Jung, 2023). A recurring theme in the participant narratives was the simultaneous experience of cultural familiarity and social distance in South Korea, which persisted after graduation and extended beyond university settings. Many of the women initially perceived Korean society as culturally *close* to Tajik norms, particularly in terms of respect for elders, hierarchical social organisation and collective practices. This perceived proximity often facilitated early adaptation to academic and professional environments. However, as their experiences unfolded over time, cultural familiarity did not translate into deeper social inclusion. Instead, it coexisted with persistent boundaries, emotional detachment, and experiences of exclusion that participants found difficult to articulate yet repeatedly encountered. Several women emphasised that elements of Korean culture felt recognisable, even comforting, upon arrival. Practices such as shared meals, formal respect for seniors and clearly defined hierarchies resonated with values they had internalised in Tajikistan.

> *The culture is somewhat similar to ours, especially in its respect for elders and eating together at the table. Otherwise, there are significant differences; they have a different historical background. Although for me, adapting was extremely easy.* (Interview 1, Nigora, online, 23 July 2025)

> *Maybe it was easy for me because Korean culture is similar to ours. We also have respect for elders, we also have a system, a hierarchy. We respect traditions, and the same is true in Korea.* (Interview 2, Fatima, online, 24 July 2025)

For some participants, this perceived similarity informed their own conduct in institutional settings. Fatima, for example, described how her Tajik upbringing shaped her early behaviour at university.

> *In my first year, when my Tajik culture still influenced me, I always stood up when the teacher entered the classroom. This surprised them. Many of these norms are clear – the hierarchy helps you, and you understand your place at work, school or university.* (Interview 2, Fatima, online, 24 July 2025)

Such accounts suggest that cultural familiarity functioned as an initial adaptive resource, enabling women to navigate formal environments with relative ease. Elsewhere in the academic literature, researchers have noted how migrants expected that having cultural knowledge of the host country would translate to more effective adaptation to the local culture, but this correlation has not been extensively studied (English et al., 2021). For the female migrants interviewed here, hierarchy provided predictability and respect offered a shared moral language. Yet, as the participant narratives reveal, these surface-level affinities masked deeper social divides.

Despite daily interaction with Korean classmates, colleagues and supervisors, the women repeatedly described an enduring sense of social distance. This distance was not expressed through overt hostility but through subtle forms of exclusion: maintained politeness without emotional closeness, cooperation without intimacy, interaction without belonging (Baek et al., 2025; Krings et al., 2014). One participant articulated this experience through the metaphor of an invisible barrier.

> *Even if you speak Korean well, understand their humour, joke with them, hang out with them – Korean society still doesn't accept you as one of their own. It is like there is always this curtain between you.* (Interview 8, Shahzoda, online, 13 August 2025)

Others echoed this sentiment, emphasising that linguistic competence and long-term residence did not dissolve the boundary between Korean and foreigner.

> *I studied and worked here, but I still feel like an outsider. I have a lot of Korean friends, but we can't get close.* (Interview 4, Gulya, online, 31 July 2025)

> *You interact with them, but you always maintain a certain formality in your conversations.* (Interview 3, Farangis, online, 31 July 2025)

Experiences of discrimination further reinforced these boundaries. Nearly all participants shared encounters in which they felt disadvantaged or excluded due to their status as foreigners. Notably, the women emphasised that discrimination was rarely directed at them specifically as Tajiks. Instead, they encountered what several described as a form of 'universal discrimination' applied broadly to non-Koreans.

> *She saw my bank account number and asked, 'Oh, you're a foreigner?' Then she said, 'I won't buy from you.' … 'It doesn't matter, you're a foreigner, that is it.'* (Interview 4, Gulya, online, 31 July 2025)

Others described similar experiences in academic environments, particularly in group work and classroom settings:

> *At university, when professors tell you to form a team, Korean girls don't want to study with you. They have this stereotype about foreigners – that we don't know anything.* (Interview 8, Shahzoda, online, 13 August 2025)

Such accounts illustrate how exclusion operated not through explicit hostility but through assumptions of incompetence and otherness. These assumptions persisted regardless of language proficiency, academic performance or length of stay. Religion emerged as a more ambiguous axis of difference. Most participants reported that they were not openly discriminated against for being Muslim. Korean colleagues generally respected dietary restrictions, prayer practices and, where applicable, headscarves. However, several women described discomfort and marginalisation in work environments, particularly when religious identity intersected with power hierarchies.

> *Our CEO constantly said Koreans are not suitable for Muslims… even though he built his business on these people.* (Interview 4, Gulya, online, 31 July 2025)

> *Every time I refused to drink after work, he asked, 'Why don't Muslims drink?' It was very uncomfortable.* (Interview 4, Gulya, online, 31 July 2025)

These experiences suggest that religious difference, while often tolerated at a surface level, could become a site of symbolic exclusion when articulated through managerial authority or casual stereotyping. Some participants also noted that Muslim women wearing visible markers of faith faced additional constraints in employment opportunities, prompting strategic adaptation, such as removing the headscarf.

Gendered forms of differentiation further shaped women's experiences of belonging. Several participants described being looked at in public spaces due to their physical appearance, hair colour or perceived foreignness.

> *They point you out everywhere because you don't look like them, even on the subway.* (Interview 6, Madina, online, 6 August 2025)

In some cases, these encounters were framed negatively, producing discomfort and heightened self-awareness. In others, the women described them as neutral or even positive, recalling interactions with older Koreans who expressed curiosity or offered compliments.

> *There are really nice ajumma and ahjussi [middle-aged people] here. They stop you, ask where you're from. It's sweet.* (Interview 2, Fatima, online, 24 July 2025)

> *Everyone compliments you – 'you're so pretty.' It boosted my self-esteem.* (Interview 5, Tomiris, online, 5 August 2025)

At the same time, gender intersected with nationality in ways that shaped how women were perceived socially. Madina described situations in which Koreans assumed she was married to

a Korean man, reflecting broader demographic narratives surrounding international marriages.

> *I've had several situations where people assumed I was married to a Korean. Due to the low birth rate, many women from Russia and Southeast Asia are married to Korean men, and if you speak Korean well, they assume you're married. I have a feeling they view you as someone who will marry a Korean man rather than being someone who will succeed on your own.* (Interview 6, Madina, online, 6 August 2025)

Such assumptions positioned migrant women not as independent actors but as potential spouses, reinforcing gendered imaginaries that constrained recognition of their professional and academic identities. Tajik women's experiences in South Korea are shaped by overlapping structures of cultural familiarity, social distance and everyday discrimination. While shared values initially ease adaptation, they do not dismantle deeper boundaries of belonging. Politeness and respect coexist with exclusion; tolerance coexists with stereotyping. These dynamics produce a condition in which women are simultaneously present and peripheral – integrated into institutions yet distanced from communities. This condition of partial inclusion forms a crucial backdrop for understanding subsequent strategies of social positioning, including selective engagement with co-national communities and the renegotiation of faith and identity, discussed in the following sections.

Engagement with the Tajik community and gender norms

Diasporic 'moral surveillance' (Asif and Asif-Malik, 2026) is a transnational mechanism through which gendered norms are reproduced and enforced beyond the home country. Engagement with the Tajik community in South Korea constituted a complex and often ambivalent dimension of the women's migratory experiences. While the presence of compatriots abroad is frequently assumed to offer emotional support, cultural continuity and social safety (Kelly, 2024; Della Puppa and King, 2019; Ahrens et al., 2016), the narratives of these participants reveal a more fragmented and gendered reality. Rather than functioning as a cohesive or unified diaspora, the Tajik community in South Korea appeared to participants as loosely structured, unevenly connected and internally stratified, with limited space for meaningful engagement by women. Most participants reported that they were initially unaware of the size or organisation of the Tajik population in South Korea. Unlike the more visible Uzbek and Kazakh communities, the perception was that there were less Tajiks and they were less institutionally consolidated. Several women noted that their first encounters with other Tajiks occurred through embassy-organised events rather than informal social networks. According to Nigora, gatherings at the Embassy of Tajikistan – particularly celebrations of Navruz – served as one of the few recognisable contact points.

> *There were around 200 people at the Navruz celebration. But that doesn't mean this is the whole community.* (Interview 1, Nigora, online, 23 July 2025)

Others confirmed the existence of online spaces, such as WhatsApp groups for Tajik expatriates, with a similar number of participants. However, these platforms were described as largely informational rather than socially integrative, and participation varied widely. The participants also pointed out that the official visibility of the Tajik community may be misleading. Some women suggested that some Tajiks in South Korea held dual citizenship, often using Russian passports, which allowed them to navigate migration regimes under different conditions rendering them statistically invisible within Tajik community structures. As a result, the notion of a clearly bounded or easily identifiable diaspora was largely absent from participant experiences.

Beyond questions of size and organisation, the women repeatedly emphasised the gendered composition of the Tajik population in South Korea. According to those who attended embassy events or interacted with co-nationals, the community was predominantly male, consisting mainly of labour migrants and small business owners. Female students and professionals were described as numerically fewer and socially peripheral. This demographic imbalance shaped the nature of interactions and contributed to women's sense of discomfort within co-national spaces. Several participants noted that Tajik men tended to socialise among themselves, with limited interest in engaging women outside narrowly defined gendered expectations. As a result, women often felt that their presence in the community was subject to scrutiny rather than solidarity. Interactions

with male compatriots were frequently framed as evaluative or disciplinary, echoing gender norms familiar from Tajikistan.

> *There's this thing: when you ask Tajiks [men] questions, they first ask why you need it. I don't want to be interrogated.* (Interview 6, Madina, online, 6 August 2025)

Another example of this kind of interaction exemplified how gendered expectations shaped even pragmatic interactions.

> *I tried to get help from a Tajik guy about a job, and instead of helping, he lectured me about how hard life is here.* (Interview 6, Madina, online, 6 August 2025)

Rather than offering concrete guidance, such interactions were experienced as moralising, reinforcing hierarchical gender relations in which women were positioned as needing instruction rather than support. This dynamic discouraged further engagement and contributed to women's strategic withdrawal from co-national networks. For many participants, interactions with Tajik men quickly shifted from neutral conversation to personal questioning centred on marriage, family and long-term life choices.

> *As soon as I start interacting with Tajiks, it turns into 'Why aren't you married? Why don't you have kids? Why don't you go back?' I don't want that.* (Interview 2, Fatima, online, 24 July 2025)

These questions were not perceived as expressions of care but as mechanisms of moral surveillance, reasserting norms that women were actively renegotiating through migration. For the participants who viewed their time in South Korea as an opportunity to pursue education, career development or personal autonomy, such interactions were experienced as intrusive and constraining. Importantly, these gendered expectations did not disappear in the migratory context; instead, they travelled across borders and were reproduced within diaspora spaces. Migration thus did not suspend Tajik social norms but rather relocated them, allowing co-national communities to function as sites of transnational norm enforcement. Women's narratives suggest that this enforcement was often intensified rather than diluted abroad, as the smaller community increased visibility and scrutiny. As a result, many participants adopted deliberate strategies of distancing from the Tajik community. Rather than seeking familiarity among compatriots, they actively cultivated friendships with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, whom they perceived as less judgemental and more accepting of diverse life choices.

> *Now I seek out friends from other cultures. I understand that with Tajiks, the conversation always turns to marriage and children.* (Interview 2, Fatima, online, 24 July 2025)

This distancing was not framed as a rejection of Tajik identity per se, but as a means of protecting personal autonomy and emotional well-being. Women differentiated between cultural belonging and social engagement, maintaining emotional attachment to their home country while limiting exposure to diaspora spaces that reproduced restrictive norms. Participant accounts also reflected ambivalence rather than outright rejection. Several women acknowledged the positive role played by the Tajik Embassy in fostering moments of collective connection. Embassy-organised events were described as rare but meaningful opportunities to meet compatriots in a relatively neutral setting, particularly for newcomers seeking orientation and familiarity.

Engagement with the Tajik community emerged as shaped by gendered power relations, demographic imbalances and divergent understandings of what migration should entail. For women seeking to redefine their life trajectories, diaspora spaces often reproduced the very expectations they had hoped to escape. These dynamics illuminate a broader paradox of migration: while physical distance from the home country can enable renegotiation of identity and norms, transnational social ties can simultaneously re-anchor individuals to familiar moral frameworks. For Tajik women in South Korea, the diaspora functioned less as a site of collective empowerment and more as a contested space in which autonomy, respectability and belonging were continuously negotiated. This tension between distance and attachment, and autonomy and surveillance, sets the stage for the final analytical dimension of the study: the renegotiation of faith and religious identity abroad.

Negotiating faith and identity abroad

Migration to South Korea prompted profound and often unexpected transformations in the participants' relationships with faith, religion and moral self-understanding. Religious transformation emerges here as a mechanism of moral recalibration rather than linear secularisation or religious revival. For many women, living abroad created a distance (both physical and symbolic) from the religious norms embedded in Tajik social life. This distance did not lead to a uniform trajectory with regards to religious belief and practices. Instead, their narratives reveal divergent and sometimes contradictory paths, ranging from religious disengagement and agnosticism to renewed closeness to faith as a source of emotional stability and meaning.

In Tajikistan, religious practice is deeply intertwined with everyday socialisation, even among families that do not identify as overtly religious (Mirzoev, 2016; Stephan-Emmrich, 2010; Borisova, 2021). Practices such as observing halal dietary rules, fasting during Ramadan, memorising surahs and participating in communal rituals are often experienced less as individual choices than as socially expected forms of moral behaviour (Borisova, 2024). At the same time, the Tajik state actively regulates religious expression, restricting visible markers such as the hijab or beards in public spaces (Thibault, 2013; Khaidarov, 2013; Gatling, 2019). This dual structure – social encouragement combined with state limitation – creates a context in which religion is simultaneously normalised and controlled. Against this backdrop, migration to South Korea disrupted familiar religious frameworks. For some participants, removal from Tajik social surveillance allowed them to critically reassess beliefs inherited through upbringing. Gulya described a gradual but decisive shift away from religious identification.

> *When I arrived, I wasn't very religious, but I did observe certain things – I tried not to drink. Over the course of four years, I became a staunch agnostic.* (Interview 4, Gulya, online, 31 July 2025)

Her narrative illustrates a process of progressive distancing rather than abrupt rupture. Initially, religious identity functioned as a default marker of belonging – something assumed rather than examined. Over time, exposure to alternative lifestyles and moral systems prompted re-evaluation, ultimately leading to a redefinition of self, outside religious categories.

> *When I first came, I was religious and had a different outlook on life. I thought I would come back, finish my bachelor's, and get married.* (Interview 5, Tomiris, online, 5 August 2025)

She linked her earlier religiosity to expectations surrounding early marriage, domestic responsibility and fear of divine judgement. Over time, these frameworks lost their centrality.

> *I don't believe in Islam or Christianity. There is someone higher up, but that's outside of religion.* (Interview 5, Tomiris, online, 5 August 2025)

This shift was not described as a loss but as a reorientation – a movement toward individualised spirituality detached from institutional religion. Migration, in this sense, enabled participants to separate belief from obligation and faith from social conformity. Other women recounted more gradual adaptations shaped by everyday practices. Several participants described initially struggling with non-halal food environments, alcohol-centred socialising and norms surrounding intimacy. Over time, behaviours that once felt morally prohibited came to be reframed as neutral or situational rather than inherently wrong.

> *I didn't eat pork, I didn't sleep with men, I feared God. I don't even remember how that changed.* (Interview 5, Tomiris, online, 5 August 2025)

Such narratives suggest that religious transformation was not always conscious or ideologically driven. Instead, it unfolded through incremental exposure to alternative moral orders, normalisation of difference and redefinition of what constituted ethical behaviour. At the same time, migration did not universally weaken religious attachment. For at least one participant, living abroad intensified spiritual reliance rather than diminishing it.

> *Here, it's just you and the Almighty. You have to ask Him for everything.* (Interview 6, Madina, online, 6 August 2025)

This experience aligns with observations in migration scholarship that displacement can heighten religiosity by removing institutional and familial supports, thereby rendering faith a personal coping resource (Estermann, 2004, as cited in Castillo Guerra, 2019). In this account, faith became less about ritual compliance and more about emotional resilience, protection and continuity in an unfamiliar environment. Rather than producing uniform secularisation or religious revival, migration functioned as a catalyst for individualised religious reasoning. Women actively reinterpreted beliefs in relation to new social contexts, labour conditions and gender expectations. Religion also intersected with practical considerations of work and social inclusion. Several participants noted that visible expressions of Muslim identity, such as wearing a headscarf, could limit employment opportunities or generate discomfort in professional settings. Observing such constraints among peers led some women to modify outward expressions of faith, not necessarily as a rejection of belief but as a pragmatic response to structural barriers.

Importantly, these adaptations were often framed as strategic rather than ideological. The women distinguished between inner belief and outward practice, emphasising individual autonomy over how faith was lived and displayed. This distinction further reflects the broader theme of negotiated identity running throughout the study: religion, like gender and belonging, was subject to recalibration rather than abandonment. The transformation of faith was also shaped by the women distancing themselves from the Tajik diaspora. Withdrawal from these spaces reduced exposure to communal religious surveillance, enabling women to experiment with alternative identities without immediate judgement.

Eventually, migration to South Korea created an opportunity for spiritual reflection in which the women could reassess deeply embedded moral frameworks and social conditioning from their home country. Faith was neither discarded nor preserved intact; it was reconfigured in response to new environments, relationships and aspirations. This reconfiguration was deeply personal, shaped by individual trajectories rather than collective scripts. In this sense, religious transformation cannot be understood in isolation from other dimensions of women's experiences. It was intertwined with legal precarity, labour participation, gendered expectations and partial belonging within Korean society. Migration did not simply relocate women geographically. It repositioned them within multiple moral and social orders, compelling continuous negotiation of who they were, what they believed and how they wished to live.

A short discussion of negotiated belonging, gendered autonomy and moral reconfiguration

These findings complicate prevailing accounts of Korean soft power that emphasise attraction, affinity and cultural proximity. While Hallyu-inspired imaginaries play a role in motivating educational migration, they do not translate into social inclusion or institutional incorporation. Instead, attraction produces a form of disciplined aspiration, in which migrants tolerate exclusion and precarity as the price of remaining within a desired symbolic space. Soft power, in this sense, does not dissolve boundaries but renders them governable. Viewed through the lens of negotiated belonging, the findings reveal how Tajik women living in South Korea navigate migration as a multidimensional process involving aspiration, constraint, identity transformation and moral negotiation. This case is analytically generative because it brings post-Soviet, Muslim, gendered moral frameworks into a Confucian-capitalist migration regime distinctively shaped by soft-power imaginaries rather than solely by labour demand.

Women's experiences cannot be adequately captured through linear models of integration, adaptation or empowerment. Instead, migration emerges as a condition of negotiated belonging, in which opportunity and exclusion, autonomy and surveillance, cultural familiarity and distance coexist in tension. Across the findings, a recurring pattern is the disjunction between imagined

mobility and lived precarity. For many participants, South Korea initially represented a space of promise shaped by cultural imaginaries circulated through Korean popular culture, social media narratives and scholarship pathways. These imaginaries were not naïve fantasies but socially produced expectations and media portrayals that framed Korea as modern, safe and opportunity-rich. However, upon arrival women encountered institutional constraints, particularly in relation to visa regimes and labour participation, that complicated these aspirations. Rather than abandoning their goals, the participants adapted to these conditions through informal strategies that normalised exploitative practices. This reveals migration not as a binary shift from legality to illegality but as a continuum in which aspiration persists under constrained conditions. Likewise, cultural proximity does not guarantee social inclusion. Participants frequently noted similarities between Tajik and Korean norms, such as respect for elders, hierarchical organisation and collective practices that facilitated initial adaptation. Yet these shared values did not translate into deeper belonging, and a larger set of social values were radically different to those experienced at home, including around food, drink, clothing and religious expression. The women described an enduring social boundary, articulated metaphorically as a *curtain*, that separated them from full inclusion regardless of language proficiency, educational achievement or length of residence. This boundary was not enforced through overt exclusion but through subtle, normalised practices of distance.

Experiences of discrimination reinforced this condition of partial inclusion. Importantly, the women did not frame discrimination primarily in ethnic or national terms specific to Tajik identity. Rather, they encountered a generalised form of exclusion directed at foreigners as a category. Such experiences were often situational and understated – manifesting in group work in class, online transactions or workplace interactions – yet cumulatively significant. The normalisation of these practices suggests that exclusion operates structurally rather than episodically, shaping migrants' sense of place even in the absence of explicit hostility.

Gender thus emerges as a critical axis through which migration is experienced and interpreted. In Korean society, women encountered gendered assumptions that positioned them as potential spouses rather than independent professionals, particularly in relation to narratives surrounding international marriage. These assumptions constrained recognition of women's academic and career aspirations, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy of belonging. At the same time, gender played an equally powerful role within the Tajik diaspora, where interactions were frequently shaped by moral expectations surrounding marriage, family and appropriate female behaviour.

Rather than serving as a refuge from host-society exclusion, diaspora spaces often reproduced – and in some cases intensified – gendered moral surveillance. The women's accounts suggested that migration did not suspend Tajik social norms but relocated them, enabling their reproduction across borders. The diaspora thus functioned as a site of transnational norm enforcement, where women's choices were scrutinised and evaluated against familiar moral frameworks from their country of origin. For participants seeking autonomy and self-definition, this dynamic prompted strategic distancing from co-national networks in favour of more heterogeneous social circles.

Faith and religion constitute the most intimate and transformative dimension of this negotiation. The participants' religious trajectories diverged significantly, underscoring the inadequacy of simplistic assumptions about migration leading uniformly to secularisation or religious revival. Instead, migration created a reflective space in which women reassessed beliefs inherited through socialisation. For some, this resulted in disengagement from institutional religion and the adoption of individualised spirituality or agnosticism. For others, distance from home intensified reliance on faith as a source of emotional resilience and continuity. Crucially, religious transformation was not isolated from other aspects of migration. It intersected with labour conditions, social inclusion, gender expectations and diaspora dynamics. Women distinguished between belief and practice, often adapting outward expressions of faith in response to workplace norms and social constraints. These adaptations were framed as pragmatic rather than ideological, reflecting a broader pattern of selective engagement across multiple domains of life.

Our findings challenge binary interpretations of migration as either liberating or constraining. Migration enabled women to question inherited norms, delay or redefine marriage expectations,

and pursue educational and professional goals. At the same time, it introduced new forms of vulnerability, exclusion and moral negotiation. Agency was exercised not through outright resistance or assimilation but through incremental recalibration. Beyond the immediate empirical case, these findings speak to wider developments in contemporary migration patterns. First, they contribute to debates on gendered educational migration by demonstrating how mobility can expand life choices without ensuring stable incorporation. Second, they shed light on migration governance in East Asia, where restrictive visa regimes coexist with strong cultural attraction, producing forms of conditional inclusion. Third, the case highlights the diversification of Central Asian mobility beyond traditional post-Soviet destinations, pointing to emerging migration corridors shaped by education, soft-power, and aspirational imaginaries rather than solely by labour demand.

Conclusion

Migration unfolds not as a linear process of integration or empowerment, but as an ongoing negotiation across multiple social, moral and institutional domains. This article has attempted to challenge linear integration narratives and soft-power optimism by showing that aspirational migration does not produce incorporation but negotiated belonging, in which opportunity and exclusion coexist. Unlike integration frameworks that assume progressive inclusion, negotiated belonging captures situations where migrants are institutionally embedded yet symbolically excluded, requiring continuous moral and social recalibration rather than linear adjustment.

While South Korea represents a space of opportunity and self-redefinition, it is simultaneously structured by boundaries that limit full inclusion. Women's initial aspirations – often shaped by cultural imaginaries associated with the Korean Wave, social media narratives and scholarship opportunities – were neither fully realised nor entirely abandoned. Instead, aspiration persisted alongside constraint, as participants adapted to restrictive visa regimes, informal labour arrangements and the everyday realities of life as foreign residents. Migration thus emerged as a condition of managed precarity, in which opportunity was pursued through pragmatic adjustment rather than secure incorporation.

Experiences of cultural proximity further complicated this process. Shared values such as respect for elders and hierarchical organisation facilitated early adaptation yet did not dissolve deeper social boundaries. Participants consistently described a sense of distance from Korean society that endured despite linguistic competence, educational achievement and long-term residence. Politeness and tolerance coexisted with emotional detachment, producing a form of partial belonging that positioned women as present yet peripheral. This pattern underscores the importance of distinguishing between functional integration and social inclusion in analyses of migration.

Gender played a decisive role in shaping these experiences both within Korean society and the Tajik diaspora. In Korean society these migrant women encountered gendered assumptions that framed them as potential spouses rather than autonomous actors, limiting recognition of their professional and academic identities. Within co-national spaces, migration did not suspend familiar gender norms; instead, these norms travelled across borders and were reproduced through moral questioning and surveillance. For many participants, distancing from the Tajik community became a strategy for protecting autonomy rather than a rejection of cultural belonging.

Religious identity constituted one of the most deeply affected dimensions of migration. Participant narratives revealed diverse trajectories of religious transformation, ranging from disengagement and agnosticism to renewed spiritual commitment. These shifts were not uniform or ideological, but incremental and situational, shaped by new social environments, workplace culture and the absence of familiar forms of religious regulation. Faith was reconfigured rather than simply weakened or strengthened, reflecting broader processes of individualised moral reasoning enabled by migration.

Beyond our initial sample, our aim was to contribute to broader discussions on gendered migration, educational mobility and identity transformation in East Asia by highlighting the need to attend to under represented migrant groups and to examine how global cultural flows, migration regimes and transnational gender norms intersect in shaping everyday experiences. Future research should extend this inquiry by exploring comparative cases across Central Asian communities, examining longitudinal trajectories of identity transformation, or analysing the perspectives of host-society actors involved in migrant inclusion and exclusion.

Aspirational migration does not culminate in integration, nor does it simply reproduce marginalisation. Instead, it generates a condition of negotiated belonging, in which migrants remain institutionally embedded yet symbolically peripheral, exercising agency through moral and social recalibration rather than through incorporation or resistance. This is a further step towards understanding migration beyond the label of movement across borders, but as a process that reorders moral, social and personal frameworks. For Tajik women in South Korea, migration opened opportunities for self-redefinition while simultaneously confronting them with enduring boundaries. It is within this tension that their experiences, and the broader significance of gendered migration, can be most clearly understood.

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Timur Dadabaev is Professor of International Relations at the University of Tsukuba, Swedish Research Council Guest Professor at Lund University, and Vice Rector for Research and Innovation at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (Uzbekistan). His research focuses on identity and international relations in Central Eurasia. He has published widely on mobility, narrative power and regional diplomacy.

Manizha Rajabova is a PhD candidate at the University of Tsukuba (Japan) under the MEXT Scholarship. Her research focuses on Tajik migration, gendered mobility and youth empowerment. She has professional experience with public and international institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, the EU Delegation and organisations in the United Arab Emirates.

Abel Polese is Associate Professor at Dublin City University (Ireland), Senior Researcher at Tallinn University (Estonia), Adjunct Professor at Chulalonghorn University (Thailand) and Associate Researcher at Tohoku University (Japan). His research focuses on migration, informality and governance in Eurasia and Eastern Europe. He has published widely on informal economies, transnational mobility and everyday state-society relations.

Liam O'Farrell is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the University of Latvia. His research focuses on development, inequality and participation, with particular attention to labour, housing and migration issues. He has contributed to a range international research projects on social precarity, sustainable urbanism and civic engagement.

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Annex I: Methodology, research design and approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Tajik women residing in South Korea. Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on subjective meanings, it adopts an interpretivist approach, and as such qualitative semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate method (Sánchez-Ayala, 2012; Sun & Zhu, 2024; Gruber et al., 2020). This method allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms, while providing sufficient structure to ensure comparability across narratives.

In total, eight Tajik women who migrated to South Korea as students were recruited for participation in this study. Out of eight participants, six were still living in the country at the time of the interview, and two had left. The participants lived in major urban centres, principally Seoul and Daegu, although not all were willing to disclose their precise locations for personal reasons.

Methodology literature highlights that interview-based studies typically reach saturation on sample sizes ranging from 9 to 17 participants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Given the focus on a small population, we anticipated a limited number of participants, but nonetheless were able to extract valuable data with common findings across the interviews suggesting broader issues for analysis. The small sample size means that the findings are not intended to be generalisable. Instead, the study offers an in-depth, context-sensitive account of Tajik women's migration experiences in South Korea. The relative homogeneity of the participants' educational backgrounds provides analytical focus but may limit insights into other migrant categories, such as labour migrants without higher education pathways.

An additional characteristic of the sample is the relative age homogeneity of the participants, all of whom were in their early to late twenties at the time of interview. This reflects the educational migration pathway through which the respondents entered South Korea, typically aligned with undergraduate or postgraduate study phases. While this age group is analytically appropriate for examining aspirational migration, identity formation and early-career mobility, it also constitutes a limitation. Experiences of migration, belonging and gender negotiation may differ for older cohorts, particularly those with established family responsibilities or long-term labour migration trajectories. The findings should therefore be interpreted as specific to a younger, education-oriented migrant population, rather than representative of Tajik women migrants more broadly.

The project was guided by three interrelated research questions:

1. How do Tajik women's aspirational motivations for migrating to South Korea intersect with everyday experiences of legal precarity and informal labour?

2. How do women negotiate belonging amid cultural proximity, persistent social distance and gendered expectations in both Korean society and Tajik diaspora spaces?

3. How does migration reshape religious orientations and moral self-understandings over time?

Together, these questions frame migration not as a linear process of integration, but as a condition of negotiated belonging shaped by aspiration, constraints and identity recalibration.

Methodologically, the study used a qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted primarily in Russian, with occasional use of English and Korean, reflecting the participants' multilingual realities. While the study draws extensively on the participants' narratives as empirical material, the analytical strategy follows a thematic rather than narrative analytical approach. Thematic analysis was selected because the primary objective is to identify recurring patterns and shared mechanisms – such as aspiration, precarity and negotiated belonging – across cases, rather than to reconstruct the internal structure or temporality of individual life stories. In this sense, narratives are treated as data sources through which broader analytical themes are developed, rather than as objects of narrative analysis in their own right. This approach allows the study to balance attention to subjective meaning-making with the identification of cross-case regularities.

Although the analysis is descriptive in orientation, it is analytically informed by attention to recurring patterns of expectation, adaptation, exclusion and identity renegotiation. Rather than treating migration as a unidirectional process of integration or assimilation, the article conceptualises women's experiences as forms of negotiated belonging, shaped simultaneously by host-society boundaries, transnational gender norms and individual strategies of self-making.

One key criterion for participation was length of residence in South Korea. Interviewees were required to have lived in the country for more than 183 days within a calendar year (for the participants who have left the country, they were also required to have had the same residency status in the past), a period corresponding to residency status under Article 1-2 (1) of the South Korean Income Tax Act. This criterion was used to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to everyday life, institutional interactions, and social environments in South Korea, beyond short-term or tourist experiences.

The participants entered South Korea primarily as students, either through private sponsorship or government-funded scholarships, most commonly the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS). While the sample is relatively homogeneous in terms of entry pathway and educational background, the participants' trajectories after arrival varied considerably. Some transitioned between student (D-2), trainee (D-4) and jobseeker (D-10) visas, while others eventually left South Korea following graduation or employment attempts. None of the participants reported holding an employment (E-type) visa during their stay.

An anonymised overview of respondents – including age, visa trajectories, length of residence and interview timing – is provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the participants' identities.

Table 1: Anonymised list of respondents

#	*Pseudonym*	*Age*	*Visa status*	*Period of residence in South Korea*	*Location of interview*	*Date of interview*
1	Nigora	29	D4 -> D2 -> Left Korea	3.5 years	Online	23 July 2025
2	Fatima	27	D4 -> D2 -> D10	5 years	Online	24 July 2025
3	Farangis	26	D4 -> D2	4.5 years	Online	31 July 2025
4	Gulya	25	D4 -> D2 -> D10	4 years	Online	31 July 2025
5	Tomiris	26	D4 -> D2 -> D10 -> Left Korea	5 years	Online	5 August 2025
6	Madina	25	D4 -> D2	3 years	Online	6 August 2025
7	Rukhsora	22	D4	1 year	Online	13 August 2025
8	Shahzoda	26	D4 -> D2	7 years	Online	13 August 2025

Note: D4 - General Trainee, Korean Language Program Visa; D2 – Student Visa; D10 – Job Seeker Visa

The participants were recruited using snowball sampling, reflecting both the relatively small size of the community of female Tajik migrants in South Korea and the importance of interpersonal networks among this group. Initial contacts were established through personal connections, after which participants recommended acquaintances met through embassy events, educational institutions, or social media platforms, particularly Instagram.

The use of snowball sampling also revealed internal dynamics within the Tajik migrant population. While some participants were closely connected to one another, others belonged to loosely overlapping or entirely separate social circles. This diversity helped mitigate the risk of capturing a single, unified narrative of migration experience.

All interviews were conducted with informed consent. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Given the sensitivity of topics such as visa status, informal employment, religion and discrimination, particular care was taken to anonymise identifying details and avoid disclosure of information that could place participants at risk.

The interviews were conducted between July and August 2025, primarily online. Each interview was initially scheduled for approximately 30-40 minutes, covering topics such as educational background, motivations for coming to South Korea, early experiences after arrival, work and study trajectories, cultural adaptation, social relationships, religious practices, and reflections on identity change. In practice, most interviews extended well beyond the planned duration, as participants shared detailed and often emotionally nuanced narratives.

All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim. Where necessary, minimal clarifications were made during transcription to preserve meaning without altering the participants' voices. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for identifying recurring patterns across qualitative narratives, while remaining attentive to individual variation. As Braun and Clarke define it, thematic analysis is a method for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data," making it particularly appropriate for research focused on lived experiences and meaning-making.

The analytical process involved several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively, focusing on recurrent ideas, emotions, practices and tensions expressed by participants. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes that captured shared patterns across interviews.