

## **Issues and Limitations of Social Service for Multicultural Families: The Case of South Korea**

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**Abstract:** South Korea has always overflowed with ethnic pride. Koreans, during their 5,000 year history have regarded themselves as a homogeneous population. However, the situation changed rapidly in the last two decades owing to globalization and the rising immigration from East Asia. It compels a change in the way in which ethnicity is conceptualized by the Korean government. Although, Koreans face the prospect of diversity their attitude toward it has not yet changed completely. Moreover, South Korea's experiences with a multicultural society are often viewed as being unequal to those of other developed nations. The emergence of cultural diversity introduces various social issues that are strongly linked to the social welfare system. It forces Koreans to redirect their focus away from a nation state oriented perspective and adopt a globalized one. With this in mind the Korean government has developed a national social service law for immigrant families the "Support for Multicultural Families Act". In this context I explain the issues and limitations of social service for immigrant families from three dimensions. First I discuss the definitional limitations on multicultural families. Second I explore the major issues they face. Third I analyze the Support for Multicultural Family Act and discuss its problems. Finally I examine the implications of these issues for developing culturally appropriate social services.

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**Key words:** Multicultural family, social service, immigrant family, violence, international marriage

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### **INTRODUCTION**

South Korea has experienced various social exchanges since the 19th century. Among them, socio-cultural change which is strongly linked to globalization is regarded as the most important issue. South Korea is proud of its ethnic and racial homogeneity and of the fact that it is distinct from other races. These attitudes have even been criticized as being exclusive which limits their ideological perspective. Until recently, Koreans had no need to consider inclusive immigration policies or social services for immigrants. However, because of the rapid expansion of globalization the large number of foreign workers and Korean men who have married foreign women is rapidly increasing. To explain it more succinctly, East Asia's economic crisis and neoliberalism have influenced the labor movement, where by workers are leaving underdeveloped nations and moving to developed nations. The existence of foreign workers has long become a reason to fill the gap in manpower that exists in developed countries. In all reality, this is a worldwide phenomenon, not just one faced by South Korea. On the contrast the increase in foreign marriage comes with its own set of unique features that are interrelated with the declining birthrate and aging population in South Korea. In other words, there is no

denying the statistics indicating that the nation is one of the world's fastest-aging societies with the lowest birthrate. Furthermore the income gap between the rich and poor as well as the economic imbalance between urban and rural populations, makes matters worse in that rural communities lose their vitality. It is common for men living and working in farming areas to face difficulties in finding a spouse. Under these circumstances they choose to marry foreigners to maintain their lineage. Such attitudes are deeply linked with patriarchy that even considers marriage as a method to reproduce posterity. In addition. It compromises with the poor women's need of social success in East Asia. In fact, women from economically underdeveloped countries may choose to engage in international marriage migration to improve their status of living.

The migrant women by marriage have a certain degree of fantasy for Korea through drama based on Korean wave. For a marriage decision, some migrant women follow their judgments but most fail to make a rational and objective decision because they are invariably misguided or cheated by temptation and false information from international marriage agencies. In this context international marriage migration could be viewed as a gender phenomenon and spouses might also be targets of the commercial marriage market (Wijers and Lin, 1997). To

explain it shortly, commercialized and feminization of marriage is the most important characteristic of immigrant families in South Korea. Whether intentional or not, South Korea is unprepared to deal with social changes and the necessity to develop multicultural policies also called Damunwha. The latest attempt by the government has been to enact the "Support for Multicultural Families Act (SMFA)" which regulates eligibility and social services for immigrant families. In this context I point out the issues and limitations of multicultural (Damunwha) families. First I discuss the definitional limitations on Damunwha families in South Korea. Second I explore the major issues they face. Third I analyze the SMFA and discuss its problems. Finally I examine the implications of these issues for developing culturally appropriate social services.

#### **CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE DEFINITION OF THE DAMUNWHA FAMILY IN SOUTH KOREA**

The word 'multicultural' has broad meanings that include not only the cultural aspects but also the institutional elements of the word. Today, owing to the influence of globalization Its meaning has expanded widely from an economic issue to a social agenda. As explained earlier there are various reasons why Korea has become a multicultural society and it is clear that the original value of a multicultural society is slanted in favor of its intentions. The Korean government created the word Damunwha to replace the word 'multicultural'. According to this alternation It uses the expression 'Damunwha family' in the act which implicates the multicultural family. If the government wants to use it as a formal definition to refer to multicultural families It must consider a wide range of socioeconomic matters. Put another way, whereas the word 'multicultural family' includes cultural diversity and socio-economic change the Korean government has begun to use it contractedly; at best the word has been synonymous with international marriage. It leads to an inappropriate, one-sided interpretation as a result of which the SMFA cannot cover the whole range of issues for multicultural families.

According to the SMFA (2012), there is a world of difference between concerns for migrant workers and their children and concerns for migrant women by marriage and their children. SMFA defines the term 'Damunwha family' as a family that meets any of the following items: a family comprised of a married immigrant and a person who acquired nationality, a family comprised of a person who obtained permission for naturalization and a person who acquired the nationality of the Republic of Korea pursuant

to birth. Under the definition If he/she wants to have rights in terms of SMFA there are only two methods to do so: marry a Korean or obtain permission for naturalization. In other words, for example, migrant workers have no grounds to become a Damunwha family even if they form a family in Korea. SMFA pretends to develop globalized guidelines for multicultural families but they contain superficial features; the real intention focuses only on the immigrant person, particularly women who have married Koreans. In summary, both migrant workers and women are actually members of the 'multi-culture' and have equal characteristics that may or may not be distinguished from Korean society. However, concerns for them vary in the significant difference of whether they can develop a kinship with Koreans.

#### **MAJOR AREAS OF ISSUES AND PROBLEMS FOR DAMUNWHA FAMILIES**

International marriages have increased in South Korea every year since 2000. Damunwha families exceeded 570,000 in 2011 and most spouses are foreign women. In particular In the case of men who work in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industries, marriage to foreign women is 38% of total marriages. Currently the number of migrant women in international marriages is approximately 150,000 in total (MOGEF, 2012). As the number rises, various issues that South Korea has never experienced are emerging simultaneously. At first the situation was regarded as a racial and cultural conflict, so the government tried to resolve it by educating people from a multicultural perspective. However, it is now clear that these matters are more closely related to social problems. In other words, serious social problems such as poverty, discrimination and violence are found in multicultural families and these problems are becoming even more severe. The problem can be divided into three issues: domestic violence, feminization and commodification of international marriage and discrimination and inequality of children in international marriage.

**Domestic violence:** Domestic violence resulting from cultural conflicts and racial prejudice is interrelated with the existing domestic violence problem which still requires institutional approaches. When domestic violence is raised, victims often they are women hesitate to ask for help from others or report to the police. Because of patriarchy, family problems are considered personnel things so that victims of domestic violence only endure the harsh environment without any resist. Though it is quite wrong, foolish attitude, yet they are tamed it when

Table 1: Nationality of migrant women married to Korean men

Years/ nationality	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006		2007	
						N	%	N	%
Total	10,006	11,017	19,214	25,594	31,180	30,208	100.0	29,140	100.0
Japan	976	959	1,242	1,224	1,255	1,484	5.0	1,665	5.7
China	7,001	7,041	13,373	18,527	20,635	14,608	48.4	14,526	49.9
USA	265	267	323	344	285	334	11.0	377	1.3
Philippines	510	850	944	964	997	1,157	3.8	1,531	5.3
Vietnam	134	476	1,403	2,462	5,822	10,131	33.5	6,611	22.7
Thai	185	330	346	326	270	273	0.9	531	1.8
Russia	157	241	297	318	236	206	0.7	156	0.5
Mongolia	118	195	318	504	561	594	2.0	745	2.6
Others	660	658	968	925	1,119	1,421	4.7	2,998	10.3

Park (2009)

young. Even most men regard themselves as controllers who have rights to regulate their families. This issue goes deeper in the Damunwha families. Men who marry foreign women tend to think their marriages are kinds of products that can purchase by money. Consequently, compared with non-international marriage couple they do violence to their foreign wives without any guilt feeling. For example, According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family the percentage of married migrant women who experienced domestic violence was 69.1% in 2010. This is higher than the domestic violence rate in the general household which is at 58.6%.

Furthermore, a national survey by the Emergency Support Center for Migrant Women (ESCMW) shows that migrant women are exposed to various types of domestic violence by their Korean spouses. From 2006-2009, migrant women experienced abuse that included hitting (83.55%), verbal abuse/contempt (33.33%), expulsion (22.33%), child abuse (3.70%), threats (3.59%) and sexual abuse (3.16%) (ESCMW, 2010). Nevertheless the concept of families in crisis has not been established in Korean society, leading to the lack of effective measures to support them. As a result Institutional efforts to solve this problem have been at a near standstill for many years.

**Feminization and commodification of international marriage:** International marriage is conducted in various ways; as it is based on personal interest It is nearly impossible to describe the stereo-type. Nevertheless, the characteristics of international marriage in South Korea can be defined as ‘feminization and commodification’.

The proportion of marriages between Korean men who live in rural areas and foreign women has risen to 35.9%. One out of every three Korean men who works as a farmer is married to a foreign woman, most of whom come from East Asia (Statistics Korea, 2007). For example as seen in the Table 1, Vietnam has increased to 33.5% in 2006. There are two reasons for the increase in these marriages: the declining birthrate and the aging population in rural areas and poverty is rampant in those

areas. As the average income is still very low when compared to the wage earner, agriculture is considered to be a declining industry in Korea. The average male/female ratio in those areas has been declining drastically and as a result there are not enough local women for the farmers to marry. It triggers the declining birthrate and increases poverty in those areas. In contrast, owing to the influence of Confucianism, most Koreans still want at least one son not a daughter to carry on the family name which explains why Korean men in rural farming regions marry foreign wives regardless of whether this is really what they want to do.

Within this context there are 1,465 commercialized international marriage agencies in Korea (MOGEF, 2012). Commercialized agencies provide a match making service between Korean men who failed to find Korean spouses and foreign women who want to improve their economic and social statuses through international marriage, especially those who live in underdeveloped countries. However, some of these agencies have a number of problems; for example, females seeking to migrate to Korea by marriage are often exposed to illegal activities, trafficking and other serious violations committed by the agencies (Seol *et al.*, 2005).

**Discrimination and inequality of children of international marriages:** Although, rapid social changes have taken place in South Korea as has been shown there was little time to prepare for a multicultural society as it was just ‘one race’ for a long time. Koreans would have to adapt themselves to a globalized thought process; however, most of their perceptions are still based on ethnic homogeneity which makes matters worse. Above all, children from Damunwha families are exposed to school violence and various types of discrimination. There were 36,706 children from Damunwha families attending primary, middle and high schools in 2011. Among them the number of children who attended primary schools was 27,285. Social problems are rapidly increasing and have expanded widely. According to a report by the National

Human Rights Commission of Korea (N = 186, NHRC) children from international marriages have experienced serious discrimination including bullying (37%), beatings (15.1%) and having no friends (59%) (NHRC, 2010). The worrisome outlook is that when these young children of international marriages grow into emotionally sensitive teenagers, many will not be able to endure prejudicial views or discrimination coming from their peers and consequently will forgo secondary school studies.

**Analysis of the support for multicultural families act:**

As previously explained Immigrant families are exposed to complicated problems that indicate the need for social services from all angles. Recognizing that serious problems exist and have escalated in various forms in multicultural families the government has introduced a comprehensive act to help them. The purpose of the act is to improve the quality of life of multicultural family members and to unite society by helping multicultural family members enjoy a stable family life. To accomplish this goal the law emphasizes the responsibility of the government to help multicultural family member live stable family lives in terms of human rights. Social services for immigrant families are being widely adopted as an important provision of the SMFA. Dealing with the issue as it is described above the government enacts several important guidelines; among them, Articles 6, 8, 9 and 10 of the SMFA are strongly linked with these problems.

**Provision of information about daily life and educational support (Article 6):** The SMFA provides information related to daily living and education. According to Article 6 of the SFMA It presents specific guidelines that the central and local governments may provide married immigrants and naturalized citizens with fundamental information necessary for living in Korea and may provide them with the support necessary for them to receive education concerning social adaptation as well as occupational education and training. However, the act does not provide rules regarding how the government should create the budget for the programs or what type of delivery system should be used. In addition, the act does not provide the definition of ‘fundamental information’. In other words, married immigrants and naturalized citizens might face difficulties in knowing the kind of information they could get from public institutions and so are not aware of their legal entitlements. Superficially It includes a variety of information but no standard practices; it simply presents good figures.

**Protection of and support for victims of domestic violence (Article 8):** Article 8 of the SMFA provides guidelines for

government entities to assist migrant victims of domestic violence. According to Article 8, major rules state that governments shall endeavour to prevent domestic violence in multicultural families and to expand the establishment of counselling centres for domestic violence and provide protective facilities with interpretation services available in foreign languages in order to protect and support married immigrants, naturalized citizens and so on, who have been victimized by domestic violence. In addition, governments may provide married immigrants and naturalized citizens with necessary services such as language interpretation, legal counselling and administrative assistance in making statements and discovering facts when they terminate a marital relationship because of domestic violence. Under the act they simply authorize these actions but do not define the specific entitlements that are available to victims. They pretend to emphasize the government’s responsibility to protect migrant victims; however they also allow wide discretion for government entities to choose how and to what extent they will assist the victims. Furthermore, there are no rules for establishment of organizations that can offer shelter for victims and provide legal and specialized information depending on the victims’ urgent needs. In fact the act imposes no absolute legal obligations on government entities to provide such services. Because the central government has issued no specific guidelines for providing services under this act, service quality may differ among local governments, depending on how service providers interpret the policy underlying the act and how much effort they are willing to put forth (Choi and Byoun, 2012).

**Support for health management before and after childbirth (Article 9):** The SMFA prescribes support for health management. However there is no mandate to enact it. Major health services defined in Article 9 include the following: nutritional support, health education, provision for a helper service before and after childbirth and medical examinations. If the purpose of Article 9 is focused on health service these provisions are insufficient to fulfil that goal. In fact the law provides health management service only for pregnant woman or mother-to-be. As we know, health service should not be considered as temporal one, rather it is lifelong social service for everyone. Nevertheless the SMFA narrows its domain and period for health service.

**Care and education of children (Article 10):** The number of children who suffer from discrimination is on the rise every year. Discrimination stems from cultural conflicts and misunderstandings. Moreover with many arriving

from overseas in their teens, language and cultural barriers are a challenge to succeeding in school. About 30 percent of children with a foreign parent are outside the school system entirely, according to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Within this circumstance, Article 10 of the SMFA provides for the care and education of children. According to Article 10 the government shall prepare measures for educational support to children of multicultural families in order to help them quickly adapt to school life. In addition the government may provide children of multicultural families with supportive educational programs in addition to their regular curricula or extracurricular programs. Based on this research, state and local governments shall endeavour to provide children of multicultural families with support in care and education before they enter elementary school and may provide them with the necessary support for improving their linguistic proficiency. Children should receive support in developing their language skills through the provision of educational teaching materials and support in the Korean language. Nevertheless, many children from multicultural backgrounds experience difficulties in their studies and suffer from identity confusion. This is caused by many factors including their poor legal and social statuses. Inability to register as Korean nationals, economic setbacks, lack of Korean language skills and obstacles in adapting to the Korean culture. Moreover, Article 10 has no mandatory feature; many municipalities have not enacted their own guidelines for supportive educational programs.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to address the issues of immigrant families with regard to how the SMFA responds or does not respond to their needs. It is true that South Korea has put forth various efforts to develop reasonable social services and address migrant families' social problems. Moreover, the SMFA is an important legal act as it presents the formal position of the state, showing that the government has a responsibility to protect immigrant families' social rights. Using the law would allow an evaluation of the efficiency of the social service for immigrant families. Also, it can be utilized as a model for another country that might want to develop a similar system. However, as has been shown, an existing program run by the SMFA barely covers the basic social needs of immigrant families or the discrimination they experience. Because it does not relate well to other social

security such as social insurance and educational policies. Its approach is characterized as a fragmental one, not an inclusive one.

In comparison with other countries which have plenty of experience for developing legal and social institutions for newcomers, South Korea is still tottering. Therefore, only massive investment and vigorous research would help realize the country's ambitious goal of achieving globalization. To make a desirable model, it should equip an orientation system for prospective immigrant families to South Korea. Additionally, it should expand intangible social service to newcomers to help them make a successful settlement. In response to these matters I suggest the utilization of the 'One Stop Service Center for Newcomers' as valuable foundation, especially in supporting and monitoring them. As a result the most important issue South Korea should immediately respond to is to have standards in place to assess the needs of immigrant families. Then, Koreans must change their perception of immigrants as foreigners and welcome them as newcomers. It is essential for South Korea to develop sustainable social services that are multi-dimensionally sensitized for the newcomer.

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