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Article

# Global Imagination and Agency Formation of Filipino Marriage Migrant Women in South Korea

Mahgie Bual LACABA

## Introduction

Migration is not a new phenomenon and in fact has always been a part of the ancient and modern history of settlement: “Although migration has always been a part of the human experience, the twentieth century saw migration expand to become a global phenomenon with migrants moving across the globe in greater numbers and between more countries” (Williams 2010, 3). Globalization has made the world a smaller place to live in linking not only people but also social happenings around the globe. Things today as they say are just “one click away” making information across the world accessible real time. As the world changes through time, people’s disposition in terms of migration is also being altered. Migration in the global setting includes motivation and desire of an individual or group to move from their location for a better living condition.

One of the issues concerning migration is the so-called cross-border marriage migration. Adopting Williams’ (2010, 5) definition, “cross-border marriage migration is understood as migration that results, at least in part, from a contractual relationship between individuals with different national or residency statuses.” Williams (2010, 1-2) explains that marriage migration happens because there are structural opportunities for individuals to migrate to join intimate partners but this goes with the assumption that migrants have the capacity to act with agency, a notion of self-determination wherein “options are shaped and limited by an individual’s personal circumstances, attributes, and environments as well as by the structures and legislative apparatuses that impact on their lives.” The notion of agency challenges the idea that women from less economically developed countries tend to engage in cross-border marriages in economically developed countries solely because of “economic geography” (Constable 2005, 7).

Although cross-border marriage migration is often associated with the individual’s desire for social and economic mobility, recent literature suggests that coming up with the decision for marriage migration has greater reasons than solely economic motivation (Constable 2003, 2005; Suksomboon 2011; Suzuki 2005; Williams 2010). The common idea of marriage migration

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merely for upward mobility is mainly confronted in this study by analyzing the perspective of the Filipino marriage migrant women themselves in South Korea (henceforth, Korea).

As many academic researchers point out that migration pattern is driven by the economic reasons especially of the brides from developing countries like the Philippines, this research explores on the influence of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) called “global imagination” on Filipino women’s agency in choosing Korea as a “site of desire” (Jolly and Manderson 1997) for marriage migration, without only focusing on the material motivations of the migrants. In line with Appadurai’s conception of global imagination, the narratives of the Filipino marriage migrants interviewed are analyzed to find out how cross-border marriage migration is firstly motivated and later on existed within their global imaginings.

This study uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic research methods. The data are primarily based on in-depth interviews conducted during a six-week field work from September to October 2016, with eight Filipino migrant wives, originating from different regions in the Philippines<sup>1</sup> and currently living in Seoul and Gyeonggi-do. In an attempt to diversify the type of data, informants with varying educational background, age, and socio-economic background are considered.

The women interviewed are between 25 and 37 years old married to Koreans who are between 34 and 47 years old. As to their educational background, one graduated from high school, two are college level, three have bachelor’s degree, and the remaining two have master’s degree acquired in Korea. Out of eight respondents, four met their husbands *through personal encounter* at work or in universities where they studied, three of them met their husbands *through their relatives*, while one met her husband *through a marriage broker*. The length of the respondents’ stay in Korea varies from five to ten years. All of them are legally married in the Philippines or and in Korea.

Conceptual frameworks such as global imagination (Appadurai 1996) and women’s agency are used in order to critically examine and analyze the narratives of Filipino-Korean marriages in Korea.

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1. Respondents are from Pangasinan, Bacolod City, Hagonoy-Bulacan, Pampanga, Puerto Princesa-Palawan, Isabela, Concepcion-Tarlac, and Baybay-Leyte.

## Filipino Marriage Migration

### *The Cultural Logics*

San Juan (2010, 102) argues that there was no real Filipino diaspora before the Marcos regime in the seventies and sixties and that the worsening economic and political conditions in the neocolonial setup from the late sixties to the present resulted in the multitude of Filipinos going abroad: “Because of the severe deterioration in the lives of 80% of Filipinos, rising unemployment and serious foreign-debt problems, Marcos initiated the ‘warm body export’—the Labor Export Policy (LEP)—with Presidential Decree 422 in 1974.” Del Rosario (2005) explains that Filipinos in early 1990s began as plantation workers (pineapple fields and apple orchards) in Guam, Hawaii, and California filling the labour gaps in the U.S. territories. Further, in the 1950s, the aftermath of the American colonial period and World War II, the Americans sent the first *pensionados*<sup>2</sup> to the U.S. to train as teachers and public servants. The oil boom in the Middle East in the 1980s pulled Filipino men both skilled and semi-skilled, to the Gulf countries (Del Rosario 2005, 258). Filipino labour migration continuously intensified along with marriage migration.

The Filipino marriage migration is understood with reference to the colonial past of the Philippines. The aftermath of the Philippine colonial period affects the marriage and migration among Filipino women. The westerners particularly the Americans became the preferred foreign husband among Filipino women who wanted to engage in cross border marriages. For Filipino immigrants the acculturation even begins in the homeland deeply affected by the U.S. and “despite ambivalent and varied attitudes toward America, for many Filipinos the United States is a fantasy” (Constable 2003, 93).

On the other hand, it is not always that Filipino women seek for American men. In *Fairy Tales, Family Values, and the Global Politics of Romance*, Constable shows how Filipino women appeal to American men in terms not only of sexual desires but of cultural and traditional values. In hundreds of websites aiming to introduce western men to foreign women for marriage, Filipino women are associated with the ideas of love, family values, and traditional gender roles.

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2. *Pensionados* is the so-called term because of the generous pensions (stipends) they received during their stint in the United States (Del Rosario 2005, 57).

They are also portrayed in photographs as conservative in contrast to Russian and European women in seductive clothes and poses (Constable 2003, 93-95). Andrea Lauser's (2008, 88) argument is also in line with such a delineation: "Filipinas are described and imagined as more 'traditional,' 'old-fashioned' and committed to family values on the one hand, and less demanding and liberated on the other. The underlying paradox of such marriages is that the men seek a traditional wife while the women hope for more modern husbands and marriages than they may find in their homeland." Aside from the pre-imagined conception, the production and dissemination of information affects the imagination of a kind of an ideal life partner: "Cultural understandings of wifehood and modernity also constitute part of the pull factors that account for motivations of marriage migration, via media and other forms of cultural globalization" (Tseng 2010, 34).

According to Constable (2003, 84) in *Feminism and Myths of "Mail-Order" Marriage*, on the discussion of women from the Philippines and China, "women cited love, attraction, 'chemistry,' respect, and practical and individual considerations that colored their motivation to meet and sometimes marry foreign men." Constable (2003, 85) further argues that "political economy is important for the way that it is linked to the cultural logics of love and desire, but material motives alone are not the only or the primary factor in these relationships." For example, the motivation of the interaction between the Filipino women reflects a certain cultural logic. Western perspectives of the Philippines as an ex-colony contribute to the belief that Filipinas are more traditional, less modern, less influenced by feminism and other ills of western culture, and therefore more devoted than western women. In addition, they are also attracted to Asian images of sexuality drawn from military experience in the country, Catholic and Christian values, English ability, and assumed familiarity to western culture (Constable 2003, 122).

Using a historical-cultural approach, Del Rosario (2005) argues against the modernist bias of resorting to economics in explaining the motivation of Filipino women to marry Americans. Her study called *Bridal Diaspora: Migration and Marriage among Filipino Women* uses the term "post-colonial love" referring to the embodied thought and feelings among Filipino women in explaining the historical relationships of the Philippines and the United States. The study points out that Filipino women's preference for American male spouses and migration choices can be explained by the "cultural logic of

desire” (adopted from Constable 2003). Constable (2003, 122) posits that the correspondence relationships of men in the United States and women from China and the Philippines show that women’s decisions to send letters to the U.S. men reflect certain cultural logic: “The prestige, status, and assumed-wealth associated with U.S. residence, light skin, western feature, or a U.S. accent—reinforced by U.S. popular culture help fuel such desire.”

However, in 1990’s, besides the cases of intermarriages between Filipino women and western men, another marriage migration phenomenon involving Filipino brides occur within Asia (Southeast Asian migration to East Asia): “The intermarriage migration of Southeast Asian women who consider Japan, Taiwan, and Korea to be their destination countries is an unusual type of migration which appears in East Asia” (Kim 2013, 108). This intermarriage migration of Southeast Asian women to East Asia involves Filipino women who initially wanted to go to Japan and earn a living or marry Japanese men for a greener pasture. In addition, due to globalization and rapid development of communication, a lot of opportunities opened for cultural and labor exchanges which also affected the diaspora of Filipino brides.

The cultural logic of the Filipino marriage migration in the West can be explained by looking at the colonial ties of the Philippines with other countries. This study problematizes how such cultural logic operates in Filipino-Korean marriages. Korea is looked at as a desirable geographic location for marriage according to the Filipino women’s understanding of what is “desirable” based on experience, perception, and global imaginings.

### *Filipino Marriage Migration to South Korea*

In Korea, the number of international marriages steadily increased since the late 1990s and most of the marriages are foreign wives from Asian countries to Korean husbands: “Korea has for some time been experiencing a critical shortage of marriageable women in its farming and villages due largely to the massive exodus of rural peasant farmers from the countryside to the cities and industrial zones during the nation’s recent economic development” (Kim 2011, xxii). The so-called “marriage squeeze”<sup>3</sup> prevalent in East Asian countries

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3. The unbalanced sex ratios in the marriageable population. In Korea, male marriage squeeze is due to female internal migration and value transformation leading to delaying marriage, remaining single,

in early 1990s paved way for Korean males to seek brides from Southeast Asia particularly Vietnam and the Philippines. This social problem in Korea paralleled by the poor economic condition of the Southeast Asian countries opened opportunities for women to cross borders not only for labor but also for marriage.

**Table 1. Marriages Between Korean Groom and Foreign Wife (By Nationality)**

Nationality of Foreign Wife	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Vietnam	5,822	10,128	6,610	8,282	7,249	9,623	7,636	6,586	5,770	4,743	4,651
China	20,582	14,566	14,484	13,203	11,364	9,623	7,549	7,036	6,058	5,485	4,545
Japan	883	1,045	1,206	1,162	1,140	1,193	1,124	1,309	1,218	1,345	1,030
<b>Philippines</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>1,117</b>	<b>1,497</b>	<b>1,857</b>	<b>1,643</b>	<b>1,906</b>	<b>2,072</b>	<b>2,216</b>	<b>1,692</b>	<b>1,130</b>	<b>1,006</b>
U.S.	285	331	376	344	416	428	507	526	637	636	577
Thailand	266	271	524	633	496	438	354	323	291	439	543
Cambodia	157	394	1,804	659	851	1,205	961	525	735	564	524
Uzbekistan	332	314	351	492	365	317	324	365	269	255	224
Mongolia	561	594	745	521	386	326	266	217	193	145	145
Indonesia	99	97	74	77	81	82	89	97	121	126	110

Source: Korean Statistical Information Service<sup>4</sup> (<http://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList>)

**Table 2. International Marriage Immigrants (Female)**

Country of Origin	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Philippines	3,913	4,532	5,948	6,157	7,272	8,066	9,071	9,754	10,135

Source: Korean Statistical Information Service<sup>5</sup> (<http://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList>)

and various marriage patterns in Korea. It is indicated that the stereotype of international marriage facilitated by marriage squeeze can mainly be applied to marriages between Korean men and foreign women from China, Southeast Asian countries, and the CIS of the former Soviet Union (Yang and Lu 2010).

- The report by the Korean Statistical Information Service (2016) shows that the Philippines is within the top five country of origin of foreign wives in Korea with regard to the number of marriages between Korean grooms and foreign brides per year.
- The Korean Statistical Information Service (2016) shows that Filipino marriage migrant women annually increased in total from 2007 until 2015.



Before the labor migrants, the first Filipinos who came to Korean peninsula are the soldiers during the Korean War in 1950s, sent to South Korea to help repel the communist aggression of the North Korea. Marriages between Filipinos and Koreans also started during this period, some reportedly followed their husbands later on in the Philippines (Tome 2011, 29).

Aside from the problem of marriage squeeze, the rising awareness of gender equality among Korean women became a pull factors in cross-border marriages (Yang and Lu 2010, 23). As Doo-Sub Kim (2010, 131) points out, “Korea has experienced substantial improvements in gender equity during the past two decades. The number of women entering college and the labor market grew at an increase pace, fostering a powerful economic and cultural transformation of Korean society...young women are well aware that their career and self-realization will be compromised once they get married.”

Kim (2010, 19) argues that the high percentage of men with foreign-born spouses in Korea is attributed to the issue of “farm-bachelor,”<sup>6</sup> which became a national issue in the 1980s with media reports of farmers committing suicide because of frustration of not finding a spouse. The farm bachelors first turned to Joseonjok<sup>7</sup> in northeastern provinces of Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang who unfortunately appeared in media representations as “runaway brides” abandoning their husbands and even children to find jobs in cities (Freeman 2005). These resulted in farm bachelors looking for brides in other countries with the support of the government and guidance of the so-called Unification Church (UC) (Kim 2009, 5). UC was founded in 1940 by Moon Sun Myung and was formally established in Seoul as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of the World Christianity (Kim 2011).<sup>8</sup>

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6. This refers to single farmers in the rural villages whom Korean women are reluctant to marry (Kim 2009, 5).

7. The term Joseon derives from the name of the last dynasty that existed on the Korean peninsula before Japanese colonization. Ethnic Koreans who migrated to northeastern China beginning in the 1860s and throughout the early twentieth century were officially recognized in 1945 as an ethnic minority of the People’s Republic of China under the name of Joseonjok or the Joseon people (Freeman 2005, 190).

8. Choong Hoon Kim (2011, 93) points out that such a marriage arranged by UC has been thriving: “The blessing ceremony facilitated by UC was first held in Seoul in 1961 with thirty six couples. Since then, the scale and size of the blessing ceremony has become larger, as evidenced by a 2009 ceremony for forty thousand couples at Sun Moon University in Asan, Korea.” Other accounts support that UC has played a great role in farm-bachelor’s marriages: “According to church officials, from 1980 to July 2010, a total number of 145,742 brides from various countries including Japan, the Philippines,

UC facilitated marriages as shown in the study of Kim (2009) undeniably involved the material desire of the Filipino women to be married to Korean men who are often portrayed to Filipino women as rich husbands with big houses and cars. However, upon reaching Korea, a lot of women became disappointed and realized the kind of life that awaits them in the foreign country. Minjeong Kim (2013) narrated the lives of two women married through UC in the conducted ethnographic fieldwork to study Filipino marriage migrants. These women are invited by UC to be matched with Korean men who came to Manila all the way from Korea to find brides. Both of these women who have never been to Manila are attracted by the free travel and believed that they can return to their hometown if they happen to dislike the men to be matched to them. However, lured by the promises of UC for a better life and future, they arrived in Korea and eventually are trapped by the manual labor and abuse from their husbands and family-in-laws.

Women matched with Korean farmers have to endure the hard labor of farming while playing the role of a virtuous wife and mother. Because of several cases of abuse and misfortunes being experienced by the brides matched by UC, a lot of women including those from Vietnam and Cambodia lose their trust to UC. Moreover, due to the reported cases of domestic violence in Korea involving migrant marriages, the Philippines banned the mail order bride in 1990 enacting the Republic Act 6955. In Korea, Marriage Broker Act was implemented in June 2008. The law banned advertising banners and fliers for marriage and matchmaking services, changed the registration policy for marriage brokers to a licensing policy, and required brokers to complete mandatory educational classes and to ensure warranty insurance and office space. These regulations, however, cannot control the language, views, and ideas that flow between matching agents and men and women to be matched (Kim 2012, 19). More recently, on April 2014, as the government faces issues on foreign brides and domestic violence, it again imposed new restrictions on mixed marriages.

## Global Imagination and Women's Agency

In an attempt to focus on the recent trend of marriage migration of Filipino women in Korea, this study utilizes Appadurai's conception of "global imagination" in the formulation of marriage migrants' "agency." Through the metaphors of global imagination and agency, the plurality of motivation for marriage migration apart from the economic standpoint is analyzed.

Mika Toyota and Leng Leng Thang (2012, 349) also investigate "global imagination" in terms of marriage migrants: "Global imagination is closely linked with desire. For instance, Japanese and Korean men prefer brides from Southeast Asia partly because of their desire for traditional, homey, feminine wives, images associated with Southeast Asia women." This "global imagination" is useful in examining the previous trend of Filipino cross-border marriages with westerners and the recent trend of intermarriages with Koreans. Global imagination is one's ability to dream and imagine oneself in a different social geographical location globally and suggests that "recent marriage-scapes both reflect and are propelled by fantasies and imaginings about gender, sexuality, tradition, and modernity" (Constable 2005, 7).

Appadurai (1996, 3-4) argues that media and migration have joint effect on the "work of imagination" pointing out that media provide new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds while mass migration as juxtaposed with the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensation produces a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities. What makes the recent increase in the Filipino-Korean marriages is that it utilized the advent of internet aided flow of communication: "There is a growing evidence that consumption of media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, *agency*" (Appadurai 1996, 7).

In the vast literature of marriage migration, women are portrayed normally as victims or agents: "When agency is attached to 'self' and conceived as an element of psychological being, it is said to be an individual's capacity for self-determination realized through decision or action" (Gardiner 1995, 25). Victim feminism has focused on demonstrating the ways in which women are oppressed, abused, and objectified in patriarchal practices and systems, which could eclipse women's agency.

In order to avoid the misunderstandings on victim and agent divide, this

study does not focus on the conventional binary but on the capacity of agency to demonstrate and understand women's action and self-realization. According to Woo (personal communication, November 28, 2016), "the beauty of agency lies in the fact that it sees constraints and opportunities together instead of dichotomizing women as victims and heroines...beyond dichotomizing, women's agency can be empowering and disempowering at the same time."

### *Global Imagination in Shaping Marriage Migration*

Appadurai claims that imagination has become a collective social fact widely affected by media and migration. He believes that modern diasporas bring the force of imagination, as both memory and desire into the many lives of ordinary people: "Those who wish to move, those who have moved, those who wish to return, and those who choose to stay rarely formulate their plans outside the sphere of radio and television, cassettes and videos, newsprint and telephone" (Appadurai 1996, 6).

As discussed earlier, the Philippines as one of the countries of origin for marriage and labour migrants in the earlier period migrate to the countries like the U.S. where the Philippines has historical and colonial ties. This migration is undoubtedly influenced by the idea of a better life and greener pastures in a different imagined geographical location. This idea is not foreign to the marriage migrants themselves in Korea. But in the course of the field work done for this study, Filipino wives in Korea have varying motivations in engaging in cross-border migration that do not only focus on the idea of economic and social mobility.

Three out of eight respondents expressed that they thought of marriage migration to Korea a means of finding a living for their family back in the Philippines. Sending remittances is the very reason why most Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) endure the hardship away from their family. While they think that earning a living in Korea is a form of sacrifice for a greater good, they also imagined that life abroad is always glamorous and worry-free. Three respondents aspired for a Korean drama and a problem-free kind of married life as part of the main reasons for marrying and settling in Korea. Their aspiration of finding their real life leading men who would always support them and make them happy influenced their desire for marriage migration. On the other hand, two of the respondents expressed their interest of simply having a different life

abroad other than what they used to have in the Philippines.

It can be noticed that the global imaginations expressed by the marriage migrants, despite multiplicity, have things in common. As Appadurai (1996, 5) suggests, imagination has become a collective social fact wherein ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of everyday lives. In articulating the plurality of their “imagined worlds,” it shows how women in the study are exposed to changing mediascapes which “refer both to the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film production studios) which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media” (Appadurai 1996, 35).

The aspirations specifically of having a Korean drama kind of life and a different life abroad reflect the proliferation of Hallyu through the media and its consumption by the masses: “This exposure to the Hallyu has helped to create the image of Korea as a land of wealth, prosperity, and lavish spending, an image that resonates well with economically deprived women who are desperate to find a way out of poverty” (Kim 2011, xxvii). Apart from the such images by the media, the plurality of the motivations as expressed by the marriage migrants merely reflect their common idea of “abroad” as a positive everyday life experience.

### ***Transforming Global Imagination into Real Life Situation***

By examining the narratives of the marriage migrants and by analyzing the multiplicity of their global imagination, it is recognized by this study how media-mediated-realities distort the actual married life in Korea. The influence of media in the *work of imagination* is so powerful that the possibility of failed marriage or the reality of the hardship of migration is not easily deciphered prior to marriage. This is not to suggest that people only have access to information that depicts a prosperous and wonderful life abroad. But instead, suggesting that a sort of adventure awaits abroad, there is another assumption they would have negative experiences in the everyday lives of marriage migrants.

As marriage migrants themselves illustrate, their global imaginations do not translate to their actual lives in Korea. This does not propose that their everyday lives are only filled with discrimination and abuse as portrayed in

the daily media. But on the other hand, it explains how reality looks like as experienced by the women in this study.

In both Korean and Filipino culture, building a good relation with the in-laws is a must. The history of extended family can be found in both cultures, so living with the in-laws in Korea may not be new to some Filipino marriage migrants in Korea. "I have been living with my mother-in-law since I came here in Korea and we never had a problem with each other. Maybe because I was also raised living with my grandparents. Unlike the others (Filipino wives) that I know, I luckily never had a conflict with my mother-in-law," says one of the respondents. Although not all wives in Korea live with their in-laws, it is highlighted on the responses collected from the respondents that it is very important to build a good relationship with their husbands' family by calling them once in a while and by visiting them during special occasions (most of the time with gifts) of the year such as Seollal (Lunar New Year) and Chuseok (Thanks Giving Day).

However, it is not always as smooth as that. Many Filipino wives are still in conflict with their in-laws in Korea for many reasons. Some of them find their in-laws too strict than one could ever imagine. One of the respondents had a huge conflict with her Buddhist mother-in-law for taking her children to the Filipino church where she has been affiliated since birth. Another respondent expressed her frustrations about her sister-in-law restricting her to attend Korean language classes in Damunhwa (multicultural center) for a reason that she will learn nothing but hang out with other Filipino women. Some other reasons are incomprehensible for other Filipino wives. As one of the respondents said, "I am totally restricted by my in-laws. They are actually not allowing me to meet other Filipinas like right now so I came here without their knowledge. I just don't understand why they always scold me even just about a pretty little thing like the way I season food. They could have told me something without yelling at me."

Aside from building good relationships with the in-laws, wives must also be involved in the filial duties of their husbands, especially if the husband is the eldest son in the family, like taking care of the ill-elderly parents and helping them in their housework.

On the other hand, one thing that struck many of the Filipino marriage migrant women the most is dealing with the negative stereotypes toward them. Most of them blame the images portrayed by the Korean media about Filipinos

as “poor, mail-order bride, user, gold-digger, and people who take advantage of foreigners.” A Filipino wife recalls one of her experiences, “Personally, I think that some Koreans look down on the Filipinos wives here in Korea. Once, when I took a cab, the cab driver asked me of my nationality. When I said that I am a Filipino, he told me, and he really told me, ‘Why did you marry a Korean? Because of money, right?’ And of course I immediately said, ‘no.’ I said that because I really do love my husband, and then he just did not say anything after that.” Filipino wives in Korea are generally aware of the cases of Filipino runaway brides and other failed Filipino-Korean marriages, but they believe that there are increasing cases of happy marriages that they say, went through “dating process” and are successful.

Filipino wives in Korea tend to think of the fact that marrying a Korean, no matter how leading-man looking, does not guarantee a Korean drama kind of life. Marriage is not a fantasy after all and each marital relationship has its unique ups and downs and ways of solving family problems. One recalls how she despises the drinking habit of her husband whom she described as a “handsome” boyfriend she had. Moreover, many others voice out their difficulty in studying Korean language not only to interact with people in Korean society but for the very reason that they need to communicate with their children and help them in doing their homework in school.

### *Global Imagination in Shaping Women's Agency*

This study argues that agency as affected by the respondents' proclaimed global imagination is realized through their decision for marriage migration. The notion of agency portrayed by the marriage migrants is obviously not free from any constraints although the degree varies. According to the World Development Report (2012),<sup>9</sup> constraints in women's agency include *markets* (female autonomous earnings), *informal institutions* (norms on roles, power relations, mobility, and masculinity/networks), and *formal institutions* (laws on ownership and marriage, enforcement, services, and information).

Migrants who married through marriage broker and kinship network experience more constraints in the markets prompting them to marry even

9. Retrieved November 30, 2016. Available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2012/Resources/7778105-1299699968583/7786210-1315936222006/chapter-4.pdf>.

without knowing their husband very well. They are also pressed by the informal institutions in terms of supposed norms to be responsive to the financial needs of their families in the Philippines while fulfilling their duties to their newly formed families in Korea. Looking at the educational attainment of two out of four women who did not finish tertiary education, and the employment mismatch of the other two, it can be seen how constraints from formal institutions are also reinforced.

Women who met their husbands through personal encounter have less financial strains and do not see marriage as a sole means for mobility. They also possessed potential to be financially independent individuals having professional jobs in the Philippines or in Korea prior to their marriage. Pressure from formal and informal institution is also less compared to women who married through marriage broker and kinship network. However, it does not mean that they experience a stress-free life at all. The self-realization to marry the men they want to be with for the rest of their lives and to form a family abroad circumscribed the agency.

All of the migrants experience the mutually reinforcing constraints of the markets, informal institutions, and formal institutions during marriage. However, the effect of the markets (in terms of the ability to support the family in the Philippines even through the husbands' earnings or the ability to be financially independent) and the informal institutions (specifically in terms of dealing with the in-laws and fulfilling filial duties) are more evident.

Agency, in spite of the mutually reinforcing constraints, provides positive opportunities to the marriage migrants in Korea. Even though agency in general is affected by global imagination that does perfectly reflect the actual everyday experience of the marriage migrants, it produces favorable outcomes. First is the ability to be in a globally imagined geographical location. These migrant women with varying motivations in engaging in cross-border marriage migration are able to fulfill their dream to start a new life in a place other than their home country. As all of them expressed their satisfaction with their current location, it shows how their freedom to make choices of where to go and with whom is exercised.

Second is the ability to build their own family. Except from one of the respondents who doesn't have a child of her own, the rest of the marriage migrants convey their happiness of having a child or children which make their married life more meaningful. The happiness of having children is beyond



fulfilling a reproductive responsibility to the Korean society. It completes the family formation, builds motherhood, and enhances the sense of womanhood. Along with having a family is the ability to gain control. Marriage migrants have in one way or another, a sense of control or shared responsibility over how they would want to build and run their homes with their husbands.

Third is the ability to be financially capable. Most of the migrant women interviewed are able to work and earn money. In the case of the housewives, they can still send money to their families to the Philippines through their husbands' income which shows their influence over resources. Being a wife to their husbands by fulfilling filial duties makes them worthy of being able to send remittances to their natal families without working.

Lastly is the *ability to fulfill global imagination*. Global imagination as motivation is fulfilled although different people have different imaginations. Some realize their dreams to provide for their families in the Philippines, and others who want to live abroad are experiencing a different life in Korea.

## Conclusion

For the past several decades, the United States and Japan are the most preferred destinations for Filipino women for marriage migration. However, the new phenomenon of cross-border marriages in Asia emerged involving East Asian men and Southeast Asian women. Marriage squeeze is cited to be the fundamental factor for the emergence of this phenomenon. Filipino marriage migration to Korea, aside from marriage squeeze, can also be explained by the rising awareness of gender equality among Korean women who intend to delay their marriage for higher education in Korea or abroad, or to pursue a career in the cities. This resulted in the shortage of marriageable women in farming areas and rural villages.

The high percentage of men with foreign-born spouses in Korea is attributed to the issue of "farm-bachelor" prompting the government to facilitate a recruitment of Asian brides including the Filipino women. The recruitment of brides in the mid-1990s is guided by Unification Church which later on lost their popularity because of the unresolved cases of violence against brides, issues of dishonesty, and deceit.

The Filipino marriage migration to Korea has changed the conventional

diaspora of Filipino migration. The continuous increase of Filipino brides in Korea from four in 1990 reaching 10,135 in total in 2015 shows an evident opportunity and logical desire for Filipino women and Korean men to marry.

This study argues that the decision for migration or the notion of agency is shaped by the global imagination of the migrant women. Global imagination includes themes such as social and economic mobility, Korean drama kind of life, different life abroad, problem-free married life, and a prestigious image being married to a foreigner.

But as this study claims, the work of imagination is mediated by media and migration, and therefore, global imaginations do not translate to real life situation. There are several issues being faced by the marriage migrants including the relationship with the in-laws, the factor of money or love, traditional filial duties in Korean society, living apart from the life portrayed in Korean dramas, the necessity to learn Korean language, and dealing with the stereotypes against Filipino marriage migrants. However, as marriage migrant women see the reality of cross-border marriages, their married lives are field with realization instead of regret in their decisions.

This study suggests that women act according to their agency which provides sets of constraints on one hand but opens positive opportunities on the other. Even though agency in general is affected by global imagination that does not perfectly reflect in the actual everyday experience of the marriage migrants, it produces favorable outcomes such as the ability to be in a globally imagined geographical location, ability to build a family, ability to have control within household, ability to be financially capable, and to fulfill their global imagination.

Aside from the pre-conceived global imagination, Korea has become a site of desire among Filipino marriage migrants because of the influence of Korean dramas, development in communication technology and transportation manifested by more venues for communication like online chatting apart from the conventional mail or e-mail communication, and more opportunities to work and study in Korea.

This study concludes that first, Filipino marriage migration cannot only be explained by the use of the economic paradigm as it only reflects one aspect of the global imagination. Second, marriage migration as a manifestation of a woman's self-determination or agency is widely affected by global imagination. Lastly, women should be seen as agents who are capable of exercising their own

agency producing favorable outcomes along with some unfavorable ones.

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## **Abstract**

The Filipino marriage migration to Korea has changed the conventional diaspora of Filipino migration. As many academic researchers point out that the emergence of this migration pattern is driven by the economic reasons especially of the brides from developing countries like the Philippines to more developed ones like South Korea, this research explores on the influence of what Arjun Appadurai called “global imagination” on Filipino women’s agency in choosing Korea as a “site of desire” for marriage migration. This study argues that first, Filipino marriage migration cannot only be explained with regard to the economic paradigm as it only reflects one aspect of the global imagination. Second, marriage migration as a manifestation of a woman’s self-determination or agency is widely affected by global imagination. Lastly, women should be seen as agents who are capable of exercising their own agency producing favorable outcomes along with some unfavorable ones.

**Keywords:** marriage migration, cross-border marriages, global imagination, agency, Filipino marriage migrant women

