

University of Groningen

## Negotiating Masculinity

Lee, Seonok

*Published in:*  
Korea and the Global Society

*DOI:*  
[10.4324/9781003301127-7](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003301127-7)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2023

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lee, S. (2023). Negotiating Masculinity: Migrant Husbands and Cross-Border 'Marrying-Up'. In Y. Ahn (Ed.), *Korea and the Global Society* (pp. 79-97). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003301127-7>

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

# 4

## NEGOTIATING MASCULINITY: MIGRANT HUSBANDS AND CROSS- BORDER 'MARRYING-UP'

*Seonok Lee*

### **Introduction**

In 2014, I visited a government-funded labor counseling center to interview Udaya, a Nepalese migrant working for the center as a counselor's assistant.<sup>1</sup> His stylish outfit seemed to fit well with the clean, modern style of the center. Since most male foreign migrants in this area tend to work as unskilled factory workers, I was curious about how he started working for the center as a staff member. I learned that he initially came to South Korea through the Employment Permit System (a Korean guest worker program) as an unskilled factory worker, then married a Korean woman a couple of years ago. Soon after his marriage, he quit factory work and took this office job with a temporary contract. At first, he was hesitant to take this contract office job because the overall salary for doing factory work was quite a bit higher. However, he eventually quit the factory for his Korean wife. He explained:

Well, I did not want my wife to feel embarrassed. Her friends and their partners have quite good jobs. She would feel ashamed if she had to tell her friends that her foreign husband is a factory worker. You can lie a few times and say 'my husband is a white-collar office worker or entrepreneur'. However, you cannot lie for too long. So I quit the factory.

After meeting him, I was struck by how the social image of migrant factory workers compels people to embrace economic disadvantages; in this case, a smaller income. Why does his Korean wife feel embarrassed about her foreign husband working in a factory, even though his factory work earns a higher income? Furthermore, how does Udaya feel about this 'big decision' – changing his career – when his wife seems to have more power over decision-making? This

initial curiosity brought my attention to a more academic question: How do South Asian migrant husbands manage their gendered integration into the Korean society?

As a new destination of global migration, South Korea faces new challenges to manage the tensions and interactions with the migrants such as marriage immigrants and foreign migrant workers. South Korea, often referred to as racially and ethnically homogeneous country (Kymlicka 2007), is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse due to a rapidly expanding immigrant and foreign migrant worker population (Seol 2000; Prey 2011; S. Lee 2019a). Until the early 1990s, there were only a few foreigners who resided in South Korea, and they made up of only 0.1% of the total population (S. Lee 2019a). However, since the 1990s, South Korea has turned into one of the major migration destinations in East Asia after achieving unprecedented economic growth in the global economy (S. Lee 2019a). As a new migrant receiving country, South Korea assumes its new position as a multi-ethnic and multicultural society despite of the strong undercurrent of ethnonationalism. Therefore, South Korea's active participation in the global society raises an important question about how South Korea can handle this new reality as a migrant receiving country.

In South Korea, while most international marriages are a union between a Korean husband and a foreign wife from low-income countries, the number of migrant husbands has increased significantly over the last couple of decades. These migrant husbands from low-income countries initially entered as factory workers through the Korean guest worker program but ended up in romantic relationships with Korean women (Kwak 2019). For these migrant husbands, marrying a Korean woman can be considered as a cross-border form of 'marrying up' due to their low legal and social status as an unskilled migrant worker and the symbolic status of their country of origin in global economic hierarchies. This chapter mainly focuses on these migrant husbands from South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, who initially entered South Korea as an unskilled migrant worker in the manufacturing, agriculture, and fishing industries.

It is widely understood that international migration offers a particular transitional situation and opportunities for migrants to renegotiate certain gender identities over the course of integration in the migrant host country. Renegotiating old and new gender roles is one of the tensions and challenges that migrants often have to deal with. In East Asia, migration scholars have researched the 'feminization of migration' (sex workers, domestic workers, and female marriage migration) to examine global systems of gender and racial inequality (Constable 1997, 2010; Thai 2008; Cheng and Choo 2015; S. Lee 2019b). Moreover, research on international marriage assumes women's cross-border hypergamy and the shifting gender roles, struggles, and strategies of these women migrants from low-income countries (H. Lee 2008; Freeman 2011; M. Kim 2010, 2014). When international migration scholars pay

attention to migrant men, their focus is mostly on ‘migrant men’s work lives’ and the act of migration itself – seen as ‘a primary stage where they can express their courage to cross borders and ability to endure difficulties’ (S. Choi 2018, 78–79). However, international migration scholars have paid very little attention to migrant husbands and their changing gender roles in the family, although the family is an essential domain for migrant men’s manhood.

In this chapter, I employ ethnographic research on migrant men from Bangladesh and Nepal and their Korean wives in two typical industrial working-class cities, Ansan and Siheung, to explore the gendered challenges and experiences of South Asian migrant men. Ansan and Siheung are administratively two different municipalities, but between them exists a large industrial complex, which shares infrastructures and government facilities. Many immigrants and foreign migrant workers populate these neighboring cities because of the industrial complex located there. The material I employ is drawn from research conducted for my doctoral research project, which examined more broadly migration, racial hierarchies, labor relations, gender, and family (S. Lee 2019a). Here, I highlight dynamics when migrant men reveal different approaches to their changing gender roles and masculinities. Thus, I focus in particular on the narratives of two groups of migrant men, South Asian single men and South Asian husbands of Korean women, to illustrate ‘flexible masculinities’ (Chua and Fujino 1999; Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009).

This chapter argues that migrant husbands actively pursue and adapt new ways of understanding masculinity – from traditional patriarchal to liberal urban-middle-class ideals. At the same time, however, they struggle between new and old gender roles in their nuclear-Korean family and their extended families back in Bangladesh or Nepal. By addressing conceptions of flexible masculinities, this chapter highlights migrant husband’s strategies that reveal their ways of ‘being a man’ in the new Korean family environment; one in which the Korean wife holds greater economic and social influence.

This chapter contributes to expanding the discussion on gender and global migration by filling the gap between male migrants’ gender strategies and masculinities: a topic which is rarely discussed in the study of migration in East Asia. The case study of migrant husbands in South Korea demonstrates how global economic hierarchies in migration are intertwined with locally specific gender strategies.

## **Migration, Gender Identities, and Masculinity**

While research in the intersection of gender and migrant women has received intensive attention from scholars, the concept of masculinity has traditionally not been a subject of much discussion in the study of migration. However, a small yet growing body of research examines the intersection of transnational marriages and masculinity in the domain of family (Charsley 2005; Charsley

and Liversage 2013; M. Kim 2014; S. Choi 2018; Cheng, Yeoh, and Zhang 2015). Recent research on migration and masculinity, directly and indirectly, acknowledges ‘multiple masculinities’ that allow us to see masculinity as non-homogenous but plural (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Based on this premise, gender and migration scholars theorized the plurality of masculinity by articulating the concepts of ‘hegemonic’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), ‘compensatory’ (M. Kim 2014; Cheng, Yeoh, and Zhang 2015), ‘masculine compromises’ (S. Choi 2018) and ‘flexible masculinity’ (Chua and Fujino 1999; Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009). The notion of ‘multiple masculinities’ opens up a further discussion on the ‘hierarchies of masculinities’ in which the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is pivotal to understand the competing yet hierarchical relationship among different masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity – defined as the most honored way of being a man – expresses widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires of a socially powerful male figure (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity involves powerful men’s dominance over women and other men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kim and Pyke 2015). Only a minority of men exercise it, yet hegemonic masculinity is understood to be superior to subordinate masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). It is noteworthy that hegemonic masculinity’s characteristics can be locally specific based on which masculine ideals and practices are desirable in the local social context. In North America, Europe, and Australia, for example, an ideal type of hegemonic masculinity ‘is associated with a white class-privileged professionally successful man who is highly involved with his family, nurturing, and emotionally expressive’ (Kim and Pyke 2015, 510). However, through the global penetration of social media, education, and corporations, Western hegemonic masculinity is considered as the most developmentally advanced form and superior to all other masculinities (Kimmel 2003). Western hegemonic masculinity constructs all other types of masculinities as backward and inferior in its association with men of color, working-class man, and non-Western men (Kim and Pyke 2015, 510). However, recent migration literature sheds light on non-Western men and migrant men’s masculinity to articulate their experiences and masculine identity such as compensatory masculinity, masculine compromises, and flexible masculinity.

Interestingly, while the concept of hegemonic masculinity highlights the hierarchical relationships among men and over women, discussions of non-Western men and migrant men’s masculinity focus more on diverse forms of gender strategies and tactics. This focus suggests that masculinity is fluid and dynamic. In particular, when men hold male privilege but at the same time are economically or racially subordinated, they actively redefine their masculinity (Chua and Fujino 1999).

For example, compensatory masculinity is often performed by men of racial and sexual minorities or men in the lower economic status in order ‘to

compensate for their subordination as they try to undermine negative stereotypes associated with them' (M. Kim 2014, 292). For instance, South Korean rural husbands who are literally and symbolically rejected by Korean women in the marriage market, and have married foreign wives, enact compensatory masculinity (M. Kim 2014, 292). While the rural husbands with Filipina wives discursively construct their masculine identity as providers and saviors of Filipinas, other rural husbands with Japanese wives emphasize their Japanese wives' national deference and differentiate their Japanese wife from other foreign wives in order to reclaim respectable masculine identity (M. Kim 2014, 292). Similarly, Singaporean husbands who have married Vietnamese wives strategically emphasize their respectable masculine status by reclaiming themselves as breadwinners and providers of foreign wives (Cheng, Yeoh, and Zhang 2015). While rural and working-class husbands in the lower socio-economic status perform compensatory masculinity to minimize the social stigma of 'failed masculinity', which is commonly ascribed to men who seek foreign spouses (M. Kim 2014; Cheng, Yeoh, and Zhang 2015), migrant men in developing regions demonstrate different strategies such as masculine compromise (S. Choi 2018).

Masculine compromises are a form of gender strategy which indicates 'men's attempt to strive to preserve the gender boundary and their symbolic dominance within the family by making concessions on marital power and the domestic division of labor' (S. Choi 2018, 90). For example, internal migrant men in China adjust their care practices and domestic roles by accommodating the new family circumstances in which their wage-earning wives have more say in family financial decisions. These migrant men compromise on certain issues, yet they try to guard the clear gender boundary of men handling 'big' issues and women looking after 'small' ones (S. Choi 2018, 90). This concept is useful to understand 'the gap between adjusted gender practices and gender ideologies that are resistant to changes' (S. Choi 2018, 79).

In this paper, I examine the experience of migrant husbands, questioning how they renegotiate their gender identities, practices, and family expectations by looking at migrant husbands' gender strategies. Therefore, I employ the concept of 'flexible masculinity' which was first introduced by Chua and Fujino (1999) and revised to 'flexible and strategic masculinity' by Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer (2009). The concept of 'flexible masculinity' offers a new construction of masculinity which signifies a move away from a male dominant form of masculinity (Chua and Fujino 1999; Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009). For example, according to Chua and Fujino (1999, 407), Asian American men, who still have male privilege yet experience ethnic and racial subordination, hold the view that maleness can contain elements of masculinity and femininity at the same time. Therefore, performing domestic tasks and women's work does not undermine their masculinity. Instead, they view these caring attributes as part of their power and masculinity (Chua and Fujino 1999, 408).

Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer (2009, 1275) slightly revise this concept as ‘flexible and strategic masculinities’ in order to examine how male migrants in London reconstruct their masculine identity when they have to take ‘women’s work’ or ‘lower-class work’. They found that migrant men originating from an affluent family background were more flexible with their economic identities and willing to take lower-class work in order to enjoy their preferred version of masculinity; even one that is considered inferior in their country of origin. In contrast, lower-class migrant men who migrated for economic gain (e.g., sending remittances) were strategic with their gender identity, taking what they considered to be ‘women’s work’ to meet their economic obligations (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009, 1282). The concept of ‘flexible and strategic masculinities’ provides a way to understand the gendered and class-based performances of migrant men (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009, 1280).

I take the concept of ‘flexible identity’ further and suggest that this concept provides an analytical tool for understanding how multiple forms of masculinity and gender strategies co-exist simultaneously throughout the integration of migrant husbands. Therefore, this paper shows how migrant husbands reconstruct their masculinities and how different masculinities – hegemonic masculinity, compensatory masculinity, and masculine compromises – appear at the same time. It also exhibits how migration creates a unique opportunity for negotiating masculinity that allows migrant husbands to reduce the dissonance between gender norms from their country of origin and their new family environment in South Korea.

### **Migration, Downward Mobility, and Silenced South Asian Husbands**

In South Korea, there are significant differences between foreign husbands from North America, Europe, and Australia who mainly work as English teachers in education and foreign husbands who used to be unskilled foreign migrant workers from South and Southeast Asian countries. In the former case, husbands from North America, Europe, and Australia are seen to have a decent financial background and education (at least a university degree), so they are likely to form a middle-class family in South Korea. On the other hand, South and Southeast Asian husbands take the manual jobs that no one else wants and eventually form the lower tier of the working class or underclass. Especially when the unskilled migrant workers are people of color, racial logics play a central role in drawing class boundaries by categorizing certain ethnic groups into lower-class position jobs (Bonnett 1998).

Throughout the recent history of immigration, scholars have examined the class-formation of migrants. For example, in the US, low-skilled, non-white immigrants tend to form a new urban underclass, with relatively lower earnings (Clark 1998). In South Korea, unskilled foreign labor began to be

imported in the early 1990s, and in 2004 the Korean government introduced the Employment Permit System (EPS) to fill the labor shortage in the manufacturing, agriculture, construction, fishing, and service industries (HRDKorea 2013). Despite gradual improvements, however, the EPS has often received criticism from human rights groups because of long working hours and foreign workers' immobility, which created conditions for labor exploitation (Seol 2000).

Therefore, while a Korean woman's international marriage is socially frowned upon regardless of her husband's nationality and race, a white husband is somewhat more acceptable than a South and Southeast Asian husband because the white husband is expected to bring his Korean wife back to his country in North America or Europe- countries which are considered developmentally and socially more advanced (S. Lee 2019b). In this type of union, a Korean woman's international marriage is considered a form of global 'marrying up'. On the other hand, foreign husbands who initially came to Korea through the Korean guest worker program but eventually developed romantic relationships with Korean women are seen as 'marrying up' while their Korean wives are 'marrying down'. For this reason, marriages of Korean women and South Asian migrant men usually elicit strong protests from the Korean woman's family members. The migrant husband's initial entry into Korea as an unskilled worker signifies his lower social and economic position in South Korea, even though migrants tend not to come from the poorest populations of their home countries, and many of them have college or university degrees (S. Lee 2019b).

Silenced masculinity delineates migrant husbands' weak position in the family and their struggles to be a man in difficult circumstances where one's wife has more legal, social, and economic power than him (Charsley 2005; Charsley and Liversage 2013). For example, Pakistani husbands who marry British-born co-ethnic women and Turkish husbands who marry Danish-born co-ethnics experience disempowerment in society and their marital relationships (Charsley and Liversage 2013). Therefore, their masculine identity is problematized and denigrated.

Migrant husbands, Ali and Udaya illustrate similar themes. Bangladeshi husband Ali came to South Korea in 2001 after he had just finished his first year of university in Bangladesh. He initially entered South Korea with a two-year study permit for a university in Seoul, but he immediately started to work for factories illegally. Eventually, he overstayed and worked in small factories for over ten years as an undocumented migrant worker until he married a Korean woman, Hye, who was a registered nurse. Due to Ali's unauthorized stay in South Korea, Ali and Hye had to pay a large fine (approximately US\$20,000) to receive a proper residency permit upon their marriage. Hye's parents opposed this marriage because of his lower social and economic status as an unskilled foreign worker. For them, the problem was not only Ali's status as an unskilled factory worker. They were also concerned



about limited promotion opportunities at work as a non-Korean, his duty to support his parents in Bangladesh financially, legal issues as an illegal migrant who needed to go through a long process to acquire Korean citizenship, and potential social discrimination that their daughter Hye would also experience because of Ali's unfavorable ethnic background. Ali's comparatively lower social and economic position meant a potential burden for Hye, who most likely would have to take on the breadwinner role and solve Ali's legal status. Hye's parents also suspected that Ali's motive for marriage was to secure a legal means of immigration to attain Korean citizenship. In separate interviews, Hye and Ali describe her family's reaction to their marriage plans:

My mom said, 'why do you want to marry a foreigner even though there are plenty of Korean guys? He is not even Canadian or American. Why do you want a Bangladeshi man, of all men in the world?'

*(Hye, Korean wife, age 34)*

Her parents opposed this marriage because I am from Bangladesh. We couldn't have a wedding ceremony because her parents protested. I couldn't meet her parents for years. After we had a baby, her parents finally accepted me as the husband of their daughter.

*(Ali, Bangladeshi husband, age 32)*

Despite her family's opposition, Hye married Ali. However, Hye's parents and siblings refused to meet him for years until Hye and Ali had a child. After the child arrived, Hye's parents finally accepted Ali, and they visited Ali and Hye's one-room studio in Siheung. Hye's mother felt sorry for her daughter after visiting Hye and Ali's place where 'they did not even have room to sit down'. Hye's mother and sister started giving them money, gifts, furniture and even helped them buy a three-bedroom apartment in Siheung. Hye was very grateful for her mother and sister's help, but she interpreted this as her family feeling sorry for marrying down; to a Bangladesh man who cannot support his own wife and child.

As Charsley (2005, 94) points out, '[a] husband's migration disrupts the conventional configuration of kinship after marriage'. For example, he would be in 'an unusual position of being the incomer without family support and facing a new family culture and way of life' under scrutiny from the wife's family and relatives.

Ali seemed to maintain a decent relationship with Hye's parents and siblings. However, Hye's parents and relatives often bring up Ali's employment struggles and express concerns about Ali's family in Bangladesh and their dependence on Ali's remittances, which hurts Ali's pride as a man. This seemed to bother Ali constantly. He told me that 'I can endure physical hardship or some bad environments quite well, but I cannot withstand it if my pride gets hurt. I worry; what if my wife's family brings up some topics that I don't want to talk about'.

The wife's strong position in the household or extended family in which 'the husband is an outsider can disrupt conventional power relationships', giving the woman more authority in general (Charsley 2005, 94). When becoming a wife is not related to being a daughter-in-law, the lack of subordination may alter the power dynamics between husband and wife (Charsley 2005). For example, a Nepalese husband, Udaya explained his place within his wife's Korean family. As a migrant husband, Udaya has more interactions with his Korean wife's parents and siblings than his natal family. This is conventionally the bride's experience in Nepal, as the bride is expected to move into the husband's family and his kinship network. According to Udaya, he was quite satisfied with his life in South Korea. However, he seems to feel intimidated by his wife's relatives when he attends family gatherings. As Udaya expressed it:

When the family and relatives got together, they didn't talk to me much. Now I speak good Korean, so I have a little bit more chances to talk with them, but usually, while Korean relatives talk together, I am quietly sitting nearby them. So I just wait for the time to go back home.

As Udaya's case shows, some South Asian husbands constantly feel intimidated and silenced, regardless of their current legal and economic status. While female marriage immigrants are considered *myōnūri* (daughter-in-law) who are accepted under their Korean husbands' control, foreign husbands (*sawi* or son-in-law) are not fully accepted as members of society because Korean society cannot permit substitute patriarchs (S. Lee 2019b). Therefore, the concept of 'silenced husband' (Charsley and Liversage 2013) provides an understanding of migrant husbands' experience and their shifting masculine identity in the new family environments where one's wife has greater social and legal power than him and where a husband's undesirable nationality and the lack of kin support make him feel weaker.

### Preserving the Conventional Gender Norms

Some South Asian migrant men show how they resist the changes in gender roles and try to conserve the conventional gender boundaries that they see as an essential part of their masculine identity. Maintaining the position of the head of a household is important for many migrant husbands to gain respect and exercise authority over their wives and children. Having a Korean wife who would become the main breadwinner and accommodating the wife's family culture may signal incompetency and hurt one's masculine identity. Thus, while Western hegemonic masculinity is appreciated as the most developmentally advanced form of masculinity in many countries, men from working-class backgrounds, immigrants, and men of color often resist and maintain ascendancy through coordinated compensatory manhood acts or protest masculinities (Kim and Pyke 2015, 510–511).

While South and Southeast Asian migrant men are often suspected of attempting to date or marry Korean women simply to gain a Korean passport, the reality is usually more complex. For example, a 35-year-old Bangladesh migrant man, Masum, said that he did not want to date or marry a Korean woman as they are overly Westernized in his eyes.

Korean women take divorce too easily, and it isn't right. I believe that you must endure and live together until the end of your life, even if it is not the best marriage for you. Well, I would protest if my brother marries a Korean woman (laughs).

Although Masum has resided in South Korea for over 12 years and was quite open to making friends with Western backgrounds, he strongly expressed his criticism of contemporary Korean women's individualism, which appears to him the opposite of proper Bangladeshi women.

Another Bangladeshi migrant, Khan, was a hardworking husband and father. As an undocumented migrant worker, he worked over 12 hours every day and often did overtime to support his wife and a young son. Unlike some South Asian migrant men who actively find a Korean woman for dating and possible marriage, Khan married a local Bangladeshi woman and brought his wife to South Korea. His parents arranged the marriage with a local village girl for him while he was working in South Korea. After holding a virtual wedding through a Skype conference call, his newlywed wife came to South Korea to live with him, and eventually, she also became an undocumented migrant. While Khan was the main breadwinner, his wife was a full-time homemaker and their five-year-old son's main caregiver. He told me that he tries not to complain about long working hours and frustrations at work but rather focuses on supporting and protecting his wife and son, who are quite helpless in such a socially and legally unfavorable environment.

While Khan and Masum insist on more traditional gender roles as the male breadwinner and the head of a household, and resists changes in marriage norms, migrant husbands Ali and Udaya - who are in marital relationships with Korean women - accept the more liberal idea of gender roles. This allows them to negotiate new ideals of masculinity throughout their marriage lives in South Korea. Their cases depict how a certain type of 'migration offers a particular transitional situation in which the opportunity exists for the renegotiation of certain gender identities' (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009, 1277).

### **Being a Compatible Husband: Negotiating between Social Images and Economic Disadvantages**

According to Y. Cheng et al. (2015, 872), 'marriage not only symbolizes a new phase of life but also bears material implication on their every conduct in

terms of the redefinition of roles and responsibility within the spaces of family relations' such as 'the affordability of housing and the additional costs for children's education'. In this regard, some migrant men compromise over certain domestic chores, but they try to keep certain gender roles, for example, men handling 'big' issues and women looking after 'small' ones (S. Choi 2018, 90). However, Udaya and Ali show how migrant husbands negotiate gender roles and become more flexible in defining their masculine identity in the new environment where the Korean wife holds greater economic and social influence.

Nepalese husband, Udaya, recalled his experience of marrying a Korean woman. After their marriage, Udaya quit his factory job and moved to the government-funded migrant worker counseling center to work as a counseling assistant. Even though the salary was quite a bit less than what he received doing factory work, his wife prefers him to be a lesser-paid office worker rather than a better-paid factory worker in a small factory. He explained that once he took his then-girlfriend to the industrial complex where he was working and told her about what he was doing and how many hours he was working. She seemed to be quite shocked to see the real-life of a foreign factory worker. Thus, she asked him not to tell her family that he was a factory worker. Even though Udaya holds a Master's degree in a Nepalese university and has worked with the United Nations Development Programme in Nepal, she assumed that her family would never accept Udaya if they found out that Udaya was a factory worker. Accommodating his wife's wish, Udaya quit the factory job soon after they married. This not only reflects a desire to compensate for a South Asian migrant man's low social position but could also be an attempt to increase the likelihood of the couple's social compatibility.

To better understand the choice made by Udaya and his wife, we need to understand the term *tongnama nodongcha* – literal meaning is 'Southeast Asian worker', but it often includes 'South Asian worker'. When Koreans call foreign migrant workers '*tongnama nodongcha*', there is often a negative class and racial connotation, which implies a lower social status. Their social position describes foreign migrant workers' racial position as *tongnama* (Southeast Asian) and class position as *nodongcha* (worker, or laborer). Koo (2001) points out that although factory workers contributed significantly to South Korea's rapid industrialization during the 1960s and the 1970s, these occupations were still regarded as low, menial, and unrespectable. The 1980s' militant democratic union movement achieved comparatively higher wages and better job security in the manufacturing industries, which led to an improvement in factory workers' societal image (D. Kim 1995; Koo 2001). However, the negative evaluation of physical labor is still influential in the contemporary Korean occupational structure, partly because of the legacy of the traditional conception of physical work and partly because of the comparatively poor working conditions and job security. Therefore, while workers have struggled to assert pride and confidence in one's identity as a factory worker, the stigma persists around this category

and has been revitalized with foreign workers' prevalence in 3D – dirty, difficulty, and dangerous – manufacturing jobs. In this context, *tongnama nodongcha*, who are considered as occupying the bottom of the vocational structure, experience racial discrimination and a lack of social respect in Korean society. Udaya explains how he felt differently about himself after he quit factory work:

Well, the difference between working for a factory and now is that when I worked for factories, Koreans looked down on me because they only saw me as a factory laborer and migrant worker who came here to sell his labor. But now I have a residency visa after marrying a Korean. So, I can work as an office worker if I satisfy the qualifications. This is a wonderful thing. When I was a factory worker, I was like a dust ball on the dirty floor. But now I feel like I am flying in the sky.

Powerful forms of social stigma constantly mediate Udaya's self-worth, and eventually, it led him to choose a lower-paid job for a comparatively less-stigmatized social position in Korean society. In my research, several migrant husbands have left the manufacturing job world or plan to leave after marrying Korean women and acquiring Korean citizenship.

In addition to Udaya, Ali also planned to leave the factory job world. He wanted to open a South Asian food supply store near the industrial complex or an import/export business between Bangladesh and South Korea. However, his Korean wife Hye was not convinced by his business plans as there are already many South Asian food supply stores, restaurants, and trade businesses in this area. Instead, Hye suggested that Ali stay in the manufacturing industry and aim to climb up to the production manager position. Accepting Hye's suggestion, Ali decided to stay at his manufacturing job, but he plans to get a college diploma or a bachelor's degree from a polytechnic in South Korea because his company does not recognize his education in Bangladesh.

Making plans for the future is an important issue for the couples I interviewed. Migrant husbands' career development is a complex area for both migrant husbands and their Korean wives because husbands' strategies and decisions on career changes are made by their Korean wives or based on their Korean wives' evaluation and assessments of the job market. This can be seen as a migrant husband and his Korean wife's collective strategy to minimize the social discrimination he experiences as a migrant worker and South Asian husband. Simultaneously, this can be understood as a migrant husband's strategy to defend his masculinity by presenting himself as a more caring husband with his ability to embrace his wife's opinion.

### **Compromising between Native Home and Korean Family**

Migration and international marriage disrupt patrilocality norms, men's marital power, and gender roles in the family. Often South Asian men's position in the

family is suggested as ‘a son should respect his parents and provide for them when they are older. As a husband and father, a man should both provide for his family and be able to exert a certain level of control over his wife and children’ (Charsley 2005, 98). These traditional patriarchal gender norms are also easily found in East Asia (S. Choi 2018). However, South Asian migrant husbands need to negotiate with their parents and siblings who expect a wife to move into a husband’s home. Some parents of South Asian migrant men deliberately search for a local girl for an arranged marriage while migrant men are working in South Korea. Parents of these migrant men expect their son to marry a local girl who is carefully selected by parents and live all together in the same house upon their son’s return. Therefore, a migrant man’s decision to marry a Korean woman creates tension not only with his Korean wife’s family but also with his native family in his own country.

Udaya’s parents did not strongly oppose his plan to marry a Korean woman because his parents respected Udaya’s authority as the first son, who also has a higher education than his sisters. However, Udaya’s whole family felt deeply sad that he would marry a foreign woman from a very different cultural background. His mother suggested that he marry a local Nepalese girl who would be willing to live with Udaya’s parents and sisters together. Even after Udaya had married a Korean woman, Udaya’s parents expected him to bring his wife to Nepal. However, they soon realized that Udaya’s Korean wife would not move to Nepal. Udaya said:

My parents expected me to bring my wife to Nepal and live together. However, after my newborn son arrived, they started worrying that I would settle down in South Korea. Whenever I call my family in Nepal, everyone cries. A couple of months ago, I went to Nepal to attend my younger sister’s wedding. When I flew back to South Korea, my parents cried, my sisters cried, and my younger brother cried. It was heartbreaking.

Instead of fulfilling his patriarchal duty, Udaya lowers his parents’ expectations and compromises his role and responsibility. Udaya’s case shows how migration disturbs established notions of gender roles. It reveals how the physical distance between migrants’ current home and their place of birth create a unique space for the renegotiation and production of new gender norms and practices (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009, 1278).

For single men, migration provides an economic opportunity to contribute to their household in their home country. However, international marriage can limit a man’s ability to fulfill several of these roles (Charsley 2005). Bangladeshi husband Ali shows a more detailed explanation of how a migrant husband negotiates between his native family in Bangladesh and his Korean wife. When Ali decided to marry Hye, Ali’s mother was very frustrated because she dreamed of a huge three-day wedding ceremony for Ali with a local Bangladesh girl. However, Ali’s parents accepted his idea of marrying a

Korean woman expecting that Ali might continue sending remittance if he successfully acquired a Korean passport.

While Ali had a more conventional idea of his duty for his parents, Hye had a more westernized idea of a nuclear family composed of a couple with their children. In particular, Hye's motivation for international marriage shows why she tried to keep a distance from her Bangladesh in-laws. Before meeting Ali, she had dated several Korean men. She felt that these Korean ex-boyfriends held patriarchal norms of family and gender roles, and she did not want to enter the patriarchal family structure in which a man's parents and siblings are most likely to interfere with her marriage. She said that she would rather prefer to be a single woman without a partner. Hye explained that on top of Ali's charming personality, his foreigner status – which to her symbolizes freedom from in-law relations – was one of the considerations when she decided to marry him. Since his parents and siblings are in Bangladesh, she expected that geographical distance and cultural differences would prevent potential interference in their lives. Thus, Hye had never expected remittances to become an issue between them. However, Ali kept sending remittances after his marriage. Hye was upset when she found out because they needed to pay a large fine for Ali's residence permit on top of the down payment of their new apartment.

While Ali understood sending remittance and financially supporting his parents as a son's duty, his Korean wife Hye considered this as 'a form of family exploitation by his parents and his sisters who abused the traditional idea of gender roles and son's duty for their comfort'. Hye expressed that her in-laws in Bangladesh are selfish because they took Ali's sacrifice for granted, and they did not understand how many hours Ali had to work as an undocumented migrant worker to send remittance, and what kind of discrimination he had to deal with at work. She even accused Ali's parents of sending 19-year-old teenager Ali to a foreign country as an illegal migrant worker in order to live off his remittances for the last ten years. Hye seemed to be upset by Ali's parents and sisters because they still expected Ali's remittances even after building his own family in South Korea. Eventually, Ali stopped sending remittances to Bangladesh. He still wishes to send some money to Bangladesh, but he does not want to create discord with his Korean wife. He decided to explain to his parents that he cannot send remittances anymore.

While migration can be an opportunity to earn a higher income and to open the door to a more affluent urban life, migration also can limit traditional gender expectations. International marriage compels South Asian migrant husbands to negotiate their masculine identity by readjusting their conjugal power and to focus more on the husband's role in his nuclear family than the son's duty to his natal family. South Asian men might feel undermined and disempowered if they have to negotiate between their parents and their Korean wife. However, my findings show that some South Asian

husbands pursue different strategies of being a man, by embracing their new gender roles as caring fathers and husbands to establish their new family life in South Korea.

### **Becoming a Caring Husband and Loving Father: Pursuing Urban Middle-Class Ideals**

Traditionally, women are considered primary caregivers, responsible for domestic chores and motherhood. However, being a good husband and father is also a crucial part of manhood and masculinity. In particular, Western hegemonic masculinity, which is associated with a class-privileged successful man who is highly involved with his family, nurturing, and emotionally expressive, has become a discursively dominant form of masculinity (Kim and Pyke 2015). As globalization accelerates, Western hegemonic masculinity affects non-Western countries like South Korea as well. Until the 1990s, the vast majority of married Korean women focused on domesticity, and Korean men's main responsibility was to fulfill the good provider role (Kim and Pyke 2015). Around the 2000s, however, the media started portraying the ideal Korean man as a kind family man, and the decline of the good provider role occurred throughout South Korea. Therefore, the loving family man who shares the breadwinning role with his wife and who is more engaged with caregiving and parenting became a new urban ideal in South Korea, at least among young professionals and middle-class families.

Bangladeshi husband Ali and Nepalese husband Udaya show how South Asian men negotiate their gender roles within their nuclear family and reconstruct a new form of masculinity that shifts from traditional working-class masculinity to urban middle-class ideals. In both Ali and Udaya's cases, their Korean wives have decent jobs as registered nurses, earning more than their migrant husbands. Although they are not exactly middle-class, their life choices and gender practices resemble young urban middle-class families in the city. For example, when I met Ali and Hye, they were searching for a three-bedroom apartment near the industrial complex. However, Hye had a long-term plan to move to a four-bedroom apartment in a middle-class neighborhood in Ansan. Hye confessed that she was not good at cooking and household chores. Ali did not seem to be bothered by his wife's inability to carry out the domestic tasks. Rather Ali tried to do more house chores like dishwashing, cleaning, laundry, cooking, and taking care of their toddler son.

Nepalese husband Udaya shows an even more liberal side of fatherhood. He explained that one of the reasons he quit the factory job was to spend more time with his wife and his newborn son. He explained that overtime work is quite common in the manufacturing industry, so he left the factory world to spend more time with his family. When I visited his office, his Korean colleagues reminded me that my visit should not be too long because Udaya needed to go back home on time to take care of his wife and their



newborn son. Udaya explained that he tries to do an equal amount of household chores and parenting because men and women are equal.

With the decline of the good provider or the breadwinning role, the new type of man willing to share the breadwinning role and childcare roles with his wife is thought to be an ideal type of family man, which only a few attain (Kim and Pyke 2015, 513). In both cases, the Korean wives share the breadwinning role with their migrant husbands, so the migrant husbands' participation in domestic chores and parenting is essential to maintain their lifestyle in the city.

As Chua and Fujino (1999, 407–408) point out, men with marginalized social status occupy a position of dominance and subordination simultaneously. Men from ethnic and racial minorities may hold male privilege, yet at the same time they may be racially or economically subordinate (Chua and Fujino 1999, 408). Though they can engage in conventional patriarchy to obtain male privileges, they prefer to exercise more flexible masculinity, which embraces effeminate images and the performance of domestic tasks (Chua and Fujino 1999, 408). Therefore, performing the new family man and pursuing urban middle-class gender practices can help migrant husbands to distance themselves from the stereotypes of South Asian men who are often accused of being patriarchal; something considered 'so third world' (N. Kim 2006).

## Conclusion

This chapter attempts to examine how South Korea's participation in global society and migration to Korea leads to tensions and interactions between migrants and Korean society. Increasing migration to South Korea is one of the most visible signs that South Korea is actively engaged with the global society as a new migrant receiving society. This is a dramatic change for South Korea where there were only a handful of foreigners until the early 1990s. Currently, South Korea faces the new challenges of negotiating totally new interactions with a new member of Korean society – immigrants. This case study of migrant husbands contributes to expanding the discussion on South Korea's new position in global migration by filling the gap between migrant husbands' gender strategies and integration: a topic which is rarely discussed in the study of migration in East Asia.

In particular, this chapter analyzes how South Asian migrant husbands, who are married to Korean women, negotiate their masculinity and gender roles over the course of their integration into a contemporary Korean family. For a migrant husband, marrying a Korean woman can be considered a cross-border form of 'marrying up' due to their low legal and social status and their country of origin's symbolic status. This chapter argues that migrant husbands actively adapt and pursue new ways of understanding their gender roles. At the same time, however, they struggle between new and old gender

roles in their nuclear-Korean family and their extended families back in Bangladesh or Nepal.

This chapter illustrates several individual strategies to defend masculinity through the concept of flexible masculinity. South Asian husbands experience downward mobility as unskilled migrant workers located in the lower tier of Korean society. After marrying Korean women, they also experience frustrations due to cultural differences and the lack of his natal family's kinship supports. The model of the silenced husband may help to explain such instances. However, my research found that South Asian husbands utilize diverse strategies that help a migrant husband minimize the social discrimination he experiences as a migrant and, at the same time, regain recognition in the family as a husband.

These strategies include 1) resisting changes in conventional gender roles and trying to maintain gender boundaries, although that requires hard work and sacrifices for their families; 2) negotiating between social images and economic disadvantages. Further strategies are choosing jobs with higher social prestige over jobs that pay more; 3) compromising between their Korean and native family; and 4) pursuing urban-middle class gender practices which emulate Western hegemonic masculinity. Contrary to South Asian men's stereotypical images in South Korea, these migrant husbands might willingly distance themselves from the conventional patriarchal norms and practices as a strategy to resituate their power of masculinity in conformity with Western hegemonic masculinity.

These findings suggest three key points. First, the cases of South Asian migrant husbands show the interconnection between global migration and the locally specific masculine identities of male migrants. In particular, South Asian migrant husbands who experience disadvantages because of the symbolic status of their country of origin in the global economy, renegotiate their gender identity in ways that suggest 'flexible masculinity'. Their masculine identities are flexible not only because they are willing to share domestic tasks, but also because they simultaneously perform multiple masculinities throughout their integration process. Thus, the concept of flexible masculinity allows us to understand how migrant husbands perform several masculinities in their family life, such as hegemonic, compensatory, silenced masculinity, and masculine compromises.

Second, migrant men's locally specific gender strategies and their flexible masculinity simultaneously reveals interactions and tensions between migrants and the host society that require a certain degree of adjustment for both migrants and Korean family members. Not only do people migrate but also values and norms migrate with people (Roth 2012). This indicates that global migration inevitably leads to a process of renegotiating gender norms and values in local contexts.

Third, these findings do not account for all South Asian migrant men's experiences and their gender strategies. As this chapter introduced earlier, some South Asian men (e.g., Masum and Khan's cases) take different gender strategies. They try to obtain male privilege by maintaining the gender norms and practices from their country of origin that match their local hegemonic

masculinity, even though these strategies might bring social and legal disadvantages in South Korea. Therefore, research into single-migrant men and their partnership with co-nationals requires further investigation to examine how they negotiate their gender identities or refuse changes in gender relations while they are participating in global migration.

## Note

1 All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

## References

- Batnitzky, Adina, Linda McDowell, and Sarah Dyer. 2009. 'Flexible and Strategic Masculinities: The Working Lives and Gendered Identities of Male Migrants in London.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35 (8): 1275–1293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830903123088>.
- Bonnett, Alastair. 1998. 'How the British Working Class Became White: The Symbolic (Re) formation of Racialized Capitalism.' *Journal of Historical Sociology* 11 (3): 316–340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6443.00066>.
- Charsley, Katharine. 2005. 'Unhappy Husbands: Masculinity and Migration in Transnational Pakistani Marriages.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11 (1): 85–105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2005.00227.x>.
- Charsley, Katharine, and Anika Liversage. 2013. 'Transforming Polygamy: Migration, Transnationalism and Multiple Marriages among Muslim Minorities.' *Global Networks* 13 (1): 60–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00369.x>.
- Cheng, Catherine Man Chuen, and Hae Yeon Choo. 2015. 'Women's Migration for Domestic Work and Cross-Border Marriage in East and Southeast Asia: Reproducing Domesticity, Contesting Citizenship.' *Sociology Compass* 9 (8): 654–667. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12289>.
- Cheng, Yi'En, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, and Juan Zhang. 2015. 'Still 'Breadwinners' and 'Providers': Singaporean Husbands, Money and Masculinity in Transnational Marriages.' *Gender, Place & Culture* 22 (6): 867–883. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.917282>.
- Choi, Susanne Y.P. 2018. 'Migration, Masculinity, and Family.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45 (1): 78–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1427562>.
- Chua, Peter, and Dune C. Fujino. 1999. 'Negotiating New Asian-American Masculinities: Attitudes and Gender Expectations.' *The Journal of Men's Studies* 7 (3): 391–413. <https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.0703.391>.
- Clark, William AV. 1998. 'Mass Migration and Local Outcomes: Is International Migration to the United States Creating a New Urban Underclass?' *Urban Studies* 35 (3): 371–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098984817>.
- Connell, Robert W., and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.' *Gender & Society* 19 (6): 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.
- Constable, Nicole. 1997. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Constable, Nicole, (ed.) 2010. *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Freeman, Caren. 2011. *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration Between China and South Korea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- HRDKorea (Human Resources Development Service of Korea). 2013. *Oegugillyōng kwallyōnbōm chedo sangdam killajabi 외국인력 관련법 제도 상담 길라잡이* [Guidebook for Hiring Foreign Workers and Relevant Regulations]. Seoul: HRDKorea.
- Kim, Allen, and Karen Pyke. 2015. 'Taming tiger dads: Hegemonic American masculinity and South Korea's father school.' *Gender & Society* 29 (4): 509–533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215584602>.
- Kim, Dong-Choon. 1995. *Han'gung sahoe nodongja yōn'gur 1987 nyōn ihu rūl chung-shim ūro 한국 사회 노동자 연구 1987 년 이후 중심으로* [Korean Workers after 1987]. Seoul: Ōksa pip'yōngsa.
- Kim, Minjeong. 2010. 'Gender and International Marriage Migration.' *Sociology Compass* 4 (9): 718–731. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00314.x>.
- Kim, Minjeong. 2014. 'South Korean Rural Husbands, Compensatory Masculinity, and International Marriage.' *Journal of Korean Studies* 19 (2): 291–325. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43923273>.
- Kim, Nadia Y. 2006. 'Patriarchy Is so Third World': Korean Immigrant Women and "Migrating" White Western Masculinity.' *Social Problems* 53 (4): 519–536. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.519>.
- Kimmel, Michael S. 2003. 'Globalization and Its Mal (e) Contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism.' *International Sociology* 18 (3): 603–620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809030183008>.
- Koo, Hagen. 2001. *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kwak, YoonKyung. 2019. 'Pushing Away from Their Own Nation? South Korean Women Married to Migrant Husbands from Developing Countries.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42 (7): 1186–1203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1473620>.
- Kymlicka, Will. 2007. *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, Hye-Kyung. 2008. 'International Marriage and the State in South Korea: Focusing on Governmental Policy.' *Citizenship studies* 12 (1): 107–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020701794240>.
- Lee, Seonok. 2019a. *The Making of a Global Racial Hierarchy: Racial Formation of South and Southeast Asian Migrants in South Korea*. PhD diss., Sociology, the University of British Columbia. <https://doi.org/10.17613/2dvh-4z43>.
- Lee, Seonok. 2019b. 'Patriarchal Racialization: Gendered and Racialized Integration of Foreign Brides and Foreign Husbands in South Korea.' In *Transnational Mobility and Identity in and out of Korea*, edited by Yonson Ahn, 57–78. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Prey, Robert. 2011. 'Different Takes: Migrant World Television and Multiculturalism in South Korea.' *Global Media Journal: Canadian Edition* 4 (1):109–125.
- Roth, Wendy. 2012. *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Seol, Dong-Hoon. 2000. 'Past and Present of Foreign Workers in Korea 1987–2000.' *Asia Solidarity Quarterly* 2 (2): 6–31.
- Thai, Hung Cam. 2008. *For Better or For Worse: Vietnamese International Marriages in the New Global Economy*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press.