

Article

Conditional Belonging in South Korea's Care Migration Experiment: Filipino Caregivers, Media Narratives, and the Politics of Integration

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Abstract

This article examines how media discourse in South Korea constructed Filipino caregivers as a legitimate yet conditional solution to the country's care crisis. Moving beyond approaches that treat media coverage as a neutral reflection of policy debate, it analyzes news discourse as part of the broader politics of immigrant integration, showing how narratives of care, foreignness, affordability, and utility helped define the terms under which migrant caregivers could be welcomed. Drawing on a qualitative discourse analysis of English- and Korean-language newspaper coverage, the article traces how Filipino caregivers were alternately represented as desirable care providers, disciplined service workers, classed household resources, and ultimately precarious migrants whose social legitimacy remained revocable. The findings show that media and policy languages worked together to normalize a form of conditional belonging in which migrant caregivers were incorporated as useful labor but not recognized as fully deserving social subjects. Across the coverage, affordability emerged as a key discursive filter through which rights, value, and inclusion were negotiated, while competing narratives pushed the care regime toward more selective, informalized, and stratified forms. The article argues that secondary citizenship in this case was not only a legal or labor-market condition but also a discursive accomplishment produced through the intertwined narration of care needs, migrant labor, and unequal integration.

Keywords: media discourse; immigrant integration; migrant care labor; conditional belonging; secondary citizenship; South Korea

1. Introduction

South Korea's care crisis is now widely discussed through the language of demographic emergency. Declining fertility, rapid population aging, and mounting pressure on households have pushed care to the center of national debate. In 2023, the country's total fertility rate fell to 0.72 births per woman, a figure repeatedly invoked as evidence of a deepening social and reproductive crisis ([Statistics Korea 2024](#)). Across East Asia, governments facing similar pressures have pursued a range of policy responses, including childcare subsidies, family support measures, and, increasingly, migrant labor. As Frejka and Westley note ([Frejka and Westley 2019](#)), the region's fertility decline has been both historically sharp and politically consequential. Care has therefore become more than a private household concern. It now sits at the intersection of demographic reproduction, labor-market sustainability, and state anxieties about the future.



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Within this broader regional context, migrant care labor has emerged as one of the most contested responses to social reproduction crises. In places such as Hong Kong and Singapore, foreign domestic workers have long been incorporated into everyday household reproduction, though under deeply unequal and tightly regulated conditions (Constable 2007; Yeoh and Huang 2010). Taiwan and Japan have developed their own selective care migration pathways, each shaped by different combinations of labor demand, legal control, and moral boundary-making (Asato 2020; Lan 2006). South Korea, however, has occupied a more ambivalent position. Although the country has accepted migrant labor in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and construction, domestic and care labor have remained especially sensitive terrain, shaped by constitutional equality concerns, labor politics, and anxieties over social integration (Seol and Skrentny 2009). For that reason, the emergence of Filipino caregivers in public debate and later in formal policy was never merely a practical labor-market adjustment. It was also a struggle over the terms on which migrants could be admitted into intimate social life.

That struggle matters because immigrant incorporation is never only a matter of entry or employment. It is also a matter of how migrants are imagined, narrated, and positioned within the host society. Integration, in this sense, extends beyond institutional access or labor-market participation. It also involves public judgments about usefulness, trust, deservingness, and belonging. Media discourse is central to this process. Public understanding of migrant labor is not formed only through laws, official announcements, or policy outcomes. It is also shaped through media language, recurring narrative frames, moral distinctions, and everyday vocabularies of usefulness, burden, trust, and worth. Media discourse does not simply record social problems after the fact. It helps organize how those problems are perceived, which solutions appear reasonable, whose needs are foregrounded, and which forms of inequality become normalized. In the case of care labor, where questions of intimacy, family life, class aspiration, gendered responsibility, and national future become tightly entangled, discourse is not secondary to policy. It is one of the arenas in which legitimacy is made.

The main research question guiding this article is as follows: How does media discourse in South Korea construct Filipino caregivers as a socially acceptable but conditional response to the national care crisis, and how does this discourse shape the terms of migrant inclusion, labor utility, and unequal belonging? This question has three linked aims. Descriptively, the article examines how Filipino caregivers were represented across English- and Korean-language newspaper coverage. Analytically, it investigates how these representations interacted with broader debates on care crisis, demographic anxiety, household need, labor regulation, and immigrant integration. Theoretically, it argues that secondary citizenship can be understood not only as a legal or labor-market condition, but also as a discursive outcome produced through recurring narratives of usefulness, affordability, discipline, and conditional legitimacy.

This article begins from that premise. It examines how South Korean media discourse constructed Filipino caregivers as a legitimate yet conditional response to the country's care crisis, and how those constructions shaped the boundaries of inclusion, usefulness, and deservedness. The focus is not only on whether the policy succeeded or failed, but also on whether migrant workers were protected or exploited. Those questions remain important, but they do not fully capture how the caregiver figure itself was publicly produced. The central concern here is how media and policy language worked together to render Filipino caregivers intelligible as care providers, disciplined service workers, affordable solutions, classed household resources, and, ultimately, precarious migrants whose place remained conditional. In that sense, the article treats media discourse not as background commentary, but as part of the broader politics of immigrant integration.

An initial analytical stage based on *The Korea Times* suggested a compelling discursive arc: Filipino caregivers were introduced as solutions, managed through ambiguity and surveillance, and later exposed as precariously included workers whose legitimacy remained fragile. In the present manuscript, that initial reading was expanded through the addition of three Korean-language newspapers, allowing the analysis to move beyond a single English-language source and trace how the caregiver issue was refracted through a wider domestic media field. The issue was not narrated in a single voice. Rather, it was refracted through several overlapping public logics: household need, classed access, affordability pressure, policy design, labor-market flexibility, and the search for cheaper and more usable care arrangements. The result is not simply a fuller policy story, but a clearer view of how hierarchy itself was narrated into common sense.

One of the most striking features of this discourse is the way care was repeatedly translated into questions of price, manageability, and social value. Filipino caregivers were often introduced as possible answers to work–family strain and low fertility, but their legitimacy was continuously filtered through affordability. Could ordinary families use the service? Was it only for affluent districts? Did equal labor standards make the scheme too expensive? Would a cheaper or more flexible legal arrangement be more “realistic”? These were not peripheral questions. They became central mechanisms through which rights, utility, and moral deservingness were publicly negotiated. In this sense, affordability did not operate as a technical budget concern alone. It functioned as a discursive filter through which the value of migrant labor and the acceptable limits of migrant rights were repeatedly recalibrated.

The cultural politics of this discourse are equally important. Migrant caregivers were not framed only as workers. At different moments, they appeared as trusted helpers, educational resources, screened service units, possible risks, over-regulated outsiders, and substitutes within a strained domestic order. In some coverage, the attraction of Filipino caregivers was linked not only to childcare but also to English-language exposure and perceived household compatibility, giving the labor a distinctly classed and aspirational edge. In other coverage, the formal pilot was criticized for being too rigid, too expensive, or too narrow in scope, which in turn encouraged discursive movement toward informalized, privatized, or minimum-wage-exempt alternatives. What emerges, then, is a picture of migrant care not simply as labor imported into a care gap, but as labor culturally sorted through questions of trust, usefulness, flexibility, and social worth.

This is where the idea of secondary citizenship becomes especially useful. Building on scholarship on civic stratification and migrant domestic labor, the article uses secondary citizenship to describe a condition in which migrants are economically and socially useful but remain symbolically and institutionally subordinate (Morris 2003; Anderson 2010). In this article, secondary citizenship is understood not only as a legal or institutional condition, but also as a discursive outcome. Migrant caregivers were welcomed as socially useful but not imagined as equal participants in the national community. Their inclusion was framed as conditional, instrumental, and revisable. They could be valued without being fully recognized, desired without being fully included, and relied upon without being granted durable legitimacy. Such a position was sustained not only through contracts, visas, and labor administration, but also through public narratives that repeatedly placed migrants within a hierarchy of deservedness. The question was never simply whether they belonged, but under what terms, for whose benefit, and at what acceptable cost.

Seen this way, the Filipino caregiver case offers more than a snapshot of one short-lived policy experiment. It reveals how care crises can become occasions for the discursive reordering of labor, intimacy, and belonging. It shows how a host society can narrate migrant workers into private necessity while keeping them publicly provisional. It also

shows how media discourse may help normalize a shift from rights-bearing labor toward more selective, bifurcated, and potentially less protected care regimes, especially when the formal equal-rights model begins to clash with affordability pressures. One of the clearest insights to emerge from the broader multi-source reading is that when regulated migrant care appears too expensive, discourse does not simply register disappointment. It often begins searching for more flexible, cheaper, and less protected alternatives. In this respect, the case speaks directly to broader debates on immigrant integration under neoliberal conditions: migrants may be incorporated into the life of the host society, yet only on terms that preserve hierarchy and keep belonging conditional.

Against that background, the analysis proceeds through three subquestions. First, how does South Korean media discourse construct Filipino caregivers as a legitimate response to the care crisis? Second, how do narratives of care, foreignness, affordability, and social usefulness organize the boundaries between acceptable inclusion and exclusion? Third, how do these discourses contribute to the making of secondary citizenship by normalizing a form of conditional belonging for migrant caregivers? These questions move the analysis beyond whether the program “worked” in a narrow administrative sense. They instead ask how language itself participated in the production of hierarchy within an emerging integration regime.

The gap addressed by the article is therefore specific. Existing scholarship has shown that migrant care labor is embedded in transnational care chains, stratified reproduction, and unequal labor markets, while studies on South Korea have examined migrant incorporation, multicultural policy, and racialized or nationality-based hierarchy. At the same time, less attention has been paid to how Korean media discourse itself constructs a new care-migrant subject as legitimate, affordable, and governable before that subject becomes institutionally settled. Similarly, migration-media studies have often examined threat, vulnerability, and deservingness, but the Filipino caregiver case shows another mechanism: the production of conditional legitimacy through the language of utility, household need, affordability, and controlled foreignness. This is why secondary citizenship is useful in this context. It allows the analysis to connect media representation to the wider politics of partial inclusion and unequal membership.

The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it brings together English- and Korean-language newspaper coverage to trace the evolving discursive construction of Filipino caregivers across multiple outlets and editorial positions. Conceptually, it treats secondary citizenship not only as a juridical or labor-market status, but as something publicly narrated through recurring distinctions between deserving and undeserving, useful and costly, safe and risky, formal and flexible. Analytically, it shows that the caregiver issue was not only about migration governance, but also about the politics of immigrant integration in a society struggling to reconcile demographic anxiety, classed family demand, and unequal visions of whose labor can be made intimate under what terms.

The sections that follow develop this argument in stages. The next section reviews the relevant literature and builds the paper’s conceptual framing around migrant incorporation, migrant care labor, precarity, racialized hierarchy, affordability politics, and media discourse. The methodology section then explains the newspaper corpus and discourse-oriented analytical strategy used in the study. The findings section traces the major discursive formations that shaped the public figure of the Filipino caregiver, from care solution and household resource to managed labor and revocable subject. The discussion considers what this case contributes to broader debates on integration, legitimacy, exclusion, and differentiated membership. The conclusion reflects on what the South Korean case reveals about the fragile moral and discursive foundations of migrant care regimes under conditions of demographic crisis.

2. Literature Review/Conceptual Framing

The employment of migrant caregivers is often framed as a practical response to labor shortage, low fertility, and the growing pressures of work–family reconciliation. Yet care is never only a technical matter. It is tied to intimacy, social reproduction, household order, femininity, trust, and moral worth. For that reason, migrant care labor cannot be understood only through the language of policy design or labor demand. It must also be examined through the discourses that make certain workers appear appropriate, affordable, manageable, or excessive within a given social order.

The South Korean case is distinctive, but it is not isolated. Across different regions, states have repeatedly turned to migrant labor to manage demographic pressure, labor shortage, welfare restructuring, and household care demand while also limiting the terms of migrant settlement and recognition. This section therefore situates the Filipino caregiver case within a wider body of scholarship before narrowing to East Asia and South Korea. It links six strands of the literature: migrant incorporation and guest-worker legacies beyond East Asia, migrant care labor and stratified reproduction, precarity and civic stratification, racialized hierarchy in the Korean migration context, affordability politics, and media discourse as a site where migrant legitimacy is publicly produced.

2.1. *Migrant Incorporation, Guest-Worker Legacies, and Care Migration Beyond East Asia*

This wider framing is important because temporary labor recruitment has rarely remained a simple labor-market instrument. In Western Europe, postwar guest-worker systems were designed around labor utility and temporariness, yet they produced durable questions of settlement, rights, family life, and social membership (Castles 1986, 2006). The German guest-worker experience is not a direct care-labor parallel, but it offers a useful historical lesson: migration programs created to solve labor shortages often generate broader integration dilemmas once workers become socially necessary but politically conditional.

More direct parallels appear in contemporary European care regimes. Research on transnational domestic and care labor in Europe shows how welfare restructuring, aging, and household demand have drawn migrant women into private homes and care services under gendered, classed, and racialized hierarchies (Lutz 2011; Shutes and Chiatti 2012). In the United Kingdom, studies of African migration into the care sector, including Zimbabwean migrants working as carers, show how migrant workers can become indispensable to care provision while remaining concentrated in low-status, precarious, and morally devalued work (McGregor 2007). These examples help position the South Korean caregiver debate within a wider comparative problem: migrants may be invited into intimate and socially necessary work while their membership remains limited, conditional, and uneven.

2.2. *Migrant Care Labor and Stratified Reproduction*

The broader literature on migrant domestic and care labor provides the next essential layer. Feminist scholarship has long shown that care is unequally distributed across lines of class, gender, race, and nationality. Glenn demonstrated how reproductive labor has historically been racialized, with more marginalized women carrying the domestic burdens of more privileged households (Glenn 1992). Colen captured this through the concept of stratified reproduction, arguing that the reproductive capacities and care needs of some groups are sustained through unequal transfers of labor from others (Colen 1995). Hochschild later extended this logic through the idea of global care chains (Hochschild 2000), while Parreñas showed how Filipina migrant workers became central to transnational care systems in which labor, intimacy, and sacrifice are redistributed across borders (Parreñas 2015).

This body of work is indispensable because it shifts the analysis away from the language of “labor shortage” alone. The issue is not simply that South Korea faced care deficits and explored migrant labor as one response. It is that the proposed response depended on bringing in women whose labor could stabilize Korean households while leaving broader care hierarchies intact. The burdens of social reproduction were not resolved so much as displaced. The crisis of one population’s family life was addressed through the managed availability of another population’s labor.

In the South Korean case, this becomes visible when migrant caregivers are framed as solutions to interrupted women’s employment, declining fertility, or dual-earner household strain. Such framings may sound practical, but they carry a deeper social logic. They treat transnational labor recruitment as a way to preserve existing domestic arrangements while shifting reproductive pressure outward. The literature on migrant care labor helps explain why such solutions are rarely neutral. They are embedded in wider systems through which care is bought, moved, and stratified across unequal populations.

2.3. Precarity, Civic Stratification, and Conditional Inclusion

A third conceptual anchor is the literature on precarity and stratified membership. Butler describes precarity as a politically uneven condition in which some populations are made more exposed, less protected, and more disposable than others (Butler 2004). Lorey extends this argument by showing that precarity is not only a condition but also a mode of governance (Lorey 2015). Insecurity can be normalized, distributed, and managed. For migrants, this often takes the form of temporary contracts, conditional legal status, restricted mobility, and the perpetual possibility of removal.

This is useful for the present study because the Filipino caregiver case was not reducible to overt exclusion. It involved a managed form of conditional inclusion. Migrants were welcomed as labor, but under arrangements that emphasized reversibility, supervision, and experimental administration. Their inclusion was functional rather than secure. They could be useful without being stable, visible without being fully heard, and present without being durably recognized.

The concept of civic stratification sharpens this point further. Morris argues that migrants are often incorporated through layered systems of partial rights in which economic participation does not translate into full social or political membership (Morris 2003). Anderson likewise emphasizes that such stratification is sustained not only legally but morally (Anderson 2010). Migrants are judged through notions of usefulness, discipline, burden, and worthiness. Hierarchy, in other words, is not only administered; it is narrated.

This provides the bridge to the present study’s use of secondary citizenship. Here, secondary citizenship is not treated as a narrow legal category. It refers to a broader condition in which migrants are included as functionally necessary subjects but remain symbolically and institutionally secondary. Their place is justified through labor and managed through discourse, but never stabilized as equal belonging. In this sense, the concept extends Morris’s account of civic stratification and Anderson’s emphasis on the moral ordering of migrant domestic labor by showing how partial membership can also be produced and normalized through public narratives of usefulness, cost, and discipline (Yu 2023; Lee and Kim 2025).

2.4. Racialized Hierarchy, Nationality, and Governmentality in the Korean Case

The Korean context makes it necessary to engage more directly with race and nationality. Yu argues that class and nationality are central to the racialization of migrant groups in South Korea, showing how policy and integration discourse sort migrants through uneven hierarchies rather than through a neutral multicultural framework (Yu 2023). Lee and

Kim similarly argue that migration scholarship on Korea has too often underplayed race, even though racialized assumptions remain deeply entangled with the country's migration dynamics (Lee and Kim 2025).

These interventions matter because the Filipino caregiver did not appear in public discourse as a generic migrant worker. She was often narrated through nationality-specific assumptions: English-speaking ability, household suitability, reliability, communicative value, and service compatibility. Such representations cannot be reduced to simple positive stereotyping. They are part of a hierarchy in which nationality, class, and perceived cultural fit shape how workers are valued and where they are placed. Even apparently favorable distinctions can function as mechanisms of sorting, making some migrants seem more acceptable than others while still keeping them within a subordinate order.

A final layer comes from governmentality. Governmentality is used here in its Foucauldian sense as a way of thinking about how populations are governed through administrative rationalities, forms of knowledge, risk management, and the shaping of conduct rather than through direct coercion alone (Foucault 1991). Ong's migration-focused adaptation of this concept is especially useful because it shows how states govern populations unevenly through differentiated regulation, flexible sovereignty, and selective inclusion (Ong 2006). Migrant labor regimes are especially revealing because migrants are often governed through overlapping institutions at once: immigration law, labor law, administrative procedure, market intermediaries, and employer households. The result is not a single coherent order but a patchwork of control.

The Filipino caregiver experiment in South Korea clearly fits this pattern. Workers were not only recruited; they were screened, trained, matched, housed, monitored, and discussed through the language of a state-managed pilot program. Pilotization is therefore important here, not simply as temporary administration, but as a mode of governance in which migrant presence is publicly framed as experimental, revisable, and revocable. Under such a logic, the state retains flexibility while the workers remain suspended in conditional legitimacy.

2.5. Affordability Politics and the Normalization of Secondary Citizenship

The expanded source base also makes affordability conceptually central. In this study, affordability is not treated as a simple economic variable. It is developed as an empirical-analytical category derived from the newspaper corpus rather than as a fixed concept imported from a single prior study. Conceptually, however, it is informed by scholarship on the marketization of care and on migrant deservingness, both of which show how public judgments about cost, worth, and social support can shape the perceived legitimacy of migrant inclusion (Shutes and Chiatti 2012; De Coninck et al. 2024). Public debate did not stop at asking whether caregivers were needed. It repeatedly asked whether they were affordable enough, whether equal labor standards made the model unrealistic, whether only affluent families could access the service, and whether more flexible legal pathways would make better sense.

This is why deservedness matters. Research on migration increasingly shows that public attitudes toward migrants are shaped not only by identity or threat, but also by judgments about who appears deserving of settlement, support, or inclusion. De Coninck et al. demonstrate that deservingness perceptions are linked to news media consumption, suggesting that mediated narratives help shape the conditions under which migrants are judged as acceptable or excessive (De Coninck et al. 2024). In the present case, the deservingness question operated through labor and care: whether migrant labor was worth the wage, whether rights were too costly, and whether usefulness justified presence.

Affordability discourse, therefore, brings about political work. It translates equality into expense, protections into burdens, and rights into obstacles to practical policy. Once that translation takes hold, movement toward cheaper, more flexible, or less protected arrangements can be narrated as common sense rather than as downgraded inclusion. This is one of the clearest routes through which secondary citizenship becomes normalized. Migrants are welcomed, but only on terms that keep their rights conditional upon continued usefulness at an acceptable price.

2.6. Media Discourse and the Construction of Migrant Legitimacy

Media discourse is placed after the preceding theoretical discussion because, in this article, it functions as the site where these wider dynamics become publicly narrated. Media discourse is not merely descriptive. It does not simply report reality after it has already formed. Rather, it helps organize categories, circulate narratives, and stabilize distinctions that make some problems and solutions appear sensible. Research on migration media has repeatedly shown that the media do not simply reflect anxieties or policy debates; they help constitute them by framing migrants through recurring tropes of threat, utility, burden, vulnerability, and deservedness (Fuller 2024).

This is especially important in the case of migrant care labor. Care work concerns not only labor exchange but also family life, emotional labor, domestic authority, and the moral organization of everyday dependence. When migrant caregivers are represented in media discourse, they are not only identified as workers. They are also symbolically positioned in relation to household intimacy, national need, and social trust. Media narratives help define whether they appear as helpers, service providers, strangers, risks, or quasi-family figures. These distinctions matter because they shape the boundaries within which policymakers, employers, and the public evaluate what forms of inclusion are legitimate.

Recent studies help clarify this process. Ho and Sewell, in their study of Chinese-language media in Hong Kong, show that reporting on mistreatment cases often shifted attention away from structural inequality and toward victim blaming, perpetrator exoneration, and sensationalism (Ho and Sewell 2023). Likewise, Ladegaard shows how employers' online discourse about migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong relied on racialized othering, public shaming, and degrading characterization (Ladegaard 2022). Rheindorf and Vollmer similarly show how political and media discourses can converge in ways that normalize exclusionary logics and overlapping forms of control (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that discourse does not simply label migrant domestic workers after the fact. It actively participates in the social production of hierarchy.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the Filipino caregiver case should be read not simply as a labor-market response or a short-lived policy experiment. It is better understood as a discursive struggle over care, differences, and social values. Media discourse did not merely describe a migrant labor program that already existed. It helped construct the caregiver as a specific public subject: useful but conditional, intimate yet external, needed but never fully secure. The conceptual argument of this article is therefore that secondary citizenship in this case was produced not only through formal governance, but also through discourse. Media and policy language helped define who Filipino caregivers were understood to be, what forms of care they could legitimately provide, what protections seemed excessive, what costs appeared tolerable, and what forms of exclusion could be justified as reasonable.

3. Materials and Methods

This study examines how South Korean media discourse constructed Filipino caregivers as a legitimate yet conditional response to the country's care crisis. Because the concern is not only what policy decisions were made, but how the caregiver figure was publicly narrated, the study adopts a qualitative, discourse-oriented design based on newspaper coverage. Newspaper texts are treated not as transparent records of events, but as mediated sites in which categories, assumptions, and public meanings are produced and circulated. In this case, the archive makes it possible to trace how care, foreignness, affordability, risk, and social worth were assembled over time.

The study draws on a bilingual, multi-source corpus consisting of one English-language daily and three major Korean-language newspapers. This design was important because the caregiver issue did not circulate through a single editorial voice. Rather, it appeared through overlapping but distinct vocabularies of demographic urgency, household need, labor rights, affordability, class access, policy design, and social legitimacy.

3.1. Data Corpus

As shown in Table 1, the dataset consisted of 173 newspaper articles published between 2009 and 2025. The corpus was drawn from The Korea Times, Donga Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo, and Chosun Ilbo. The aim was not to produce a statistically representative sample of all South Korean media coverage, but to assemble a theoretically meaningful discourse corpus capable of tracing how Filipino caregivers were constructed across different media registers.

Table 1. Newspaper corpus included in the deconstructive narrative analysis.

Source	Language	Number of Articles	Publication Span	Rationale for Inclusion
The Korea Times	English	56	2009–2025	Longitudinal English-language source tracing the issue from early references to later policy uncertainty
Donga Ilbo	Korean	31	2023–2025	Included to capture domestic reporting during the active policy debate and implementation phase
JoongAng Ilbo	Korean	57	2023–2025	Included to broaden source diversity and examine framing in another major national daily
Chosun Ilbo	Korean	29	2023–2025	Included to broaden source diversity and capture framing in another major conservative-leaning daily
Total		173	2009–2025	Combined bilingual newspaper corpus used in the analysis

Articles were identified through newspaper archive searches using combinations of English and Korean terms, including “Filipino caregiver,” “Philippine caregiver,” “foreign caregiver,” “foreign nanny,” “domestic worker,” “care worker,” “필리핀 가사관리사,” “필리핀 가사도우미,” “외국인 가사관리사,” “외국인 가사도우미,” and related policy terms. Articles were included when they discussed Filipino or foreign caregivers in relation to childcare, domestic work, care policy, labor regulation, affordability, household use, or migrant integration in South Korea. Articles were excluded when they used similar terms but did not address the caregiver policy debate, migrant care labor, or the Korean care-migration context.

The Korea Times was included because it provided sustained English-language reporting on migration, labor, and public policy across the longest period in the dataset. The three Korean-language dailies were included because they made more visible the domestic political and social dimensions of the issue, especially household consumer logic, affordability pressure, class concentration, policy deadlock, and arguments for more flexible or less regulated labor arrangements. Together, the four newspapers make it possible to trace both continuity and variation in how Filipino caregivers were publicly narrated.

The corpus also offered a temporal advantage. The Korea Times captured the longer prehistory of the issue, including early references to foreign nannies before the formal caregiver pilot program took shape, while the Korean-language newspapers were especially valuable for the later phase of policy formation, implementation, controversy, and recalibration. This combination made it possible to follow both the emergence of the caregiver figure and the more concentrated period in which that figure became politically contested.

For analytical transparency, article-level evidence used in the Results is identified in the text by newspaper outlet, publication date, and, where useful, the article title or topic. These newspaper items are treated as corpus evidence rather than as bibliographic scholarship; the full list of articles analyzed in the corpus is submitted separately as part of the study materials. Korean-language articles were analyzed in Korean, with selected phrases translated into English for presentation in the manuscript. Translation was treated as part of the interpretive process, and Korean terms such as *gasa-gwallisa*/*gasa-doumi* were read in relation to the wider discursive movement between caregiver, domestic helper, and household service worker. Coding was conducted manually through iterative close reading rather than through automated content counting, although article identifiers were maintained to allow claims in the Results to be traced back to specific corpus texts.

3.2. Analytical Approach

The study employs a qualitative, discourse-oriented interpretive approach informed by deconstructive narrative analysis (Bamberg 2004; Riessman 2008). Narrative analysis is appropriate because the Filipino caregiver issue did not unfold as a static debate. It developed through an evolving public story marked by phases, turning points, contradictions, and shifts in moral framing. A deconstructive orientation is useful because the purpose is not to recover one stable meaning of the policy, but to examine how apparently coherent narratives were built through tension, exclusion, silence, and reversal.

The analysis therefore attends not only to what was explicitly said, but also to framing, foregrounded voices, recurrent oppositions, and repeated assumptions. It asks how Filipino caregivers were positioned as care solutions, classed as household resources, manageable labor, possible risks, or unsustainable burdens. The analytical procedure was also informed by thematic analysis in its attention to recurring patterns across the corpus (Braun and Clarke 2006). However, thematic patterning was used within a broader discourse-analytic framework, and contradictions were treated as analytically meaningful rather than as noise.

3.3. Coding and Interpretive Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four overlapping stages. First, the newspaper materials were read chronologically in full to reconstruct the broad narrative arc of the Filipino caregiver issue. This helped identify major phases such as early commodification, formal pilotization, role ambiguity, crisis episodes, policy uncertainty, and institutional drift.

Second, repeated close reading was used to identify recurring discursive formations across the four newspapers. These included demographic crisis framing, work–family burden, care shortage, household convenience, trust and worker usability, educational

or English-language value, affordability pressure, task ambiguity, surveillance and disciplinary management, policy deadlock, class concentration of access, and the search for cheaper or more flexible legal arrangements.

Third, the materials were coded iteratively rather than through a fixed pre-set frame. An initial code list included categories such as demographic solution, affordability, rights compliance, surveillance, role ambiguity, and crisis management. As the wider corpus was incorporated, additional codes were refined, especially those related to consumer-household logic, classed demand, educational surplus value, non-scalability, labor-market flexibilization, and bifurcated care regimes.

Fourth, coded patterns were interpreted in relation to the conceptual framing developed earlier. This involved asking not only which themes recurred, but how they functioned discursively. Particular attention was paid to silences, contradictions, and shifts in evaluative language, all of which were treated as central evidence rather than as marginal inconsistencies.

To address evidentiary grounding, the Results section now links each major interpretive claim to specific corpus examples. These examples include outlet names, publication dates, brief quoted or paraphrased formulations, and citation numbers for the relevant newspaper items. The purpose is not to turn the Results into a chronological news summary, but to make visible how the broader interpretive claims were grounded in recurring textual patterns within the corpus.

3.4. Researcher Reflexivity

Because this study is interpretive, reflexivity is essential. As England and Rose remind us, qualitative analysis is shaped by the positionality of the researcher (England 1994; Rose 1997). My engagement with migration, labor, social welfare, and inequality in the Korean context informed both the questions asked of the material and the patterns treated as significant.

This positioning offered both strengths and risks. It helped make it visible how migration discourse intersected with care politics, labor regulation, and social membership, but it also carried the risk of reading the corpus too quickly through a critical lens already attentive to hierarchy and precariousness. To address this, the analysis relied on repeated close reading, attending not only to critical evidence but also to moments of endorsement, ambiguity, and reformist optimism. This was especially important because the newspapers did not speak with one voice and often contained internally conflicting positions.

Even when workers' words appeared in the corpus, those words were already filtered through journalistic selection, translation, framing, and editorial context. For that reason, quoted migrant voices are treated not as transparent evidence of subjectivity, but as part of the discursive field itself.

4. Results

4.1. Constructing the Migrant Caregiver as a Solution to the Care Crisis

Across the newspaper corpus, Filipino caregivers first appeared through the language of crisis response. They were introduced not simply as migrant workers seeking jobs abroad, but as part of a possible answer to what had already been framed as a national problem: low fertility, care shortage, women's interrupted employment, and the burden of balancing work and family life. This construction was visible in early policy-focused reporting. For example, The Korea Times described the plan to bring 100 Philippine domestic helpers to Seoul as a pilot program responding to rising demand for childcare and housework support, thinning domestic labor supply, rising costs, and women's career disruption (The Korea Times, 18 April 2024). A later Korea Times article similarly framed

the program as an effort to ease childcare burdens among young working parents and respond to the declining birthrate (The Korea Times, 27 May 2024). From the outset, then, the caregiver was made intelligible less as an ordinary labor subject than as a functional response to Korean social strain.

Early media representations already reflected this pattern. Foreign nannies, especially Filipinas, were associated with childcare support, household convenience, and sometimes English-language exposure in the home. As the discourse developed, this household-centered framing widened into a broader demographic one. Donga Ilbo's coverage of the arrival of 100 Filipino workers emphasized the state-managed pilot, shared accommodation, priority selection for single-parent, multi-child, dual-income, and pregnant households, and the beginning of services in September 2024 (Donga Ilbo, 6 August 2024). The Korea Times likewise reported that applications were open to Seoul households with children aged 12 or younger, while priority would be given to single parents, families with many children, dual-income families, and pregnant women (The Korea Times, 16 July 2024). Foreign caregivers were therefore linked to fertility decline, shrinking domestic care labor, and the difficulties faced by dual-earner households.

Newspapers did not speak in exactly the same way. Some emphasized labor shortage and policy design, while others focused more on parental burden, work–family stress, or the need for trusted household help. Still, a shared pattern was clear: migrant care labor became publicly thinkable because Korean social reproduction was presented as being under pressure, and Filipino caregivers were positioned as part of the solution.

At the same time, this solution frame was selective. Caregivers were legitimized mainly through burden reduction, demographic urgency, and service provision, not through the language of social membership or labor justice. Their presence was made reasonable because they were useful to Korean households and to a broader national concern. Their legitimacy rested first on function.

4.2. Care, Convenience, and Class: The Household Marketization of Migrant Labor

A second major pattern was the shift from care as a public issue to care as a household service. Once Filipino caregivers became visible as a response to care shortages, the discourse quickly moved into the practical language of the home: convenience, trust, communication, flexibility, and household fit. Care was discussed not only as a labor or welfare issue, but as something to be selected, evaluated, and used within everyday family life.

In this setting, the caregiver increasingly appeared as a service figure. Coverage focused on whether the arrangement would be practical, whether the worker would be reliable, whether communication would be smooth, and whether the service would feel worth the cost. The emphasis was less on labor recognition than on domestic usefulness. The worker was judged through household expectations.

This became even more visible when the discourse extended beyond childcare alone. In some reporting, the caregiver was imagined not only as someone who could watch children, but also as someone who could stabilize family schedules, reduce parental strain, and, in some cases, provide added linguistic or educational value through English-speaking interaction at home. The classed and aspirational character of this framing was especially clear in coverage of demand patterns. The Korea Times reported that 43 percent of applications came from Gangnam, Seocho, and Songpa and noted criticism that some “Gangnam mothers” viewed Filipino caregivers as resources for children’s English education (The Korea Times, 14 August 2024). Chosun Biz similarly foregrounded the combination of English ability and childcare in its headline and linked demand to affluent southern Seoul districts (Chosun Biz, 14 August 2024). At that point, care was no longer presented only as support. It became tied to aspiration as well.

This shift gave the scheme a distinctly classed character. Although the public justification remained broad—low fertility, work–family burden, and care crisis—the practical discourse around use became much narrower. Donga Ilbo reported that 318 of 751 applicant households, or 43 percent, were located in the Gangnam three districts and interpreted this concentration as evidence that relatively affluent households were more able to absorb the cost of the service (Donga Ilbo, 12 August 2024). The issue increasingly turned on which families could actually use the service, who could afford it, and who might see extra value in English-speaking or highly flexible care. A policy discussed in national terms was gradually translated into a service most attractive to more advantaged household settings.

Trust also took on a marketized form. It was tied to the image of a worker who was safe, disciplined, usable, and appropriate for intimate family space. Migrant care labor thus became more publicly visible, but also more narrowly valued through the expectations of domestic consumers.

4.3. Affordability as a Discursive Filter: Rights, Value, and the Narrowing of Legitimacy

If the first move in the discourse was to construct Filipino caregivers as a solution, the next was to test that solution through cost. Across the corpus, affordability became one of the central criteria through which the legitimacy of the scheme was judged. The Korea Times reported that the monthly earnings of Philippine caregivers were expected to exceed 2 million won under Korea’s minimum wage and labor standards, while also noting that the original appeal of foreign caregivers had been linked to lower-cost models in Hong Kong and Singapore (The Korea Times, 27 May 2024). The question was no longer only whether caregivers were needed. It became whether the service was affordable enough, whether it could meaningfully reduce family burden at its actual price, and whether a more protected labor model made the arrangement too expensive to work at scale.

Once cost moved to the center, migrant care was increasingly discussed through the gap between social need and practical price. Protections such as minimum wage, insurance, and formal employment regulation were often reframed not simply as labor standards, but as reasons the model was becoming too costly. This tension was visible in competing article framings. The Philippine ambassador to Korea insisted in The Korea Times that equal labor standards and the minimum wage should be the “bare minimum” for Philippine caregivers (The Korea Times, 13 May 2024). In contrast, another Korea Times report described labor and migrant-rights groups condemning the Bank of Korea’s proposal to exempt foreign caregivers from the minimum wage, a proposal criticized as discriminatory and exploitative (The Korea Times, 13 March 2024). Under this logic, worker protection was subtly transformed into a question of policy feasibility.

That shift narrowed legitimacy. The coverage did not usually deny that migrant workers deserved protections. However, those protections were repeatedly placed inside a framework of affordability. Rights became acceptable only so long as they did not undermine scale, household demand, or the usefulness of the service. Labor protections were not rejected outright; they were made conditional.

Affordability also exposed the gap between the universal language used to justify the scheme and the socially selective reality of its use. Donga Ilbo reported that Seoul City had asked the Ministry of Justice to create a separate visa route that could allow individual households to contract directly with foreign domestic workers, potentially making wages lower than the minimum wage (Donga Ilbo, 9 August 2024). Chosun Ilbo later reported Mayor Oh Se-hoon’s call for differentiated minimum-wage treatment for foreign caregivers, noting that households would otherwise pay about 2.38 million won per month for eight hours of daily service (Chosun Ilbo, 27 August 2024). A program presented as a response to broad national problems was therefore repeatedly discussed in terms that raised

questions about who could actually benefit from it. If the service remained too expensive, its public justification weakened. However, if it were to become more widely usable, many strands of the discourse implied that labor costs would have to be lowered or legal arrangements adjusted.

In this way, affordability became a discursive filter through which rights, value, and acceptable inclusion were sorted. Filipino caregivers remained welcome only so long as they could stay useful at a socially and politically manageable price.

4.4. Governing Ambiguity: Role Boundary, Surveillance, and Conditional Labor

Another persistent feature of the corpus was the instability of the caregiver's role. The category of "caregiver" never remained entirely secure. It repeatedly drifted toward housework, domestic flexibility, and broader household assistance, even when the formal language of the scheme tried to distinguish caregiving from maid work. This instability was directly visible in article-level debate. A Korea Times report cited Migrant Forum in Asia's concern that the project's scope seemed to encompass both domestic work and caregiving, including cleaning, cooking, laundry, childcare, eldercare, and support for pregnant women (The Korea Times, 4 June 2024). Another Korea Times report noted that the approved project document defined the primary role as care for children and pregnant women while also allowing cleaning, laundry, and kitchen work related to caregiving (The Korea Times, 7 August 2024). This instability shaped how migrant labor could be used and governed.

Much of the coverage returned to the question of what Filipino caregivers were actually expected to do: childcare only, childcare plus related chores, or a wider set of household tasks shaped by family need. The problem was not only the lack of clarity itself, but what that lack of clarity allowed. Once the role was described through flexible wording and negotiable expectations, labor boundaries became easier to stretch.

This ambiguity operated both publicly and privately. At the public level, the worker was introduced through a more acceptable and professional label than "maid" or "domestic helper," yet that label was often paired with language leaving room for "some chores" or related tasks. At the household level, everyday family needs could further expand the role in practice. Ambiguity thus made labor more elastic without openly abandoning the caregiver category.

The same discourse that blurred labor boundaries also placed workers under close forms of management. Across the corpus, Filipino caregivers were described as screened, trained, matched, housed, monitored, and administered. Their inclusion was carefully managed rather than treated as ordinary labor mobility. Donga Ilbo's arrival coverage emphasized shared accommodation near Yeoksam Station, seven months of residence during the pilot, and structured pre-service arrangements (Donga Ilbo, 6 August 2024). The Korea Times later reported that two Philippine domestic helpers had been detained in Busan after weeks of unauthorized absence from work, translating worker movement into the language of immigration enforcement and possible illegal stay (The Korea Times, 5 October 2024). Dormitory rules, curfews, matching systems, and behavioral expectations all pointed to a model in which labor was welcomed under visible conditions of control.

When instability appeared, this pattern became even clearer. Worker departure or dissatisfaction did not simply produce concern; it triggered responses combining accommodation and discipline. After the unauthorized absence incident, The Korea Times reported that Seoul City would drop the curfew, revise the payment system, and adjust other rules for Filipino caregivers, while also noting that the two absent workers faced deportation under immigration law (The Korea Times, 6 October 2024). Some rules were loosened to improve retention, while at the same time, the language of unauthorized absence, tracing,

illegality, and sanction became more visible. The broader pattern was one of calibrated control. Workers were given limited flexibility where necessary, but the system continued to mark their presence as conditional.

Taken together, ambiguity and surveillance produced a labor relation that remained useful precisely because it was never fully secure. The caregiver's role could expand quietly while her autonomy remained bounded.

4.5. From Pilot to Policy Deadlock: Successful for Some, Unstable as a Social Model

A striking pattern across the corpus was that the Filipino caregiver scheme was not narrated as a simple failure, nor as an uncomplicated success. Instead, the coverage increasingly pointed to a more difficult contradiction: the model could appear useful for some households while remaining unstable as a broader social arrangement.

At the household level, the scheme could be presented positively. Some families valued the service, user satisfaction appeared relatively high, and the arrangement seemed to answer a real demand in the lives of particular working parents. The Korea Times reported Seoul City's claim that the pilot was running smoothly, with 98 caregivers serving households, growing use, and a waitlist of 795 families (The Korea Times, 15 January 2025). Donga Ilbo later reported an 84 percent satisfaction rate and the government's decision to extend the pilot by one year for caregivers who wished to remain (Donga Ilbo, 14 February 2025). This prevented the discourse from collapsing into a straightforward story of policy breakdown. The pilot was not publicly rejected because nobody wanted it.

Yet this partial success did not resolve the larger problem. The same coverage that pointed to household usefulness also highlighted the model's inability to stabilize as a general social solution. The Korea Times article that described Seoul's pilot as successful also reported that nationwide expansion remained uncertain because most local governments showed little interest, citing working-condition and wage concerns (The Korea Times, 15 January 2025). Another Korea Times article described parents as being left in limbo as the pilot approached its scheduled end, with some households attached to caregivers but unsure whether the service would continue (The Korea Times, 6 February 2025). The model remained too expensive to function as broad demographic support, too selective in its user base to sustain universal policy rhetoric, and too politically contested to settle into a widely accepted institutional form. As a result, the pilot increasingly came to be discussed as an unresolved policy dilemma.

Part of this deadlock lay in the gap between formal legality and practical usability. The pilot could be framed as more regulated, more rights-conscious, and more institutionally credible than cheaper care arrangements elsewhere. But those same features also made it harder to deliver on the original promise of accessible care. The very elements that made the scheme more defensible also made it less easy to scale.

This tension was reinforced by the mismatch between symbolic justification and practical benefit. The caregiver scheme was publicly tied to fertility decline, care shortage, and women's labor-force participation, yet the discourse increasingly suggested that actual use clustered in narrower and more advantaged household settings. That made it difficult to sustain the broader story through which the policy had first been justified.

In the end, uncertainty itself became one of the scheme's defining features. The issue was no longer simply whether the pilot would continue, but whether it could become anything more than a limited, contested, and only partially workable arrangement.

4.6. Bifurcation and the Making of Secondary Citizenship

As the contradictions surrounding the caregiver scheme intensified, the discourse did not move only toward hesitation or retreat. It also moved toward differentiation. One of

the most important late patterns in the corpus was the growing normalization of multiple possible care-labor tracks: one more formal, regulated, and rights-conscious; the other cheaper, more flexible, and more weakly protected. The Korea Times reported that, even as the Filipino caregiver pilot was extended, the government was preparing a separate foreign caregiver program for international students, graduates, and family members of marriage migrants that would not be subject to the minimum wage (The Korea Times, 4 March 2025). This matters because it shows that the response to the instability of the pilot was not simply to abandon migrant care. It was increasingly difficult to imagine alternative routes through which migrant care could remain available under downgraded terms.

Across the coverage, this appeared in recurring discussions of direct household hiring, private contracting, exempt or partially exempt labor categories, and the use of foreign residents already in Korea under more negotiable arrangements. Korea JoongAng Daily reported that the Seoul Metropolitan Government would cooperate with the Justice Ministry to train foreign residents in housekeeping and childcare, and that qualified recruits would enter direct contracts and not be subject to minimum wage requirements (Korea JoongAng Daily, 23 March 2025). The Korea Times described the same new program as one that used private contracts, allowed lower wages, and sidestepped labor protections under the legal category of domestic service (The Korea Times, 25 March 2025). The basic logic was consistent even when the details varied. If the more regulated model made migrant care too expensive or too limited in reach, then another route had to be found. The answer was not to reject migrant care, but to reorganize the conditions under which it could be obtained.

This shift changed the structure of the debate. The issue was no longer only whether foreign caregivers should be part of Korean care arrangements. It increasingly became a question of under what level of protection, regulation, and legitimacy they should be allowed to care. This differentiated logic also appeared in reporting on possible expansion to Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries, live-in care, and elder or sick care, with the mayor referring to systems in which wages differ by nationality (The Korea Times, 15 October 2024). What was being normalized, in effect, was not a single migrant care system, but a hierarchy of possible systems.

That hierarchy helps clarify the making of secondary citizenship in the corpus. Filipino caregivers were repeatedly represented as necessary labor, but the terms of their inclusion remained open to revision. Full or equal protections became negotiable when they appeared to threaten affordability, while cheaper alternatives were often presented as practical adjustments rather than as downgraded inclusions. In this way, migrants were not stripped of value; rather, their value was distributed selectively according to the form in which their labor could best be used.

Bifurcation, therefore, revealed something fundamental about the management of the care crisis. The newspapers did not merely report a policy experiment under strain. They also participated in the normalization of a differentiated care regime in which migrant labor remained central, but equal inclusion became less stable. Filipino caregivers were welcomed as useful and even necessary, yet the terms of their belonging were increasingly arranged across unequal tracks. That is the clearest form secondary citizenship took in the results: not outright exclusion, but selective incorporation under uneven conditions.

5. Discussion

This study shows that the Filipino caregiver issue in South Korea was never only about labor shortage or childcare policy. It was also a discursive process through which care, foreignness, usefulness, and legitimacy were publicly organized. Newspapers did not merely report a policy debate already underway. They helped construct the caregiver as a recog-

nizable figure: needed, useful, manageable, and sometimes even desirable, yet always tied to cost, flexibility, and conditionality. The case therefore reveals how media and policy discourse can produce a form of inclusion that is intimate and socially valuable while still remaining unequal.

One of the clearest implications of the findings is that migrant care labor was legitimized from the beginning through instrumental necessity rather than equal recognition. Filipino caregivers entered public discourse as a response to demographic strain, work-family burden, shrinking domestic care labor, and the exhaustion of family-based care. That framing gave their inclusion a moral rationale, but it was a narrow one: they were welcome because they could solve something. Conditionality, in other words, was not a later distortion of an otherwise equal arrangement. It was built into the earliest terms of acceptability. In this respect, the case supports broader scholarship showing that migrants are often incorporated through hierarchies of usefulness, discipline, and social worth rather than through equal membership (Morris 2003; Anderson 2010).

The findings also clarify the cultural politics of care in this discourse. Once care became tied to migrant labor, its public meaning shifted quickly. The caregiver was not only a worker. She became a figure onto whom several expectations were layered at once: burden reduction, domestic reliability, emotional reassurance, communicative ease, and, in some strands of reporting, educational or linguistic advantage. This helps explain why the scheme moved so quickly from demographic policy language to household consumer language. What emerged was not only the commodification of care but the marketization of migrant care as a classed domestic asset.

That shift matters because it reveals how social reproduction was being reorganized. Feminist scholarship has long shown that migrant care regimes often redistribute reproductive inequality across classed, gendered, and transnational lines rather than resolving it (Lutz 2011; Shutes and Chiatti 2012; McGregor 2007; Glenn 1992; Colen 1995; Hochschild 2000; Parreñas 2015). The South Korean case fits that pattern, but the expanded corpus helps specify its local form. The policy was justified in broad public terms, yet the practical meaning of the service narrowed toward households able to perceive and purchase its value. Care was thus recoded as a differentiated solution: publicly attached to national need, but privately shaped by convenience, classed access, and aspirational advantage.

This comparative framing also clarifies what the Korean case contributes beyond East Asia. Like European guest-worker regimes, the caregiver debate shows how temporary labor programs can be justified through utility while postponing the harder question of social membership (Castles 1986, 2006). Like European and UK care-labor cases, it shows that care crises can recruit migrant workers into intimate and socially indispensable work while leaving them concentrated in unequal, low-status, and precariously protected positions (Lutz 2011; Shutes and Chiatti 2012; McGregor 2007). The Korean case, therefore, does not stand outside wider migration debates; it adds a newer East Asian example of how demographic anxiety, care marketization, and conditional integration can become mutually reinforcing.

The findings further suggest that affordability was not simply an implementation problem. It functioned as a central discursive filter through which the legitimacy of migrant care was narrowed. Once the lawful cost of the scheme became visible, rights and protections were increasingly discussed through the language of burden, feasibility, and realism. Minimum wage, insurance, and formal labor standards were not usually rejected openly, but they were often repositioned as obstacles to scale and access. This shows how equality can be recoded as impracticality without ever being denounced directly. In that sense, affordability worked as a politics of deservedness. It did not ask whether migrant caregivers were valuable in general terms. It asked whether they remained worth pro-

protecting at the price such protection required. This logic resonates with emerging work on deservingness and media discourse, which shows that mediated narratives shape not only how migrants are seen, but also the conditions under which they are judged worthy of support, recognition, or inclusion (De Coninck et al. 2024; Rheindorf and Vollmer 2025).

This helps explain why the question of rights remained so unstable. Once migrant care was publicly legitimized through usefulness and household need, equal protection could always be tested against affordability. That testing process made rights contingent. The worker remained legitimate only so long as she remained useful at a socially acceptable cost. This is one of the clearest points at which secondary citizenship becomes visible. It is not only that migrants receive fewer protections. It is that the legitimacy of those protections is continuously filtered through the market value of their labor.

Another major contribution of the study lies in the way it brings together ambiguity and governmentality. The caregiver category never remained fully stable. It repeatedly slid between childcare, domestic work, household support, and flexible service provision. This ambiguity was not incidental. It allowed the worker to remain publicly acceptable as a “caregiver” while also remaining privately useful in ways that exceeded a fixed occupational boundary. At the same time, this elastic labor role was governed through close forms of monitoring: screening, matching, housing, curfew, administrative oversight, and disciplinary response when instability appeared. Taken together, these patterns suggest a calibrated form of conditional labor management. Ambiguity made the labor expandable; surveillance made it governable. This closely resembles the kind of managed precarity described by Butler and Lorey (Butler 2004; Lorey 2015), where insecurity is continuously adjusted rather than simply imposed once and for all.

The formal caregiver pilot program—that is, the state-managed initial implementation through which Filipino caregivers were recruited, trained, matched with households, and monitored before any permanent policy settlement—also became trapped between competing rationalities that could not be reconciled easily. It could be useful for some families and still remain unstable as a wider social model. It could generate user satisfaction while failing to achieve the broad demographic legitimacy originally attached to it. It could be presented as more rights-conscious and institutionally credible than regional alternatives, yet those same features made it difficult to sustain the promise of accessible care. This is why the language of simple success or failure is too narrow. The case is better understood as a form of policy deadlock: not because nothing worked, but because the more the model demonstrated limited usefulness, the more sharply its contradictions appeared.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the findings, however, is the move from deadlock to bifurcation. As the pilot became harder to justify on its original terms, the discourse did not simply move toward abandonment. It moved toward differentiation. Newspapers increasingly normalized the possibility of multiple care-labor tracks: one more formal, regulated, and rights-conscious; another cheaper, more flexible, and more weakly protected. This is crucial because it shows how media and policy discourse may respond to the tension between equality and affordability. Rather than resolve that tension, they redistribute it across differentiated regimes of inclusion.

This differentiated logic is where the article’s argument about secondary citizenship becomes most visible. Secondary citizenship here is not only a matter of legal inferiority. It is a broader discursive and governance outcome in which migrants are incorporated deeply enough to sustain everyday life, but not fully enough to secure equal standing. They are valued, but selectively; protected, but conditionally; included, but through unequal tracks. Importantly, the discourse did not usually present this as an injustice. More often, it appeared as realism, practicality, or a necessary adjustment. That is exactly what made it powerful.

The case also contributes to recent work on media representation and migrant domestic labor. Studies in Hong Kong show how media narratives can render migrant domestic workers visible while still sustaining structural asymmetry through selective emphasis and moral framing (Ho and Sewell 2023; Ladegaard 2022). The South Korean case adds a somewhat different layer. Here, the key discursive work was not only in portraying vulnerability or deviance, but in making usefulness, affordability, and household need the main criteria of legitimacy. Migrant caregivers were often welcomed, but on terms that kept their rights and social standing perpetually negotiable. The case also speaks to recent work on race and migrant hierarchy in Korea, which shows how nationality and class continue to organize migrant value even when race is not explicitly named (Yu 2023; Lee and Kim 2025). Filipino caregivers were often valued through nationality-specific assumptions—communication, care competence, English ability, and domestic suitability. Such apparently positive valuations did not escape hierarchy; they reorganized it.

Viewed through the lens of immigrant integration, the significance of the case lies precisely there. It shows that integration cannot be understood only as labor-market entry or policy access. It must also be understood as a discursive process through which the terms of belonging are publicly negotiated. In South Korea's caregiver debate, media and policy language worked together to produce a model of incorporation that was intimate but unequal, needed but conditional, and central to social reproduction without being securely folded into the moral frame of equal membership.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that the Filipino caregiver issue in South Korea was not simply a short-lived policy response to care shortages. It was also a discursive process through which care, foreignness, usefulness, and legitimacy were publicly organized. Filipino caregivers were introduced as a response to demographic strain and work–family pressure, but from the beginning their inclusion was tied to utility. They were welcomed because they could relieve the burden, support households, and help stabilize a society increasingly anxious about reproduction and care. Yet that usefulness also limited how they were recognized. Their legitimacy rested less on equal standing than on what they could provide for others.

As the issue developed, migrant care was increasingly translated into the language of convenience, trust, flexibility, and value for money. The caregiver became more than a labor figure. She became a classed domestic resource, assessed through practicality, affordability, and sometimes educational or linguistic surplus value. At the same time, rights and labor standards were repeatedly drawn into the language of cost, making protection appear as a possible obstacle to usability and scale. Under these conditions, the question was no longer only whether migrant care was needed. It became clear what kind of migrant care could be made affordable, governable, and socially acceptable.

What emerged across the discourse, then, was neither outright exclusion nor stable inclusion, but an uneven condition in between. Filipino caregivers were necessary enough to enter the intimate space of the household, yet they were not secured enough to be recognized on equal terms. Their labor was wanted, but their protections remained negotiable. Their presence was useful, but always under conditions shaped by affordability, role ambiguity, surveillance, and institutional uncertainty. As the contradictions of the pilot deepened, the discourse increasingly opened toward bifurcated arrangements in which migrant care could continue under more selective and less equal terms.

The broader lesson is that societies facing care crises may increasingly depend on migrant labor while still resisting the social and moral implications of recognizing that labor on equal terms. Because this study is based on a newspaper corpus rather than interviews

with caregivers, its findings concern the public discursive construction of Filipino caregivers rather than the full lived experience of the workers themselves. Media discourse matters deeply in this process. It is one of the places where such dependence is made intelligible, where inequality is softened into pragmatism, and where selective inclusion can come to feel reasonable. The Filipino caregiver debate therefore reveals something larger about the politics of immigrant integration: inclusion may be extended, but unevenly; recognition may be offered, but conditionally; and care may be treated as indispensable while the people who provide it remain only partially admitted into the social world they help sustain.

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