

South Korea's New, Young Faces

South Korea currently has the highest rate of plastic surgery per capita in the world. It is estimated that between one-fifth and one-third of the women in Seoul have undergone plastic surgery or other cosmetic procedures, compared to only five percent of American women. For women in their twenties, this number rises to fifty percent. Meanwhile, men make up fifteen percent of the plastic surgery market, including the former President Roh Moo-hyun.¹

Experts attribute these high rates of plastic surgery to multiple factors. First, many people in South Korea believe that they need plastic surgery in order to meet prevailing standards of beauty. For example, a typical high school graduation gift for a Korean teenager is a blepharoplasty, also known as a double-eyelid surgery, which many seek out so that they can look "less Asian."² As a college student who received this double-eyelid surgery stated, "When you're nineteen, all the girls get plastic surgery, so if you don't do it, after a few years, your friends will all look better... we want to have surgeries while we are young so we can have our new faces for a long time." Indeed, some cosmetic transformations are so radical that the hospitals offer certificates of identity to the patients.

A second and related factor is that many people in South Korea believe that they need plastic surgery in order to compete at school and work – especially since many employers require job applicants to submit pictures with their résumés. Many claim that this requirement is especially burdensome for low-income women in South Korea. For example, a young woman reports that beauty is a big advantage in a job interview: "If the interviewer saw two women who had similar abilities, of course he'd go with the better-looking one."³ Similarly, plastic-surgery reality show producer Siwon Paek reports that lower-income South Koreans are more compulsive about cosmetic procedures: "[T]hey feel they have no other way to prove themselves to people and lift themselves socially and economically."⁴

A third factor is that the plastic surgery industry is not regulated in South Korea. As a result, the increase in demand for cosmetic procedures has come along with an increase in unlicensed hospitals and unqualified surgeons, known as "ghost doctors." These "ghost doctors" enable more people to have cosmetic procedures in South Korea, but they also have an unreliable track record. For example, the Korea Consumer Agency reports that a third of all plastic surgery patients are dissatisfied with the results, and seventeen percent claim to have suffered at least one negative side effect⁵.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Can it be good for a person to get cosmetic surgery to meet to an unreasonable – perhaps even oppressive – standard of beauty? Why or why not?
2. Is it morally permissible for an employer to require job applicants to submit photographs with their résumés? Why or why not?
3. Is it morally permissible for the state to allow "ghost doctors" to treat citizens who are willing to accept higher risk in exchange for lower prices? Why or why not?

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/24/business/international/plastic-surgery-tourism-brings-chinese-to-south-korea.html?_r=0

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30295758>

³ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face>

⁴ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face>

⁵ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2015/05/16/stunning-photos-show-why-south-korea-is-the-plastic-surgery-capital-of-the-world/>

