

Trends in Marriage Migration and the Well-Being of Southeast Asian Wives in South Korea

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Abstract

Marriage migration of women is a global phenomenon; however, social work's response to the needs of these women and their families has been slow. This article reviews the trends in marriage migration in South Korea, focusing on women from Southeast Asia, and examines emerging research on this population over the 10-year period from 2000 to 2009 in the following areas: acculturative stress, adaptation and life satisfaction, marital and family relations, depression, and human rights. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research and makes suggestions for policy and social work practices to improve the well-being of marriage migrant women and their families.

Keywords: Marriage migrants, Southeast Asia, acculturation, human rights, well-being, South Korea

1. Introduction

Marriage migration is a global phenomenon that has ignited a discourse on national identity and citizenship as well as transforming the culture in many portions of the world. Every year, tens of thousands of women from less developed countries cross borders to marry men in more developed countries. Men in Western Europe and the US seek marriageable women from Russia and Eastern Europe (Levchenko and Solheim, 2013), and men in East Asia and Australia find prospective wives in Southeast Asian countries (Lu and Yang, 2010). The very nature of marriage migration places these women in a vulnerable position because the women lack resources, language skills, social support, and legal protection in their adopted countries. Only recently, the field of social work has begun responding to the needs of these women and protecting their rights (Valtonen, 2008). Consequently, social work research on marriage migrants and their families remains in its infancy.

Over the last two decades, South Korea has become a receiving country for marriage migrant women. As Korea's¹ economy surged, its birth rate dropped and life expectancy soared, Korean women achieved higher education, obtained employment and delayed marriage. For less educated Korean men with limited means or men living in rural areas, marrying a Korean woman has become an unattainable goal. Thus, a shortage of marriageable women in rural areas and the desire of Korean men to start a family (Kim and Choi, 2011) influenced Korean men to marry women from Southeast Asian countries as well as ethnic Koreans from China, using marriage brokers. As of January 2014 in Korea, nearly a quarter of a million women were marriage migrants (Korean Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, 2014). The pace of international marriages has slowed in recent years but has not ceased. There were 16,200 such marriages in 2014, constituting 5.3% of all marriages (Korean National Statistics Office, 2015). As the number of such marriages soared, so did concerns over the fragility of these new families. Marriage migrant women, particularly women from Southeast Asian countries, experienced difficult transitions into a Korean family system. Family conflicts and domestic violence led to a higher divorce rate for these families compared with other Korean families.

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Limited legal protection and lack of social and economic adaptation added to their vulnerability. For migrant women, adaptation to a newly formed family and Korean society obviously involves an acculturation process and subsequent acculturative stress, which must affect marital satisfaction, life satisfaction, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. A growing body of research on marriage migrants is a response to these emergent social issues. Although progress has been made in remedying these problems, we believe that comprehensive social work practices are needed. A systematic review of research would enable the field to assess current knowledge, offer suggestions for future research, and offer practice and policy recommendations (Booth et al., 2012). The present study seeks to fill this gap by reviewing studies examining the well-being of Southeast Asian marriage migrants in Korea. We first examine the trends in marriage migration and the underlying issues to situate subsequent findings in Korean social-political contexts. Then, we discuss the review methodology, including the selection criteria and the coding process of studies from 2000 to 2009. We present findings on the methodological issues that were identified by the review process. The review of research is synthesized into the following five topics: 1) Acculturative Stress; 2) Adaptation and Life Satisfaction; 3) Marital and Family Relations; 4) Depression; and 5) Human Rights. This critical examination concludes with implications for social work research, policy, and practices for the future.

2. Marriage migration: trends and underlying issues in South Korea

In recent years, South Korean marriages involving non-Korean spouses have represented 8%-10% of all marriages (Korean National Statistical Office, 2007, 2011). Until the late 1990s, marriage migration to Korea was limited to a small number of cases (Chung and Yoo, 2013). In just 15 years, from 1990 to 2005, marriages involving non-Korean spouses increased nine-fold. Although these changes were unexpected and unprecedented in Korea, similar trends in marriage migration were observed in other East Asian countries. For example, in Japan, approximately 4% of marriages in 2012 involved a foreign spouse. Of these marriages with non-Japanese spouses, 73% were between Japanese men and marriage migrant women (Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2013). In Taiwan, “a third of all marriages registered in 2003 involved a foreign spouse, and marriage migrants, and 13% of children born that year had mothers born outside of Taiwan” (Bélanger et al., 2010: 1111).

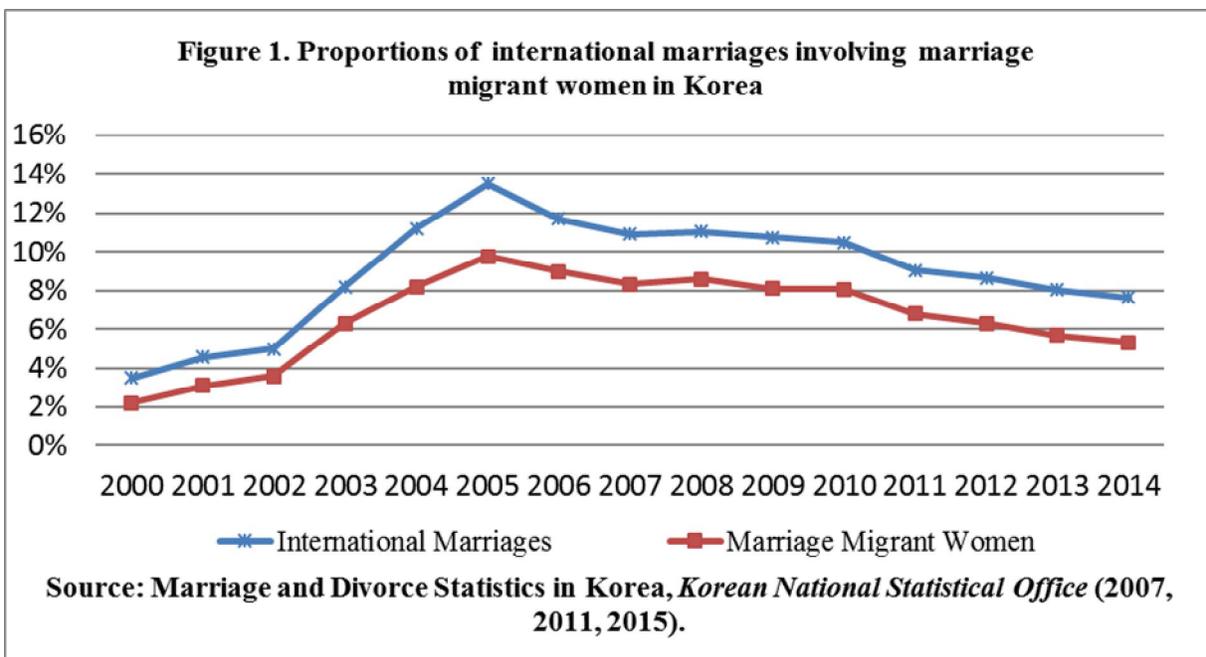


Figure 1 illustrates the trends in international marriage in Korea for the last fifteen years and the proportions of Korean marriages involving marriage migrant women. In 2000, the rate of international marriages was less than 4% of all marriages. The rate of international marriages peaked in 2005 and then leveled off gradually (Korean National Statistical Office, 2015). The lower line in Figure 1 indicates that the majority of these international marriages involved marriage migrant women.

Over a few years, the number of marriages between Korean men and marriage migrants nearly quadrupled. The increase in international marriages has a related effect on the parent's country of origin for many children in Korea: in 2010, 4.3% of all births were to couples with one parent who was not Korean (Korea National Statistical Office, 2011). Kim and Choi (2011) discussed four different theoretical frameworks of marriage migrant women, which include 1) push-pull theory, 2) labor migration theory, 3) transnationalism, and 4) the feminization of migration. Korea's economic prosperity, low fertility rate, and shortage of marriageable women in rural areas are pulling factors that promote international marriages with women from underdeveloped countries. These factors also involve the feminization of labor relocation because these women are involved in domestic labors, caring for the elderly and children in the spouse's country. Poverty in the mother country and personal pursuit of better economic and living conditions may serve as pushing factors that enable these women to participate in the labor market in a new country although their participations in the labor market may be limited to domestic services (Kim and Choi, 2011).

The rapid increase in international marriages was fueled by a growing number of Korean men unable to find Korean spouses but open to marrying non-Korean women (Lee, 2012). Men who seek marriage migrants and sponsor their entry into Korea often work in industries designated "3D," which stands for "dangerous, demeaning, and dirty." Such men are not considered desirable marriage partners for Korean women who have achieved educational parity and have obtained earning power. In 2006, for example, 40% of all Korean men working as farmers or fishermen married non-Korean women (Korea National Statistical Office, 2007). Comparatively, women from Southeast Asia are willing to leave their home countries to seek better opportunities in a foreign marriage. Korea is one of several desirable destinations for such women. The marriages are typically arranged by commercial marriage brokers approved by the Korean government. Once the paperwork is processed, the women enter Korea as marriage migrants. However, their legal rights and residency are not guaranteed until they obtain full citizenship after several years of living in Korea. The economic and social contexts of marriage migration are complex, and marriage migrants are viewed by many as being in a vulnerable position. Because the husbands in migrant marriages use financial resources to secure brides, some feminists regard these unions as a form of sexual exploitation and even a violation of human rights (APMM, 2010; Schaeffer-Grabiel, 2006; So, 2006; Vergara, 2000). Some feminists also view marriage migration as a manner of securing cheap domestic labor (including care-giving work) and sexual services (Kim, 2010a; Lu and Yang, 2010; Piper, 1997).

Other scholars, however, have moved away from viewing the marriage migrant women as victims. Instead, these scholars regard marriage migration as one facet of the larger phenomenon of transnational migration and propose a more nuanced view of these women as autonomous agents seeking to better their own lives (e.g., Kim, 2010b). This transnational perspective views the effects of marriage migration at three levels: global, local, and personal. On the global scale, women in less developed countries migrate to more developed countries and thus participate in an international division of labor (particularly in domestic and care services). Their migration has local effects on both the receiving and the sending countries, requiring changes in immigration policies and the provision of social and cultural services for newcomers. In addition, marriage migration involves personal stories; requires relocation and adaptation to a new country; involves international travel, resulting in separation from and union with various diverse and extended families; and calls upon women to adapt to marital life and child-rearing in a new culture (Lu and Yang, 2010). The Korean reality falls somewhere between the feminist and the transnational perspectives. Although Korea as a nation is far more prosperous than Vietnam and the Philippines, the Korean men entering these marriages are generally not prosperous at all. Typically, these men are of limited means, farmers, fishermen, and blue-collar workers. In fact, their lack of financial resources – at least compared to their fellow countrymen – is the primary reason why they cannot find Korean brides.

The young women who enter into these marriages, in turn, are availing themselves of an opportunity to secure a better future for themselves and their families of origin (Kim, 2007a). The growing phenomenon of international marriage, or so called "intra-Asia flow" (Lu and Yang, 2010), has required Korea to face complex challenges. Korean society has traditionally placed a high premium on ethnic homogeneity. Grounded in the long history of an independent nation with its own language system, many Koreans take pride in their nation's single lineage population. Moreover, Koreans living in regions sustained primarily by farming and fishing tend to espouse the patriarchal values of Confucian ideology. Therefore, at least initially, foreign-born wives were expected to simply adopt the culture and customs of Korean society.

However, Koreans have begun to realize that this expectation is unreasonable given the changing structure of their society. Some migrant wives, for example, want to pursue their own goals, including employment. After all, migrant wives were motivated to enter into these marriages by a desire for greater opportunity and prosperity. In recent years, there has been growing “multicultural contention” in Korea (see Kim and Oh, 2011; Lim, 2010). Government entities have responded to the demographic and social changes created by the increase in marriage migration by coordinating efforts to address the needs of multicultural families and their offspring. However, these efforts have been criticized by some for their overtly “assimilationist” approach (Kim and Oh, 2011). In short, marriage migration has been a response to a desire for family formation among socio-economically marginalized South Korean men but has forced the Korean society to reexamine its long claim to a homogeneous culture. As the following review demonstrates, this process has not been without its share of stress, tension and outright conflict.

3. Method: A systematic review of research studies on Southeast Asian wives in Korea

In the first decade of 2000, marriage migration not only changed patterns in family formation among Korea’s marginalized sectors but also spurred a debate on the well-being of marriage migrant women and their families. Wives of Southeast Asian origins were considered particularly vulnerable because of their steep learning curves in Korean customs. High divorce rates, family conflicts and incidences of domestic violence became prevailing concerns, in addition to the difficulty of adapting to a newly formed family and Korean society. Adaptation to a new family and Korean society also involves acculturation processes, acculturative stress and subsequent changes in mental health. Further, disruption of family and domestic violence created human rights issues because these women become victims of domestic violence and, in some cases, victims of sexual exploitation by organized crime (See Kim and Choi, 2011 for details of violations of human rights during and after the marriage process). The response from academia has been swift; research has been expedited to understand the causes and consequences of acculturative stress, marital discord, family disruption, and human rights issues.

To critically assess the status of knowledge on marriage migrant women from Southeast Asia, we conducted a systematic literature review (Booth et al., 2012). For comparability, our review is limited to studies published in Korean peer-reviewed journals or theses accepted at Korean academic institutions. If a thesis was subsequently published as a journal article, we selected the journal article for the review. The review process is as follows: As a first step, we conducted literature searches using such phrases as “marriage-based immigration,” “immigrant women,” “marriage migrant women,” and “foreign brides” in four Korean academic databases: the National Congress Library (www.mamet.go.kr), Korea Education and Research Information Service (KERIS, www.riss4u.net), Korean Studies Information Service System (KISS, <http://serach.koreanstudies.net>), and DBPIA (www.dbpia.co.kr).

We limited our review to studies published between 2000 and 2009 for two reasons. First, as indicated in the previous section, the influx of marriage migrants dramatically increased in the early 2000s, resulting in heightened interest by scholars. Second, earlier studies, particularly studies prior to 2000, tended to focus on demographic trends and the statistics of marriage migration or on Korean language education issues. A systemic review of ten years of studies on marriage migrant women in Korea enabled us to envision directions of future research and social work services for next ten years and beyond. We further narrowed our inclusion criteria by focusing on issues germane to social work, particularly topics related to the well-being of marriage migrant women and their families. Our review also excluded studies of marriage migrants who were ethnic Koreans from China. These Korean-Chinese immigrants speak Korean, share similar cultural values as Koreans, and thus face a different set of challenges from marriage migrants from Southeast Asia. However, if a study included Korean-Chinese migrant wives as well as Southeast Asian wives, that study was included in the review. The next step was to categorize and code studies for inclusion for further analysis and synthesis. During this step, each study was checked by two independent coders who were graduate assistants. Two coders independently categorized each study by its primary focus, independent variables, and dependent variables. If there were incongruities between the two coders, the authors reviewed the codes with the assistants until unanimous agreement was reached. Using this scheme, we recognized that acculturative stress was often used as an independent variable whereas adaptation, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction and family relations, and depression were used as either independent or dependent variables or sometimes as mediating variables. In addition, human rights issues, primarily in conjunction with domestic violence and legal protection, emerged as a separate theme.

With these parameters, we finalized 43 empirical studies to be included in the review (see the references marked with asterisks). Despite our intention to review the studies published in the first decade of the 2000s, nearly all of the selected studies were published after 2005. This surprising result is because of the delayed process of scholarly publications on an emerging social issue. Although scholars began to pay attention to marriage migrants and their families, concerned about their well-being in the early 2000s, their studies took several years to move from data collection to publication. For example, Seol and Yoon (2005) collected quality data in 2005; their findings were published in 2008. Therefore, the surge of publications in the latter half of the 2000s indicates the scholarly response to marriage migration.

4. Synthesis of Findings

Our findings are presented in two sections. First, we discuss issues related to methodology. Because the volume of research has increased substantially in recent years, we identify a number of methodological issues (i.e., language proficiency, sampling, and use of standardized instruments) during the review that warrant separate discussions. We then present the current state of knowledge in five areas: acculturative stress, adaptation and life satisfaction, marital and family relations, depression, and human rights. The accompanying tables summarize selected quantitative studies because we were interested in comparing the results of statistical analyses. It should be noted that a number of studies are examined in more than one topic area given their research topics and findings.

4.1. Methodological issues

4.1.1. Language proficiency

Of the quantitative studies, 14 used self-administered questionnaires and 4 used both self-administered questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to collect data directly from marriage migrants. However, only a few of the studies (i.e., Kim, 2007b; Kim, 2007e; Yang et al., 2007) prepared questionnaires both in Korean and in the participants' native languages. For studies using face-face interviews, a few studies (i.e., Park et al., 2007) hired bilingual staff although most studies did not. Thus, whether language barriers were an issue for wives filling out questionnaires or participating in interviews deserves further scrutiny. It is unlikely that marriage migrants of Southeast Asian origins could easily fill out the questionnaires written in Korean. One also wonders whether verbal nuances may have gone undetected and how cultural gaps with non-native speakers were bridged in interviews and surveys. Although many of the studies required a residency requirement for participation, proficiency in the Korean language was not used as a criterion for participation. The duration of stay varied ranged from 6 to 48 months (Koo, 2007; Lee, 2007b). Although duration of residency is a good criterion for study eligibility, residency itself cannot ensure that participants will understand questions and answer them accurately.

4.1.2. Sampling

Research on this population has primarily relied on non-probabilistic sampling methods to identify study subjects. Such methods have allowed researchers to create samples quickly and efficiently and avoid the difficulties of selecting a random sample. Selecting a purposive sample in a particular area may also offer insight into the regional context of processes by which the wives are integrated. Conversely, random sampling produces a representative sample and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the issues. With the exception of a few notable studies (e.g., Park, 2007a; Seol and Yoon, 2008), the majority of the research has sacrificed representativeness by relying on community welfare or family support centers to recruit study participants. Consequently, findings are difficult to generalize to Southeast Asian wives in Korea.

Another issue related to sampling is an underrepresentation of the experiences of Southeast Asian wives living in large urban metropolitan areas. Nearly 75% of Southeast Asian wives live in Seoul or other major metropolitan areas although these women represent a relatively small proportion of total urban populations (Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2015). Their presence and unique problems tend to remain invisible. Although only 20% of the wives reside in farming and fishing regions, their presence is much more likely to be noticeable and often oversampled because of low population density. One exception is a study by Seol and Yoon (2008), which conducted a nationwide survey (excluding Jeju Island) using systematic and weighted sampling methods and succeeded in recruiting 885 participants who were marriage migrant women. Their study provides an example of the importance of representative sampling in which findings can be generalized to the entire population.

4.1.3. Use of standardized instruments

Close examination of the selected studies raises several issues regarding the use of standardized instruments translated into Korean for this population. To measure depression or stress, studies (Chung and Yoon, 2007; Kim, 2007e; Kweon and Park, 2007; Park et al., 2007; Shin, 2006; Sung, 2008) used the translated versions of instruments such as the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) or the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS). Although a few well-known instruments were standardized for the Korean population, the instruments were neither tested nor validated for marriage migrants. Of particular concern is the use of the ASSIS. As the instrument's name indicates, the ASSIS was originally developed in 1994 by Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) for international students and was soon translated into Korean (Lee, 1996). Despite the wide application of the instrument by Korean researchers, the validity of the instrument has not been fully tested or standardized with marriage migrants.

Recently a number of scholars (i.e., Hong, 2009; Kim, 2007e; Kwon, 2009; Yang et al., 2009) have attempted to verify the validity of instruments by obtaining feedback on translated instruments from marriage migrant women and bilingual professionals. For example, Kwon (2009) asked a Korean/English bilingual social worker to clarify the meanings of items of the ASSIS in Korean and then recruited 10 marriage migrant women to gauge their level of understanding of the instrument. Yang et al. (2009) also translated the Korean version of the ASSIS into 6 different languages. Na (2008) translated the Korean version of the ASSIS into Chinese, English, Mongolian, Russian, and Vietnamese, and a set of instruments in each language matched to Korean were then back-translated. Although these efforts are encouraging, there has been no psychometric testing of the ASSIS on this population to date. Another concern is that some studies failed to explain how the instruments were translated and back-translated. Back-translation to the instrument's original language ensures the accuracy of a translation. For example, if a standardized instrument is written in English and subsequently translated into Korean, another researcher should translate the instrument from Korean back into English. If the back-translated instrument achieves an 80%-90% congruency with the original instrument, the instrument is accepted as a valid translation. Many of the studies we reviewed did not indicate translation methods.

4.2 Research findings on the well-being of Southeast Asian wives in Korea

Although there is no single agreed definition, well-being generally includes multiple domains of human functionality, including life satisfaction, the absence of negative emotions and a sense of security (Pontin et al., 2013). For migrants, well-being as a desired goal often involves successful integration into a host society (Lee and Yoon, 2011). During the review process, a number of themes related to the well-being of the women and their families emerged. Some themes, such as, acculturative stress and life satisfaction, are common domains of well-being. Other themes, such as marital and family relations, are specific to the experience of marriage migrants. Finally, we decided to add human rights to our review of well-being. There is growing attention in international social work to the need to identify and assess the human rights of marriage migrants as an important facet of overall well-being (Gamble, 2012). For the purpose of this study, the authors summarized research findings on five dimensions of marriage migrants' well-being: acculturative stress, depression, adaptation and life satisfaction, marital and family relations, and human rights issues.

4.2.1. Acculturative stress.

Not surprisingly, many studies of Southeast Asian marriage migrant women living in Korea examine acculturation processes, particularly the stress associated with living in a new country. Except for a few (Lim et al., 2009; Park, 2007c), all of the reviewed studies used the ASSIS as a measure of acculturative stress. The ASSIS comprises 36 items with a 1 to 5 Likert scale with six subscales: Perceived Discrimination, Homesickness, Fear, Guilt, Perceived Hatred, and Cultural Stress. In general, higher scores indicate greater higher acculturative stress. Table 1 presents a summary of the results of the selected studies to examine the overall Acculturative Stress and the selected subscales using the ASSIS. As seen in Table 1, it is noteworthy that researchers used different items of ASSIS depending on the goal of their study.

Table 1. Summary of selected studies on acculturative stress using ASSIS.

Authors	N	# of Items	Mean (sd)	Findings
Ahn (2008)	174	15	1.72 (.33)	Employment status was inversely related to acculturative stress. Higher family income was negatively associated with acculturative stress. Higher levels of communication with husband and cultural understanding by family were negatively associated with acculturative stress.
Hong (2009)	235	28	2.58 (.67)	Social support and couple's communication mediated the negative effects of acculturative stress on a couple's relationship.
Kim (2006)	174	16	2.73 (.64)	Acculturative stress increased a couple's conflict.
Kwon (2009)	280	30	2.79 (.70)	This study used acculturative stress as a dependent variable. Higher self-esteem and higher Korean language skills reduced acculturative stress. Self-esteem mediated between Korean language skills and acculturative stress.
Kweon and Park (2007)	197	36	98.69 (24.04)	Acculturative stress increased mental health problems whereas social support decreased mental health problems.
Lee (2006)	359	25	2.50 (.76)	Wives who were more assimilated exhibited less acculturative stress. A stronger ethnic identity led to more acculturative stress. Acculturative stress was a significant predictor for depression whereas assimilation and ethnic identity were not.
Lee (2007c)	111	32	2.36 (.63)	Calls to home country, friendship with co-ethnics, marital satisfaction, and relations with Korean neighbors decreased acculturative stress. Age gaps in migrant marriages increased acculturative stress.
Na (2008)	154	36	3.53 (.67)	Wives living in an extended family showed higher levels of acculturative stress than wives living in a nuclear family. Employment decreased acculturative stress. Greater Korean language proficiency and a longer duration of stay in Korea were associated with lower acculturative stress.
Yang and Kim (2007)	304	36	2.14 (.52) 2.75 (.60)	The clinically depressed group scored higher in acculturative stress than the non-depressed group. Family life stress, spousal abuse, self-esteem, and family relations were also predictors of acculturative stress.
Yang et al. (2007)	304	36	2.30 (.61)	Acculturative stress was negatively associated with cultural adaptation and positively associated with segregation and marginalization.
Yang et al. (2009)	197	36	2.35 (.58)	Acculturative stress was used as a dependent variable in this study. Difficulties in sharing housework were positively related to acculturative stress whereas husbands' emotional support showed a negative relation.

Although some variation exists, the total mean of acculturative stress based on the ASSIS is generally modest. Na's (2008) study of Southeast Asian wives in four cities reports the highest level of acculturative stress of any of the studies we examined. However, that study is an exception. For example, Ahn's (2008) study showed that the total mean score for the ASSIS is 1.72. Yang et al.'s (2007) study based on a sample from the Seoul metropolitan area reported a total mean score of 2.3 of 5. Although the total mean scores of the ASSIS were generally low, Homesickness, one of the six subscales, was consistently high across the reviewed studies. This is understandable because most Southeast Asian wives do not have the comforts of their ethnic food, language, family and culture and cannot make regular visits to their native countries because of distance and lack of financial resources. Two contrasting interpretations may be offered for the surprisingly low levels of acculturative stress measured by the ASSIS. One interpretation is that these wives may not in fact experience high levels of acculturative stress; whereas their language and cultural differences may contribute to high levels of acculturative stress.

Yet social support from husbands and/or friends from the same ethnic group (Hong, 2009) or self-esteem (Kwon, 2009) may either buffer or mediate the negative effects of acculturative stress. The second, and more plausible, explanation is that the ASSIS, which is originally designed for international students, may not be a valid and compatible measure to assess acculturative stress in the population. Recognizing the validity issues of the ASSIS for marriage migrants, Park (2007c) developed a 5-item scale for acculturative stress. Its factor analysis showed promising results, which produced one factor (eigenvalue = 2.06, explanation of variance was 41.24%). Lim et al. (2009), using Park's acculturative stress scale, reported consistent results that showed a positive association between acculturative stress, depression, and anxiety. Based on Berry's acculturation model, Park (2007c) also developed acculturation scale, which produced two factors, preservation of one's own culture (eigenvalue = 1.84, explanation of variance was 36.27%) and adaptation to a new culture (eigenvalue = 1.50, explanation of variance was 30.31%).

Park reported that preservation of one's own culture negatively affected perceived psychological well-being and that acculturative stress significantly mediated only the relation between the preservation of one's own culture and perceived psychological well-being. Thus a higher level of preservation of one's own culture indicated a higher level of acculturative stress and, in turn, reduced psychological well-being. Although this development is positive, more rigorous testing and replication are required.

4.2.2. Adaptation and life satisfaction.

Adaptation is a broad topic and touches upon multiple areas, such as social, economic, and cultural adaptation. The reviewed studies variously operationalized the term "adaptation" but appeared consistent regarding cultural adaptation as a natural process (e.g., Koo, 2007). Notably, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and mental health issues were included as components of the research on adaptation. This section focuses only on social, economic and cultural adaptation and life satisfaction because other topics are discussed in depth later. As summarized in Table 2, several studies have focused on adaptation models of Barry (2001) or Berry (1997). Seol and Yoon (2008) observed that social and economic adaptations are influenced by study participants' country of origin and the geographic area in which the participants currently reside.

For example, marriage migrants from Vietnam living in agricultural areas showed a higher level of economic adaptation than marriage migrants from other countries (Seol and Yoon, 2008). Another study indicated that marriage migrant women living in agricultural areas exhibited a higher level of social adaptation than marriage migrants in small or midsized cities (Ryu, 2007).

Table 2. Summary of selected studies on adaptation using standardized instruments.

Authors	N	# of Items	Findings
Park (2007c)	187	6 for acculturation: 3 for native culture, 3 for new culture	Acculturation was used as an independent variable. Based on Berry's (1997) acculturation model, the author developed 6 items of acculturation strategies with two subscales: preservation of one's own culture and adaptation to a new culture. Adaption to a new culture was positively correlated with duration of marriage ($r = .206, p. < 01$).
Seol and Yoon (2008)	885	12 different indexes to measure social-economic adaptation	Using hierarchical clustering techniques, Euclidean distance, and an average linkage between groups, these authors measured social and economic adaptation. Wives from Mongolia and Russia showed higher levels of social adaptation whereas Vietnamese wives living in agricultural areas and Korean-Chinese living in metropolitan areas demonstrated higher levels of economic adaptation.
Yang et al., (2007)	304	28 for 4 subscales	Barry's (2001) 'The East Asian Acculturation Measure' measures integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. A higher score in integration indicates integration of the Korean culture and the culture of origin. A high score in marginalization indicates being isolated and withdrawn from Korean culture and the culture of origin, being unable to form an identity in either culture. A significant ethnic difference in assimilation and integration: Southeast Asian wives ranked lower than other groups such as Korean-Chinese.
Yang et al., (2009)	197	28 for 4 subscales	Barry's (2001) 'The East Asian Acculturation Measure' measures integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Korean-Chinese showed the highest score in assimilation whereas Vietnamese wives scored highest in integration. There were no ethnic differences in marginalization and separation.

Two studies (Ahn, 2008; Park, 2007c) reported that wives are better adapted to Korean culture if they experience satisfactory communication with their husbands and feel that their in-laws understand their native culture. Using case study methods, Yoo et al. (2008) observed similar results: support from their husbands and parents-in-law led to successful adaptation. Not surprisingly, several studies (Kim, 2007b; Park, 2008; Park et al., 2007) observed that family income, social support, participation in social activities, and self-esteem are positively related to life satisfaction. Kim (2007b) reported that social support was an extremely influential positive predictor for life satisfaction. By contrast, the husband's and the in-law's negative attitudes toward the wife's own culture rendered the migrant wife's life more difficult (Kim, 2008).

However, women's autonomy and control of the domestic budget increased life satisfaction. Unlike other studies that identified predictive factors for positive adaptation, Na (2008) identified that stress-related domestic labor, economic hardship, and relationships with the husband and the husband's extended family were predictive factors for life stress.

4.2.3. Marital and family relations.

Because few Southeast Asian wives are gainfully employed outside the home, the primary source – for some, the sole source – of social interaction is family members (Chae and Hong, 2006). Placed in an unfamiliar environment and unable to communicate in a foreign language, many of the wives must rely on their husbands and in-laws to conduct even simple household chores or social activities during the first few years. Kim (2008) indicated it took a long time for a marriage migrant wife to obtain autonomy and control over the domestic budget, during which time the wife has a 'subordinate relationship' with her husband (p.56). All of the studies reviewed indicated that wives experience a high level of dissatisfaction in marital and family relations. One study (Park, 2007b) reported that one-third of the wives surveyed planned to divorce their husbands, which is consistent with the high divorce rates recorded among international marriages (Korea National Statistics Office, 2011). Low levels of satisfaction with marital life and husbands' violent behaviors predicted intent to divorce in this study. Divorce rates can be underestimated among this population because many of these wives lack the resources to pursue a legal separation from their husbands and because these women must prove that the reason for divorce is attributed to her husband (Kim, 2011). These difficulties are often exacerbated by language barriers, domestic violence, and poverty (Kim, 2008; Lee, 2005; Lee, 2006; Yang, 2006; Yu, 2008).

A number of the studies we reviewed examined factors influencing marital or family relations. Table 3 summarizes these studies.

Table 3. Factors for marital or family relations in selected studies.		
Authors	Dependent Variable	Predictive Factors
Chung and Yoon (2007)	Marital Relations	Couples' cohesiveness and fluency in Korean were positively related to marital satisfaction. Parenting stress was negatively related to marital satisfaction.
Hong (2009)	Family Relations	There was a strong negative correlation between acculturative stress and dyadic adjustment and strong positive correlations between social support and couple's level of communication, and dyadic adjustment. Both social support and a couple's level of communication mediated the effects of acculturative stress on dyadic adjustment.
Jun et al., (2009)	Family Relations	Korean language level directly and indirectly affects families' health by resilience and marital satisfaction. Korean language also has an indirect effect on families' health via social support.
Kim (2006)	Marital Relations	Level of education, family income, fluency in Korean, and support by co-ethnic friends decreased marital conflicts. Acculturative stress and cultural identity (attitude toward separation) were positively related to marital conflicts. Fluency in Korean, degree of assimilation, co-ethnic friendship, mother-in-law, and support by NGOs were negatively related to wife abuse. Acculturative stress, marital conflict, and attitudes toward marginalization were positively related to wife abuse.
Kim (2007e)	Marital Relations	The level of marital happiness among marriage migrant women was 7.33 of 10 points, which was quite similar to levels of Korean women in the general population. Intimate and mutually accepting family relationships, the husband's efforts to understand the wife's culture, and hours of leisure time with the husband were positively associated with marital happiness whereas domestic violence and acculturative stress were negatively associated with marital happiness. Intimate and mutually accepting family relationships and the husband's efforts to understand the wife's culture were the most powerful variables affecting marital happiness.
Na (2008)	Life Stress	Stress related to domestic labor, economic hardship, and relationships with husband and husband's extended family were predictive factors for life stress. Life stress and acculturative stress were negatively correlated.
Park (2007b)	Intention to Divorce	A large gap exists between pre-marriage information and reality. Dissatisfaction with marriage is a problem. There is spousal abuse. Low Korean language proficiency adds to problems.
Park et al., (2007)	Family Relations	Self-esteem was negatively related to family conflict. Number of children was positively related to family conflict. Self-esteem was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction, followed by conflicts on economic issues, the number of children, conflicts with extended families on the husband's side, and income.
Yang (2006)	Couple's Adjustment, Marital Satisfaction	Korean-Chinese wives and their Korean husbands showed the highest level of adjustment. There was no group difference in the level of marital satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, parenting stress is negatively correlated with marital satisfaction and family conflict whereas family income and fluency in Korean are positively correlated with marital satisfaction (Chung and Yoon, 2007; Park et al., 2007). Acculturative stress is consistently observed to be a significant factor in marital conflict or spousal abuse because high acculturative stress is likely to increase marital conflict or spousal abuse (Kim, 2006). Marital life satisfaction was highest among Korean husbands married to ethnic Korean Chinese, followed by Filipino and Japanese (Yang, 2006).

Although only a few studies examined Korean men's experiences in international marriages, the men reported a significant gap in expectations. The wives' expectation of an "equal relationship in marriage" is a stark contrast to the husbands' expectation of an "unequal or hierarchical relationship" (Kim, 2007a; Lee, 2005; Park, 2007b). Data on in-laws, like data for husbands, are limited except for a few notable studies. Chae and Hong (2006) reported that the husband's parents often actively participate in the process of selecting a prospective bride by visiting the bride's country with their son. Those authors also reported that when a mother-in-law becomes supportive of a bride by buying clothes, a cellular phone, and even sending money to the bride's family, the wife's marital satisfaction and adjustment to Korean society become easier. Another study (Chung and Yoon, 2007) reported that 32.5% of study participants were living with parents-in-law and that another 12.3% were living with other extended family members. Neither is typical of the modern Korean family household.

Although the wife's conflicts with in-laws were negatively correlated with marital satisfaction, conflicts with in-laws were not a predictive factor for marital satisfaction when other factors were controlled (e.g., age and education) (Chung and Yoon, 2007, Kim, 2007e). One consistent finding is that the wife's relationship with her Korean mother-in-law is second only to her relationship with her husband in importance because the mother-in-law has enormous authority in families that enter into international marriages. To date, little is known regarding parent-child relationships among the Korean marriage migrant population. This lack may partially be a result of the fact that international marriage is a comparatively recent social phenomenon in Korea. As such, children from these marriages remain too young and too few to participate in research studies.

4.2.4. Depression

Depression is a negative indicator of well-being and reflects a troubling sign of the woman's difficult life in Korea. As seen in Table 4, several studies used Korean versions of standardized depression inventories to assess depressive status and its relations with other aspects. However, it is difficult to discern what proportions of the women in fact suffer from clinical depression. For example, Lee (2007a) and Yang and Kim (2007) used different cut-off scores for clinical depression, and their results do not appear to match (*For details of cutoff points for clinical depression, please refer to Table 4*). Whereas one study (Sung, 2008) reported 21% of the participants with a clinical level of depression, another study (Lim et al., 2009) reported only 2.6%. Yang and Kim (2007) used the scores of 21 from CES-D Korean Version as a cut-off to identify people with depressive symptoms in the community-based study and the scores of 25 as a cut-off for those with major depressive symptoms. More highly educated wives were less likely to be depressed, as were wives who were married longer (Yang and Kim, 2007). Women's demographic and socioeconomic variables were associated with depression. Several studies (Kweon and Park, 2007; Sung, 2008; Yang and Kim, 2007) confirmed that acculturative stress and domestic violence were directly associated with depression and mental health problems. A satisfactory relationship with her husband and positive cultural adaptation to Korean society were protective factors against depression (Park, 2007a; Yang and Kim, 2007).

Less social support was associated with more depression (Sung, 2008). Notably, Cha and Kim (2008) reported that child bearing and delivery were negatively correlated with depression for Vietnamese but not for Japanese or Chinese marriage migrant wives. Group counseling and educational groups, common practices in social service agencies in Korea, were associated with better effective coping and problem-solving abilities among Southeast Asian wives and their families (Lee, 2007b; Lee and Kang, 2007; Shin, 2006).

Table 4. Summary of selected studies on depression.

Authors	Instrument	N	Results
Jun et al., (2009)	Korean CES-D	143	Depression was negatively associated with social support, marital satisfaction, and family health.
Lee (2006)	Korean CES-D	359	When the cut-off point for clinical intervention was 16, 18% of the participants showed clinical depression. There was a significant difference in the level of depression according to the ethnic background of marriage migrants, Filipinos being the highest and Japanese the lowest. However, Filipinos and Vietnamese women displayed the clinical range for depression. Marriage migrant women showed higher levels of depression if they were younger than their husbands, had a wider age gap with their husbands, had higher educational levels than their husbands, had a lower income than their husbands, and had higher acculturative stress.
Lim et al., (2009)	SCL-90-R	184	A satisfactory relationship with the husband, positive cultural adaptation, and higher levels of anxiety were negatively associated with depression. Acculturative stress was a positive predictor for depression, and an unsatisfactory relationship with the husband increased the level of depression.
Park (2007c)	CES-D	187	Acculturative stress and stress as a housewife were positively correlated with depression. Naturalization to Korean citizenship made a significant difference in the level of depression; being Korean lowered the level of depression.
Sung (2008)	BDI	104	6.7% showed a mild range of clinical depression whereas 12.5% and 1.9% showed moderate and severe ranges of clinical depression, respectively. Less social support was positively correlated with higher levels of depression.
Yang and Kim (2007)	CES-D	304	Three cut-off scores (21, 25, and 31) for clinical depression were used: 26.9%, 18.2%, and 8.7% of the women met a clinical range of depression, respectively. Higher levels of acculturative stress, family life stress, and domestic violence were predictive factors for depression. Self-esteem and family relations were negatively associated with depression.
Yang et al., (2009)	CES-D	197	Depression was used as an independent variable in this study and was a positive predictor for acculturative stress; having higher levels of depression was associated with higher levels of acculturative stress.

4.2.5. Human rights.

Protecting the human rights of foreign-born wives of Korean men has emerged as a serious concern because these women face an elevated risk of domestic violence and intimidation but have limited legal protection. Yang (2006) reported that approximately 40% of migrant women were subject to domestic violence and that the husband and mother-in-law were the common perpetrators. Choi and Byoun (2014) reports that from 2007 to 2009, the number of domestic violence cases at the Emergency Support Center for Migrant Women (ESCMW) in Korea was doubled and the actual number would be greater when those who do not seek professional help was considered. Several scholars have noted failures to protect the basic human rights of marriage migrant women in Korea. Based on the case analysis of counseling sessions, Lee (2006) observed significant limitations in laws protecting migrant wives.

Kim (2007c) argued that the victims of domestic violence and sexual exploitation had little available social support or legal recourse. Limitations in current laws protecting marriage migration wives from domestic abuse have been widely recognized (Park, 2008; Oh, 2007). As migrants, these women are not entitled to the same legal and political rights as native-born Koreans, particularly if the wives have not achieved permanent residency. Furthermore, marriage migrants lack adequate support systems and cannot advocate for themselves because of cultural and language barriers. Another concern raised by scholars is the Korean government's lack of oversight of international marriage brokers who recruited prospective brides with false information and engaged in human trafficking (Kim, 2007c; Park, 2008). False information regarding prospective husbands regarding age, health, and economic status was a common issue.

The Korean government enforced a law in 2010 that oversees international marriage brokers, requiring brokers to register with local governments and receive ongoing monitoring and supervision by the local governments. Although divorce is nearly always contentious, the dissolution of marriages between Southeast Asian wives and Korean husbands is particularly problematic because of the wives' relative powerlessness in Korean society. Compared with divorce rates among native-born Koreans, divorce rates for Korean men and marriage migrant women have been high. In addition to other challenges that contribute to divorce, their immigration status is a major complicating factor when Southeast Asian wives seek separation or divorce from their Korean husbands (Kim, 2006; Lee, 2005). If the women are in the early stages of marriage and their permanent residency has not yet been secured, wives may jeopardize their residency status by seeking a divorce. Oh (2007) identified the significant barrier of the regulation requiring domestic violence victims to provide proof of marriage dissolution to be granted temporary residency.

The Korean government's policies have not accounted for the vulnerable positions in which many of the marriage migrant women have been placed. Park (2008) argued that a fundamental cause of migrant women's human rights violations is that many Korean husbands spent significant sums of money to secure the marriage using unregulated brokers. Consequently, many husbands believed that their wives were financially bound to their marriages. The government's policies of requiring the husband's presence and approval of the wife's visa and citizenship further places these wives in a vulnerable position (Kim, 2007c, Park, 2008)

5. Discussion and directions for future research

This review examined trends of marriage migration in Korea and current research on marriage migrant women, specifically women from Southeast Asia. South Korea witnessed a dramatic shift in marriage and family formation in its marginalized populations in the first decade of 2000. During its peak years, one of ten marriages in South Korea involved non-Korean spouses, the majority of marriages involving Korean men and foreign-born marriage migrants. The increase in marriage migration, however, was accompanied by high rates of domestic violence and divorce among this population, raising concerns regarding the well-being of the marriage migrant women and their families. Our review observed that the majority of empirical studies on marriage migrants were published in the second half of the 2000s. Studies concerning language acquisition and demographic profiles of marriage migrants emerged earlier, and studies examining the issues related to well-being were developed later, responding to emerging social problems. Studies appeared to agree that the wives of Southeast Asian origins experience a high level of homesickness. However, estimating the severity of acculturative stress is challenging because of the questionable validity of the measurement instruments. Nonetheless, it appears that acculturative stress could be reduced by social support and better communication.

As expected, marriage migrant women from Southeast Asia struggle with social and economic adaptations in Korea, even more so than marriage migrant women in other countries. Notably, outside employment was a protective factor for stress, perhaps because employment allows the wives to develop their own social network outside of the family and secure the finances to fulfill their Korean dreams. As in any good marriage, communication and support from the husband were associated with a satisfying marriage. Given their migrant status, women's improved proficiency in Korean as well as their family's improved economic standing was also positive factors for good family and marital relations. Not surprisingly, acculturative stress was associated with depression. The wives with high acculturative stress experienced clinical levels of depression. However, because the studies were not longitudinal, we cannot determine whether acculturative stress causes depression.

Nearly one-third of the marriage migrant women wanted to end their marriages, and the statistics appeared to support this number. Disillusion with marriage was exacerbated by domestic violence; however, women's options were limited because of their legal status as marriage migrants. Family disruption, particularly in the early stages of the international marriage, created multiple problems such as the women's legal status and child custody issues. Marriage migrant women, however, are not helpless victims. Kim and Choi (2011) noted that marriage migrant women, compared with native born Korean women, were more likely to seek outside help (i.e., obtaining help from neighbors and calling the police) in cases of domestic violence, indicating their resilience. However, 46.9% of the participants did not seek outside help because of lack of information, potential threats of retaliation and marital disruption by husband and in-laws, and fear of losing residency in Korea (Kim & Choi, 2011).

Based on our review, we suggest several directions for future research. First, there is clearly a need for standardized instruments that will accurately measure acculturative stress, mental health, marital satisfaction, and overall well-being among this population. It is promising that instruments to focus on marriage migrants are in development in Korea (e.g., Sohn, 2012). The development of these instruments will likely benefit from collaboration between Korean scholars and scholars from marriage migrants' countries of origin. Second, research has primarily been conducted on marriage migrants residing in rural areas. The use of random and stratified sampling methods will allow research findings to be generalized. Further, the use of more rigorous research methods would enhance our understanding on this population, such as a meta-analysis (Shin et al., 2015) and a longitudinal study design. Third, research on protective factors among the wives and their families is required. There have been recent advances in understanding how migrant wives create better lives for themselves. For example, we observed that some foreign-born wives build their own social networks by introducing friends or sisters to eligible men in the rural area in which the women now reside (Chae and Hong, 2007; Kim, 2006). Research to identify factors that predict positive outcomes in migrant marriages would help advance the field.

Finally, another important area for future research is family relationships. Although there has been a great deal of research on migrant wives themselves, we know comparatively little regarding their interactions with their husbands and in-laws. Moreover, there is a paucity of studies on the progeny of international couples. Because the number of children from migrant marriages is expected to triple by 2020 (Korean Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs, 2009), there is a pressing need for research on these parent-child relationships, children's adjustment, and issues of ethnic and racial identity among these children.

6. Practice and policy implications

The changing patterns of family formation have significant implications for social work practice in Korea as well as in other portions of Asia. Research has shown that educational and therapeutic programs are effective in helping wives reduce acculturative stress and depression while enhancing adaptation and social integration (e.g., Chae and Hong, 2006; Lee and Kang, 2007; Shin, 2006). However, the issues faced by migrant wives in Korea are multifaceted, and no single program is likely to resolve these matters.

Findings from this study illuminate challenges inherent in cross-cultural marriages and challenges faced by marriage migrants. Because these marriages are a growing global phenomenon, social workers must develop new practices for serving this population. We first must recruit, educate, and retain bilingual and culturally competent workers and identify manners in which to promote culturally sensitive practices to accommodate the needs of marriage migrants and their families (Hong et al., 2013). Social workers and human services workers also must be aware of constantly changing rules and regulations related to marriage, migration, and divorce involving marriage migrants.

We must develop culturally sensitive interventions given the variety of experiences and ethnic origins of marriage migrant women. Developing multilingual websites and communication portals for the women in their own languages could be a component of these efforts. The efforts should include understanding what values and cultural norms are respected or avoided from these women's perspectives. The development of interventions should reflect the women's voices and wishes by treating these migrant wives not simply as victims but as autonomous agents.

The Multicultural Family Support Center in Korea, operated by a non-profit organization with government funding, has typically provided language services and cultural programs targeting marriage migrant women. However, the Center must provide educational programs for couples and their extended families to enhance their communication skills and mutual understanding of Korean culture and the cultures of migrant women.

By presenting narratives of 10 foreign brides, Chung and Yoo (2013) reported how this multicultural family support center serves as a bridge for multicultural families to embrace their lives more positively and to enhance their potential capacity. Further, the Center must provide job training programs for marriage migrant women and a program to build informal and formal social support systems. Noting that migrant women at the multicultural family support center showed the lowest satisfaction with job training programs among other services and programs, Kim (2015) recommends recruitment of career counselors and mentors to guide marriage migrant women.

In addition, we must promote public discourse and education to counteract discrimination against marriage migrants and their families. Social workers will likely be at the forefront of efforts to coordinate services for this population. As such, social workers should be aware of and work toward eliminating bias and discriminatory practices at both the personal and institutional levels. Social work curriculum must embrace cultural sensitivity and focus on developing skill sets for combating bias and discriminatory practices.

At the policy level, the rights of migrant wives should be expanded by more inclusive immigration policies, policies protecting them from bias and discrimination, and by encouraging their participation in local and central government decision-making processes concerning their welfare. Supporting and restoring justice for wives whose human rights have been violated should also be a priority.²Efforts to remove institutional barriers and to increase access to legal and social resources are required for all marriage migrants regardless of where they settle. Proactive policies must address the challenges faced by these women and protect this growing vulnerable population.

Notes

¹In this paper, the term “Korea” refers to South Korea and “Korean” to South Korean

²The Korean government recently responded by establishing the Emergency Support Center for Migrant Women (ESCMW), which provides emergency shelter services, legal counseling, and other related services.

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