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**Master's Thesis of International Studies**

**Marriage migrant women in South  
Korea and their civil society support:  
The citizenship versus empowerment dilemma**

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**Graduate School of International Studies  
Seoul National University  
International Cooperation Major**

**Fanny Sauvignon**



## **Abstract**

This project first seeks to demonstrate that there is a tension between the pursuit of citizenship and the process and means of empowerment for marriage migrant women in South Korea. This inherent tension is due to disempowering policies and restrictive perceptions of multiculturalism – perceptions which incorporate elements of ethnocentrism, cultural nationalism, gender inequality, familism and ideas of economic superiority. Once this tension is demonstrated through policy and social analysis as a crucial reason why marriage migrants are not acquiring citizenship in higher numbers, nor better integrating in Korean society, the practical consequences of this hindering factor on the strategies of CSOs supporting marriage migrants are explored through comparative case studies.

The first case study is that of KOCUN, a CSO with a high level of institutionalization and top-down governance, while the second, the Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center, represents bottom-up governance and strength at grassroots level. While KOCUN is found to transnationalize the problematic dilemma between citizenship and empowerment and to harness the power of the market to make up for government shortcomings, the WMHRC's strategy is one of decentralization for the sake of community-building and self-reliance, while leveraging ally forces in civil society to keep its independence.

Although both approaches are valid and necessary, KOCUN encourages a rather unilateral effort for marriage migrants to assimilate to South Korea, whereas the WMHRC's approach allows for integration at local level, a preliminary step to belonging to South Korea national society, all while mobilizing native Korean civilians who are already sympathetic to the cause and/or are interested in marriage migrants' native cultures. This represents a fairer model for an empowering pursuit of citizenship for foreign brides. The case of marriage migrants remains one of the most fruitful lenses through which to imagine the future of South Korean multiculturalism, citizenship and civil society.

**Keywords: citizenship, empowerment, civil society, marriage migrants, South Korea, multiculturalism**

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## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

AKC: ASEAN-Korea Center

ASEAN: Association of South-East Asian Nations

CSO: Civic Society Organization

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

KOCUN: Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy

KVMS: Korean-Vietnamese Multicultural Support project (KOCUN)

MFSC: Multicultural Family Support Center

MOEL: Ministry of Employment and Labor

MOGEF: Ministry of Gender Equality and Family

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

PDO: Pre-Departure Orientation program (KOCUN)

PFS: People's Friendship Society

UNOG: United Nations Office at Geneva

WMHRC: Korea Women Migrants' Human Rights Center

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# CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

## Overview of the current situation and significance of research

As the issue of multiculturalism becomes more pressing, with the number of foreigners in Korea steadily increasing (at an average of 8% per year between 2011 and 2015<sup>1</sup>) and stories like that of Yemeni asylum seekers monopolizing and polarizing media attention, it is useful to remember that the Korean government only legally recognizes the term for multiculturalism, *damunhwa*, as describing the marriage between a South Korean national and a foreign-born spouse<sup>2</sup>. In the eyes of most Koreans, the image of these “multicultural families” is even more specific: it is that of a Korean man married to a foreign Asian woman, the latter being expected to assimilate to Korean culture and to raise her children as Korean<sup>3</sup>. In fact, the government started employing the term *damunhwa* around 2006 as a replacement to the word *honhyeol* – literally “mixed-blood”, deemed derogatory by civic society groups and academics, to describe half-Korean children (Jun, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> [Number of foreigners in Korea exceeds 2 million](#) by Y.I. Jeong for *The Korea Herald*, July 27, 2016

<sup>2</sup> and <sup>3</sup> [« Damunhwa » Is No Multiculturalism: A Congolese Refugee Reflects on Life in South Korea](#) by D. Corks for *Korea Exposé*, April 6, 2017

The term *damunhwa* reflects South Korea's struggle to incorporate foreign-born residents in society, and marriage migrants offer a prime example of this phenomenon. In 2010, more than 50% of long-term migration flows to South Korea were composed of marriage migrants (OECD, 2012). Moreover, as opposed to other types of migrants, they are expected to settle down as Korean citizens through their Korean in-laws and the waiting time for them to apply for citizenship is of only two years, compared to five for other foreign residents according to Korean naturalization laws. Yet, according to the 2012 National Survey of Multicultural Families, only 42.4% of marriage migrants have been naturalized as South Koreans, whereas around 60% of them wish to acquire citizenship (Jeon et al., 2013).

Given the official acknowledgement of marriage migrants and the existence of numerous specialized policies to provide for them, one could think that they are a relatively sheltered minority and that they integrate better in Korean society. This apparently privileged situation actually does them a disservice: as a recent report by South Korean NGOs to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2018) has underlined: this state policy has “only generated the prejudice that marriage migrants are all from poor area in less-developed countries and

that the government provides them with special advantages. Since the Multicultural Family Support Act was introduced in 2007, the social prejudice and stereotypes has become permanent.”

On the opposite side from the state and conservative forces in Korean society, civil society organizations have been leading migrant advocacy activities in the country since the 1990s (Jun, 2013), ranging from volunteer initiatives to well-connected institutions. They provide legal and psychological resources to these women as well as represent them when advocating for a better legal framework, better policies. These two functions (service and representational) may come in tension with each other as they represent two different relationships with the government – and the provision of services may be in tension with advocacy for better policy. Moreover, NGOs in Korea have to accommodate for a certain paradigm of civil society, that of the Confucian “organic state” which does not distinguish between state and society, as well as a past of authoritarianism. Therefore, the autonomy of civil society is more relative than in a liberal pluralist state (Lee H.K., 1995). In this understanding, the work of marriage migrant women organizations is framed by an ambiguous relationship with the Korean state.

Given the alleged importance of the South Korean government's position and policies concerning marriage migrants, it is all the more significant to research on the topic as the Moon Jae In administration recently took office. Not only is it the first center-left government in power (with a human rights lawyer as President) since the enactment of the Multicultural Family Support Act (2007-2008), it is also the dawn of a new era of Korean foreign policy towards South East Asia with the announcement of the New Southern Policy in 2018. One can only hope that these shifts will eventually produce not simply a better socio-legal framework for migrants, but also, ultimately, a less one-sided version of multiculturalism in South Korea.

### **Research question and hypothesis**

After more than a decade of government policing and targeting, and being defended by civic society for twice as long, why has the general integration of marriage migrants in South Korea seemingly not improved and why is citizenship still hardly attainable? How is this reflected in the organizational strategies of civic society organizations working in their defense?

I argue that advocating for citizenship for marriage migrant women in South Korea is an ambiguous goal given that Korean state

policies, in interplay with Korean society, have created an environment in which citizenship does not lead to empowerment for marriage migrants. Indeed, for these women, Korean citizenship and membership in Korean society have a price: that of being deprived of agency as maternal, marital, immigrant subjects in a patriarchal and ethnocentric system. This poses a dilemma not only for migrant women but also for the civic organizations that represent them and their interests. I argue that depending on their governance characteristics and institutional levels, civic society organizations deploy specific strategies to find a way around said dilemma. They are limited, however, by the restrictive framework of the state-sponsored and gendered concept of Damunhwa, which has negative consequences on the lives of marriage migrant women.

## CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review seeks to delve into the various problematizations of citizenship, rights acquisition and empowerment, from mainstream contemporary views to their contestation and reinvention by scholars writing more specifically about marginalized groups in society -including women and migrants –, in the Korean or more broadly East Asian context. This review concludes that a study focusing on the concrete impacts of the tension between citizenship and empowerment on civic society organizations advocating for marriage migrant women in South Korea is necessary.

Contemporary literature on citizenship, starting with T.H. Marshall's seminal work *Citizenship and Social Class* (1950), unequivocally link the status of citizenship and the process of empowerment, with the latter being a natural consequence of the former. Indeed, citizenship is viewed as an institutional mechanism seeking to equalize rights and duties of all recipients of citizenship status. This mechanism is deemed necessary in a society riddled with conflict due to modern capitalism, and it is a show of responsibility from the state to its citizens to safeguard social order. The society in question in Marshall's opus is that of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Great

Britain, in which social rights were acquired after civil and political rights. Marshall argues that the advent of social rights in such a context is due to a shift from citizenship as protecting the rights of the ruling class – to citizenship as an anti-market force, as a result of successful collective bargaining from the oppressed classes. As such, Marshall’s vision of citizenship is instrumental and tied to national politics, the welfare state as well as labor relations.

As an important counter-approach to citizenship as a mechanical instrument tied to political participation, citizenship as membership has been theorized to offer a deeper sociological scrutiny of shared meanings and senses of belonging and connection between members of a polity. This approach (retroactively) includes late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century sociologist E. Durkheim’s theorization of collective consciousness and interdependence of members of a society – and the shared values, norms, practices that come with it. Individual experiences and perceptions of citizenship supposedly come together and await sociological analysis to define citizenship as membership in a given context.

Scholars researching on citizenship issues regarding more marginalized groups in society mostly take issue with the instrumental, public and political rights-based approach defined by Marshall. Feminist critiques tend to qualify this definition as masculinist and ignoring the

experience of women with citizenship (Pateman 1989, Lister 2003), including the lack of recognition of unpaid care work in society. For Seungsook Moon, Marshall and his peers' error is to create a rigid dichotomy between the public sphere of labor and politics, and the private sphere of domestic work.<sup>4</sup> Moon's remarks are significantly motivated by the characteristics of modern Korean society, in which a large proportion of women are housewives and mothers, or at least expected to be after marriage.

Among the scholars who have sought to redefine citizenship in the Korean context, the most prolific has been sociologist Chang Kyung-sup, namely with his coined concept of *developmental citizenship*. The former is highly political, though not in the same way as Marshall's theory. Developmental citizenship is not the sum of rights and duties of citizens – but plainly 'the collective duties of ordinary citizens', implying not a responsibility from the state to its citizens but a mechanism of subordination to the developmental state, exploitative businesses included (Chang, 2012). The word collective also silently rids citizenship of the notion of guaranteed individual rights – only sacrifices remain as the

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<sup>4</sup> "Local meanings and lived experiences of citizenship: voices from a women's organization", Seungsook Moon in *South Korea in Transition: Politics and Culture of Citizenship* edited by Chang Kyung-Sup (2014)

country must develop. Chang goes as far as calling it *developmental corporate citizenship* as the rights of the proletariat are swept under the table and non-productive citizens lose the meager rights they could seek to receive as working citizens – and this takes us back to Moon’s housewives as secondary citizens. The rights received by productive citizens are called *transformative contributory rights*. Most importantly, not only does this definition of citizenship make little case of social rights – unlike Marshall’s Great Britain, the situation has not, supposedly, changed too significantly following the democratization of South Korea in the late 1980s.

Chang makes the case for a *transformative political citizenship* which would have arisen with native democratization movements in Korea, whose main agents were the middle class and students, and main beneficiaries the lower class. However, as Chang acknowledges himself, this active agency and type of citizenship quite exclusively benefitted male laborers (Koo, 2001) and the transition of Korea into a welfare state has not happened.

On the topic of the integration of foreign-born residents into South Korean citizenship, Chang, in his book *South Korea in Transition: Politics and Culture of Citizenship* (2014), critically opposes the concept of *neoliberal* and *cosmopolitan citizenship* in the context of globalization.

Globalization itself is argued to be an ambiguous term when applied to South Korea, a country which developed under foreign influence but without an imperialist past for itself (apart from the Vietnam war). Globalization was brought into Korean politics as the political tool of *segyehwa* in the early 1990s by President Kim Young Sam to plan the rise of South Korean legal, economic, social and cultural institutions to so-called “global standards”. This project, as yet another transformative endeavor of the Korean state, ‘readjusted’ South Korean developmental citizenship but does not correspond to a cosmopolitan mindset.

Concerning the national pursuit of multiculturalism, Chang argues that it was proposed by civil society only to be appropriated by the government’s “pro-business developmentalist stand”. This instrumentalization is demonstrated in the absence of provisions for foreign workers within *Damunhwa* policy – signaling that they are not welcome among Korean citizenry, as opposed to foreign brides charged with reproducing South Korean offspring. However, Chang semi-enthusiastically argues for a possible *compatriotic citizenship* in the horizon, in which South Korean perceptions of citizenship are fundamentally changing. In parallel (or jointly), there is a prospect for a *post-transformative society* in which citizens of Korean society are still somehow united and brought together in the absence of economic growth

or developmental transformative project. These last two concepts remain tentative and the author himself acknowledges a certain status quo.

Taking traditional rights-based approaches to empowering citizens to ask for their social rights, together with the notion of *transformative contributory rights* specific to South Korean *developmental citizenship*, points to the ambiguity of a rights-based approach to citizenship, and therefore to a rights-based approach to empowerment. Several researchers have questioned this approach for the goal of improving the condition of migrant women in East Asia. One of them is Leah Briones, with her ethnographic research on Filipina migrant domestic workers in *Empowering Migrant Women: Why Agency and Rights are not Enough* (2013). The condition of these workers is mostly discussed in terms of narratives and discourses: Briones opposes a dominant paradigm of victimization to a desirable capability-based empowerment paradigm to overcome the first one. Her main argument is that the studied group must be endowed with capability, as the possibility to build one's livelihood, in order to move on from victimization. In this case, it is better to be empowered through capability in order to fight for one's rights – rather than to be given rights without an access to empowerment. Briones quotes Battistella and Bell & Piper on the topic of migrant workers, explaining

that as opposed to migrants moving to Western Europe, newcomers in Asia may have their rights tied to the stipulations of short-term contracts (2002, 2005). As the situation for marriage migrants significantly differs from that of migrant workers in Korea, the conclusions in this study may differ.

Another critical approach the complexity of rights negotiation in context has been Choo Hae Yeon's in *The Cost of Rights: Migrant Women, Feminist Advocacy, and Gendered Morality in South Korea* (2013). Choo conducted ethnographic research on marriage migrants and foreign sex workers in South Korea and concluded that negotiating for one's rights is not cost-free nor a harmless practice – for the studied groups, it is akin to a 'gendered pursuit of morality' which relies heavily on mechanisms of victimization narratives on the part of women's movements. This raises the issue of a civil society-imposed moral hierarchy – in the scope of Choo's study, however, it concerns mostly feminist and women's movements (including non-feminist women's movements) and not necessarily advocates of the selected groups.

The present research acknowledges the heavy costs of such victimization narratives and gendered morality. The researcher now seeks to understand the tension between citizenship and empowerment from the

perspective of state policies and their effect on civic society organizations' activities and governance. The perspective of discourses and narratives is never really far, however, as it can be a site of contestation and empowerment for marginalized groups – as exemplified later in this piece. This will be explored in the frame of self-acceptance and self-reliance within structural constraints and instrumentalization – rather than on moral grounds within gendered morality constraints. This thesis also argues that the “moral landscape” Choo refers to is rather inextricable from Korean state policies. These are not “neutral” nor separated from the gendered social structure. The ideological is never too far from the political.

Although the present research was conducted using qualitative methods, it is useful to consider a representative quantitative study of citizenship acquisition (in the legal sense) for marriage migrants, in order to attach factual evidence to the study and open new paths for investigation. Minchul Hwang's study based on the results of the 2012 National Survey of Multicultural Families is a good example. According to him, citizenship acquisition of marriage migrants is a relatively new problem. Citing that only 42.4% of marriage migrants have been naturalized while 60% cited citizenship acquisition as their goal, as

opposed to only 15% aiming for permanent residence (Jeon et al., 2013), Hwang endeavors to explore the factors accounting for low naturalization success. These numbers are presented as paradoxical since marriage migrants are generally understood as being privileged in the race for citizenship, as guests of the South Korean government and expected to settle down in the country.

The factors encouraging naturalization are given as follows: characteristics from the origin country including legal provisions for dual citizenship, poverty level and distance from South Korea; a larger presence of one's ethnic population in Korea; and an overall good experience in Korea. Factors discouraging naturalization include: shorter length of stay, lack of Korean language skills, lower income level as well as higher levels of unemployment. This raises several questions for the present research: not only are some factors such as "favorable" experience in Korea quite subjective, some others including the length of stay and low-income levels indicate further investigation of structural constraints imposed on marriage migrants are key to understanding low levels of citizenship acquisition. In the context of the present study, the answer may lie in the important sacrifices required in the pursuit of citizenship.

# **CHAPTER THREE - ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

## **A. Theoretical Framework**

### **The citizenship-empowerment nexus**

How to approach the nexus between citizenship and empowerment in the most fruitful way to answer the research questions – first to prove that there is a tension between the two in the particular context of marriage migration to South Korea, then to observe its effects on the organizational evolutions of civic society organizations? As this thesis accepts the status and access to citizenship in both its politico-legal and societal meanings, the nexus is dissected in context along these two dimensions before attempting to reconcile them in the Korean context. Building such a framework requires to answer the following question for both conceptions: for marriage migrants in South Korea, in which conditions is the pursuit of citizenship consistent with a process of empowerment, or inconsistent, leading to disempowerment?

For citizenship as a legal status which comes with rights and duties, one must look into South Korea's Naturalization law, its potential amendments in the particular case of marriage migrants and last but not

least, its application. Such laws determine the necessary efforts required by marriage migrants to join the ranks of South Korean citizens. The nature of these legally-enforceable efforts shall determine how it is related to empowerment or, as this piece argues, disempowerment: do they require sacrificing one's legal and bodily autonomy, restricting one's lifestyle choices, accepting potential abuse and exploitation, accepting restrictive top-down norms in general, censoring one's language, culture or identity? This is in contrast with classical views of citizenship according to which aspiring citizens, typically white working-class men, earn their way through citizenship in honourable manner, acquiring political rights using which they can ask for measures of social and economic justice – in other words, an empowering process from A to Z. To be clear, this piece does not focus on the empowering aspects of acquiring citizenship, but a major difference between this model, which has been widely criticized in citizenship studies for its masculinist pre-conceptions, and the condition of marriage migrants in Korea, is that the latter first obtain social and economic rights before the political rights that come with naturalization. If social and economic rights are considered partial citizenship, something more akin to denizenship – which is the case here – then the conditions for accessing these rights must be examined as well in their relation to empowerment and, or disempowerment. Lastly, I

must say that my approach to citizenship as being riddled with sacrifices in the Korean context and for marriage migrants has been directly and profoundly impacted by Chang's *developmental citizenship* as a sum of duties towards the state's economic development (Chang, 2014) as well as Kim and Kilkey's idea of marriage migration as social investment (Kim and Kilkey, 2016) – with all the instrumentalizing and exploitative possibilities these entail.

Citizenship as membership, as belonging to a community, appears more complex – especially at a national level of identity and community. Although I argue that there is a strong link between state policies and the norms and values which dominant social discourses describe as “Korean” (or at least South Korean), no national identity is ever fully homogeneous. Attempts to make a country's values homogeneous are always highly politicized and designed to suppress narratives both in the main opposition and in marginalized fringes of society which promote alternative visions of society. Many questions still stand, however: what are the obstacles to marriage migrants belonging to South Korean society according to mainstream societal norms? Would overcoming these obstacles be a fundamentally empowering or disempowering process? Considering the polarizing place of marriage migrants in societal debates and in Korean media, it is natural that marriage migrants and “multicultural families”

would themselves become a hot topic around which the battle over identities rages. This is one of the places in which empowerment or disempowerment can take place: can marriage migrants take charge of their own narratives in Korean society? Or are there overwhelmingly strong and relatively negative discourses on their characteristics and identity, discourses (and potential practices) which set them apart and prevent a progressive integration into society? Identities are of course flexible, but does reshaping one's identity as a marriage migrant in Korea require to give up, unilaterally, too much of one's core pre-departure identity?

When it comes to the theoretical foundation to organizational analysis in the light of the tension between citizenship and empowerment, the nexus together in the shape of an uncooperative state and hostile dominant norms as gatekeeping citizenship with disempowering processes – versus civic society organizations trying to counter these disempowering processes and improve the overall conditions and autonomy of marriage migrants. The nexus can thus be explored in terms of state-society relations.

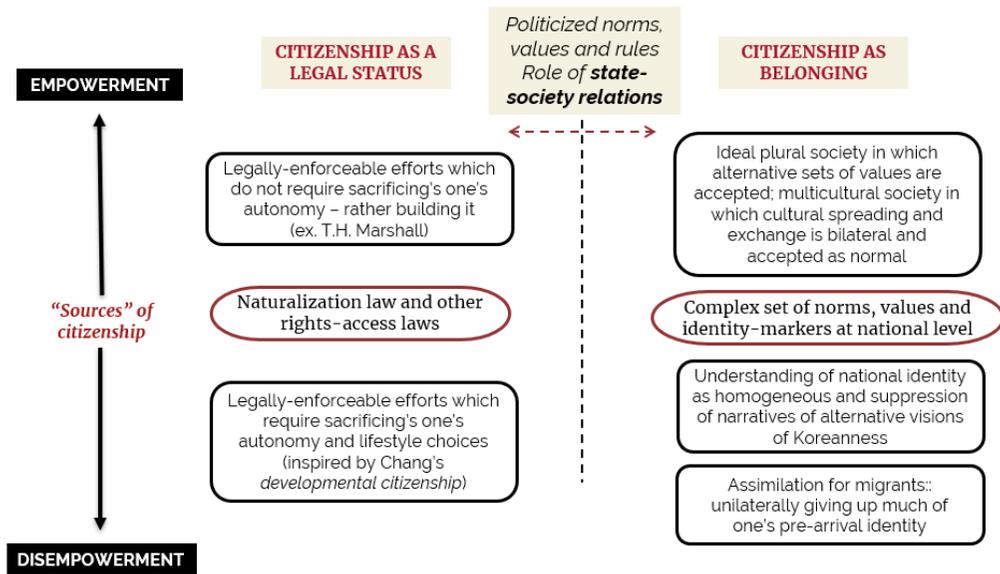


Figure 1: Visualization of the citizenship-empowerment nexus

## Perspectives on citizenship

Firstly, the reason why it is the concept of citizenship and not simply rights that is used is partly clarified in the Literature Review. The pursuit of rights for marginalized migrant women been explored rather thoroughly and has been concluded to be ambiguous and not universally beneficial – if not harmful (Choo, 2013). For Briones, rights alone are insufficient to empower those who are not given the capability to overcome victimization (Briones, 2013). Taking on citizenship, in all its complexity and flexible definition (defined below), allows us to try and understand the complexity of marriage migrants’ path to belonging or not

in South Korea; to go back and forth between the private and public sphere for our analysis, which in turns expands our reflection on empowerment. It could eventually help us think about the future of a possible Asian cosmopolitan citizenship.

The concept of citizenship is all the more crucial to put at the center of the present research because of the peculiar situation of marriage migrants: among the numerous immigrant groups which are either neglected by the South Korean government or whose stay is severely constrained by short-term contracts, such as seasonal workers and migrant workers in general with the widely criticized Employment Permit System<sup>5</sup>, marriage migrants have the rare advantage of being expected to settle down in South Korea as invited citizens. Policy provisions and state discourse are thus supposedly adjusted to encourage citizenship acquisition among them, at the very least status-wise and in terms of family membership.

As for the fitted definition of citizenship in this piece, I chose to combine its conceptualization as a status or tool deployed by the government with its conceptualization as membership in a community of shared meanings. This is not simply in order to remain flexible with

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<sup>5</sup> “Migrant workers oppose Employment Permit System”, *The Investor* (August 17, 2016). URL: <http://www.theinvestor.co.kr/view.php?ud=20160817000937>

regards to analyzing the tension between citizenship and empowerment, but also because I argue that the conditions of citizenship as a status in South Korea are not so far removed from the conditions of membership in national South Korean society, partly due to Korea's recent history as an authoritarian developmental state seeking to control Korean values and mobilize the Korean people around them<sup>6</sup>. Government policies and their corresponding values in modern South Korea are analyzed in Chapter 4 and require going back and forth between legal rights or status and social incorporation. As will be shown, both are ambiguous goals for marriage migrants. Coming back to the distinction between the public and private sphere for gendered citizenship made by Moon Seungsook<sup>7</sup>, one can observe that marriage migrants are in between the two. Indeed, marriage migrants in public are presented as guest citizens eligible to social benefits and potential citizenship, whereas the basis for their being given a chance is precisely their role in the private sphere, including unpaid marital work and child-rearing.

Last but not least, in order for the conceptualization of citizenship to remain framed within the South Korean context, the concept of

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Moon Seungsook's *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, 2005

<sup>7</sup> See Moon Seungsook, "Local meanings and lived experiences of citizenship: voices from a women's organization" in Chapter 2. Literature Review

developmental citizenship coined by Chang specifically for the case of South Korea and detailed in the literature review is a major reference and conceptual precedent to this paper. In short, it is a mode of citizenship whose basis is not individual social rights but the “collective duties” of citizens as determined by the state (Chang, 2012). In return for the satisfactory fulfillment of these duties, certain rights are allotted in accordance: these are, according to Chang, transformative *contributory rights*. This framework allows us to think about marriage migrants’ alleged contribution, which is reproductive rather than productive. Indeed, marriage and subsequent childrearing are the apparent key to rights obtention for foreign brides. This differs from the obtention of political rights prior to the negotiation of social rights – as the classical model for citizenship – as well as from notions of membership. One could argue that the shared meaning here would be collective transformation, but the complexity of Korean identity - beyond the subjection of individuals to developmentalism - incites us to consider other factors including ethnical, social and cultural. For this purpose, the present theoretical framework needs to assert the scope and application of the concept of multiculturalism in Korean context and for marriage migrants.

## **Perspectives on empowerment**

I chose the concept of empowerment to put in tension with that of citizenship after having visited CSOs advocating for marriage migrants and realizing the strong antagonism between their daily struggles with social and political discrimination and the goal of naturalization. As detailed previously, empowerment and rights are no synonyms. Empowerment is also a more interactive concept, defined in terms of enabling, of capacity. It encloses not simply the status of being empowered, which is hardly tied to a single definition, but the possibility to take control of one's own narratives and redefine one's place in all spheres of society. The broad notion of empowerment can therefore be used for analysis of government policy, civil society and more. Factors to empowerment and disempowerment may be very diverse and include policies, mindsets and stereotypes, the existence of safe spaces and more.

When discussing the potential empowerment of non-native group in a given host society, the mechanisms of empowerment and disempowerment affecting native citizens themselves might be brought to light. As gender and demographics matter in this research project, the plight of marriage migrants might partially reflect that of native Korean women, not the least because they both have Korean husbands and in-laws.

Practical definitions of empowerment in context are explored below. As important as it is to define empowerment in demonstrating the tension between the pursuit of citizenship, as a status and as membership, the present research remains voluntarily flexible about the meaning(s) of empowerment to avoid closing any doors in analyzing the case studies of CSOs and their dealing with the diverse lived experiences of marriage migrant women. However, flexibility does not mean vagueness – which has plagued conceptions of empowerment related to its popularization in international development, to the point of emptying it of its revolutionary political signification. Political correctness transformed freeing empowerment into liberal empowerment (Sardenberg, 2008). Ultimately, its use by the World Bank may have encouraged the status quo as a top-down strategy – and may have privileged the economic aspect of empowerment over the social (including issues of gender) and political. Empowerment is a multidimensional concept and this research framework agrees with the paradigm that empowerment is a set of radical and transformative means rather than a set of measurable results (Agot, 2008).

According to Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès in *Empowerment: The History of a Key Concept*, the term empowerment was first popularized in the English language through radical black and feminist discourse in the

1980s, to some extent as an antonym to marginalization as a priority for minorities to overcome. For Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, it is the revolutionary process from a dominated conscience to a freed one, or the informed awareness to spring to action (Freire, 1974). In the 1990s, empowerment quickly became a buzzword of international development lingo after a report about “third world women” published in 1987 by Sen and Grown advocating, beyond economic growth and independence, the need for political mobilization, awareness and widespread education to achieve gender equality. The result of empowerment can be integration and a gain in autonomy, which is not so different in itself from citizenship as membership.

Empowerment can also be the process of transforming the power balance between individuals and social groups (Batliwala, 1994). Following Batliwala’s transformative definition, empowerment requires the following ingredients: a decisive ideology, the access and control to certain resources, as well as improved institutions. This seizing of power is not an oppressive one (“power over”), but a capability (“power to”) which can be shared (“power with”) and which originates in a powerful understanding of one’s condition and capacity to overcome certain circumstances (“power from within”) – since empowerment is for communities rather than for the state or the market (Friedman, 1992). This

notion of overcoming is reminiscent of early 1980s activism – as J. Friedman recalls, communities have to empower themselves precisely because they have to battle with “disempowerment” as the historical process of exclusion on a systematic basis. They have to elicit responsibility and change from every influential institution participating in this oppressive system: the state, private businesses, the media and more.

Taking these definitions together with the South Korean context for marriage migrants, empowerment can include and is not limited to the following processes, in no particular order: the power to challenge oppressive institutions; taking control of one’s narrative and the power to refuse victimization narratives; the power to demand a fair path to citizenship; the power within to not renounce to and/or “practice” one’s culture and identity freely in the face of adversity or exclusion; the power to challenge gender roles; the accessing to and use of resources; the action of reclaiming one’s rights; the process of gaining autonomy; and the “power with” to fight these battles in solidarity with one’s community and allies of this community, whether politically or socially.

## **Perspectives on Korean multiculturalism**

It is impossible to speak on the topic of marriage migrants in Korea without framing the concept of multiculturalism as *damunhwa*. In contemporary Korean language as well as for the majority of South Korean society, these words are synonymous. The term *damunhwa* was first used in the 2000s by civic society organizations and scholars advocating for the so called “multicultural” families in which one of the spouses is non-Korean. This appellation was an alternative and a reaction to the South Korean’s government use of the term *honhyeol* (mixed blood in English) in legal documents to refer to half-Korean children. Following accusations by civil society advocates that this practice was derogatory and a human rights violation, the government adopted the term *damunhwa* around 2006, before devising its multicultural policy shaping and targeting the “multicultural family” (*damunhwa gajok*) model – which describes the union of a South Korean national and a foreign-born spouse (Jun, 2011). Far from being a merely technical and politically correct term, *damunhwa* bears this specific meaning across Korean society, with an additional layer of details: the image of a foreign East-Asian woman married to a Korean man and strongly assimilating to Korean culture, raising her mixed children to be strictly Korean.

This restrictive vision of multiculturalism calls for reflecting on a related concept: globalization, or *segyehwa*. Coincidentally, *segyehwa* also predominantly refers to a policy rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon. Under the Kim Young Sam presidency (1993-1998), globalization in the country was conceptually transformed from foreign influence to the necessity for South Korean institutions and technology to reach “global standards” – Kim’s catchphrase – in all possible fields. For the sake of such goals, neoliberal globalization was a logical enterprise. However, as pointed out by sociologist Chang Kyung-sup, *segyehwa* gave way for a “globalization without globalist philosophy such as cosmopolitanism”, with economic patriotism and capitalism as guiding ideologies. Contemporary visions of multiculturalism are not so far removed from this view.

Conceptualizing multiculturalism in context allows us to link the problematization of citizenship and empowerment to complex governance issues and cultural factors – since *damunhwa* is predominantly an engineered ethno-cultural and demographic change. It also allows us to swing back and forth between multiple, often gendered narratives and the very concrete policy measures mirroring social discourse.

## **Perspective on state-society relations and civil society in South**

### **Korea**

Given South Korea's history as an authoritarian and developmental state, it is useful to problematize civil society in the country as a predominantly antagonistic force to the state, even after democratization. At least up to the 1990s, civil society was not a well-understood component of the Korean nation, its force was downplayed, and its legitimacy was questioned by the state (H. Lee and Yamamoto, 1995). Whether from Confucian tradition, political interest, priority for security and economic growth or simple refusal to cooperate, the government made

non-governmental organizations in South Korea dependent its good will to tolerate them. During the authoritarian period, NGOs which were not service-oriented but advocacy, justice and rights-oriented were labeled as anti-government, repressed and/or had to go underground. Interestingly, certain groups of the women's movement were encouraged by dictatorships which reciprocated with policy research (H. Lee, 1995) – perhaps as a way to leverage civil society power for economic and demographic purposes.

When the first democratic governments of South Korea started counting former activists against the former dictatorships in its leadership,

the relationship between state and civil society significantly improved and advocacy NGOs flourished, opening debates and influencing policy in the name of human rights or public goods, receiving attention from intellectuals and the wider public. However, certain accounts of civil society post-democratization such as Kim Sunhyuk's<sup>8</sup> demonstrate that groups that were instrumental in the movements for democracy, such as students or trade unions, discarded their radical militant style for political demands. Student groups, for example, mainly advocate in the name of intra-campus issues rather than broader societal causes. According to Kim Sunhyuk, the majority of civic society organizations created after democratization do not buy into Marxist class narratives nor confrontational movements and tactics. These citizen's groups advocate for diverse causes such as economic justice or the environment. Although militant action has been significantly toned down, this mode of existing may have been useful in limiting backlash from the state when a significant illiberal rollback on democracy occurred in 21<sup>st</sup> century Korea, particularly under the Lee Myung-Bak presidency (2008-2013). The omnipresence of such a possibility for anti-democratic practices from the government, or simply political turnover, is a factor of instability to take

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<sup>8</sup> Kim, Sunhyuk. Civil Society in South Korea: From Grand Democracy Movements to Petty Interest Groups? *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1996): 81-97

into account when considering state-society relations in South Korean context.

Beyond feeble militantism and possible antagonism, another tension in the existence of civic society organizations is useful to incorporate to this framework. As most civic society organizations engage in both service and advocacy functions, their relationship with the state – as a resource provider and may critically vary according to which function is in question (H. Lee, 1995). Given this unavoidable tension, it would be interesting to explore whether this makes CSOs privilege one activity to another in order to stabilize its relationship with the state.

## **B. Methodological Framework**

### **1. Research project: problem and hypothesis**

The research problem is to understand why marriage migrants in South Korea struggle to integrate as citizens in their host country despite their being officially invited in. I argue that there is a tension between their pursuit of citizenship and the process of empowerment by which they could define their status and identity on their own terms due to disempowering policies and conceptions of multiculturalism. Once demonstrated, the hypothesis calls for an analysis of how such tension impacts civic society organizations as advocates for marriage migrants. In order to answer the research questions and make the most of this hypothesis, qualitative research methods are applied.

### **2. Research design: variables of the citizenship-empowerment nexus**

In order to transform the citizenship-empowerment nexus described in the theoretical framework into a workable research design, this nexus must be split into distinct variables along our hypotheses, all while paying attention to the complexity of human agency that is unavoidable in

qualitative research. The first task is to untangle the processes of empowerment and citizenship, which are interdependent variable, according to what this piece is trying to uncover.

The first investigation is that of the effect of the process of seeking citizenship in South Korea on the process of empowerment for marriage migrants. A negative effect, i.e. disempowerment is expected to be the result. This expectation stands in direct contradiction with the classical interpretation in sociological studies that a move closer to citizenship is also a move closer to empowerment, which is to say that the processes of citizenship and empowerment are supposed to be interwoven in a positive manner; precisely, citizenship as an independent variable is supposed to encourage empowerment as a dependent variable.

The second venture is to investigate how the tension between citizenship and empowerment, or in other words the negative effect of seeking citizenship has on empowerment, influences the functioning of civic society organizations (CSOs). This tension or negative influence is treated as an independent variable which would influence and explain the functioning of CSOs working with marriage migrants as the dependent variable, because the selected CSOs work primarily to ensure the social well-being and empowerment of migrant women – beyond urgent and administrative help. While the first investigation is an explanatory one,

the second is more exploratory, as the researcher seeks to understand in which ways the selected CSOs try and avoid the effects demonstrated by our first investigation: what can organized civil society do to counter the nefarious effect of institutional forces directing the citizenship process and disempowering marriage migrant women?

Both variable relationships that are presented here are complexified by the dual nature of citizenship, one as a legal status and the other as membership. The implications of this duality are detailed in the theoretical framework.

### **3. Methodology and data for demonstrating the tension**

In order to demonstrate that there is a tension between citizenship and empowerment, policy and legislation from various ministers and committees of the South Korean government are analysed using the established theoretical framework in order to highlight said policies' pernicious effects on the struggle for marriage migrant women to earn membership in South Korea without having to submit to disempowering practices. Apart from actual policy papers from several ministries and government agencies, important contributions by other researchers and

additional data from reports written by NGO coalitions and submitted to the government are used to enrich the analysis.

Building on this analysis of state policies, manifestations of what civic society organizations call the *Damunhwa wall* are analysed to emphasize the power of the restrictive model through the case of Multicultural Family Centers, the demonstration of disempowering hierarchies and prejudices in Korean society as well as the gendered labour division inherited from Korean familism. The analysis is conducted using the established theoretical framework with the following data: official information provided on the Danuri portal, the multicultural website portal dedicated to damunhwa families, external knowledge and accounts of MFSCs, survey results from the ASEAN-Korea Center on perceptions of ASEAN by Koreans as well as ethnographic accounts of the traditional Korean family system most experience by female migrants.

#### **4. Methodology for CSO analysis: comparative case studies**

Once the tension between citizenship and empowerment has been established, its influences on the work of civic society organizations working with marriage migrants are analysed through selected comparative case studies. This method was chosen in order to take this

study beyond theoretical analysis and examine the concrete impacts of the demonstrated phenomenon on civic society organizations and draw conclusions on the constrained role of CSOs for the support of marriage migrants, South Korea's invited citizens. Ultimately, citizenship and empowerment are defined by a complex power balance between institutions and civil society.

Two cases were selected. Their commonality is that they are South Korean civic society organizations (CSO) headquartered in Seoul, South Korea, operating both service and advocacy activities in support of marriage migrants. These activities include, non-exhaustively: legal and administrative support, psychological counseling, policy research and overall human rights-themed activities. Their main difference lies in their type of governance and level of institutionalization, mostly because the citizenship vs empowerment dilemma is one mainly posed by institutional forces and power balance, in both categories of social studies. This basis for comparison allows us to isolate the effects of the dilemma of citizenship versus empowerment following these criteria:

- (1) Governance and organizational structure
- (2) Accountability and funding structure
- (3) Evolution of activities

These criteria have been chosen after data collection through focal point interviews, because they reflect organizational areas in which the tension between citizenship and empowerment seems to have had impacted how CSOs function in-between state and society. They are directly related to the level of institutionalization of the studied CSOs.

The first case study is conducted on the Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN), representing civic society organizations with “top-down” governance and a higher level of institutionalization. Justifications include that KOCUN was created to carry the name and norms of the United Nations as well as being accountable to UNOG officers. (It is not, however, a UN-mandated agency. In Korea, the organization has a complex body of directors and representatives (see Appendix 1). KOCUN was also originally more dependent on government funding than the other case, due to being mandated to carry out the pre-departure orientation program by the MOGEF.

The second case study is that of the Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center. Unlike KOCUN, it does not operate by an international organization’s institutional norms but by a “bottom-up” type of governance in which local grassroots representatives determine the

Center's priorities based on fieldwork evidence, during an annual meeting of all WMHRC branches. Following the results of this meeting, the Center's work for the year is planned. Throughout the year, local branches hold regular community workshops. Although the WMHRC plays a consultative role for the national and local governments, the latter are rarely the main donors for the Center's budgeted activities, significantly reducing its accountability towards the state.

The main data sources for the case studies are notes and recordings of two focal point interviews with professional Korean NGO workers. The first one was conducted by the researcher with a Planning Manager at KOCUN. I obtained their contact through the Co-Director of KOCUN and SNU-GSIS faculty. The second interview was conducted with a Representative at the Women Migrants Human Rights Center. This interview subject was contacted by the researcher via e-mail and personal visit before the interview. Both interviews lasted about an hour, following a set of open questions, the same for each interview, for the interviewees to answer at length. The interviewees were allowed to expand on some questions more than others according to how important they thought one issue or the other was.

The interview with the KOCUN planning manager was conducted in English, whereas the interview with the WMHRC Representative, a long-standing and experienced advocate of women migrants, was conducted in Korean - with the help of a trusted female classmate from SNU-GSIS. The gender of the interpreter is relevant here as the interview revolved around women's rights and included sensitive topics such as domestic violence. Another potential issue of bias was discussed with the WMHRC Representative, who was genuinely curious to know why a young white woman from a developed European country was interested in the plight of women migrants from developing South East Asian nations to South Korea. I first explained my interest on the topic of multiculturalism in South Korea – the characteristics of which differ so greatly from multiculturalism in my own country – as well as my opinion that *damunhwa* reunites most great challenges of South Korean society: citizenship of foreign-born residents, gender inequality, state instrumentalization, democracy without growth and more. I then discussed with her my awareness of the presence of ethnic and economic constructed hierarchies in the conscious and/or unconscious minds of South Koreans (especially for the second type) and of people in general, including potentially myself. These factors were taken into account in the analysis.

Additional data for the case studies include official publications these CSOs have published or contributed to and the official website contents of both organizations.

Within this research framework, these comparative case studies serve a double purpose: initially, the focal point interviews conducted sought to shed light on the current activities and working environment of civic society organizations – in order to understand what kind of obstacles they are facing. That is, they sought to answer the research question. As a second step, these same cases and interviews are explored through the lens of the tension between citizenship and empowerment, in order to make sense of the power distribution between the state and these members of civil society, as well as to define the survival and adaptation strategy of selected CSOs in the midst of this dilemma.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – EVIDENCE OF THE TENSION BETWEEN CITIZENSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT FOR MARRIAGE MIGRANT WOMEN**

### **Introduction: The workers-brides divide**

As mentioned previously, there is a paradox to marriage migrants' struggle to acquire citizenship and integrate to South Korean society – and it is a policy paradox. Despite rumours of a possible merger (Chang, 2014), completely different sets of policies are applied for marriage migrants and migrant workers although they are from the same sending countries. If the administrative existence of *damunhwa* families are mostly regulated by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF), migrant workers are policed by the Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) – although other ministries of Justice, Health and Welfare as well as Foreign Affairs and Trade have a share in immigration policy. The difference between the MOGEF and the MOEL is quite clear: while the former indicates that marriage migrants are invited, as women, to settle down in Korea and build families, the latter suggests the limitation of one's rights and legitimacy to be in Korea by employment contracts – and not necessarily fair ones.

The fact that *damunhwa* policies exclude foreign workers is thus not trivial – according to Seol and Kim, it is a testimony that migrant workers’ labour and outright exploitation will never be rewarded with citizenship nor social rights and benefits (Seol, 2012 and Kim, 2012). Nor has South Korea signed the United Nations human rights treatise ruling that foreign workers be allowed to live with their family (Lee, 2008), when in fact these situations are very common, specifically situations in which foreign workers are forced to hide their children “whose illegal residential status denies them access to” any kind of welfare. This dire situation raises questions on the reasons why marriage migrants, who are more desired by immigration policy and whose rights are comparatively more welcoming, are still not easily accessing citizenship. Part of the answer lies in low proportions of marriage migrants actually receiving these promised benefits (Chang, 2014). According to the Danuri website, a government-run portal for the multicultural family community, marriage migrants’ rights to protection and respect as regards to their ethnicity and culture must be upheld, and their language, adaptation and relationship difficulties must be alleviated (Danuri, 2013). However, the policy review below proves there are gaps between official discourse, state policies and their practical impact.

## **A. Policy evidence: familism, instrumentalization, commodification**

### **1. Instrumentalization for demographic governance**

The mere existence of marriage migration through international brokerage as a government policy shows that such policy will first and foremost be devised in the interests of the host state, whatever they may be, rather than in response and support to human flux which were not caused by government planning. This planning aspect is reflected in the type of policy research that were conducted by policy committees to devise marriage migration policy: it was the work of the Presidential Committee on Ageing Society and Population Policy. The priority was thus demographic and in no way a project to integrate foreigners to make South Korean society a cosmopolitan one. According to Kim Hyun Mee, this instrumentalization is reminiscent of the developmental state's planning policies of the 1970s in their democratic, quantified nature, isolated from other developmental goals (Kim; Chang, 2014)

## **2. Familism: citizenship through motherhood and marital status only**

The primary way in which *damunhwa* policy is disempowering is by promoting one single way for marriage migrants to earn their place and legal status as South Korean citizens: through birthing and raising children of South Korean descent. The 2008 Multicultural Family Support Act contends that its main purpose is to help multicultural families through helping them to “enjoy stable family living”. It does not promise to protect and support invited marriage migrants but puts great emphasis on safeguarding “the unity of society”.

Article 1 (Purpose)

The purpose of this Act is to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of multi-cultural family members and the unity of society by helping multi-cultural family members enjoy stable family living.

*Figure 2: Article 1 of the 2008 Multicultural Family Support Act*

Beyond biased terminology, this restrictive citizenship model has very concrete consequences on the daily lives of marriage migrants. For example, their access to social rights is restricted if they do not have children. Indeed, welfare protection under the *damunhwa* policy is “for

Parents'. Marriage migrant women are not entitled to these rights as potential Korean citizens on their own. This does not merely restrict their access to rights – such policy also denies foreign brides the possibilities to make empowered and enlightened lifestyle choices for themselves and their families.

### **3. Legal precarity: when the contract breaks**

When it comes to marriage migrants' legal precarity, the issue is not so much with existing policy but with the lack of appropriate policy. The current Naturalization Act and Multicultural Family Support Act do not plan for the eventuality of divorce and of the husband's death – no legal framework exists to stabilize marriage migrants' and their potential children's situation vis-à-vis citizenship and residence in such situations (Kim, Park and Shukhertei, 2016). Albeit extreme in terms of their negation of the marriage migration policy to build a secure *damunhwa* family life, these situations are quite common and often result in the deportation of foreign brides. In case of divorce, marriage migrants may be allowed to stay in the country if they prove that they were not faulty in the divorce. Their odds are also better if they have produced half-Korean children (re-find source).

In all other cases, visa sponsorship by the husband as expressed in Article 6 of Naturalization Law seals their fate: as husbands cannot or do not want to testify on the good marital behavior and residence of the spouse during yearly renewal of their residency permits, immigrant divorcees are sent back to their host country, sometimes without a proper divorce (provide additional data, analysis and sources). Moreover, divorce proceedings are not legally required to be translated for the foreign spouse (Jeong, 2019) and employment is prohibited for the foreign spouse during the divorce (So, 2005), which effectively bars them from hiring legal defense and, at a more basic level, from breaking dependency with their husband and potential abuser.

The legal precarity which marriage migrants face has far-reaching effects even if divorce or death of the husband does not happen before the obtention of citizenship or permanent residency. The possibility for the husband to decide get rid of their wife overnight provides them with disproportionate and potentially abusive power over their spouse. This “life on probation” (Kim, Park and Shukhertei, 2016)) in the wait for citizenship is a crucial example of systematic disempowerment of marriage migrants.

#### **4. Objectification and commodification**

I argue that marriage migrants are disempowered by their commodification (Kim, 2011) and objectification by marriage brokers, on which the state relies to maintain the steady influx of marriage migrants. Not only are women traded as goods in a way which denies them the necessary subjectivity of a future empowered citizen and in many cases the respect of their human rights, Korean policies have evolved towards the protection of Korean husbands from scams rather than the protection of marriage migrants' human rights.

Indeed, Korean Consumer Law was modified in June 2008 for scam prevention. As Korean husbands pay thousands of dollars for their “mail-order bride”, they are consumers with full rights over marriage migrants, including the possibility to return the product and be reimbursed in case they are not satisfied with it, all under the supervision of patronizing brokers. At personal level, marriage migrants thus experience dehumanizing commodification upon coming to Korea. At macro level, they are victims of capitalist globalization, reflected in national neoliberal policies.

## **B. The Damunhwa wall**

The term “damunhwa wall” (*damunhwa jangbyeok*) has gained popular in civil society and activist circles to talk about the instrumentalized appropriation of multiculturalism by the South Korean government as well as negative or misguided perceptions of multiculturalism in society. Damunhwa is a wall because it is a restrictive notion, label and framework to think about the multicultural future of South Korea, and for immigrants to fit in. Women migrants, as the target of damunhwa policy and societal perceptions of foreigner integration, are particular restricted by this wall.

### **1. Multicultural Family Support Centers (MFSC), where policy meets reality**

The physical manifestation of damunhwa are more than 200 MOGEF-mandated multicultural family support centers (MFSC, *damunhwa gajok jiweon senteo*) across the country. Main free services include Korean language classes, interpretation and translation services, psychological and legal counselling as well as emergency case management, personal and vocational training, “family education”,

language assessment for children and other services pertaining to children, including the provision of a “bilingual environment” for families with children. If most of those services appear straightforward, the Danuri portal’s use of English words to describe some offered services can seem curious: for example, “character training” for marriage migrants or “family education” remain ambiguous in description as to the guiding values and attitudes of these sessions. Although the MOGEF has sustained continuous effort to improve the impact of services from MFSCs with fact-finding surveys every three years since 2009 and, for example, the introduction in the centers of a bilingual space for bi-cultural families since 2015 (Danuri, 2015), MFSCs bear the mark of the government’s familism and assimilationist model. Familism, because activities target mostly families with children and do not accept mixed families of labour migrants nor foreign families in which none of the spouses are Korean (Thona, 2017) – even for Korean language education. Assimilationist, because most cultural activities at MFSCs tend to privilege Korean language and culture over the language and culture of the wife and/or mother, which are rarely incorporated and valued.

Despite the government’s efforts, only little more than half of marriage migrants in Korea make use of MFSC services (Oh, 2015). The other half may stay away from the manifestation of a one-sided vision of

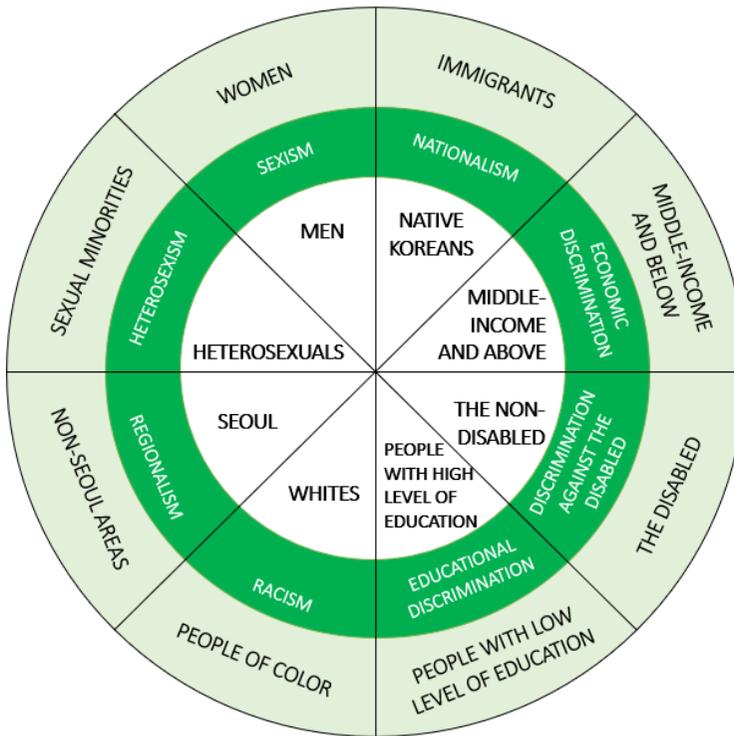
multiculturalism and of the family, preventing the proud preservation of one's identity – especially as marriage migrants come from very varied countries and cultures – and fair membership in South Korean society. Instead, they visit CSOs such as the Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center or the Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy. MFSCs represent the uncooperative authority of the Korean state and the overpowering authority of the husband in traditional Korean family culture. Marriage migrants are not well represented among MFSC executives either: among 217 centers in Korea, only 1 of them counts a migrant woman in the higher executive ranks (Jeong, 2019). This is definitely not an environment in which marriage migrants can take control of their own narratives and become citizens on a fair basis.

## **2. Ethnocentrism and perceptions of cultural and economic superiority**

Damunhwa as a model of multiculturalism is a “wall” because its rests on several beliefs of superiority: that of “ethnically Korean” people over other ethnicities, especially those from the southern hemisphere, of Korean culture over native cultures of marriage migrants, and of the Korean economy (and thus value in the neoliberal world order) over so-

called developing countries. Beyond perceptions of superiority, the Damunhwa model encourages the creation of families that privilege the continuity of Korean “blood” through the father and of Korean culture despite the incorporation of a foreign element. The latter is precisely why marriage migrants are trained to assimilate through language, values and other cultural skills such as Korean cuisine. Perceptions of superiority coupled with a voluntarily self-preserving immigration policies result in marriage migrants having to willingly erase their culture to become deserving citizens of South Korea and fit Koreans’ “bio-cultural identity” (Chang, 2014).

Below is a representation of hierarchies present in Korean society with the inner circle representing the centre or favourable norm in society and the outer circle showing the marginalized group. This diagram is included in the very first chapter of a multilingual guide for immigrant women living in Seoul published by the Seoul Metropolitan Government (See Appendix 5), although predominantly written by professional civil society activists such as Ms. Heo from the Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center, one of this research’s case studies. It is as if the first thing that immigrant women should be aware of when coming to Korea, and specifically migrant women, is their place on this diagram of discriminatory hierarchies.



*Figure 3: Hierarchies in Korean society, reproduced from TIME'S UP (Seoul Metropolitan Government)*

What follows is a direct interrogation for the reader: where do you stand on the Russian roulette of life in Korea? This is meant to inform migrants of their newfound status as a marginalized minority in Korea because of their gender, origin, economic status, “biological” citizenship status, skin colour and more.

### **Where am I ?**

Identity - 'who am I?' - is associated with the position I have in the Korean society? There are two circles. Let's mark where I am. Am I largely in the inner circle? Or am I in the outer circle?

Those in the outer circle belong to the margin (non-mainstream) whereas those in the inner circle are the center (mainstream) of society. One person can belong to the center as well as the margin at the same time depending on elements. However, elements in the center and the margin are not equally matched to each other. They are asymmetrical and unequal. When specific differences are used to separate the center (inner circle) from the margin (outer circle) based on judgement of values, a hierarchy is created between the two.

For instance, Korean natives and immigrants are not simply distinctive, equal groups when nationalism is at play. In this case, the former tends to be regarded as a superior group.

*Figure 4: Excerpt from TIME'S UP (Seoul Metropolitan Government)*

Another important component of marriage migrants' disempowerment by accepting South Korean untold rules for citizenship as national membership is the country's global economic elitism, not void of racist pre-conceptions. In a study published in April 2018 by the ASEAN-Korea Center survey Korean people's perceptions of ASEAN countries, the first images and words that come to the mind of Korean youth on the topic are analysed. In the figure below, besides appreciative terms related to tourism, such as "vacation spot" or "delicious", negative perceptions of South East Asian countries' development are present, with the words "underdeveloped" and "poverty", which translates Koreans'

feeling of economic superiority towards their favourite exotic travel destinations.

As for perceptions of South East Asian people, migration-related terms such as “marriage”, “foreign worker” and “labour” are presented next to racial terms which, in Korean context, are not meant to be flatter: “dark-skinned” and “dark”. Moreover, no less than five stereotypical judgments of character are included: “simple”, “diligent”, “sincere” and “relaxed”. Although these are overall positively connotated, the first two terms give away their relation to images of accepting exploitative labour due to poverty. The fact that young people answered this survey also proves that these potentially harmful and disempowering stereotypes are not only in the minds of older Koreans.

Top terms associated with ASEAN	Top terms associated with ASEAN people
- Vacation spot	- Kind
- Hot	- Skin
- Travel	- Foreign worker
- Tourism	- Foreigner
- Developing country	- Labor
- Food	- Poverty
- Price	- Simple
- Poor	- Marriage
- Poverty	- Dark
- Development	- Relaxed
- Underdeveloped	- International
- Delicious	- Migration
- Tropical	- Diligent
- Growth	- Dark-skinned
- Fruits	- Sincere
	- Smile

*Figure 5: Mutual Perceptions of ASEAN and Korean Youth.*  
*Source: ASEAN-Korea Center survey*

### **3. Gendered labour and marital division**

The husband sponsorship system for citizenship acquisition and motherhood conditionality for the obtention of social rights are not merely policies – they reflect ways of thinking of the family that are still prevalent in Korean society and in the private sphere in which foreign brides start their life in Korea. Specifically, this entails superiority of the husband in the marriage, who works while the wife takes care of domestic duties and child-rearing. In this model, the housewife usually does not engage in paid work (see Moon Seungsook, 2014). This strict gender division of labour and marital duties often comes as a shock to marriage migrants who come from countries whose dominant family culture is less restricted by notions of gender, such as Vietnam or the Philippines. According to J. Encinas-Franco, some Southeast Asian women who come to South Korea as brides are marrying up in terms of country GDP but down in terms of gender equality – as opposed, for example, to marriage migrants to Taiwan (Encinas-Franco, 2018). Marriage migrants may thus experience disempowering downward social mobility and have their professional aspirations ignored when coming to Korea, preventing economic empowerment, increasing risks of poverty and causing forced subordination.

Besides marital and child-rearing duties, marriage migrants insert themselves in a complex power system within the family, in which power for women is uterine, which is to say that women obtain bargaining power by birthing a child, specifically a son, to be faithful and obedient to his mother and follow her decisions (Kim, 2014). Rather than benefitting from this power system with their children, marriage migrants often fall victim to the tyranny of in-laws, particularly their mother-in-law (Seol et al., 2016), which often exercise psychological control over marriage migrants' husband and force the women to adapt to extremely constraining gender roles in the home. This can only obstruct mechanisms of empowerment – but protesting may result in divorce and effective deportation.

# **CHAPTER FIVE – IMPACT OF THIS TENSION ON CIVIC SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES**

## **A. Presentation of the case studies**

### **1. Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN) (유엔인권정책센터)**

#### **Brief history of activities**

KOCUN is a South Korean NGO working regionally to advance human rights causes following United Nations directives. Although KOCUN officers report to the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), it is not a UN agency. KOCUN's activities in support of marriage migrants started after the murder case of a Vietnamese bride in South Korea in 2006. By 2007, the Pre-Departure Orientation (PDO) program was launched in sending countries like Vietnam and Cambodia under the sponsorship of the Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) in order to help marriage migrants in learning about their rights and where to find help before their arrival in South Korea. In some cases, specific centers dedicated to the PDO were created as in Cần Thơ province where many Vietnamese brides come from. However, in the early 2010s,

the center started receiving the visit of “returnee brides” in a dire legal situation, meaning marriage migrants whose marital circumstances caused them to hurriedly come back to Vietnam, sometimes with child, without having gone through a legal divorce. After nearly 10 years of PDO, the Korean-Vietnamese Multicultural Support (KVMS) project was started in Vietnam in 2016 to support these women, mainly through the sponsorship of private Korean companies such as Hyundai. In the Seoul office, activities mainly include legal and administrative support for marriage or divorce certificates and other civilian affairs. As for KOCUN as a whole, the organization slowly reduced the breadth of its other activities to focus on their work with marriage migrants at national and transnational level.

### **Categorization for analysis: “top-down” governance and institutionalization**

Similarly to the other case study, KOCUN is a South Korean civic society organization (CSO) headquartered in Seoul, South Korea, operating both service and advocacy activities in support of marriage migrants. The difference lies in its level of institutionalization and relationship to institutions in general. Whereas the other chosen CSO is a grassroots organization, KOCUN is more institutionally-backed, created to carry the name and norms of the UN as well as being accountable to

UNOG officers. KOCUN was also originally more dependent on government funding than the other case, due to being mandated to carry out the pre-departure orientation program by the MOGEF.

### **Relationship to the general Korean public and other civil society actors**

KOCUN offers no specific educational program or campaign on the issue of discrimination against marriage migrants. To a certain extent, exposition to public opinion is avoided, specifically with the knowledge that the MOGEF and National Assembly members receive backlash from conservative groups in society, as well as the powerful conservative media, when budget is allowed to multicultural family support. As for other civil society actors, KOCUN is primarily in contact with private sector companies, mainly Korean, who have operations in marriage migrants sending countries.

## **2. Women Migrants Human Rights Center of Korea (한국이주여성인권센터)**

### **Brief history of activities**

The Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center (hereafter WMHRC) was established in 2000 as a shelter, before the main influx of marriage migrants from South East Asia (and after the influx, in the 1990s, of Chinese brides). The shelter hosted female migrant workers for whom immigration laws and policies, designed for male migrants, did not prepare for the eventuality of marital, domestic violence and reproductive emergencies. Shortly after opening, Korean classes started as there was a demand from women. Soon, marriage migration became a full-fledged and regulated phenomenon, and from then on counseling and violence-related services were offered at the Center. Throughout the years, local branches were established across South Korea. In recent years, community-building activities and human rights-themed workshops have become the Center's primary activities. Activists also conduct policy or issue-themed research, such as marital sexual violence faced by marriage migrants.

**Categorization for analysis: “bottom-up” grassroots governance**

Like KOCUN, the Women Migrants Human Rights Center is a South Korean CSO supporting marriage migrants through service and advocacy activities and headquartered in Seoul. Unlike KOCUN, it does

not operate by an international organization's institutional norms but by a "bottom-up" type of governance in which local grassroots representatives determine the Center's priorities based on fieldwork evidence, during an annual meeting of all WMHRC branches. Following the results of this meeting, the Center's work for the year is planned. Throughout the year, local branches hold regular community workshops. Although the WMHRC plays a consultative role for the national and local governments, the latter are rarely the main donors for the Center's budgeted activities, significantly reducing its accountability towards the state. An illustration of the WMHRC's overall approachability can be observed on the Center's multilingual webpage (See Appendix 2)<sup>9</sup>, on which the first item is the sentence "We Listen to Your Story" followed by a welcoming open letter written by an actual migrant.

### **Relationship to the general Korean public and other civil society actors**

Although the WMHRC, like KOCUN, does not usually directly confront the wider Korean public about issues concerning marriage migrants, many collaborations with various groups of civil society play an

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<sup>9</sup> Women Migrants Human Rights Center homepage. URL : <http://www.wmigrant.org/wp/english/>

important part in the Center's activities, mostly through volunteering. This includes student organizations from Ewha Womans University for language teaching, groups of lawyers working pro bono to solve migrant women's legal issues, medical corporations offering care and assistance – generally to domestic violence victims – and other regular citizens. Beside this strong role for Korean citizenry, the private sector is also involved as a number of Korean companies incorporate support to the WMHRC to their corporate social responsibility programs.

## **B. Effects of the tension on the functioning of the CSOs**

### **1. Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN)**

#### *Effects on governance and organizational structure*

#### **Strong role of domestic activists and “deported” role of marriage migrant activists**

Due to disempowering policies and conditions in South Korea, marriage migrants may not be able to fend for their own cause and claim their own rights when in their host country. No matter how informed they are, foreign brides have to face legal and administrative proceedings which are fully in Korean language and a bias against them, as foreigners and as women, in civilian affairs – a translation of societal norms as well as a direct impact of the husband sponsorship system. Moreover, legal protection is expensive and directly plays into webs of institutional power. This is where South Korean activists come into play – or, in the case of KOCUN, CSO officers which deal with these mostly bureaucratic tasks, which can be as mundane as the correction of a typo on one’s name on identification documents. Beyond disregarding one’s identity, such a mistake can have far-reaching consequences – for example a transnational

legal conundrum between the woman's Korean identification and her information in her home country. In case of separation from the husband, nothing about her administrative status in Korea can be changed. I argue that KOCUN harnesses its institutional power to fill the gap, sparing marriage migrants the citizen-like tasks of interacting with government officers.

Since marriage migrants have no strong role to fulfil in KOCUN's activities in South Korea, the other and perhaps more fortunate side of the coin is that they are called to action when it comes to KOCUN's activities abroad, mostly in Vietnam with the Korean-Vietnamese Multicultural Support project (KVMS) since 2016 (See Appendix 4). The Cần Thơ center for Vietnamese divorcees namely includes "a children's library, legal advice office, kitchen, lecture room and auditorium, as well as accommodation and showers for volunteers"<sup>10</sup>. These activities, mostly operated and facilitated by former marriage migrants, attest to a stronger community role in the sending country than in any Korea-based KOCUN program. Despite their transnationalized struggles and precarious legal status (including for their children), marriage migrants seem more

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<sup>10</sup> "Hyundai supports returned Vietnamese divorcees", *The Korea Times* (January 25, 2018)

URL: [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2018/07/419\\_243063.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2018/07/419_243063.html)

empowered to be their own defenders as well as take control of their own lives and narratives when back in their native region and country.

### ***Effects on accountability and funding structure***

#### **From an oppressive institution to another: state to the market**

Changes in KOCUN's funding and accountability structure may well reflect the evolutions in marriage migration trends and the new manifestations of the tension between citizenship and empowerment that come with it. Despite the Pre-Departure Orientation program having been KOCUN's flagship program for a long time and a proven really important component of the CSO's human rights support system for marriage migrants, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's budget to support it has been decreasing for several years. This does not reflect a decrease in demand, as marriage migration influx from Vietnam and other countries remain steady.

However, the government is not the only institutional shareholder in the lives of marriage migrants. Korean *chaebol* conglomerates have been partnering with KOCUN for their CSR – which serves their capitalist commercial interest in South East Asian markets and the potential half-Korean labour force made of *damunhwa* children. For example, Hyundai Motor is the biggest sponsor for the returnees and divorcees program in

Vietnam. KOCUN has to adapt to and harness institutional interests in the situation of marriage migrants: Hyundai's welcome private funds for the KVMS project are used to finance the fixed costs of the Pre-Departure Orientation program which the MOGEF is gradually neglecting. Despite the fact that the increasing number of returnees and divorcees to marriage migrant sending countries represents the failure of South Korea's *damunhwa* policy and foreigner citizenship, the government has also shown interest in the KVMS project, allegedly as to not give up on the "Koreanization" of multicultural children that the state has invested in. As for chaebols, they might take little interest in citizenship in a context of neoliberal globalization. They may support former marriage migrants' economic empowerment back in Vietnam, but this may point to a new manifestation of Chang's contributory rights and neoliberal developmental citizenship.

### *Effects on the evolution of activities*

#### **Hosting all empowering activities only in sending countries**

As observed with KOCUN's organizational structure, the major part of the CSO's activities are hosted not in South Korea, but in the sending countries. On top of this, most activities conducted in Korea are primarily administrative and only involve the critical role of Korean KOCUN

officers, charged to deal with “uncooperative husbands and the state” (Kim, Park and Shukhertei, 2017). In a way, the CSO takes its role in Korea as an inevitable semi-institutional intermediate between marriage migrants and the discriminatory state and society, giving up on the empowerment of foreign brides in their host country as a lost cause. Whereas this mode of functioning may be based on the premise that the situation in Korea cannot be fixed by civil society, KOCUN’s activities abroad represent the only areas in which KOCUN believes things can improve: pre-marriage preparation through the PDO and post-marriage rehabilitation through returnee support. The PDO does impart marriage migrants with knowledge of their human rights, but it also gives them tools for assimilation as a prerequisite condition for their incorporation in South Korea, instead of addressing the restrictive *damunhwa* model directly. Hopes for a pre-marriage orientation program for Korean husbands are not rare in the minds of CSO members, but its implementation seems unlikely. As for the KMVS, it is perhaps the most empowerment-focused KOCUN program, and it is enabled by different modes of citizenship and empowerment than what is available in South Korea. It does not, however, act upon the factors that made marriage migrants return home in the first place.

## **2. Women Migrants Human Rights Center (WMHRC)**

### ***Effects on governance and organizational structure***

#### **Empowerment of marriage migrants *sans* citizenship?**

The Women Migrants Human Rights Center started as an actual shelter for victims of domestic violence and women migrants facing emergencies specific to their gender and situation, but it seems that the Center has become a shelter from all that is hostile in South Korea's oppressive society, policies and norms. From data collected in the interview, some Seoul headquarter professional activists hold a rather pessimistic discourse on the possibilities for betterment of *damunhwa*. As long as "poverty, discrimination, hierarchy, toadyism and sexism" are not resolved simultaneously overnight, which it realistically cannot, they say, there is little chance for the situation of marriage migrants to ever improve. Beyond pessimism and rejection of oppressive institutions, there may be the paradigm-changing realization that citizenship and empowerment cannot be simultaneously pursued and practiced by marriage migrants. It is also the belief that as their main defender in South Korea, CSOs may have to focus on one over the other. As an organization privileging the voices and experiences of marriage migrants themselves, the WMHRC seemingly chose empowerment, which here requires to be

“freed” of hopes for general citizenship and membership in Korean society and the abandonment of particular goals. One of the organizational means of empowerment that the Center has put in place is decentralization. The analysis of this change actually unveils a new type of citizenship, one that is not in such tension with citizenship.

### **Decentralization: importance of local and regional branches**

Although the Seoul headquarters of the Center help coordinate all local and regional branches, the latter are extremely important to the WMHRC’s “bottom-up” strategy to relieve the tension between citizenship and empowerment. A comparison with Moon Seungsook’s study of the citizenship discourse in the women’s organization People’s Friendship Society (PFS) in Korea can offer a similar perspective. PFS emphasizes the importance of physical proximity of local branches for local members as a way for housewives to “develop a new political subjectivity” as citizens, mostly because their membership of Korean society is defined primarily in the private reproductive and marital spheres, whereas traditional notions of citizenship emphasize citizens’ public roles, i.e. working men. Although single professional women are more numerous in the ranks of the Seoul PFS headquarters as full-time professional activists, housewives not only participate in local activities

but also have the opportunities to be civilian leaders in local branches. As for the WMHRC, the Seoul headquarters are also mostly run by professional activists, although they are not all Korean. Local branches offer an opportunity for marriage migrants to become civilian leaders in their own local communities of other women migrants. Perhaps they also develop a “new political subjectivity” conducive to a new type of citizenship and a membership in a smaller community than the whole South Korean citizenry. Most importantly, communities are strengthened and empowered to be resilient and self-reliant in the face of legal and socio-economic adversity. This is in sharp contrast with the governmental Multicultural Family Support Centers (MFSC) in which marriage migrants are very rarely made directors. The WMHRC’s decentralized governance manifests itself at least once a year through the annual meeting in which local activists are the main voices to determine priorities for the CSO.

### *Effects on accountability and funding structure*

#### **Distrust of and reduced dependence on the government**

Due to the shortcomings and pernicious effects of the legal and political framework put in place by the South Korean state around marriage migrants and their family, the WMHRC strives to protect these

women and offer them stability despite potentially precarious situations by keeping a distance with ministries and government agencies practices and interests. The price of this strategy is to receive less funding from the MOGEF. The achieved stability is useful in two manners, both creating the idea of a safe space from government: for the safeguarding of human rights as well as for empowerment.

Although human rights are not as directly threatened by government as under the former administrations, the Center remains cautious. For example, under the Lee Myung Bak- and continuously under the Park Geun Hye-administrations, so-called “illegal residents” were not supposed to receive shelter nor emergency help. As a result, the Center welcomed women migrants in distress in the shelter without officially registered them, a practice merely tolerated by authorities. In the first months of the Moon Jae In government, the law changed: once the person is exposed to violence, they have a right to receive emergency care and shelter regardless of visa status. This change is extremely recent and former government practices have created a memory and organizational practice and pattern that still has strong effects on the WMHRC’s operating mode. If anything, the “positive” regime change only proves that political instability will potentially harm women migrants’ rights again in the future as administrations will keep changing. Moreover, the

Center deals with both marriage and labour migrants without discrimination – and women labour migrants also have to abide by unrealistic policies such as their absence of right to live with children, despite many of them being mothers. The superposition of causes partly explains the Center’s undying distrust of the state and the wish to put a distance between it and women migrants. The same goes for local governments such as the Seoul city government, although relations have gotten slightly warmer since Park WonSoon’s elections.

I argue that this distrust and distance because of human rights issues have translated into the Center’s wish to be mostly financially independent from the state to finance its community-building and empowerment programs, although it does respond to some call for projects from the MOGEF (but not during the Park administration). A collateral issue with government funding is the restricted use of the money according to government interests, for example supporting half-Korean children more than their mothers. Since the Center cannot rely on the public sector, it had to find allies in the private sector.

### **Reliance on civil society for funding and services**

Financially, the Center has to rely on funds received from individual donors or private corporate donors, namely through their CSR strategy.

The difference with KOCUN is that the use of these funds is not restricted to companies' sole commercial interest and goals are set by the WMHRC – activities are not co-designed with any conglomerate. The other characteristic of the Center's private sector support is that it is more akin to a volunteering community than to a diffuse influx of money. Indeed, the work of civilian volunteers blends in with that of pro-bono lawyers, doctors or caregivers. For most, supporting women migrants takes the appearance of a citizen's duty for the sake of human rights and the common good. It is interesting to note that Master's and PhD student volunteers are at the forefront of this civil society support movement, in a way that is reminiscent of their involvement in the democratization movements.

### *Effects on the evolution of activities*

#### **Decrease in regular integration/assimilation services and increase in human rights-focused activities and services**

One of the recent evolutions in the Center's activities is the progressive decrease in Korean language class services. Although linguistic ability is a vehicle of survival, empowerment and membership altogether, Korean classes bear the shadow of the assimilationist, mono-culture *damunhwa* model – especially in relation to MFSCs. Actually, the

main reason for this change is the increase in existing volunteer teaching organizations, for example from Ewha Womans University students. This externalization allows the Center to focus on human rights and empowerment-themed activities touching upon women migrants to encourage community-building, self-reliance and training of community leaders regardless of citizenship or marital status. These activities include themed workshops such as a Me Too workshop. Similarly to other movements of minorities across the world, discussing one's specific issues in a safe space and learning about one's rights are important vehicles of empowerment. These community-consolidating activities go hand-in-hand with the WMHRC's decentralized organization.

Despite this focus on community activities, professional activists at headquarters still play an important role in the Center's activities beyond national coordination – they conduct research, including policy research, about the condition of women migrants in Korea. Research themes – for example sexual violence for the year 2018 – mirror the priority theme chosen each year at the organization's national meeting. This is in order to produce informational knowledge of women migrants' struggles, in hope of stimulating academic writing, influencing policy and raising awareness among Korean citizens who care enough to take interest in the situation.

## **C. Conclusions on comparative case studies**

### **Effects on governance and organizational structure**

#### ***Transnationalization and decentralization***

It appears that the demonstrated dilemma between national citizenship and empowerment has powerful effects on the geographical configuration of both CSOs, which accommodate differently depending on their level of institutionalization. For KOCUN, the strategy is a transnational answer to a transnational problem, a strategy which is made possible due to its institutional network and leverage. Korean officers are present in all locations of KOCUN's activities, but especially at Seoul headquarters where they deal with an uncooperative government and sometimes hostile social forces. In Vietnam, marriage migrant returnees and volunteers can take on a bigger role, although new problems arise due to divorce proceedings and the legal status of *damunhwa* children. Overall, governance remains mostly in the hands of professional Korean women activists. For the Women Migrants Human Rights Center, despite professional coordination from headquarters, the CSO's true organizational strength – and means of empowerment – resides in its decentralized leadership and encouragement of self-reliance of communities at local and regional level. To sum up, KOCUN goes beyond

the tension between citizenship and empowerment by working transnationally, thanks to institutional leverage and network, whereas the WMHRC goes beyond this tension by working locally, harnessing grassroots-type strength.

### *Domestic activists and foreign minorities*

Geographical configuration aside, KOCUN's stronger roles given to professional Korean activists appears to be the norm for CSOs in South Korea. In her lecture about "Gender, Citizenship and Empowerment of Marriage Migrants in East Asia" given in June 2014<sup>11</sup>, Taiwanese scholar and activists Hsiao-Chuan Hsia explains that whereas in Taiwan, the role of marriage migrants is very strong in contesting state policies and domestic activists only fulfil a supporting role, South Korean civil society generally gives a stronger role to South Korean activists and a non-decisive role to migrants. Potential causes include, on Taiwan's side, an ethnic-minority sensitive political history and split identities at national level, and on South Korea's side a homogenous population and strong state combined with a historically strong and resistant social movement. In this perspective, the WMHRC's approach may represent a necessary

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<sup>11</sup> "Gender, Citizenship and Empowerment of Marriage Migrants in East Asia by Hsiao-Chuan Hsia", posted on June 11, 2014 by IAFOR Media. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlffovjC-zs>

change in civil society and social movements to incorporate social and ethnic minorities in a homogeneous state. The potential power of Korean activists is not lost, however, as their contestation of policies continues namely through research. Moreover, women migrants are encouraged to nurture their own communities and solidarity before taking on any contestation role against institutions.

### **Effects on accountability and funding structure**

#### ***Decreased reliance on the state and rising importance of businesses and civil society***

Both CSOs have had to decrease their reliance on the state, due to untrustworthy legal framework, practices and instrumentalization strategies – and despite the inevitability of maintaining a relationship with at least the MOGEF and lawmakers. The MOGEF's declining support for pre-departure orientation, new commercial interests in South East Asia and sustained interest in half-Korean children have influenced KOCUN to review its budgeting strategy, find a middle ground and harness the capitalist interests of large private donors. On the opposite end, counting on the state has never been an option for the WMHRC which began as a shelter in 2000, which was before any legal framework for female migrants was in place. Its activities were merely tolerated, and recent

changes can hardly reconfigure the Center's accountability mechanisms. Keeping a distance between the CSO and the state is deemed necessary to guarantee a safe space and a stable environment for women migrants to nurture communities in. The WMHRC does turn to the private sector for funding and services, but it is truly the power of civil society that is harnessed here through pro bono actions and the help of volunteers. They may be bound together by a moral or civilian duty to help. Multiplying allies in civil society allows the Center not to "uproot" its work with the pressure of institutional accountability.

### **Effects on the evolution of activities**

#### ***Community-building in the face of adversity***

The evolution of both CSOs' activities is where they are most divergent, although both engage in community-building in a way which follows their geographical and organizational configuration – transnationalization or decentralization – and a certain way of confronting the tension between citizenship and empowerment. With PDO, KOCUN gives valuable tools for women to potentially integrate as South Korean citizens, through the knowledge of human rights and language skills – but the CSO cannot fully protect marriage migrants from marriage brokerage and South Korean laws. Moreover, trying to reduce the cultural difference

between spouses cannot go only one way, as KOCUN officers are themselves aware, regretting that husbands are not held responsible to similar efforts. The ultimate failure of *damunhwa* policy triggered the need for post-marriage arrangements from civil society due to the absence of a transnational legal framework for this eventuality (Kim, Park, Shukhertei). From this failure and potentially traumatic experience, KOCUN strives to create communities of women who went through the same ordeal, strengthened by common identity and experience. KOCUN still receives sufficient institutional support and funding for these transnational activities because the fate of half-Korean children, about 80% of them with Korean citizenship, is at stake.

KOCUN's community consolidation post-return is mirrored in the WMHRC's community-building activities in Korea. As marriage migrants cannot rely on the Korean government for citizenship, nor on Korean society for membership, they turn to the stability of the Center and its local branches to become community leaders, learn self-reliance and emulate a sense of solidarity – which is challenging in itself as different groups of women migrants, subjected to different policies, are included in these communities. It is nevertheless a preliminary step to a fairer path to national citizenship and membership.

## Combined visualization of effects

*Tabular*

CRITERIA	FINDINGS: KOCUN	FINDINGS: WMHRC
<i>Effects on governance and organizational structure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong role of domestic activists and “deported”, transnationalized role of marriage migrant activists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decentralization: importance of local and regional branches</li> <li>Empowerment of marriage migrants <i>sans</i> citizenship?</li> </ul>
<i>Effects on accountability and funding structure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From an oppressive institution to another: state to the market</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distrust of and reduced dependence on the state</li> <li>Reliance on civil society for funding and services</li> </ul>
<i>Effects on the evolution of activities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hosting all empowering activities only in sending countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decrease in regular integration/assimilation services and increase in human rights-focused activities and services</li> </ul>

Figure 6: Key findings on comparative case studies (tabular)

*Schematic*

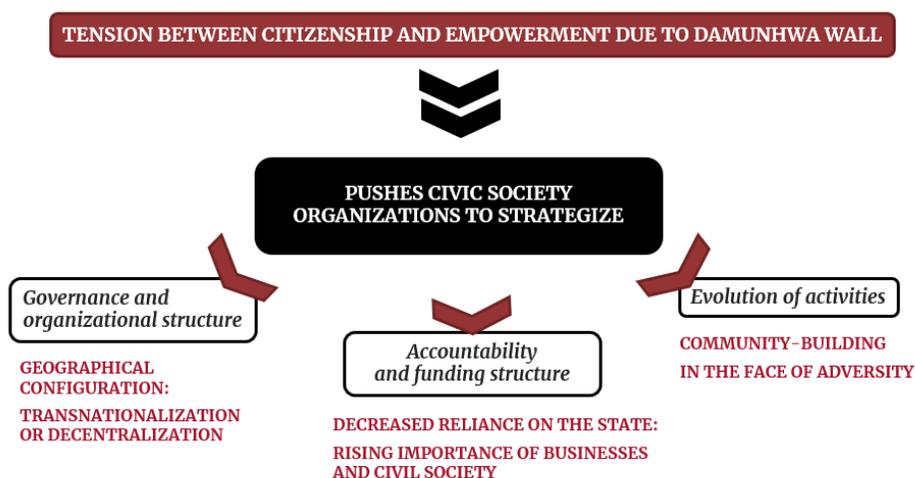


Figure 7: Key findings on comparative case studies (schematic)

## **CHAPTER SEVEN – CONCLUSION**

### **A. Research project summary and answer to the research questions**

This project sought first to elucidate what stands between marriage migrants and citizenship in South Korea. My hypothesis is that there is in this context a tension between citizenship and empowerment, between the legal and membership processes of belonging to the South Korean nation and the freedom to live by one's narrative, empowered on social, economic and political levels. Policy and societal analysis are used to provide a landscape of the disempowering effects of the pursuit of citizenship on the lives of marriage migrant women.

The demonstrated tension is thus due to disempowering policies and restrictive perceptions of multiculturalism – perceptions which incorporate elements of ethnocentrism, cultural nationalism, gender inequality, familism and ideas of economic superiority. The maintenance of such a restrictive legal framework as well as discriminatory society hierarchies keep marriage migrants at bay of attaining South Korean citizenship without significantly restricting their legal and personal autonomy; on the membership side of citizenship, national belonging to

South Korea – when one’s identity and origin are the less desirable ones according to mainstream cultural and economic hierarchy – appears to entail self-censoring of one’s identity and to live with the knowledge that one may never be considered Korean based on mere ethnicity.

In the face of such restrictive laws, policies and mainstream norms in society, civic society organizations take on the defense of marginalized groups and their rights – South Korea is no exception. It made sense, therefore, to investigate the impact of the tension between citizenship and empowerment on the organizational strategies of CSOs working with marriage migrants. Using two comparative case studies of CSOs which differ from each other by their level of institutionalization, this impact was analysed along three types of organizational changes which were deduced from interview data: (1) Governance and organizational structure, (2) Accountability and funding structure and (3) Evolution of activities. For category (1), while the more institutionalized KOCUN is found to transnationalize the problematic dilemma between citizenship and empowerment and to harness the power of the market to make up for the government’s shortcomings, the WMHRC’s strategy is one of decentralization for the sake of community-building and self-reliance, while leveraging ally forces in civil society to remain independent.

Two models for CSOs to reduce or at least circumvent the tension between empowerment and citizenship emerge: while KOCUN advocates for transnational legal and institutional change in order to stabilize the situation for marriage migrants in the region and protect their rights, the WHMRC's decentralization suggests undermining the tension from inside through the creation of new and empowered social and political subjectivities at community level.

I argue that both approaches are complementary answers to the difficulties of *damunhwa* policy and practice. If there is no push by organizations such as KOCUN for an appropriate transnational legal framework for “multicultural” families, anxiety-inducing instability will persist in the life of marriage migrants. If there is no civil society initiative to help returnee brides following the failure of *damunhwa* policy, how will they recover alone in this relatively new situation? However, an approach such as KOCUN's, by taking the problem mostly transnationally, may not be complete as it partly ignores the issue of citizenship as membership of national South Korean society. Actually, it does not ignore it but rather approaches the issue unilaterally, through Pre-Departure Orientation programs which teach marriage migrants rudiments of the Korean language and inform them of their human rights. Such a unilateral effort on the part of immigrants does not bode so well for

empowering national integration, as it is combined with restrictive assimilation. During the interview, the KOCUN Planning Manager expressed regret at the fact that there is no such pre-marriage orientation program for future husbands, in which they could learn about their future wives' culture and rights. Obstacles to such an initiative appear rather obvious: apart from the possibility that future husbands of marriage migrants may opt out of such programs, it is unlikely for now that the state or businesses would find interest, namely commercial interest, in pursuing this. On the other hand, the WMHRC's activities are not bound to these commercial interests, nor are they unilateral. Not only does the decentralization of the Center allow for community-building and integration at local level, a preliminary step to belonging in wider circles, it also requires an effort of South Korean society by mobilizing parts of civil society which are already sympathetic to the cause and/or are interested in marriage migrants' native cultures.

Apart from better, bilateral relations between sympathetic fringes of civil society and efforts from marriage migrants to integrate; as well as an emphasis on local community-building as a preliminary step to national citizenship as political and social subjects, the grassroots model as exemplified by the Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center has got another selling point which matters for the future of Korean

multiculturalism. That is, although there are regional and international issues concerning marriage migrants at transnational model, multiculturalism is a South Korean problem. As such, it should be accepted by South Korean civil society as something to be resolved in South Korea itself.

## **B. Limitations**

Among various limitations, this research's comparative case studies do not constitute a systematic analysis of civic society organizations working with marriage and women migrants in Korea in general: there might be many more forms of CSOs along the spectrum of institutionalization and as many strategies to counter the tension between citizenship and empowerment. The selected cases, however, aim at exploring opposite ends of that spectrum. Another limitation is that Seoul, where data was collected for the case studies, is not representative of the entirety of South Korea – the research may thus be influenced by the point of view of primarily professional Korean activists working at the headquarters of these CSOs.

The main practical limitation to this research was the lack of time to collect data more extensively in the shape of interviews with more staff members of CSOs and perhaps with marriage migrants themselves. An important personal limitation and issue of ethic may be unconscious bias regarding the situation of a non-white and generally economically-disadvantaged population. The researcher does not pretend to know exactly what women migrants go through upon entering Korea – some may be successful in their pursuit of the “Korean dream” – but the focus

is on activism and issues of governance rather than the direct experience of migrants, also in order to fit an international studies scholarship approach.

As regards to future research, speculating about the future of mobilizing social consciousness about multiculturalism through progressive – but careful – government policies may be of interest to move past usual dichotomies and see how civic society organizations fit into this changing puzzle. Another interesting pathway for research would be to think about the existing and potential ways in which efforts for foreigner integration can become more bilateral between host societies and newcomers. This need was also identified by the ASEAN-Korea Centre in a recently published report, in which they endorsed the empowerment of an “ASEAN wave”, which the Centre describes as “the spreading of culture occurring in tandem with the movement of people” (AKC, 2019). Civil society would have an absolutely central role in this.

# CHAPTER EIGHT – APPENDICES

## 1. Webpage: Governance body for KOCUN<sup>12</sup>

The screenshot shows the KOCUN website's 'About Us' page. The main heading is '함께하는 사람들' (People We Work With). Below this, there is a list of members categorized into different groups:

- 대표이사** (Board of Directors):
  - 신혜수 (President): 유엔 경제적 사회적 문화적 권리 위원회 위원, 이화여자대학교 국제대학원 초빙교수
  - 정진성 (Vice President): 서울대학교 사정학과 교수
  - 김현미 (Member): 연세대학교 문화인류학과 교수
  - 노연상 (Member): (주) 경동원 대표이사
  - 문경란 (Member): 서울경제인간행영회 조직위원장, 전 국가인권위원회의 상임위원
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- 감사** (Auditors):
  - 김상준 (Auditor): 법무법인 중정 공인회계사
  - 차지훈 (Auditor): 법무법인 에이릭스 변호사
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  - 우종길 (Member): 유엔인권최고대표사무소 인권사무관
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<sup>12</sup> URL: <http://www.kocun.org/v1/load.asp?subPage=130> (retrieved Feb. 2019)

## 2. Webpage: WMHRC's English welcome page<sup>13</sup>

中國語 | Монгол | Tiếng Việt | English



# Women Migrants Human Rights Center of Korea

## We Listen To Your Story Women Migrants Human Rights Center of Korea

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*A Letter from Le Thi Mai Thu, a 10-year migrant from Vietnam*

Dear Migrant Friends Who Came to South Korea,  
We are strong people. Leaving the family and friends behind, holding on to the dream and ambition, we settled here on the soil of Korea to begin our new life. We indeed are courageous people.  
The new life in Korea may be full of excitement at the beginning but does not always flow smoothly. We often face unbearable situations. We have to deal with the difficulties in communication that cause misunderstandings and frustrations, the anguish and despair when we feel alone without a place to look for help, the look of despises and disparagement, the damages inflicted not by strangers but by our own family, the unstable legal status as an immigrant, and the maltreatment in the workplace that sometimes include physical violence.  
When questions grow in your mind why it happens to you and where to begin to get through the troubles, knock on the door of the Women Migrants Human Rights Center of Korea. Since 2000, the Women Migrants Human Rights Center of Korea has served as a non-profit organization advocating for migrant women regardless of the borders.

You can find friends and neighbors here who are Koreans as well as who came from your country of origin. They will be listening to your story and reaching out to hold your hands. We will listen to your story with more care when your situation makes it hard for you to share your story with others. We will do our best to assist you when you are in trouble and feel like there is no way out. We will help you live through with confidence and grow to become a mentor for other friends.

**We will listen to your story – each word with hearts.  
You are safe in here to say anything you want.**

Women Migrants Human Rights Center of Korea

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.wmigrant.org/wp/english/> (retrieved Feb. 2019)

### 3. Tabular data collected for case studies (Jan.-Feb. 2019)

ISSUE	KOCUN	WMHRC
Person interviewed	<i>Choi Jaekyoung, Planning Manager</i>	<i>Heo YoungSook, Representative</i>
Brief history	<p>2006: Murder case of a Vietnamese bride, trigger for the new program → <b>to help marriage migrants to learn about their rights and where to find help</b></p> <p>2007: <b>Pre-Departure Orientation program, fully sponsored by the MOGEF since ~2009</b></p> <p><b>Since then, budget cuts despite steady influx of marriage migrants (mainly VN &amp; PL)</b></p> <p>2011: Can Thao center to carry out PDO but had to deal with <b>returnee brides → counseling for returnees wanting to divorce</b></p> <p>2016: Official launch of the Korean-Vietnamese Multicultural Support project</p>	<p><b>Established in 2000 as a shelter.</b> Context: emerging immigration laws and policies were <b>designed for immigrant men as a labor force</b> – no provision or shelter for women’s marital and reproductive emergencies. Started Korean classes shortly after opening because of high demand. Soon, marriage migration started, as well as counseling and violence-related services. Local branches were established across Korea.</p>
Recent evolutions	<p>Changes in KOCUN’s organization: marriage migrants used to be a smaller portion of their work. <b>General decrease of KOCUN’s size and staff towards specialization on PDO after 2016.</b> Also meant becoming more distant from the UN.</p> <p>Emphasis on <b>empowerment of returnees,</b> including professionally.</p>	<p>Focus shifting away from Korean classes [support of the many existing teaching organizations] and closer to <b>community-building and self-reliance</b> as well as human rights activities. Dramatic increase of migrant women since 2005 &lt;&gt; training women to create their own communities.</p>
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✂ <b>Pre-Departure Orientation program:</b> Korean classes, human rights, resources, etc. Staff mainly migrant women themselves.</li> <li>✂ <b>Korean-Vietnamese Multicultural Support</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✂ Korean classes</li> <li>✂ Shelter and redirection to medical, psychological and legal support</li> <li>✂ <b>Human-rights based programs, support of local community network and training of community leaders</b></li> <li>✂ <b>Themed/case-study workshops ex. Me Too workshop</b></li> </ul>

	<p><b>Project:</b> legal counsel (divorce papers), Korean lessons, self-empowerment groups, communities</p> <p>✧ Seoul office: legal work around marriage and divorce certificates, civilian affairs...</p>	✧ <b>Policy or issue-themed research</b>
<b>Categorization</b>	<p><i>An institutional organization?</i> More akin to activists doing administrative work in Korea + marriage migrants empowered to help other returnees in SEA countries</p>	<p><i>A grassroots organization?</i> Perhaps not but emphasis on accessibility and supporting the empowerment and self-reliance of local communities. Goal to create a sense of community among immigrant women from similar cultural backgrounds. Ex. Regular meetings and discussion sessions among community leaders.</p>
<b>Goal setting</b>	<p>General goal to <b>improve returnees' situation and bring attention on the issue to the National Assembly</b> Reports submitted to the United Nations every 4 years</p>	<p><b>Annual meeting</b> of local office representatives and members, regular community workshops throughout the year. <b>The choice of a focus/pillar area is supposed to come naturally from field experience</b> and the Center's work is planned around it. Ex. Sexual violence for the year 2018</p>
<b>Relationship to former governments</b>	<p>Both the government and the UN do not care much for returnee brides. <b>Interest mainly in legally Korean children.</b></p>	<p><b>Distrust, distance</b> Lee/Park administrations: skeptical of accepting <b>'illegal residents'</b> so there was no official registration of women helped and sheltered through the center, Center's activities tolerated but not fully legal.</p>
<b>Relationship to current government</b>	<p><b>Globally better relations with MJI administration. Sudden interest in South East Asia, Kopino children issue, etc. Human rights as well as commercial interests. Continuous interest for legally Korean children</b> in SEA and their welfare. Will to launch a new multicultural support project in northern Vietnam. <b>Declining funds</b> from MOGEF for PDO. Following seminars in Can Thao, booklets sent to ministries &amp; the National Assembly.</p>	<p>Change in legal status under MJI administration: once the woman is exposed to violence, she has a <b>right to be in a shelter and to receive help regardless of visa status.</b> Frequent open discussion events to increase awareness of issues and obtain public support. Wish to <b>remain independent</b> and to keep a distance, so that beneficiaries' conditions are <b>stable</b> and not dramatically affected by administration changes. Similar for Seoul City govt, slightly better since Park WonSoon's election.</p>
<b>Funding</b>	<p>PDO program funded by <b>different govt bodies</b> &amp; private companies in Vietnam, then</p>	<p>✧ <b>Very rarely funded by the government</b> (see reasons above) but responding to call for projects by the Gender equality support funding program (MOGEF?) – however not</p>

	<p>Cambodia, Mongolia, etc.- <b>decreasing</b> Korean-Vietnamese <b>program supported by chaebols CSR</b> ex. Hyundai ⇒ <b>Private funds</b> for returnee program serve to support PDO's fixed costs</p>	<p>under the Park admin. Even now: govt funding = <b>restricted use</b> of the money according to govt interest.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ Individual donors</li> <li>✧ <b>Private donors</b> (CSR)</li> </ul>
Actors other than the state	<p><b>Korean chaebols</b> incl. Hyundai <b>United Nations</b> ◇ representatives often in Geneva in KOCUN's name</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ <b>Numerous volunteers from civic society</b>, willing to learn and teach, including Master's and PhD students ex. Ewha Univ. volunteer association to teach Korean, citizens interested in human rights, in South East Asia, etc.</li> <li>✧ Group of <b>lawyers</b> willing to work specifically for women migrants using fees from their respective firms</li> <li>✧ Medical corporations offering care and assistance, generally to domestic violence victims</li> <li>✧ Other social actors</li> <li>✧ <b>Private companies</b> willing to incorporate migrant women in their CSR programs</li> </ul>
Policy development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ NGO reports consulted for policy-making</li> <li>✧ Wish to <b>change husband sponsorship of visa</b></li> <li>✧ Other administrative changes for more administrative accessibility to non-Koreans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ <b>Government organizing seminars</b> and inviting NGOs on particular topics, each administration selects a particular organization to represent an issue. Problem: migrant women are scared of participating because of having to confront governmental authority and being exposed to the public.</li> <li>✧ The Center conducts extensive <b>research</b> and transmits its results to governments.</li> </ul>
Identified issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ Husband-sponsorship of <b>visa and documents handled only by the husband/Korean national</b></li> <li>✧ Korean nationality takes too long to obtain</li> <li>✧ Assimilationist and ethnocentric model</li> <li>✧ <b>Decrease in public funding for pre-departure orientation</b></li> <li>✧ Cultural differences between Korea and countries of origin of marriage migrants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ <b>As long as the law is designed to protect the Korean husband and support a blood-relation paradigm, policy will not change no matter the administration</b></li> <li>✧ Govt Damunhwa centers do not want to deal with <b>women who came as labor migrants</b>, despite the fact they represent about 70% of multicultural spouses! Vs. 30% marriage migrants targeted by existing laws.</li> <li>✧ Absence of an <b>independent public fund</b> for NGOs to work without political influence</li> <li>✧ Hard to avoid government influence in their work anyway, always facing <b>legal limitations</b></li> <li>✧ Immigrant women have to publicly rally for their own rights but might face <b>public</b></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ For divorce &amp; separation issues, MM do not usually go to <b>damunhwa centers</b> which are where their husbands ‘allow’ them to go, associated with his authority</li> <li>✧ Runaway brides have to go in <b>hiding and work illegally → precarity</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>backlash</b> and not be protected (ex. picture on the internet)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ <b>Incomplete law:</b> In many cases such as divorce or death, damunhwa laws do not have provisions.</li> </ul>
<p>Relationship to the general Korean public</p>	<p>No specific educational program or campaign on the issue of marriage migrants. <b>Negative outlook of Korean society and conservative media on the issue.</b> Backlash against the MOGEF for budget allowance to multicultural families.</p>	<p>Publication of booklets and research as a bid to inform the general public. <b>Public knowledge</b> production.</p>
<p>Final thoughts on Korean multiculturalism</p>	<p>Wish for a fairer society including <b>less hierarchy between cultures and less forced assimilation.</b> Will eventually happen as Vietnam is developing fast and Vietnamese women are more educated. <b>Hope for more ‘natural’ marriages</b> without marriage brokers and will from Korean husbands to ‘do their part’ including receiving their own pre-marriage orientation.</p>	<p>The word damunhwa should not even be used as it is tied to a <b>blood-related and patriarchal idea of narrow assimilation</b> as multiculturalism. Produces situations like stateless children. Despite an <b>incomplete legal framework</b>, the high number of migrants as a pressing issue, nothing is really changing. <b>Pessimistic as to Korea’s ability to change.</b></p> <p>As long as damunhwa policy is considered a <b>demographic issue (fertility, ageing)</b>, discrimination cannot be removed. These women are not accepted as valuable workers either. Among 217 damunhwa centers in Korea, only 1 has a migrant woman as an executive. <b>Vicious cycle of poverty and cultural erasure</b> for them and their children.</p> <p>Expression of <b>damunhwa ‘wall’ (jang-byeok)</b>: restricted by the notion, label &amp; framework. <b>All issues that have to be simultaneously solved: poverty, discrimination, hierarchy, toadyism, sexism.</b></p>

#### 4. Pictures from the Korean-Vietnamese Multicultural Support Center in Cần Thơ, Vietnam<sup>14</sup>



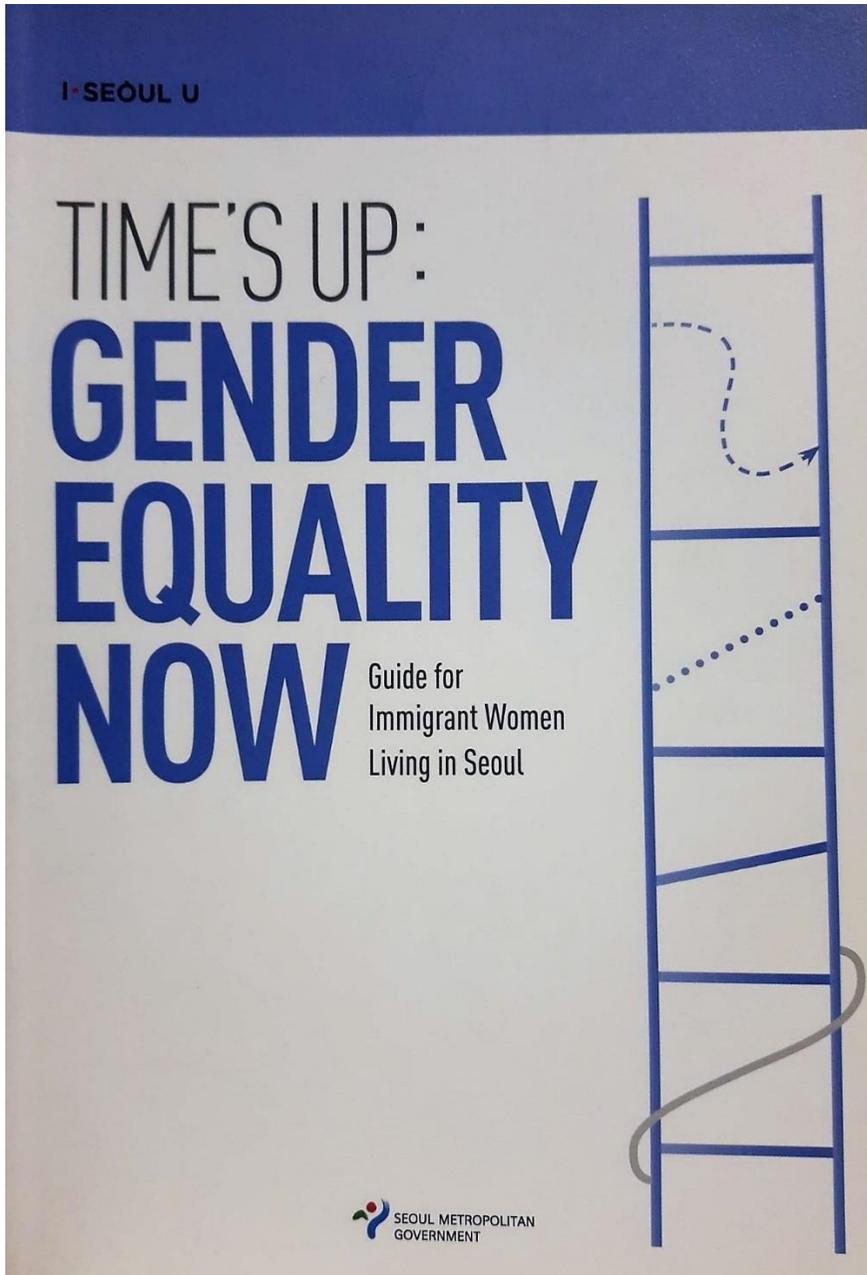
*Opening ceremony for the KVMS center in the presence of its main sponsor, Hyundai Motor*



*Performance by Vietnamese returnees and their children at the KVMS center opening facility*

<sup>14</sup> Retrieved from The Korea Times:  
[https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2018/07/419\\_243063.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2018/07/419_243063.html) Photo credit:  
Hyundai Motor

5. Front cover of “TIME’S UP: GENDER EQUALITY NOW”: Guide for immigrant women living in Seoul, Seoul Metropolitan Government



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