

The State and Migrant Women: Diverging Hopes in the Making of “Multicultural Families” in Contemporary Korea

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth understanding of the current conditions and the status of migrant women in Korea by examining the Korean government policy relating to them. The rapid increase in the number of migrant women in recent years has initiated a new type of family known as the “multicultural family.” This has also fuelled active discussions about cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

However, the concept of “multicultural families” is appropriated by the Korean government, which does not recognize the different cultural backgrounds and aspirations of migrant women, to cope with the multitude of social problems, such as declining birth rates, rising divorce rates, and sex ratio imbalances, in the marriage market. This paper argues that the multicultural family in Korea is a site where Korea as a nation, civil society in Korea, and migrant women as a category struggle over the meaning of the term “multicultural.”

Keywords: multicultural family, cross-border marriage, international marriage, migrant women, marriage migrants, multiculturalism, migration, marriage brokers

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Introduction

The “Getting Rural Bachelors Married” project began in the 1990s, but international marriages between Korean men and Asian women boomed in Korea from the year 2000. Today, seven years later, there are more than 11,000 migrant women who have come to Korea through international marriages. It is predicted that by 2020, the number of households with such migrant women will comprise twenty percent of the total number of households in Korea. It is true that migrant women, the first “settler type” immigrants to come to Korea, have paved the way for reconsidering the “pure blood” ideology or “ethnic nationalism” in Korea. “Multiculturalism” has become the theme of many academic conferences, and the national government and local governments, as well as NGOs, have also actively carried out a variety of programs to help migrant women get successfully settled. The rapid increase in the number of migrant women has created a new family type, called the “multicultural family.” However, what the Korean government wants from the multicultural family is a family based on traditional family values, that is, one that upholds patriarchy and emphasizes reproduction. The government’s notion of the multicultural family is a far cry from the mutual coexistence of cultures, which is the core of multiculturalism. Foreign women with diverse cultural backgrounds and desires are on the brink of being reduced to a homogenous social minority group.

In a way, “migration through marriage” suggests that there is a sense of openness within Korean society that men and women could establish social, economical, and sexual bonds regardless of nationality, ethnicity, and region. The explosion of international marriages is not a phenomenon unique to Korea. Japan and Taiwan have also seen a significant increase in international marriages between the native men and other Asian women since the 1980s. These two countries and Korea share something in common: they are all promoting international marriages to resolve the problem of declining birth rates. The nuclear family, which is founded on the heterosexual fami-

ly model, has served the function of reproducing social members and sustaining capitalism through a gendered labor division with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as homemaker. However, as men's status as breadwinner becomes unstable and women's economic power increases, the number of men who find themselves in a more inferior position in the marriage market starts to increase. International marriage in Korea since the 1990s is global in the sense that a large number of foreign women are encouraged to move to Korea to remedy the regional imbalances within the potential marriage population. It is also "problematic" because, in the course of promoting international marriage, the central and local governments have collaborated with commercial international marriage brokers to form an "international marriage brokerage system." In this regard, international marriage is not only a personal problem involving the people seeking to marry, but also a social issue strewn with problems such as the economic gaps between countries due to rapid globalization, blind faith in a heterosexual marriage model that is based on dichotomized gender roles, and the strategies of commercial marriage brokers.

In this social context, migrant women are struggling everyday to establish their social status and stabilize their living conditions. However, the Korean government has created a Korean "multicultural family," using both material and symbolic resources in the name of assisting in the social integration of migrant women into Korean society. The Korean government's global project of creating the "multicultural family" cannot be consistent or thorough, due to the diversity of desires, differences, and unpredictability on the part of the participants. Most importantly, the kinds of social relations that migrant women establish with their Korean families and every single process of multicultural family formation are diverse, fragmented, and individualistic. This paper argues that the multicultural family in Korea is a place in which Korea as a nation, civil society in Korea, and migrant women struggle over meaning of the term "multicultural." To do so, I will discuss the history of the multicultural family and demonstrate the falsity of the Korean government's notion of the

multicultural family. I will illustrate that there are various interpretations of the meaning of family, based on interviews I have conducted with migrant women since 2004.

The Birth of the “Multicultural Family” in Korea

The term “multicultural family” is a notion shaped within the historical context of Korea’s international marriages. After 2000, various grassroots organizations and NGOs working for migrant women and those in international marriages used the term “double-culture family,” in an effort to replace the word “international marriage family,” until “multicultural family” was adopted as a term considered to be more open to cultural diversity. The term “multiculturalism” was coined in Korea after the racial, sexual, and class violence stemming from ethnic nationalism based on pure-blood ideology was thought to seriously encroach on the rights of migrant workers, biracial people, and migrant women. Multiculturalism in Korea is thus used as a counter-concept to Korea’s violent mono-ethnicity, rather than its general meaning of recognizing or having a mutual understanding of cultural difference.

The word “multicultural family” first appeared in government documents at the suggestion of an NGO. In 2003, “Hifamily,” an activist organization focused on families, submitted a petition to the National Human Rights Commission saying that the use of the word “mixed blood” (*honhyeol*) was a human rights violation, and sought to replace the term with “the second generation of a multicultural family.” Since 2005, migrant women have been at the center of the Korean government’s attention, and it hence started using the word “multicultural family.” As the government started using the word “multicultural family,” the term “deteriorated” into a “technology of governance” that justifies governmental intervention. Ong, using the Foucauldian concept, defines neoliberalism as a technology of governance, or a “profoundly active way of rationalizing governing and self-governing in order to ‘optimize’” (2006, 3). I also argue that the

multicultural family is appropriated by the Korean government as part of its endeavor to mobilize foreign women in order to achieve the nationalist project of boosting the country's population. In 2006, the Korean government suddenly announced "a change into a multicultural, multiethnic society," hence introducing a multicultural discourse focusing on state-led migration (Oh 2007, 31).

Beginning in January 2006, while awaiting the visit of American football player Hines Ward, born of a Korean mother and American father, the Korean president ordered a number of new policies for biracial people and foreigners. At that time, the media was responsible for conveying an array of messages, such as reporting on the fear that the offspring of migrant women or migrant workers could become an influential political group in the future and cause unrest, and hope that they would benefit the Korean economy by continuing the Korean pop culture wave (Moon 2006). In this context, as "multicultural family" became the official term used by the government and NGOs, a consensus was reached that systematic support for multicultural families should be provided. Integrating the offspring of migrant women into Korea's nationalistic profit relations gained importance in policy-making. Therefore, even though the implications of "human trafficking" in the broker-involved process of female migration have hardly changed, government research is focusing on "social convergence discourse" rather than on the structural violence migrant women experience. Recent government policies aimed at the social integration of women tend to merge in one direction. In April 2006, the "Plan for Promoting the Social Integration of Migrant Women, Biracial people, and Immigrants" was announced. This plan, which envisioned social integration and creation of a multicultural society, idealistically aims at eliminating human rights violation, and problems of maladjustment and poverty that migrant women often experience after migrating to Korea and settling there (Kim Yee-Sun et al. 2006). Since 2006, there has been a so-called boom in research projects on marriage migrants, which was driven by a sudden increase in the number of projects that were supported and sponsored by the central and local governments in the name of investigating the cur-

rent status of marriage migrants and social service programs and events geared towards them.

The Multicultural Family as Project Making

In the historical context of civil society's budding recognition of multiculturalism, Korea's multicultural family is appropriated by governments, both central and local, to create specific types of migrant women subjects. While support programs for women organized at the grassroots level have been mainly led by NGOs to enhance migrant women's abilities as "cultural translators," the government's efforts simply reinforce prevailing attitudes in Korea of using women as uniform objects to achieve the state-building project. The current multicultural family system is a governance structure jointly created by the nation, local government, and marriage brokers. My explanation of these three tiers of agents follows.

The New Definition of the Multicultural Family

Since the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family established a center for the support of migrant women's families in 2006, the number has now grown to thirty-seven. Each government ministry undertakes multicultural family projects in competition with each other: the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development works through the local human resources development center; the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, through the local culture center; and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, through the visiting educational helper project, which provides Korean language education, Korean cooking classes, Korean culture exposure, and counseling. All these form part of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's preparation for implementing the "multicultural family support policy law." The report on which the law was based defines the multicultural family:

The multicultural family refers to a family formed by a Korean citizen and a legally residing marriage migrant or foreign worker through matrimony, kinship, or adoption. Families created by the marriage between foreigners of different nationalities or denizens are excluded (Park and Cho 2007).

Interestingly, while “multicultural family” was used in the past as an umbrella term to refer not only to foreign brides but also to marriages between foreigners who migrated to Korea and Sae teo people (North Korean defectors), the law actually limits its support only to “legal” marriage migrants. The objective of the law is to provide marriage migrants with an education in Korean history, the Korean language, and traditional Korean etiquette, along with marriage and child-rearing counseling services. All of these are intended for the “assimilation” of foreign women into Korean society. As one statement indicates, “Providing a contact network for marriage migrants through the state and local governments, or similar measures to support their preservation of culture and language, is not desirable at all as it will hinder their integration into Korean society,” this policy reflects the nation-state’s anxiety about changes to Korean society. The law also discriminates between legal/illegal migrants, male/female marriage migrants, and strictly legal marriage and common law marriage based on intimacy. In fact, foreign men, including migrant workers who married Korean women, are not supported by any service, including education. As Jung Hyesil (2007) points out, since the boundary of the multicultural family is limited to “legal settlers” married to natives, whether they are legal or not, migrant workers who are not married to Koreans, African families who came to Korea as refugees, and overseas Chinese families are excluded.

This became evident after 2006, when government documents and officials openly referred to migrant women collectively as “an object that can be used to resolve Korea’s low birth, aging society crisis.” The reason that social integration has become the main goal of migrant women policy is because foreign women are perceived as the most easily mobilized resource to solve the various family crises and

care-work burden facing Korean society. In Korea, the “crisis of the family” and low birth rate has, since 2000, become important themes of various social agendas. The goals of middle-class families have been reduced to expanding opportunities for their children to achieve success in life as parents dedicate all their material and emotional resources to education, hence a process of class reproduction. In Korea, where investments in public resources for child-raising and education are virtually absent, “the small family” model is used as a family survival tactic. Competition among families leads to a “de-territorialized” strategy for obtaining “transnational resources,” and for this reason, there are more separated families like “*gireogi* family,” “global households,” and “single-parent household” than there are families that actually reside together.

On the other hand, the family crisis facing the urban lower class or the rural community is such that men are being increasingly deprived of the material, social, and cultural resources to obtain a “heterosexual” family. The only strategy they can use to form a family is to convert economic gaps between countries into personal advantage. Since 2000, family planning in Korea has focused on examining the reasons for the persistent low birth rate, analyzing the socioeconomic outcomes, and preparing solutions. For middle-class families, however, who are already widely aware of the economic costs and losses from raising children and buying a house at the same time, the government’s “naïve” birth encouragement plans were doomed to fail. The Korean government’s interest in migrant women comes at a time when the Korean government’s birth policy has failed to take off with Korean natives. When international marriages first began to increase in the 1990s, the central government was indifferent, therefore policies for migrant women were absent. The government’s only concern was to track down foreign women who came to Korea through “fake marriages.” From 2006, however, the introduction of the “healthy family law,” which was made to resolve problems such as the low birth rate, high divorce rate, and aging society, led to the discovery of migrant women as easier targets for policy-making. Migrant women were quickly perceived by the

government as the most easily mobilized resources to resolve the social problems of low birth rate and aging problems. In fact, that the frame of the migrant women support plan came from the Presidential Committee on Aging Society and Population Policy reveals the population policy-focused nature of the government plan.

Interestingly, current policies on migrant women and family planning policies in the 1970s have many things in common. Family planning from 1970-1980 “[was] carried out in a very isolated way, by reaching a quantified goal of each region through bureaucratic measures.” The Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea (PPFK) placed two family planning officers in every public health center in Korea, and one education officer in each of the 1,473 towns and townships.” The government did not mind performing “illegal intervention” and “violation” of women’s bodies as long as the government could reach its goal (Hwang 2005, 108-109). If the maternal image of contraception as an act of patriarchy is the image that governed the family planning era, it thus made women who give birth to Korean babies the focus of today’s multicultural family support plan. The instrumentalization of maternity in policy-making is indeed persistent. The Korean government’s policy focuses more on the maintenance and reproduction of the Korean family, rather than on “multiculturalism.”

While the government uses the foreign spouses of Korean men to resolve family crises, it also marginalizes them at the same time. Interestingly, migrant women who have divorced or left their Korean families still appear as “seceders” in governmental literature, including that of the Ministry of Justice. While recruiting foreign women who have become the spouses of Korean citizens, it also marginalizes them. Examples of this are evident in the way that national support and concern for migrant women’s Korean education and adjustment have sharply increased while the women’s legal status remains frail. A migrant woman’s legal status is dependent on her husband, the basis of which lies in proving that she is the mother of his children. Prior to obtaining Korean nationality, migrant women who are applying for Korean nationality or to visa extension in order to remain in

Korea are required to obtain a fidelity guarantee by having their husbands accompany them. Furthermore, employment is prohibited during a divorce suit (So 2005). Interestingly enough, while migrant women are included in the revised December 2005 Natural Basic Livelihood Security Law, they are allowed benefits and legally entitled to become the beneficiary of the “Welfare Protection Law for Parents” only as mothers of children with Korean fathers. Their access to public resources is only as “mothers” of their children (Kim MJ 2007). Migrant women therefore do not have the choice not to bear children. Childless foreign women fail to qualify as model migrant women. Their rights in Korea depend on how successfully they have fulfilled their purpose in family-making, in other words, in housekeeping, child-bearing, and child-rearing. Because the migration of women enforces Korea’s familism, government policy supporting migrant women thus focuses on settlement plans for the sake of maintaining the “family.” In doing so, it reinforces social tendencies to ignore women’s cries for help when they experience domestic violence and abuse at the hands of their husbands and in-laws. The fact that there are only two government-sponsored shelters for migrant women across the country proves this.

Marriage Support Programs by Local Governments

Local governments started encouraging international marriage in the 1990s, with the campaign slogan of “giving rural bachelors a chance to marry.” Since the 1990s, Korea, like Japan and Taiwan, began to actively recruit foreign brides for farmers in rural areas who are in a very disadvantageous position in the Korean marriage market. Cross-border marriage was, in fact, started by local governments as a strategy for alleviating the farmers’ marriage difficulties. Since 1992, local governments, agricultural associations as well as the government-funded Research Association for the Welfare of Farm and Fishing Villages have been recruiting rural bachelors to join marriage tours to China (Lee H. 2006; Freeman 2005). The local governments also find it more convenient to rely on marriage brokers to secure a constant

supply of women from other Asian countries. Local governments have been playing a pivotal role in the formation of international marriages.

Given that the country's birth rate is low, and that rural population is on the decrease as more farmers head for cities, family planning aimed at migrant women is indeed very important for the survival of rural communities in Korea. Local governments are competing to implement local laws with regard to "international marriage support programs for farmers and fishermen." One of these laws states that single men aged 35 to 50 and working in the agricultural or fishing industries can apply for financial support ranging from 3 to 8 million Korean won (US\$ 3,200 to 8,600) to assist them in finding a wife through international marriage. As of May 2007, 60 cities and local governments have implemented a similar act, with all the budgets totaling 2.85 billion Korean Won (Han K. 2007). Representatives of local governments are rushing rural men off into the international marriage market instead of making long-term policies that would help improve rural areas, which will experience even more difficulties after the Free Trade Agreements (FTA). Various proposals, such as "providing subsidies for childbirth and monetary support for delivery, supplies needed for child-raising, and child-rearing," are surfacing in rural areas, where "'preventing people from leaving' has become the major task for sustaining and providing budget for administrative organization" (Kim J. 2007, 50).

Marriage Brokers' "Sales Warranty"

Under the limited influence of the state-run migrant women's support center, the realities in which Korean-style "multicultural families" are situated are diverse and hence vastly different. However, since the majority of international marriages between Asian women and Korean men are handled by well-organized brokerage systems, brokers thus play a significant role in helping migrant women adapt to Korea. Within the process of the creation, sustenance, and change of the multicultural family, various agents such as brokers, extended Korean families, and the social networks of migrant women also play

important roles. In this context, migrant women expand the Korean-style multicultural family by combining their desires, motives, lack of resources and power, and adaptive strategies.

In a survey of 164 women in rural areas, 54.1 percent received Korean language education. Among these women, 43.3 percent replied that they learned Korean through lectures provided by marriage brokerage companies (Yi S. 2007). Brokers therefore play the most important role in the early stage of migrant women's family-making process. They commence this service after marriages have taken place and migrant women have arrived in Korea. Since both men and women in the initial stages of marriage discover disparate information about their spouses before and after marriage, the "conflicts" therefore inevitably occurred. At this stage, the brokers play a role in resolving conflicts, by discussing "cultural differences" and related issues. Brokers' "in-warranty" services include counseling by telephone, paying visits, running Korean language classes, and inviting couples to their offices (Han and Seol 2006, 59). One broker calls their company's service "emotional management." This means that the brokers have to manage the "emotions" of both Korean men and their foreign wives in the early stages of marriage, when disappointments arise due to differing expectations and ideals about each other.

Most brokers maintain a custom of "guaranteeing the bride" after marriage for a duration of six months to one year, in order to lure more Korean men into using their services. For example, if a divorce occurs due to the fault of the foreign bride, or if she leaves the family, the broker promises to introduce a new foreign woman to that Korean man. The Korean man can go on another matchmaking trip, paying only for actual expenses incurred, such as airfare. Brokers often introduce foreign women who are already in Korea to Korean men. To avoid further complaints from the men, brokers instruct them on how to "accommodate" foreign women. Some tactics used are to "get them pregnant fast," "don't let them roam about outside," and "don't let them contact women from the same country, either on the phone or in person." One company's president even describes his role as "father" to these migrant women, and would often advise

them to treat their husbands well (Han and Seol 2006, 60):

One broker said “they (Vietnamese migrant women) are 21 to 23 years old. I think they have to be beaten once in a while, like what I do to my children. I take care of them on behalf of their parents-in-laws, who are too old to oversee the brides. But whenever I beat them, I call the brides’ parents and ask for approval,” justifying his violence towards the women (Kim J. 2007, 52).

Most of them simply attribute all conflicts to “cultural differences” and “misunderstandings,” saying that these would be resolved after couples have acculturated to being with each other. In-warranty services thus play an important role in maintaining the reputation of brokerage companies, as well as in losing it. Brokers invest more time and energy in providing in-warranty services in Korea than in arranging overseas weddings, as it is where they derive and maintain their profits. This is why 72.9 percent of companies in the international marriage business provides in-warranty services (Han and Seol 2006). While in-warranty services are essential to preventing losses, it can also be rather costly at the same time. Transportation expenses and interpreter fees are needed in visiting households to resolve conflicts. Less in-warranty services thus mean more profit. One broker said to me that “nothing is left of your brokerage after ten service sessions.” Large brokerage companies with professional management and regulations talk Korean men into signing a contract stating that they will not seek in-warranty services. A newly formed brokerage circle, called the Association of International Marriage Counseling, also swears it will not hesitate to invest great resources in in-warranty services. The existence of the multicultural family is very dependent upon in-warranty services provided by brokers (Kim J. 2007). However, they tend to simply order the migrant women to obey the demands of their Korean husbands and families, rather than making the service a venue for negotiations between husbands and wives. One Mongolian woman said to me that a broker once visited her household with an interpreter but spoke only to her husband without asking her anything.

Women Practicing the Multicultural Family: The Ideal of the Modern Family and “Prepared Maternity”

If the marriage migrant women policy reflects the demands and influences of Korean families, it ignores those of migrant women for “social and familial recognition for their mother tongue and native culture,” the most important factor in the creation of the multicultural family (Kim Y. 2007, 30). Many migrant women acknowledge the importance of treating their husbands and family members with the same amount of education that they receive in learning the Korean language and about Korean tradition.¹ These women say that the biggest difficulty they experience is coping with the Korean family culture, which is still often maintained in a premodern style, wherein the married son lives with his parents. Like Korean women, migrant women also consider their relationships with parents-in-law the most difficult (Seol et al. 2006, 100). In other countries, this intergenerational combination usually applies to some upper- and middle-class people who need to hand down their economic and cultural assets to the next generation. In Korea, however, this intergenerational combination occurs in almost every class, and they do so in the name of tradition, etiquette, and custom. The mother-in-law plays the biggest role in propagating this intergenerational combination. As a stranger among her husband’s family members, a woman gains power only by giving birth to a child, thereby producing a paternal family.

In Korea, where the characteristics of the “uterine family” are maintained, maternal power is exercised by making children (especially boys) emotionally dependent on their mothers. In the “multicultural family,” the mother-in-law considers it her duty to mold her daughter-in-law into the fabric of the family. In many cases, mothers-in-law extensively control the eating habits, manners, etiquette,

1. When questioned about the necessary educational programs that husbands should receive, 27 out of 108 replied saying that “education regarding wife’s nation and culture” was important, while 26 cited “education in the wife’s native language”, and 18 said “education regarding international marriage” (Yi 2007).

working styles, and even sexual behavior of daughters-in-law. There are many examples of mothers-in-law making their foreign daughters-in-law eat only rice and kimchi so that they will get “quickly accustomed” to Korea. Many mothers-in-law insist that daughters-in-law formally greet them every morning and night, saying that this is a Korean custom. This even occurs among lower-class families, where daughters-in-law are not to expect material compensation for their obedience. Mothers-in-law are thus the main agents in transforming foreign women into Korean women. All the Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Mongolian women whom I met said that they have never heard of mothers-in-law living with daughters-in-law, nor do they understand this custom. Meanwhile, Korean men have different expectations of Filipino or Vietnamese women, thinking that “they will be obedient and good to my parents” or “they look similar to Koreans” (Seol et al. 2006). Brokers are responsible for creating some of these orientalist images of these Asian women as “familial and obedient women,” whereas foreign women actually perceive the nuclear family as the norm, as shaped by their experiences in socialistic backgrounds or the limitations of their class backgrounds.

Though different in varying degrees, Chinese and Vietnamese women have internalized the notion of labor equity under socialism. Foreign brides express their dissatisfaction with their married lives in terms of “the rigid gendered dichotomization of work and domesticity” (Freeman 2005, 97), economic dependence, and powerlessness. These women have chosen international marriage to escape the problems in their societies in order to lead a life more compatible with their outlook on the world. A recurring theme in the stories of Vietnamese women is the desire to depart from the lifestyles their mothers lead, whose daily life begins in the fields from the break of dawn and involves endlessly performing household chores to support their families. These migrant women aspire to make their own nuclear families, and live and work in cities.

The women often believe that international marriage would enable them to become modern mothers. Their image of Korea is that of a rich country that has embraced capitalism and modernity. Their

idea of a typical nuclear family is couple-centered, filled with romantic love, intimacy, and modern maternity. Relatively young Vietnamese women say that while they did not have feelings for Korean men, who are typically much older, prior to marrying, they had thought that these men would “love only me” and “care for me,” and that they would be able to form romantic relationships. One Mongolian woman who left graduate school to come to Korea said that she had believed marrying a Korean man would give her the opportunity to “concentrate” on raising children:

There are many cases in Mongolia in which young people in their early twenties just give birth to children and get married without any preparation. The reason I chose a Korean man is because I heard that they buy houses and everything before marriage, and they have a strong sense of responsibility. I have heard that the men coming over to get married are old because it takes a long time to get prepared. I believed that as a mother, I would be able to raise children at home while my husband support the family.

This woman had married with the belief that “prepared maternity” was possible, but now she has experienced violence from both her husband and mother-in-law, and is selling shoes and pins on the street for a living. Since many migrant women were unaware that many older Korean men typically lack economic resources, are not well-educated, and may have even left the labor market, they married based on their idealized image of Korean men without suspicion. They believed that while the man supported the family, they could realize their dreams of establishing a modern family and fulfill their imagined role of “high quality emotional care, systematic guidance and education, and rational operation of the family economy” (Hwang 2005). Those Filipino women who have had experience working as domestic maids before coming to Korea through international marriages want to experience and practice genuine maternity, as opposed to “commercialized” maternity (Chang 2007). Also, Korean-Chinese women and Mongolian women wish to move to Korea with their children from previous marriages in their hometowns, but

they have to constantly prove that their marriages to Korean men are not “disguised marriages” for that purpose. A Korean-Chinese woman, who divorced after 15 years of marriage and tried to bring her son from China following the death of her former husband, told me that her Korean husband and parents-in-law accused her of fraud and claimed that she had faked the second marriage in order to bring her son to Korea, and even planned to steal their money.

Child-bearing and child-rearing are also problems caught in webs of power relations. One recommendation given by brokers to prevent migrant women from running away and making them acculturate quickly is by “getting the women pregnant.” Thus, a serious problem that emerged in the course of the interviews with migrant women is that “pregnancy” and childbirth in many cases are not considered “blessed” events that help strengthen the marital bond. Many studies about international marriages have interpreted childbirth positively for foreign women since it is said to improve marital relations by providing the assurance that the women will not run away. However, such an interpretation does not apply in many cases. Strong opposition from husbands, especially due to concerns about having “mixed-blood children,” sometimes leads to abortion. In some cases, Korean men and migrant women who have both internalized and taken for granted the idea that their children will experience discrimination in Korea deliberately avoid pregnancy, and some husbands even force their wives to abort. Moreover, those Korean men who treat foreign women simply as sexual objects or docile housekeepers sometimes express strong objections when these women become “normal” wives upon becoming pregnant and giving birth. On the contrary, some Korean men tend to avoid taking the responsibility of creating the idealized nuclear family consisting of a couple and their children.

Meanwhile, migrant women are very realistic when it comes to matters such as raising children and maintaining the family, quite different from the Korean government’s expectations of the multicultural family. While child-rearing in Korea is a heavy responsibility for both Korean and migrant women, migrant women tend to actively

control childbirth the longer they stay in Korea.² Migrant women are surprised by the substantial amount of money needed to raise their children and the lack of public facilities for children. Many also give up whatever hope they have of getting a job. The women I met during this research said that even if they love children they “cannot give birth to more children. We don’t have enough money. We can’t raise them,” with some resorting to birth control as an inevitability.

Similar to marriages among natives in Korea, divorce rates among “multicultural families” are also soaring. The number of marriages between Korean men and foreign women that ended in divorce rose from 401 cases out of the total number of 11,017 in 2002, 583 out of 19,214 in 2003, 1,611 out of 25,594 in 2004, and 2,444 out of 31,180 in 2005 (Seol et al. 2006, 21-22). These migrant women are thus deviating from the so-called state-governed status of marriage migrants. Since the legal process for divorce is not simple, many women either return to their home countries without getting divorced or remain in hiding in Korea. Some of the women I met who had children at the time of their divorce said they have to simply accept their existence with “fatherless” children. While lamenting that their early experiences of being raised by a sacrificial mother in the absence of a father are being repeated once again in their lives, they stress it is better to remove their children from “the violent father” and describe separation from their husbands as a “choice.” Some other migrant women have come to realize that their husbands are economically and socially marginalized, and they conclude rather quickly that they should not rely on their husbands for support. Instead, they seek “economic independence” through part-time and temporary jobs, and earn a living while staying at a friend’s house and returning home periodically.

As women begin to realize the discrepancies between their initial expectations before migrating and the actual reality during the early

2. As stated in the report, the women who replied saying they “have no plans for future childbirth” cited difficult family circumstances and the economic burden of child-rearing and providing education as the main reasons (Seol et al. 2006).

stages of settlement, they develop survival strategies by deciding what to “trade” or “exchange” with their husbands. Existing literature on international marriage shows how many migrant women deal with their situations by reverting to strategies such as sleeping in different rooms, leaving home, threatening divorce, refusing a divorce, gaining emotional support from other women from the same countries, and pressuring their husbands (Yoon 2004; Lee 2005; Han G. 2006; Kim Jung Sun 2007). Sometimes the cultural coercion to become a Korean daughter-in-law does not work, and disparity is maintained between Korean mothers and migrant daughters-in-law in terms of what should be done about their reproductive labor. Their expectations of their husbands and family members are lowered, leading to their refusal to respond to difficulties: some migrant women simply choose to lie in their rooms and not come out when spoken communication is difficult, free access to the outside world is not granted, or economic resources are not provided. The women may be reproached for being “stubborn” or “lazy,” but the husbands and family members are unable to force the women to obey. This “weapon of the weak” that many migrant women use is thus expressed at times by blatantly refusing to conform to basic labor and manners.

Conclusion

The Korean government’s “multicultural family” is a “categorical” structure formed for the interpellation of migrant women subjects by the state. The multicultural family is based on mono-cultural imagination, but migrant women in this global age are deconstructing or expanding the boundaries of the multicultural family by either abiding by or resisting the coerced processes of Korean family-making. As Piper and Roces (2003) point out, female migrants through international marriage not only acquire the status of wife or mother, but also as worker and naturalized citizen as time goes by. The women are not “strangers inside families,” who silently follow the state-led

“multicultural family” scenario of learning the Korean language, getting accustomed to Korean culture and reproducing for the country’s labor force. They are agents who struggle to seek and newly locate their existence within the family; between the family and the community; and outside the family. The families that migrant women form are not mere copies of the meaning of maternity and family acquired from within their own cultural contexts, but manifestation of the image of the modern family combined with the “motive” of migration. In due course, migrant women come to experience just how distant the Korean family is from their ideals, hence prompting them to devise various survival strategies. The reason Korea’s migrant women support policy concentrates on Korean language education and the learning of Korean customs is because it is based on the narrow idea that these women are merely the dependents of their Korean husbands. However, it is important to understand that migrant women are active agents who seek to obtain multiple statuses along every step in the process of deciding to migrate, settle, and plan for the future. The “structural enforcements” made by the “multicultural family” project exercises violence by bundling women into the same closed category of instrumental objects. Against this violence, women are reincarnated into “survivors” and “cultural interpreters” through everyday life and practice.

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