

# **A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION POLICIES AND ADULT EDUCATION PRACTICES IN SOUTH KOREA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this session is to facilitate a dialogue on how South Korea's immigrant integration policies and related adult education practices at public social service agencies affect marriage immigrants' learning and becoming in their post-migration context.

Keywords: immigration integration policy, social integration, multiculturalism, marriage immigrants

## **BACKGROUND**

Although historically considered a homogenous society, South Korea is emerging as a migration-receiving country (Castles, De Hass, & Miller, 2014), triggered by a surge of marriage immigrants since the mid-1990s. As of 2018, there were 159,206 registered marriage immigrants in the country, of which 85% were female (Korean Statistical Information Service [KOSIS], 2019). Foreign wives mostly come from Korea's neighboring countries, including China (36.9%), Vietnam (26.7%), Japan (8.6%), and the Philippines (7.4%), but are becoming more diverse recently (KOSIS, 2019). Witnessing the changing demographic landscape, the Korean government enacted the *Multicultural Family Support Act* in 2008, primarily targeting foreign wives and their children. Unlike other immigrant groups (e.g., immigrant workers, international students) that are seen as temporary sojourners, foreign wives have received particular attention in policy making because they are considered permanent residents (Ghazarian, 2018).

## **IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION POLICIES AND ADULT EDUCATION PRACTICES**

In response to the aforementioned law, various policies have been prepared and practiced to help foreign wives integrate into Korean society. Multicultural Family Support Centers (MFSCs) have been established across the country by the Korean government as the central social service agencies to support the social adjustment of marriage immigrants and their children. Adult education programs provided at MFSCs have rarely been examined critically regarding their nature because learning and education opportunities are generally considered positively, bringing benefits to personal growth and development. Existing literature on educational programs at MFSCs tends to address foreign wives' educational barriers, needs, and satisfaction level with educational services (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2012; Lee, 2015; Park, 2009).

Policies and their practice reflect ideas related to particular ideological orientations, but not much research engage in questioning the underlying nature of policy (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). The Korean government, as a policy actor, disseminates the ideology that it values through policies (Considine, 1994). Its immigration integration policies are executed under a deep-rooted ideology of ethnic and cultural nationalism (Jo & Jung, 2017). These policies further shape adult education practices provided at MFSCs, therefore affecting foreign wives' learning and their becoming in Korean society.

As explicitly implied in the titles of the related law and policies, *the value of "family" is emphasized in the Korean government's vision of immigrant integration*. In the past, marriage migration was encouraged by the Korean *government* as its development plan to resolve the demographic and labor shortage challenge related to the declining fertility rate, growing elderly population, and the shortage of marriageable brides in rural areas (Parreñas & Kim, 2011). Marriage migrants are given their legal status in Korea to take on the traditional feminine role of childbearing and caregiving. Their acceptance in Korean society is validated by family formation and maintenance. Such emphasis on value of family can be identified in the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's three foundational policy documents, *Basic Plan for Multicultural Family Support Policy (2010-2012; 2013-2017; 2018-2022)*, which represent the Korean government's official views of multiculturalism and immigrant integration.

The *First and Second Basic Plans* put their primary interest in promoting foreign wives' social integration by educating them with Korean language and culture. Accordingly, the core services at MFSCs are to teach Korean language, history, and cooking and to provide counseling for effective family communication. These services aim to maintain a stable family life by enhancing foreign wives' cultural understanding of Korean society and family relationships. They are asked to assimilate into existing norms by erasing their own cultural backgrounds. Parental education and bilingual education programs are also provided. Rather than focusing on foreign wives themselves, these programs are implemented to support the healthy development of children of multicultural families. A notable change at MFSCs' educational programs in recent years is a considerable increase in vocational programs that prepare foreign wives for entering the labor market. The currently effective *Third Basic Plan* outlines its core policy goal as providing vocational education and training that can lead directly to employment opportunities.

Although the recent policy consideration for foreign wives' long-term adjustment and social involvement is favorable, the actual vocational education programs at MCFSSs train foreign wives into limited employment opportunities (e.g., barista, children's book reader, multiculturalism instructor, and elderly caregiver). The programs disregard foreign wives' different backgrounds, previous work experience, and social and cultural capital they can utilize, which variously shape their employment aspirations. Also, these programs focus on developing minimum skills and making a quick transition into the labor market that positions foreign wives at the periphery labor market. Such employment with an unpromising future can hardly help foreign wives seek better life chances.

## **CONCLUSION**

The three *Basic Plans*, which set guidelines for what foreign wives' integration outcome should look like, consecutively underline assimilating them into existing sociocultural norms of Korean society. Adult education practices at MFSCs, reflecting this policy goal, participate in constituting certain ideal immigrant subjectivities. Despite their good intention to engage foreign wives into a deeper layer of the society, the education programs also serve to govern and ascribe them with the roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers, who only take existential meaning in family relationships. That is, foreign wives are accepted as "new Koreans" but conditionally at the cost of their individuality. Vocational education programs, that are increasing in numbers recently, also assumes foreign wives as a homogeneous group and provide them limited choices in employment training and guidance. This may regulate what

they become and where they are socially located rather than promoting them to actively engage in society.

In this roundtable, I aim to discuss immigration integration policy and its influence on adult education practices for foreign wives to understand how they are presented and constituted as certain ideal immigrant subjectivities. In the given policy context, I call into question how adult education can better serve foreign wives for their long-term adjustment in Korean society. Rather than "fixing" foreign wives to assimilate into Korean society as compliable wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and low-skilled laborers, can adult education create spaces where they can voice their concerns and thoughts in learning and becoming? I would like to invite the audience to think together about how to reorient the adult education system.

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