

Discrimination plagues migrant children

By **Min Seong-jae**
Staff Writer

Nazia is an 11-year-old girl from Bangladesh whose parents came to this country in pursuit of the “Korean dream.”

Her mother works in a factory inspecting cell phones, while her father is employed in a plastics factory. The family arrived in the country about two years ago on a tourist visa, and remained here illegally.

Late last year they legalized their status under a government amnesty program, but their residency permit will expire late next year, and Nazia worries that she and her parents may be deported.

As Korea’s economy has advanced, many immigrants have come from other parts of Asia, often filling dangerous and dirty jobs that Koreans are no longer willing to do. Many workers also bring their families, and so the number of migrant children is growing.

Many of the children, such as Nazia, are adjusting relatively well to their surroundings, but significant problems exist for many others, including discrimination on social, racial or cultural grounds.

The Labor Ministry estimates that there were around 400,000 migrant workers in Korea at the beginning of this year, most of them from China and Southeast Asia, and about 35 percent of them here illegally.

While no accurate count of the number of foreign children exists, Seoul Dong-hoon, a sociology profes-

or at Chonbuk National University, estimates that in 2001 there were as many as 10,000 between the ages of 7 and 12, and that number has increased.

According to a National Human Rights Commission survey last year that interviewed and observed 98 foreign children and their families, primarily illegal migrants from Southeast Asia, more than half said they experienced at least some discrimination.

The problem becomes critical when hospital staff turn away

school. Her teachers consider her well-adapted to her new environment, and Nazia says she is generally enjoying her life here.

She may be considered one of the fortunate children.

According to Education Ministry statistics for last year, out of 1,000 foreign children without legal residency, only 205 were enrolled in any school.

The other 80 percent, while entitled to attend school under international conventions, chose not to attend or have been prevented from doing so.

alien,” Nazia said. “Koreans who help migrant workers persuaded one of the schools to accept me.”

Korea in 1989 signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which bars discrimination against children regardless of their origin, and the Education Ministry in 2001 revised regulations so that children of illegal migrant workers may officially enter school.

But these institutional arrangements remain ineffective for most children of migrant workers because the measures either have not been implemented or are not being enforced.

Children of illegal immigrants may attend school under the revised law, for example, but few have an opportunity to do so because admission to a particular school is at the discretion of the school’s principal.

“When I went to an elementary school so that a child of an illegal migrant couple could enter it, the deputy principal of the school did not want to accept the child,” said a volunteer worker who helps illegal migrants.

“After a lot of persuasion, he finally agreed to accept the child. But he said, ‘Please never come to me again. There are many other schools nearby,’” the volunteer said.

Those children who do not go to school mostly work at factories, restaurants and construction sites. “I first attended a Mongolian school here,” said a 16-year-old Mongolian boy who requested anonymity. “But I

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migrants with medical emergencies, for example, or when children are barred from attending school.

And while the government has taken some steps to try to alleviate the situation, critics among groups devoted to helping migrants say much more needs to be done.

Nazia attends an elementary school in Bucheon, Gyeonggi province, a southwestern suburb of Seoul. She is fluent in Korean, and has close Korean friends from her

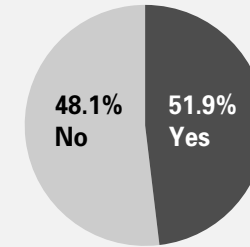
The human rights commission survey of 98 children found that around 28 percent of the children did not attend school.

Of that total, 32 percent did not attend because they cannot speak Korean well. Another 21 percent said Korean schools did not accept them because they are illegal aliens, and 5 percent said they chose not to attend school in order to earn money.

“At first, schools here did not want to accept me since I was an illegal

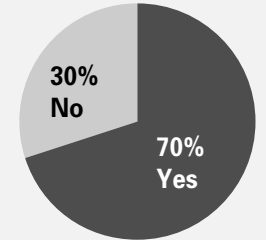
Have you ever experienced discrimination?

(81 children were surveyed)



Have you or your family members had difficulties in visiting a hospital?

(60 families were surveyed)



Source: National Human Rights Commission

quit after a year, since I was more interested in making money.

“I then worked in a factory manufacturing envelopes,” the boy added. “I worked from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, and I also recently quit this job because my back hurt too much after they asked me to move heavy things.”

Despite the lack of significant government aid for migrant children, many do receive help from civic groups and charities.

The Bucheon Migrant Workers’ Home, for example, pays for Nazia’s school meals and also helps her to better adapt to her life in Korea. Workers there often counsel her, and help her with her schoolwork.

But this is insufficient, say experts and civic group officials who help migrant workers and their children.

“The Korean government should guarantee the rights of migrant children, even though they are illegal aliens, to be cared for by their parents,

to be educated, and to be free from discrimination,” says Mr. Seol of Chonbuk National University.

“Most of all, a fundamental solution to the problem is to redress the general tendency in Korean society that discriminates against migrant workers,” he said.

In response to criticism of the government’s efforts on behalf of migrant children, Kim Ji-yeon, an official at the Education Ministry, said, “The ministry is currently setting up a five-year general education plan that will include enhanced support for children of migrant workers.”

But Yi Ran-joo, a senior official at the Bucheon Migrant Workers’ Home, says, “Schools that foreign children attend will have to develop a curriculum of international understanding. An understanding of foreign countries and mutual respect will help solve the problem.”

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