

Women's Bodies in Intercultural Marriage Family in South Korea

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Introduction

Through the impact of internationalization and globalization, cultural diversity in Korea has been recently increasing, resulting in more international marriages. Since the late 1980s, this trend has coincided with the Korean government's policy that supports a solution to the so-called "rural bachelor's marriage problem." This problem is resulted from a certain circumstance in which relatively more women than men tend to migrate from rural to urban areas to find jobs, while bachelors choose to stay in their hometown to take care of their parents and family business based on Confucian culture in South Korea.[1] Because of the imbalance of gender rate between men and women in the rural areas, many men began to look for their wives outside the country through matchmaking program provided by commercial matchmaking business for international marriage. Since the 2000s, this intercultural marriage rate has been even more dramatically increased because of the establishment and prevalence of this business. Mainly Vietnam, Cambodia, Mongolia, and China are mostly targeted countries from where women migrate to South Korea in order to marry Korean men. The countries include those in Southeast Asia and rarely in Eastern Europe, which are mostly economically developing countries.

I would explore intercultural marriage focusing on where they are placed in Korean society and family and how their bodies are marginalized in this paper. As I expound this issue, the terms designating "marriage migrant women" would imply only those women who are from developing countries to get married to Korean men for socio-economic reasons and are marginalized in their homeland as well as Korean society.

Unfortunately, many marriage migrant women who left from their homelands face vulnerable situations, which threaten their own identities and generate oppressive body experiences against them. Marriage migrant women from the developing countries are likely to experience diverse problems due to cultural conflicts from cultural differences, financial difficulty, racial discrimination/stereotypes, and difficulties supporting and educating children. The voices of marriage migrant women are drowned out by those of the dominant culture. This patriarchal society is the vehicle of privileged groups in Korean society in which the bodies of foreign women have become unique sites of exclusion and marginalization. Given that this study only explores regarding the body of marriage migrant women related to "rural bachelor's marriage" in South Korea, overgeneralization over intercultural/ international marriage should not be made.

1. Women's Bodies as 'Breadwinner' in their Homeland

Women's bodies in chronological process have different experiences related to the motivation of migration, marriage processes, and diverse discrimination in the memory of body in Korea. Even though women's behaviors and decisions to choose their migration and international marriage might be seen as voluntary, they do not fully exert their rights over their

body, given the fact that many of them made their choices based on the socio-economic factors which are imposed on them such as poverty and responsibility of supporting their families as a 'breadwinner.' [2]

Marriage migrant women hoped not only for economic improvement but also prospects for future life, employment, happy marriage, and so on. Their body experiences in the beginning step of migration are related to evaluation by themselves and others, which are regarded as reliable daughters who can take full responsibility for family finance support. Whether their choice is voluntary or involuntary, they in the process of migration explain themselves as heroines who are challenged by their financial hardship, as deliverers of hope for their families, and instruments of their courage to be beyond border crossers from different cultures/nations.

2. Body as Sexual Commodity in Marriage Process

International marriage migration develops by a series of processes including marriage motivations among men and women, meetings with prospective marriage partners, and making decisions for marriage, and migration. In these processes, marriage broker businesses play a crucial part but unfortunately tend to produce gender inequality. Female's bodies are drawn into a whirlpool of inequality. Through the direct arrangement of commercial marriage brokers, Korean men's short marriage tours to other Asian countries happen only within one or two weeks. Their wives are chosen by the agency in their short tour. Korean marriage brokers gather Korean grooms and move to the countries future brides live. Like choosing commodities, a Korean grooms can choose their prospective marriage partners among group members.[3] Each Korean man can meet at least 30 women and choose his wife among women whom he met already several times. After his final choice, he can have sexual relationship with the chosen woman on the very day. Then, their wedding process starts. In the process of the marriage meeting, their wives are prepared as marriage immigrants. The grooms who pay all of the wedding expenses and broker fees completely seize the initiative in the process of marriage. By following the customers' needs, the broker business produces the stereotyped image of foreign brides in a traditional patriarchal gender system, which reveals subordinate, obedient, and submissive qualities. From the starting point of matchmaking process, the bodies of foreign brides are exposed to sexual vulnerability.

Whereas it is those women's choice of the international marriage, they lose their autonomy regarding whom they meet or how they raise their family is completely out of their control. It is impossible for marriage partners to have enough time to get to know each other and share their family plans and visions for their family life. The absence of women's agency generates emotional instability as well as fear and anxiety towards their new future. This marginalized position of women and their objectified experiences are the outcomes from both marriage broker system and masculine domination.

The asymmetrical power relations between men and women generate honor versus shame dynamics inside the family.[4] Women's bodies become an object for a man's masculine honor. Such an experience of women puts them to a vulnerable position of shameful experiences.

3. Body as a Baby Carrier and 'Not Enough' Motherhood

Female immigrant wives, upon arrival, encounter multiple challenges. In particular, the stereotyped awareness about marriage migrant women in Korean family and society is one of the

factors that harden them. Stereotypes on women from poor countries label on them and create oppressing environment for female marriage immigrants, who are devalued in their new families.[5] Their gendered identities constricted under economic relationships and patriarchal metaphors recommit women to Orientalized myths (in Edward Said's sense) of docile femininity, sensuality, and domestic subservience. Their bodies are instrumental wombs and baby carriers for Korean male families.[6]

The family problems of marriage migration women in martial conflicts are rooted in the Korean traditional authoritarianism and patriarchal ideology. Under the patriarchal structure, foreign wives have been exempt from basic protections and privileges because of the rigid sexual and gendered criteria that constitute, *namjon yobi* (men are higher and women are lower).[7] The gender hierarchy in Korean families can be a stressor in which foreign wives are forced to do domestic chores and for children care. The failure and limitation of social participation by their husbands and in-laws make it easy to lose their self-esteem in their relationship with others and hinder social adjustment.

Many female immigrants of international marriage feel the necessity of learning Korean language in the early stage of their settlement, but they often lack opportunity to access language education or family support because of family-based burdens such as children-care and parents-care.[8] Because of this, many female immigrants tend to cut off interaction with others, even barely speaking with their husbands and other family members, becoming further isolated. They are struggling with miscommunication and mistrust by others. In the improvement of their language skills, they may have adequate development, but this problem does not end only there. As their children are growing up, its circumstance demands mothers to speak Korean up to a high level of language fluency.[9] Thus, their language fluency for their children and others is not as developed as they expect, and their language barrier makes foreign wives/mothers experience their bodies that cannot enough for their families.

4. Body as Forced 'Korean' Identity rather 'Hyphen' Being in Her New Land

In Korean family relations, the major stressor of female marriage immigrants is the communication difficulties that end up with the need for cultural assimilation of those women.[10] It is also preferred that they are enforced to have a sense of Korean identity based on emotional affinity with Koreans and a personal willingness to become a member of the Korean society by learning and following its main values, principles, history, language, and ways of life. In addition, Korean paternal-family members have also implicit expectations and pressure regarding what marriage immigrants should accept and how they should follow Korean culture rather than live their own different cultural background.[11]

Immigrant women frequently feel that they are not qualified completely to be good Korean wives and mothers. They are not accepted if they are not speaking Korean and assimilating to Korean culture. Struggling with this acculturation, they feel huge pressure to give up their original self-identity to become a true Korean. They are not allowed to be a 'hyphen' being in migrant lands. Their self from their own ethnicity is devalued, which they experience as inferior, valueless, and unworthy. They are not foreigners anymore because they are married to Korean men and should embrace Korean culture. Yet, they might not be able to live as Korean no matter how much they strive to assimilate to the culture because of their different appearances with major ethnicity in Korea.[12]

Conclusion

Their body experiences reveal about where they are standing on and how they are struggling with their sufferings on sociological and ethical levels. Marriage migrant women who come to Korea through a socio-economic diaspora experience see themselves as strange ‘Others’ because they need to endure their economic conditions in an era of globalization, patriarchal ideology, and exclusive authoritarianism, as well as being discriminated against in gendered and conservative families. Their bodies are marginalized as female ‘breadwinners’ in their homelands, sexual commodities in their marriage process, as wombs for male families, and forced into being Korean in an environment demanding social assimilation.

Marriage migrant women definitely cannot establish their subjectivity as a whole person neither through assimilation nor acculturation. Rather, what is needed for their subjectivity is an acknowledgement of their own identity and culture the society. Only to the degree that those women are acknowledged of their full citizenship in Korea, marriage migrant women can have freedom to live as autonomous subjects in Korea. For building a mature intercultural society, respect and dignity of their bodies ought to be restored in their everyday lives.

[1] This kind of tendency has been made based on Confucian culture in which men are mainly in charge of taking care of their parents and all business related to family issues.

[2] Hye-Sun Kim, *Global Migration and Family Band*. (Seoul: Idambooks, 2014), 104

[3] *Ibid.*, 93.

[4] Akpınar, Aylin. “The Honour/Shame Complex Revisited: Violence Against Women in the Migration Context,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 26. No. 5, (2003): 431.

[5] Sung-mi Lee, *Multicultural Policy* (Seoul: Bakyoung Press, 2012), 48.

[6] Mary Lee, “Mixed Race Peoples in the Korean National Imaginary and Family,” *Korean Studies* Vol. 32. (2009): 32.

[7] Pyong Gap Min, “Severe Underrepresentation of Women in Church Leadership in the Korean Immigrant Community in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 47 Issue 2, (2008): 225.

[8] Iseon Kim, Areum Lee, and Euna Lee, *A Study of Political Demand and Social-Integrate Process of Marriage Immigrant Women* (Seoul: Korean Women’s Development Institute, 2013), 78.

[9] *Ibid.*, 84.

[10] Grace H. Chung and Joan P. Yoo, “Using the Multicultural Family Support Centers and Adjustment among Interethnic and Interracial Families in South Korea.” *Family Relations* 62 (2013), 245.

[11] Kim et al., 2013, 77.

[12] Haeyeon Choo, “The Cost of Rights: Migrant Women, Feminist Advocacy, and Gendered Morality in South Korea,” *Gender and Society*, Vol. 27, no. 4 (2013): 462.