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Migration Data and Marriage Migrants in the Republic of Korea

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and Development Studies (Geneva)

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Abstract

Current data indicate a significant increase in the "feminization of international migration" over time. This report aims to review, analyse, and compare existing data collections on migrant flows and stocks in the Republic of Korea to showcase different migration patterns and processes at the national level, with a specific focus on gendered marriage migration. The report examines various characteristics of marriage migrants in the Republic of Korea, including their sex, age, type of residence, nationality, naturalization status, and employment status. Additionally, it explores the recent impacts of the pandemic on migration trends within a historical context. Furthermore, the report discusses policy issues related to migrants in multicultural families and briefly examines the policy effects over the past decade. It highlights the importance of collecting and analysing high-quality, sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics to better understand gendered migration patterns, inform policy objectives, and address relevant issues and strategic trends within the Korean context.

1. Introduction

Migration scholars have discussed the so-called "feminization of international migration" focusing on the increase in absolute numbers and relative shares of female international migrants for several decades.¹ Currently available data indicate that there has been a deepening of gendered international migration over time. However, it is worth noting that the feminization of migration at the global level masks various migration patterns and processes at the national or subnational level. As surveyed by Abel (2022) and Buettner (2022), an overview of demographic details such as age and gender and further breakdowns of international migration data in the combination of gender are required to address gender-relevant international migration issues and support gender-responsive migration policies. Data that adequately show the differences and inequalities between men and women will allow us to understand better how temporal, spatial, and social factors determine the type of international migration involved and subsequently shape the degree of gendered international migration.

With demographic changes such as rapid population aging and low marriage and fertility rates, and in the context of economic and human development over recent decades, the Republic of Korea has been increasingly recognizing the need for international migration as central to continued economic growth (Lee, 2015). Even though there are consistently more male immigrants than female immigrants in the Republic of Korea (around 56% male immigrants of total immigrants in 2020), there is one category of migrants that is highly feminized with more than 80 per cent being female: marriage migrants (DESA, 2020; Statistics Korea, 2020). With various gender-disaggregated migration data being made available in the Republic of Korea, the gender-related aspects of migration to the Republic of Korea can be explored in a more detailed manner.

The long-term, cumulative immigration to the Republic of Korea indicates that the main origin countries are China, Viet Nam, Thailand, the Philippines, and the United States (IOM, 2021; Oh et al., 2013), with the top two origin countries connected to "marriage migration" at a certain degree. Urbanization and evolving gender roles in Korean society have fueled the rise of these female marriage migrants to rural areas in recent years (Estévez-Abe and Caponio, 2022; Chang, 2021; Belanger et al., 2010; Cho, 2014; Briselli, 2022).

In this case study report covering migration to the Republic of Korea, I perform a stocktaking exercise of migration data by reviewing, analysing, and comparing existing data collections on migrant stocks in the Republic of Korea with a particular emphasis on gendered marriage migration. The datasets include not only international data already introduced in Abel (2022) and Buettner (2022) but national administrative data, national surveys, and vital statistics conducted by the Ministry of Justice (Korea Immigration Service), the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Multicultural Family Division), and Statistics Korea. I first review the available literature – peer-reviewed articles and research reports, on the topic of marriage migration to the Republic of Korea and other neighbouring Asian countries. Secondly, marriage migration patterns are analysed in the context of the existing multi-disciplinary body of literature on Korean immigration. Thirdly, I explore recent pandemic-related issues in a historical context with implications for gendered migration impacts. Lastly, policy issues regarding female marriage migrants are examined through available gender data.

Therefore, this paper reaffirms the importance of collecting and analysing good quality and reliable sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics to understand the gendered patterns, inform policy objectives and highlight issues and strategic trends in the Korean context.

¹ See the literature review in Fleury (2016).

1.1. Background

This part briefly examines the recent history of immigration policy reforms and initiatives in the Republic of Korea to address deepening demographic woes and growing labour shortages. The Republic of Korea has undergone an extremely rapid demographic and social transformation during the past six decades. The total fertility rate declined steeply from 6.0 in 1960 to 2.06, or around the replacement level in 1983, then reached its record low level of 0.81 in 2021. Meanwhile, the working population – people aged between 15 and 64, recorded its first decline from 37.8 million in 2016 to 37.6 in 2017 and has been declining since (as of 2021, it came to 36.7 million). Furthermore, the share of the Korean population aged 65 years and older has increased considerably from 3.3 per cent in 1960 to 16.5 per cent in 2021 (Statistics Korea, Population Trend Survey and Population Projections, 2021). The Republic of Korea introduced the “Industrial Trainee System” in 1993 to authorize small companies to recruit foreign workers mainly from China and South-East Asian countries. However, it was unequipped to warrant trainees’ labour rights and social protection and associated with high recruitment costs (Yi, 2013; Oh et al., 2011). To address these shortcomings, two formal guest worker programmes were introduced through the Act on Foreign Worker’s Employment: the Employment Permit System (EPS) introduced in 2004 which allows the entry of foreign workers from 15 countries (non-professional Employment E-9 visa category), and the Working Visit System (WVS) introduced in 2007 designed specifically for ethnic Koreans with foreign nationality from China and the CIS countries (Working visit H-2 visa category).^{2,3} As of 2020, 33.8 per cent of total registered foreigners (387,000 foreigners) reside in the Republic of Korea with these two visas.⁴

Korean women started to leave rural areas to pursue educational and work opportunities elsewhere and the pool of marriage partners for unwed males in rural areas had dramatically shrunk. With the deregulation of the commercialized binational marriage brokerages in the Republic of Korea in 1999 and the introduction of the marriage-to-Korean citizen visa (F-6 visa category) under the 2007 Act on the Treatment of Foreigners, local governments and agricultural associations in rural areas tried to address the so-called bride famine by brokering arranged marriages between unmarried Korean male and female migrants from around the world—especially in South-East Asia, China and the Russian Federation (Lee, 2008; Chang, 2021).⁵ Since larger immigration policy reforms began in the 2000s, E-9 and F-6 visas granted by the Korean Government to migrants have increased significantly (see Table 1).

Table 1. Incoming foreigners by type of visa (2009–2019)

Year	Non-professional Employment Visa (E-9)			Marriage to Korean citizen visa (F-6)		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
2009	85 654	78 083	7 571	-	-	-
2010	82 099	75 557	6 542	-	-	-
2011	106 442	97 394	9 048	3 965	699	3 266
2012	99 140	91 026	8 114	97 504	17 279	80 225
2013	105 738	97 166	8 572	98 965	18 673	80 292
2014	115 294	-	-	98 364	-	-

² Fifteen countries participating in the Korean EPS are Viet Nam, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, China, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Timor-Leste.

³ The E-9 Non-professional Employment visa is for foreign workers coming to work in unskilled jobs.

⁴ All foreigners planning to stay in the Republic of Korea for more than 90 days must register for an Alien Registration Card (ARC) at a local immigration office within 90 days from the date of entry.

⁵ In the early 1990s, the Korean authorities began to encourage (even subsidized) binational marriage through marriage brokers who set up foreign brides with Korean grooms in rural areas. These brokers, like other companies that arrange “domestic” marriages, are subject to the 2007 Act on Regulation of Marriage Brokerage Agencies which prohibits any advertisements suggestive of human trafficking or human rights violations.



Year	Non-professional Employment Visa (E-9)			Marriage to Korean citizen visa (F-6)		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
2015	123 433	-	-	106 318	-	-
2016	134 764	124 220	10 544	118 883	23 465	95 418
2017	140 072	129 400	10 672	130 834	26 281	104 553
2018	145 174	134 839	10 335	143 092	29 028	114 064
2019	151 116	140 469	10 647	159 499	31 897	127 602

Source: Korea Immigration Service Statistics (2009–2019).

Note: All ages included. Both new and re-entry are considered. F-6 visa was first introduced in the year 2011. Sex disaggregation is not available in the years 2014 and 2015.

The table above displays a clear gender difference in both types of visas; while the non-professional employment (E-9) visa is mainly given to male migrants, the incoming foreigners with the marriage migration (F-6) visa are dominated by female migrants. This gendered pattern in visa application may reflect gender-specific “push” and “pull” factors of migration to the Republic of Korea.

Many theoretical approaches are trying to explain migration in various disciplines. For example, the neoclassical economic approach (Borjas, 1987) states that potential migrants make a comparison of their wages in the origin country and their expected wages in the destination country, which leads them to migrate, while the world systems theory emphasizes the social linkages between migrants-sending and receiving countries. Unlike labour migration, however, there are few comprehensive theoretical explanations or empirical models addressing marriage migration (Chi, 2019; Torneo, 2020). Social and cultural factors including traditional gender roles present in the Republic of Korea may impact the gendered distribution of visas. In the following subsection, I examine potential factors affecting binational marriage migration decisions.

1.2. Potential factors affecting binational marriage migration within Asia

Earlier literature documented the phenomenon in developed Western countries and, more recently, in Japan and the Republic of Korea (Constable, 2005; Williams, 2010; Torneo, 2020). This subsection introduces several potential driving forces of marriage migration to Asian countries examined in recent literature. It should first be noted that binational marriage is more difficult to define and conceptualize. For example, a binational marriage migration in this report does not include same-sex marriage or the marriage between a native and a foreigner who had already migrated several years ago (Jones, 2012). In the Korean context, marriage migrants refer to F-2-1 (Resident: Spouse of Korean), F-5-2 (Permanent resident: Spouse of Korean) and F-6 (Spouse of Korean National) visa holders.⁶

The economic model by Kawaguchi and Lee (2017) predicts that some economically successful women remain unmarried, financially successful men get married to native women, and some men with low economic status marry women from less developed countries. Therefore, low-educated men and highly-educated women are likely to be leftover in the marriage market due to female hypergamy or “marrying up” and higher female education. As women’s economic status has improved and their improved status in marriage has been incorporated insufficiently into gender-discriminative household arrangements, women with high education stay unmarried rather than marry down. At the same time, men prefer to marry a foreigner rather than remain single in developed Asian countries and economies such as Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore.

⁶ F-1-3 (Visiting or Joining Family) and F-2-1, F-5-2 visa holders before 2011. F-6 visa has been replacing F-2-1 visa since its introduction in 2011 as part of efforts to guarantee their stable stay and better deal with their growing numbers.



This model has been further tested and developed in other Asian economies. First, Weiss et al. (2018) analyse cross-border marriages between mainland China and Hong Kong, focusing on the effects of a reduction in marriage costs. They find that marriages mainly involve men from Hong Kong SAR, China from the low tail of the distribution and position of women from Hong Kong SAR, China in the marriage market deteriorated following the reduction in marriage costs. Furthermore, Ahn (2021) shows that gender imbalances the income differences across countries are driving an increase in marriages between males from Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China and Vietnamese females by studying who marries whom, including how couples are selected, and how marital surplus is allocated among couples in the marriage markets of Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China (migrant-receiving) and Viet Nam (migrant-sending). The paper finds that men from Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China are selected from the middle level of the socioeconomic status distribution, and Vietnamese women are positively selected for marriages. Finally, a recent paper by Briselli (2022) empirically examines the model in the Korean context by showing that an increase in the ratio of outflows over inflows of local women at the municipality level raises the arrival of foreign brides over the following year. According to the study, both the rural and the cultural components of municipalities are significant determinants for female internal migration and the demand for foreign brides.

Another critical factor is the explosively growing care needs for older people in the Republic of Korea. Daughters-in-law in the Republic of Korea were traditionally responsible for such care and only a few Korean women are willing to shoulder this responsibility nowadays. Many Korean men, therefore, marry women from developing countries as better potential caregivers for their elderly parent(s) (Lee, 2015; Estévez-Abe and Caponio, 2022). For example, Lee (2018) argues that ethnic Korean women with Chinese nationality (Joseonjok) who played an important role in providing paid care services did not enter as labour migrants but as marriage migrants.

Other than the aforementioned factors, there are also social, cultural, and institutional factors that have affected the marriage migration to the Republic of Korea. Commercial matchmaking industries and local governments arranging marriages between Korean men in rural areas and foreign women facilitated the development of the marriage migration trend, particularly in its early stages (Lee, 2015). These will be briefly showcased in the following subsection.

1.3. The association between social and cultural norms and institutional settings and the number of foreign brides

This subsection introduces additional datasets, “Marriage Brokerage Statistics” disclosed by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and “Social Survey” by Statistics Korea, and briefly examines the potential social and institutional channels through which marriage migration is affected by looking at the simple association between the number of marriage migrants and some proxy variables. Even though a thorough empirical analysis of the possible causes of binational marriages is beyond this paper's scope, the following analysis calls for reducing the knowledge gap by suggesting that there are multiple determinant factors for binational marriage migration to the Republic of Korea. It should be borne in mind that we are looking at merely the correlation not the causal relationship between these factors and marriage migration. The results cannot be interpreted in causal terms.

1.3.1. Social Survey

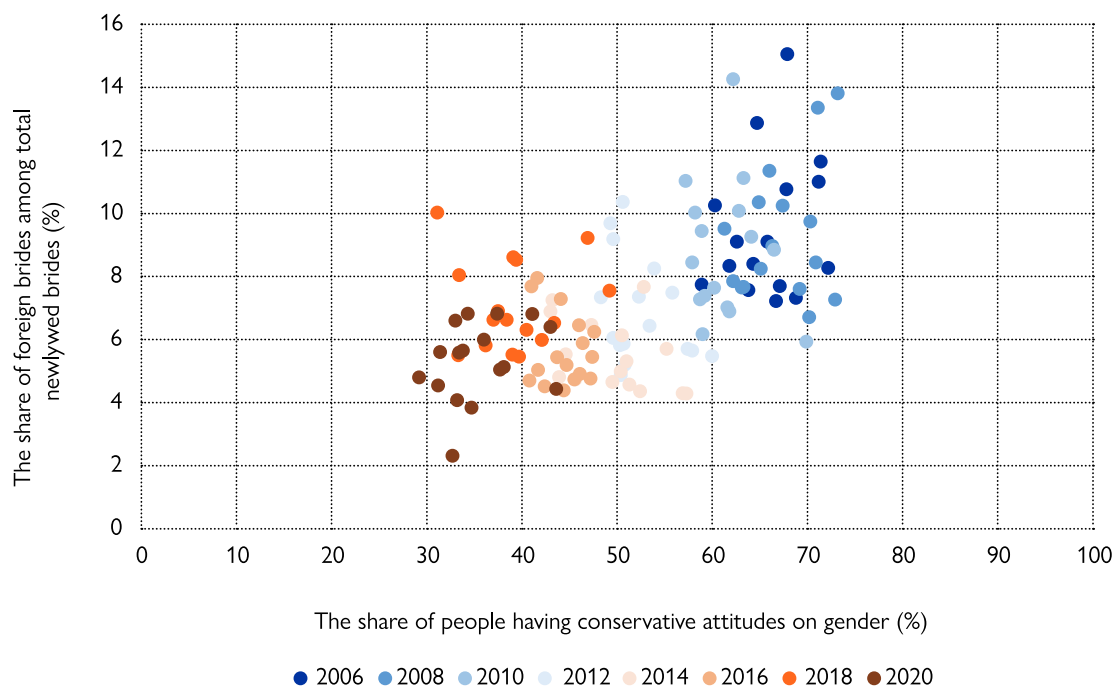
To measure social interests and subjective opinions on various topics regarding family, education, health, crime, environment, welfare, social participation, leisure, income and labour, Statistics Korea has conducted Social Survey since 1977. In this analysis, I included eight surveys from 2006 to 2020 to look at the temporal and spatial variations in gender norms measured at the province



level and their relationship with the number of foreign brides in each provincial-level division (a total of 17 as of 2020).⁷

I created the variable that takes equal to 1 when the respondents agree with the statement that housework should not be equally shared and should mainly be taken care of by housewives. This variable is then averaged at the provincial level for each year to proxy conservativeness on gender attitudes. Figure 1 shows a correlation between a persistent traditional gender norm and the share of newlywed foreign brides out of total newlywed brides that more conservative provinces or metropolitan cities are likely to host more foreign brides in relative terms. The figure also suggests that Korean people became less conservative and regional variations decreased over time.

Figure 1. Gender attitudes and the share of binational marriages between foreign brides and Korean males at the provincial level, 2006-2020



Source: Social Survey and Population Census (2006–2020).

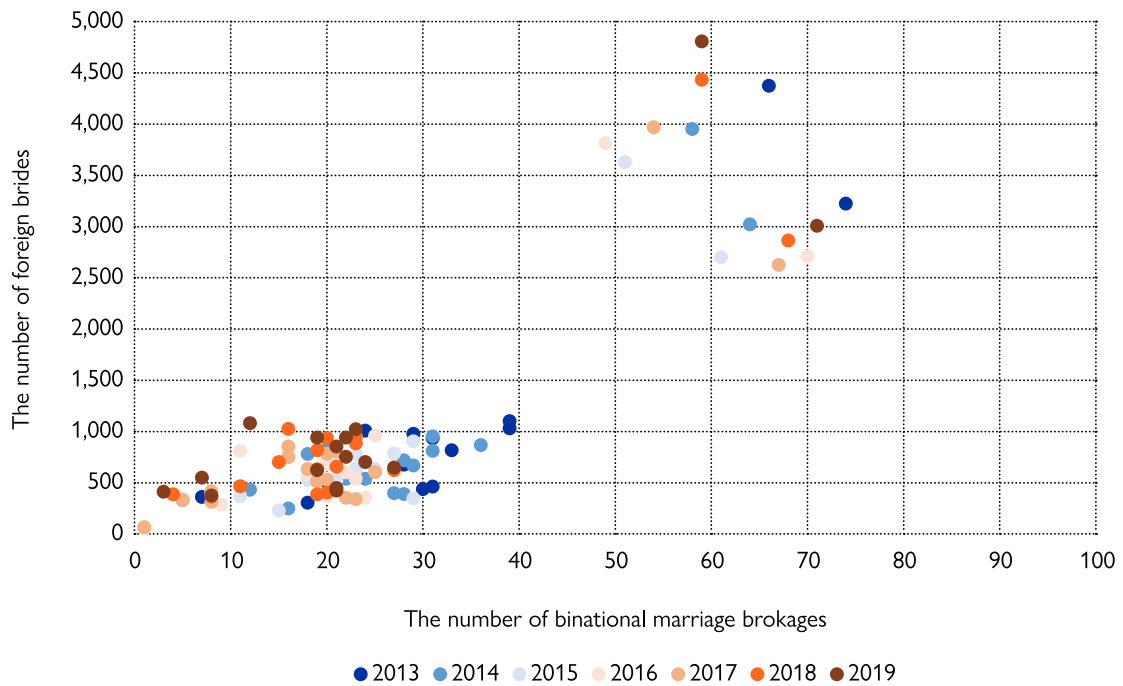
1.3.2. Marriage Brokerage Statistics in the Republic of Korea

To understand the current status of binational marriage brokerage and to provide comprehensive ground materials for the policies which protect any victims of the binational marriage brokerage and generate appropriate binational marriage environments, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family announced the list of marriage brokerage agencies in 2013 and conducted the Survey of Marriage Brokerage in Korea in 2014, 2017 and 2020.

⁷ There were 16 first-tier administrative divisions until 2006.



Figure 2. The number of binational marriage brokerage agencies and foreign brides at the provincial level, 2013–2019



Source: Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (2013–2019).

Note: Two groups located at the upper right of the plot represent Seoul and Gyeonggi province.

The number of binational marriage brokerage agencies is in decreasing trends from 2013 to 2019. Still, it shows a strong correlation between the number of binational marriages between Korean males and foreign brides, underpinning the development of binational marriage markets in the Republic of Korea (Figure 2). Regarding the organization of the binational marriage brokerage agency, 87.5 per cent of them is the individual agency, of which the average number of staff are 1.5 people in 2020.

2. Overview of migration trends in the Republic of Korea

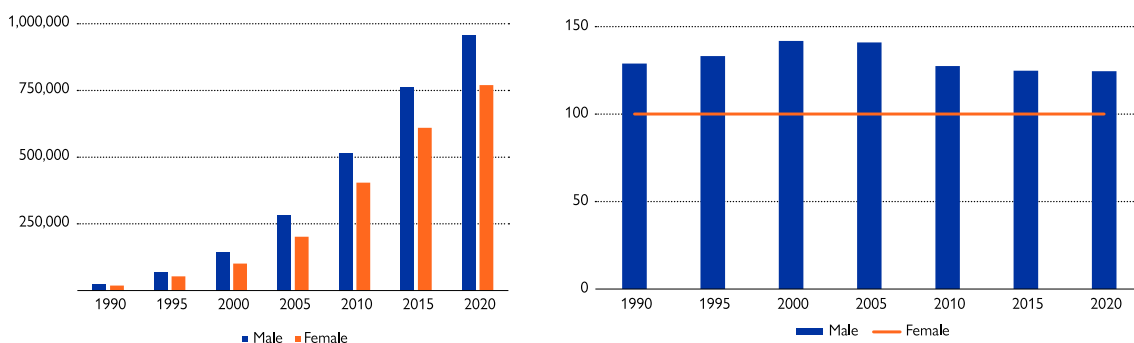
2.1. Data

This section providing an overview of international migration trends to Korea is based mainly on data from the following sources: DESA International Migrant Stock, Korea Immigration Service Statistics (Ministry of Justice), Vital Statistics of Immigrants (Statistics Korea), and Surveys on Immigrant Living Conditions and Labour Force (Ministry of Justice and Statistics Korea). There are a few caveats to keep in mind. Foreigners staying in the Republic of Korea for more than 90 days must be registered at a local immigration office within 90 days from the date of entry. The analysis using Korea Immigration Service Statistics, Vital Statistics of Immigrants, and Surveys on Immigrant Living Conditions and Labour Force, therefore, does not cover unauthorized migrants who are staying illegally in the Republic of Korea for more than 90 days without being registered. The essential demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, and country of origin, are covered by all these sources. Additionally, data on marital status, educational attainment, labour-related characteristics, and household size can be found in the Survey on Immigrant's Living Conditions and Labour Force. I first analyse the migrant population in the Republic of Korea by gender, place of residence, country of origin and visa category. And then, the marriage migrants in the Republic of Korea are discussed in more detail.

2.2. Migrants in the Republic of Korea

According to the DESA (2020) estimates, international migrant stocks in the Republic of Korea increased by almost forty times from 43,000 in 1990 to 1,730,000 in 2020.⁸ There have been always more male international migrants; they outnumbered the female migrants by 189,000 (Figure 3), and the share of males among international migrants was larger than 55 per cent in 2020. However, the male-to-female ratio increased from 129 (129 males per 100 females) in 1990 to over 140 in the early 2000s and then has decreased to below 130 again since 2010.

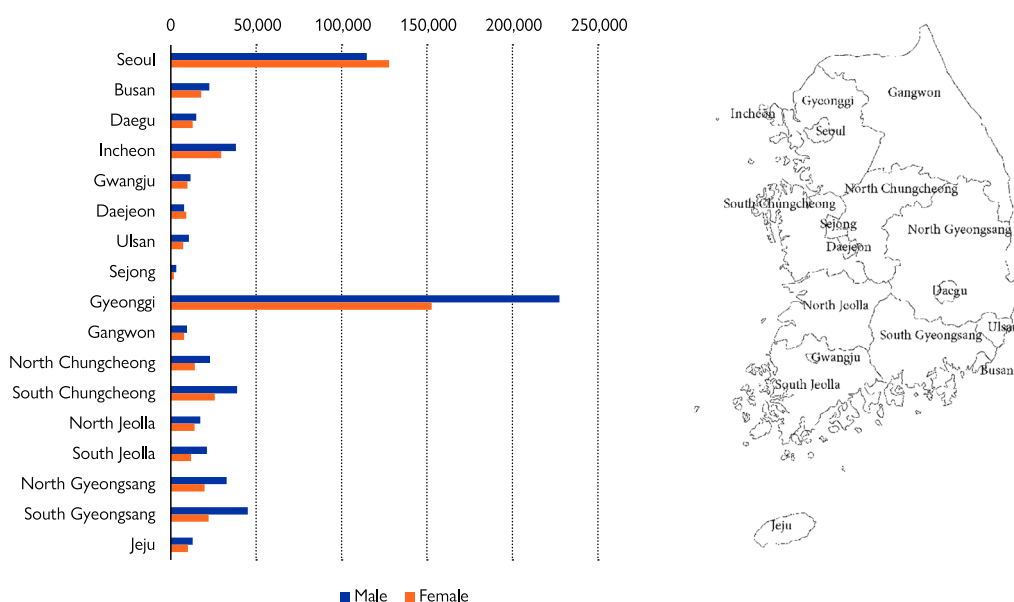
Figure 3. International immigrant stock in the Republic of Korea disaggregated by sex, 1990–2020



Source: DESA, 2020.

The subregional-level distribution in Figure 4 shows that the male migrant population is larger, except for Seoul and Daejeon. The gap between male migrants and female migrants is pronounced in Gyeonggi Province – the most populous province in the Republic of Korea, which has a much higher share of the foreign population (about 8%) than a national level of 4 per cent, with approximately 227,000 registered foreign males and 153,000 females. This reflects that many migrant workers (mostly male) are concentrated in the industrial suburbs of this province.

Figure 4. The number of registered international immigrants by provinces and metropolitan cities in 2020 (left) and the map of administrative divisions at the provincial level in the Republic of Korea (right)



Sources: Korean Immigration Service Statistics, 2020; Statistical Geographic Information Service of the Statistics Korea.

Notes: The F4 visa (Overseas Korean visa) holders are not included.

This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

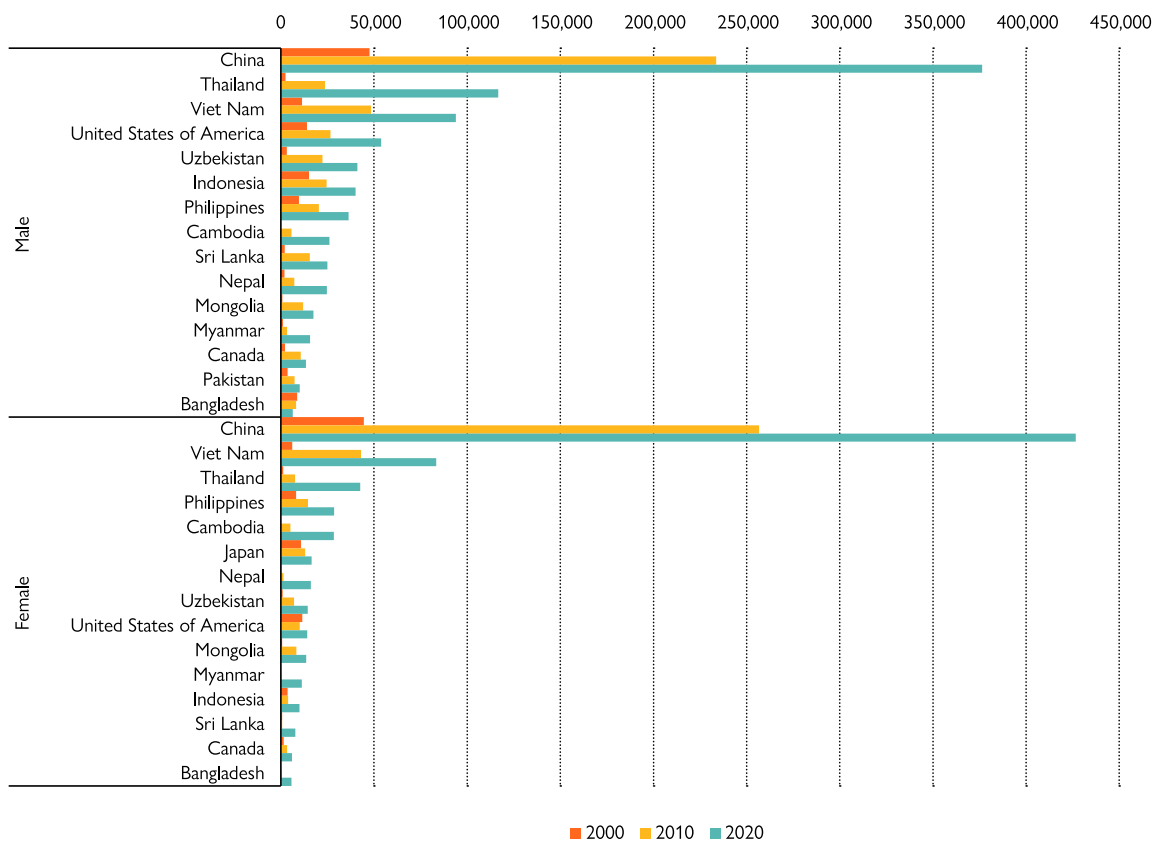
⁸ Figures based on the Korea Immigration Service Statistics are included in the Appendix for cross-checking purposes. Compared to the Korean statistics, the DESA (2020) over-estimated international migrant stocks in the Republic of Korea for the years 2015 and 2020 but the sex ratio was not greatly different between them.



Figure 5 shows the number of male and female migrants from the top 15 migrant-sending countries to the Republic of Korea.⁹ As of 2020, migrants from China (800,000) – including ethnic Koreans with Chinese nationality, Viet Nam (177,000) and Thailand (159,000) accounted for 66 per cent of the total migrants. Since 2000, the number of migrants from China and South-East Asian countries such as Viet Nam and Thailand rapidly has increased by 771 per cent, 910 per cent, and 4,230 per cent, respectively, while the growth rate of the migrants from the United States (166%) and Japan (43%) was relatively smaller. The explosive growth of the migrant populations from these countries would reflect the introduction of two programmes – the Employment Permit System and the Working Visit System, in the mid-2000s.

China, Viet Nam and Thailand are among the top origin countries for both male and female migrants in the Republic of Korea. However, there are striking variations in the share of migrant women in each country. For example, migration from Japan is much more feminized (74% of female migrants among total migrants) while migration from Thailand (27%) and Indonesia (20%) is dominated by male migrants in 2020.

Figure 5. Top 15 countries of origin by sex, 2000–2020



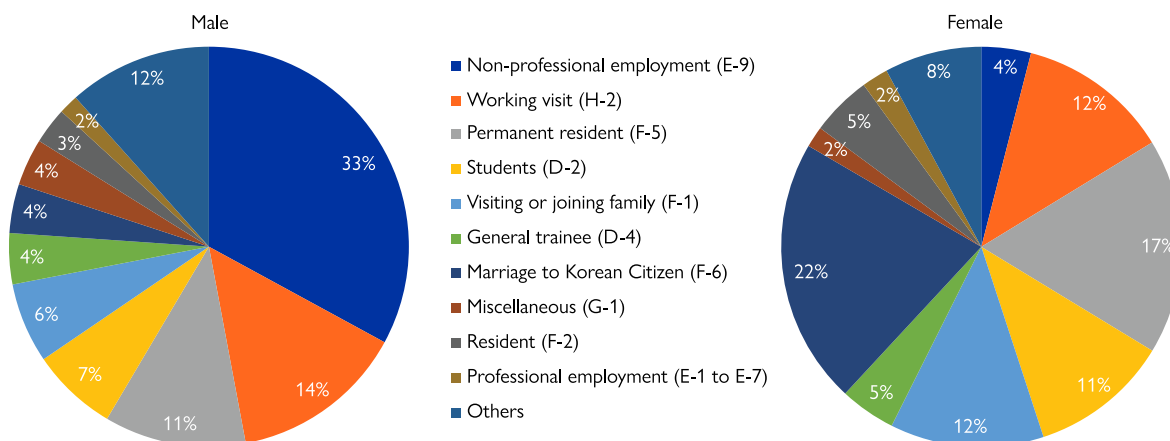
Source: DESA, 2020.

The unequal distribution of male and female migrants can be partially explained by looking at the type of visa (Figure 6). As of 2020, employment reasons are predominantly noted as the status of sojourn among male migrants whereas female migrants often stay in the Republic of Korea for family reasons.

⁹ A further breakdown of Chinese migrants – ethnic Korean Chinese and Chinese using the Korean Immigration Service Statistics is available in the Appendix.



Figure 6. Status of sojourn in the Republic of Korea by sex, 2020



Source: Korean Immigration Service Statistics, 2020.

Note: The F4 visa (Overseas Korean visa) holders are not included.

Male migrants are most likely to reside with a non-professional employment visa (E-9) and a working visit visa (H-2) granted through the Employment Permit System (EPS) and the Working Visit System (WVVS). In 2020, 215,000 male migrants – 33 per cent of all registered male migrants in the Republic of Korea and 92,000 male migrants (14%) resided in the Republic of Korea with E-9 and H-2 visas, respectively, significantly more than those who stayed with marriage to Korean citizen (F-6) visas. Only 26,000 male migrants, or 4 per cent, resided in the Republic of Korea with this type of visa, indicating that it is less likely for male migrants to marry Korean females as a means of their sojourn.

However, 105,000 female migrants, or 22 per cent of all registered female migrants in the Republic of Korea, stayed in the Republic of Korea with the F-6 visa category in 2020. Female migrants in the Republic of Korea are more likely to remain in the Republic of Korea through marriage than their male counterparts, and they are much less likely than men to stay with an E-9 visa, accounting for only 4 per cent of female migrants in the Republic of Korea.¹⁰ When female migrants work in the Republic of Korea, they are highly represented in elementary occupations (36.1%) and service and sales workers (29.2%) mainly in wholesale, retail trade, accommodation, and food sectors. Other than family reasons, female migrants in the Republic of Korea commonly hold study (D-2) and permanent resident (F-5). The following section examines marriage migration trends and the consequent naturalization patterns in the Republic of Korea, focusing on the gender perspective.

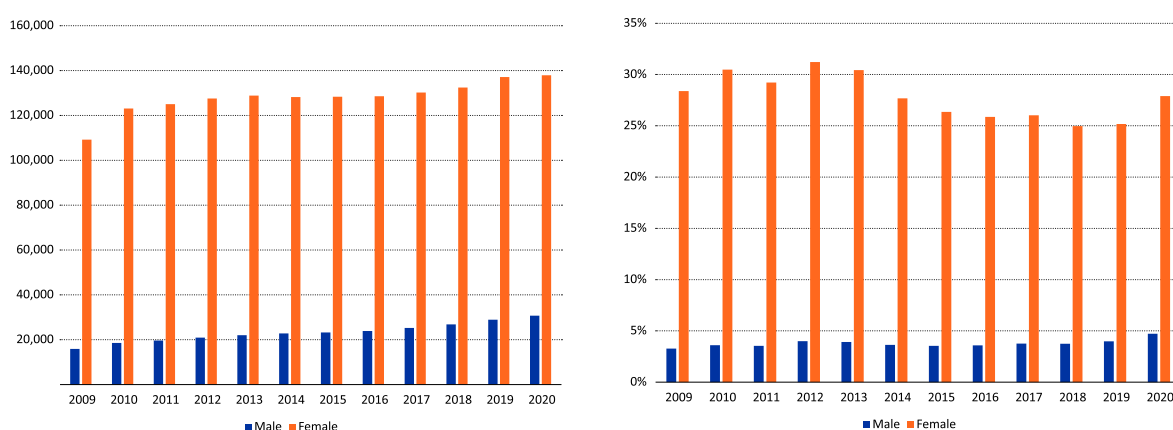
2.3. Marriage migrants in the Republic of Korea

In this subsection, I examine some key patterns of binational marriage migrants in the Republic of Korea.

First, Korean males are more likely to marry foreign brides. While more than half of migrants – around 56 per cent, have been male since 1990, when it comes to the number of marriage migrants in the Republic of Korea, the male-to-female ratio is reversed significantly. In 2020, there were approximately 138,000 women admitted as marriage migrants, or 82 per cent of total marriage migrants, while only 31,000 marriage migrants were male (Figure 7). The figure also shows that the marriage migrants always took up a significant share (at least 25%) of female migrants in the Republic of Korea.

¹⁰ A foreign bride may be previously a migrant worker who later married a Korean as marriage migrants and migrant workers cannot be directly distinguished from marriage records.

Figure 7. The number of marriage migrants by sex (left) and the share of marriage migrants among total migrants by sex (right) in the Republic of Korea, 2009–2020



Source: Korean Immigration Service Statistics, 2009–2020

Note: The F4 visa (Overseas Korean visa) holders are not included.

Secondly, Korean men marrying foreign brides are older and more educated than their spouses.¹¹ The descriptive statistics from the latest National Survey of Multicultural Families survey (2018) help to identify who these marriage migrants and their partners are.¹² Table 2 reports summary statistics of basic socioeconomic variables for each marriage migrant and their Korean spouse by gender. The average age of female marriage migrants was approximately 37.3 which is almost ten years younger than that of Korean male spouses (47.8 years old). Educational attainment distribution shows that nearly 90 per cent of female marriage migrants did not complete elementary education while more than 80 per cent of their Korean husbands finished upper secondary education. Female marriage migrants' low level of educational attainment implies that they have been negatively self-selected.

Table 2. Socioeconomic characteristics of marriage migrants and their Korean spouses

	Marriage migrant		Korean spouse	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age	45.2	37.3	47.8	42.8
	[10.9]	[10.2]	[9.1]	[10.5]
Education				
No education	81.9	87.3	4.4	42.9
Elementary education	1.0	0.8	4.5	1.7
Low secondary education	2.1	2.0	10.1	4.0
Upper secondary education	4.9	4.0	49.5	14.9
Assoc./jr. College degree	1.3	1.7	11.6	6.8
Bachelor's degree	5.4	3.0	18.1	23.2
Master's degree or above	3.5	1.2	2.0	6.5
Obs.	2 805	12 550	12 550	2 805

Source: National Survey of Multicultural Families (2018).

Note: Those respondents divorced or widowed at the time of the survey were not included. The Korean spouse sample also includes naturalized Koreans. Standard deviations are in brackets.

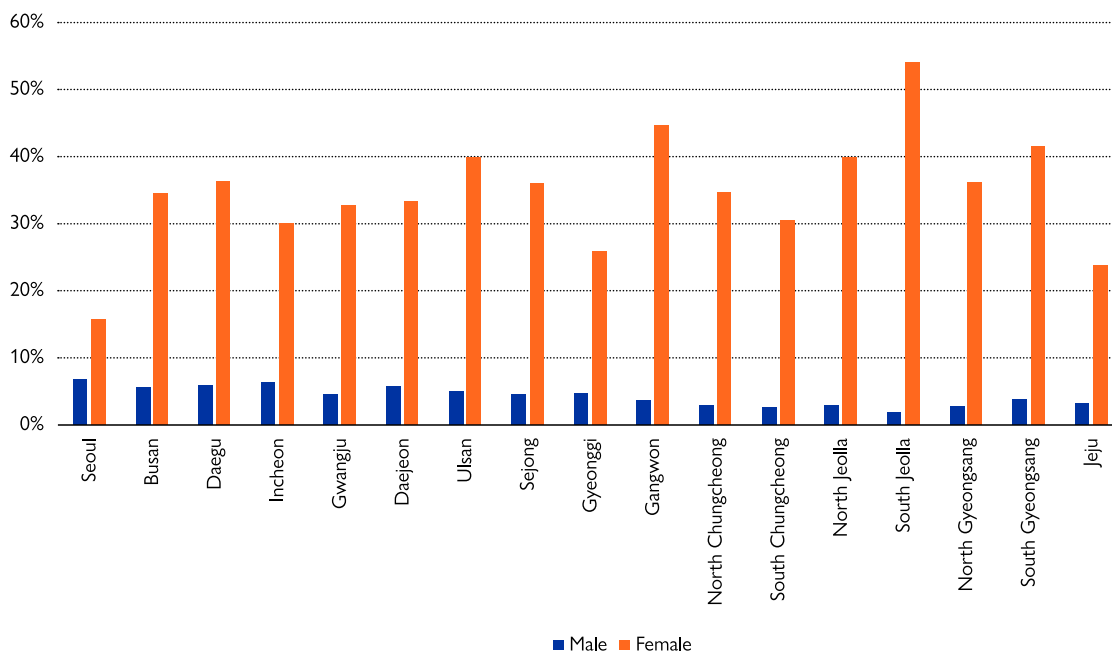
¹¹ Korean men marrying a native bride are also older (33.15 years old for men and 30.40 years old for women in 2018) but relatively less educated (73.5% of males tertiary educated and 79.2 per cent of females tertiary educated) than their spouses. The main differences are domestic marriages have a smaller age gap but an educational gap in the opposite direction between bride and groom.

¹² According to the Multicultural Families Support Act, a multicultural family refers to a family comprised of immigrants by marriage and persons who have acquired the Korean nationality.



Next, immigrant wives in the Republic of Korea are over-represented in rural areas. The subregional-level distribution of marriage migrants in the Republic of Korea (Figure 8) confirms that female marriage migrants are more concentrated in depopulated rural areas in the Republic of Korea, such as the South Jeolla (54%) and Gangwon (45%) provinces, where unmarried male residents faced the shrunk pool of marriage partners due to “rural flight” of females.¹³ Consequently, the share of female marriage migrants among female migrants is smallest in Seoul and the metropolitan Gyeonggi area, while the share of male marriage migrants is highest in Seoul.

Figure 8. The share of marriage migrants among total migrants in the Republic of Korea by gender and provinces/metropolitan cities, 2020



Source: Vital Statistics of Immigrants, 2020.

Note: The F4 visa (Overseas Korean visa) holders are not included.

Furthermore, there exist different characteristics of spouses in the case of males and females marrying foreigners. Geographically, female marriage migrants come from a broad range of neighboring Asian countries – China, Viet Nam, Philippines, and to a lesser extent, Thailand and Japan. The following figure of registered marriage migrants from 2000 to 2020 shows the five largest sending countries, which together represent approximately 80 per cent of binational marriages. Korean females are however marrying men from a wider range of countries – mainly men from Asia, but also from North America (Figure 9).

In 2022, there were 2,525 marriages between Chinese-born women (include ethnic Koreans, Joseonjok) and Korean men and they represent a significant share (23%) of total newlywed foreign women. The number of Chinese-born brides (20,582) peaked in 2005 and has decreased since then. Consequently, only in 2006 did their proportion of total annual binational marriage brides first fall below 50 per cent (14,566 out of 29,665) due to a shortage of females at marriageable age in China with another sharp fall in 2016 to 28.3 per cent (4,198 out of 14,822) and then 20.6 per cent (3,649 out of 17,687) in 2019.¹⁴ This sharp decrease can also be attributed to the policy changes regarding low-skilled migrant workers. For example, the introduction of the

¹³ The rural-to-urban “flight” of unmarried women can be attributed to several factors (Briselli, 2022). While traditional gender roles in rural Republic of Korea persists and prevents female labour market participation, migration to the urban area significantly increases the likelihood for unmarried women to take part to the labour force.

¹⁴ Previous research including Bulte et al. (2011) argues that the unbalanced sex ratio in China in the 2000s can be explained by the lagged effect of the 1980 One-Child Policy which has generated selective abortions for strong son preference.

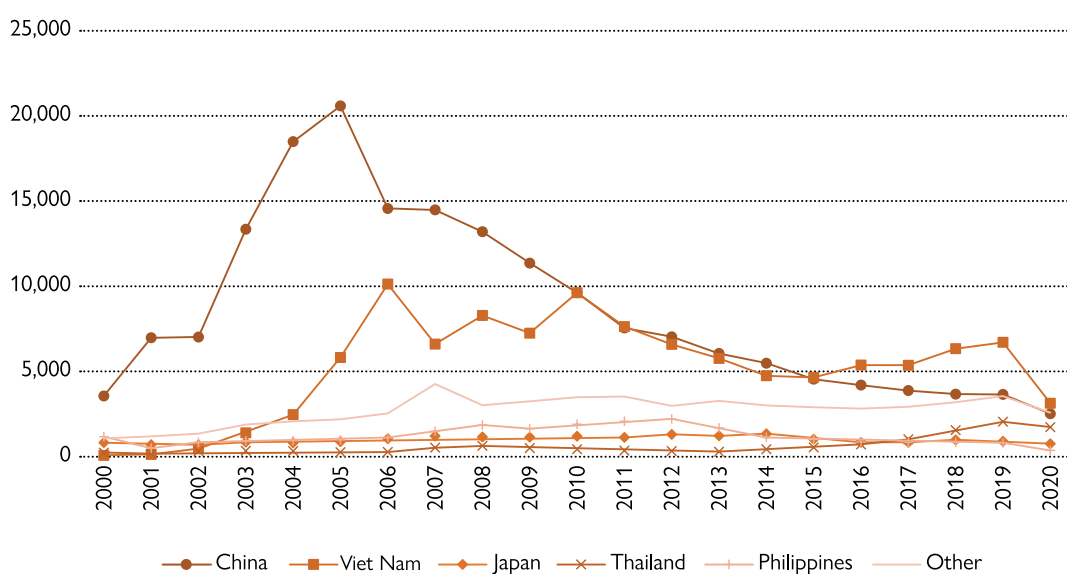
Working Visit System in 2004 resulted in a significant decrease in the influx of ethnic Korean Chinese marriage migrants who easily entered the Republic of Korea with an H-2 working visit visa instead of F-6 marriage to Koreans visa (Lee, 2008).

Those from the South-East Asian countries such as Viet Nam, the Philippines, Cambodia and Thailand together comprise a substantial number as well. There has been an enormous upsurge in the proportion of Vietnamese brides. It has accounted for the largest among foreign brides in the Republic of Korea since 2015 and reached 38 percent of the total (6,338 out of 16,608) in 2018. According to Ahn (2021), Vietnamese brides used to migrate to Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China but in 2004 a visa-tightening policy for foreign brides was enacted and the flow of foreign brides to Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China was drastically reduced. From that year, Vietnamese women switched destination country from Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China to the Republic Korea. However, when the Vietnamese Government attempted to restrict the binational marriage of Vietnamese females in 2013, foreign brides from other countries such as Cambodia and Mongolia increased. The Korean Government also endeavored to address foreign bride issues and regulate marriage brokerage agencies through a new law and a pair of enforcing acts and regulations in 2008 (The Marriage Brokerage Act), with various amendments promulgated in 2010 (Enforcement Regulations on the Act) and 2012 (Enforcement Decree on the Act).¹⁵

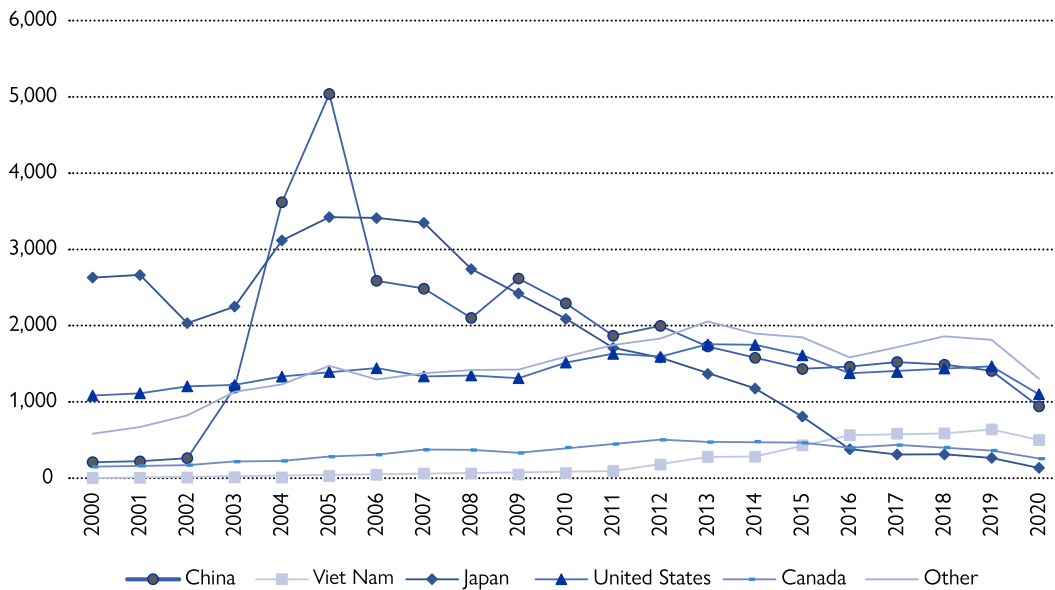
Meanwhile, the proportion of Japanese and Filipino brides declined sharply – from 11.8 per cent to 6.8 per cent and from 16.9 per cent to 3.3 per cent, respectively, over the period 2000 to 2020. It should be noted that the number of brides from Japan (819 in 2000 and 903 in 2020) and the Philippines (1,174 in 2020 and 816 in 2019) did not change much; it was just that the number from the other source countries increased greatly (Jones, 2012; MacLean, 2014).

Foreign grooms from China and Japan are also declining in absolute numbers since the peak in 2005, reflecting the introduction of the H-2 working visit visa in 2007 which facilitated Chinese males to enter the Republic of Korea and strained Republic of Korea–Japan relations in the 2010s, respectively. The recent increase in the number of binational marriages between Korean females and Vietnamese grooms is mostly driven by the remarriages of nationalized Korean females originally from Viet Nam.

Figure 9. The number of binational marriages between foreign bride and Korean male (below) and foreign husband and Korean female (next page) by foreign spouse's nationality, 2000–2020



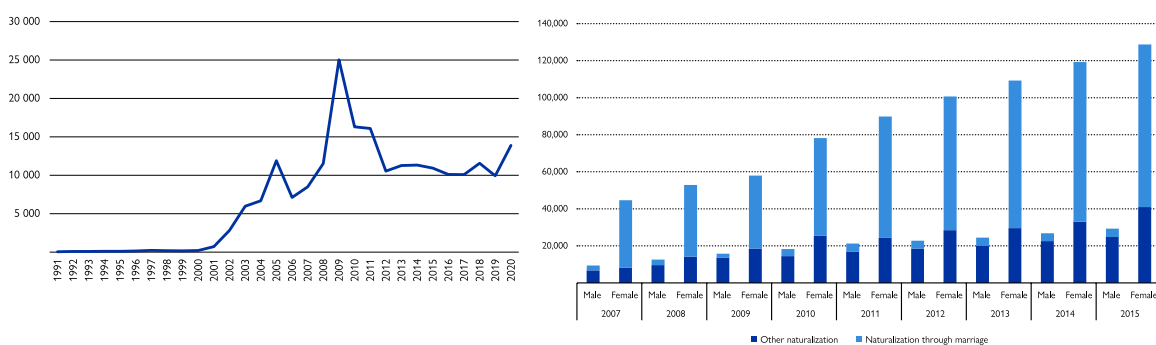
¹⁵ The 2008 Marriage Brokerage Act and its revision in 2010 and 2012 were intended to prevent fraudulent procedures of international marriage brokerages by stating the brokerage's duty to explain the contract to the clients in their mother language and by requiring an educational seminar for Korean spouses and more rigorous scrutiny of their criminal and medical records for the issuance of spouse visas (Chi, 2019).



Source: Vital Statistics of Immigrants, 2020.

In addition, there are many female naturalized Koreans who acquired citizenship through marriage to Korean. Marriage migrants show distinct naturalization patterns as marrying a Korean facilitates the acquisition of permanent residency as well as citizenship. Marriage migrants may apply for an F-5 permanent resident visa after two years of residence. Foreign permanent residents may naturalize as citizens after residing in the Republic of Korea for more than five years (three years for individuals with a Korean parent, two years for individuals with a Korean spouse, and one year for applications who have been married to a Korean for more than three years). The number of newly naturalized Korean increased from less than 50 in 1991 to approximately 25,000 in 2009 but then it dropped to around 16,000 due to new restrictions on dual citizenship and a decline in the number of binational marriages. Since then, this number has stabilized at around 10,000 per year. Accordingly, the number of naturalized Koreans has surged in recent years, from 54,000 in 2007 to 111,000 in 2011 and 158,000 in 2015 (Figure 8). Eight out of ten naturalized Koreans have been female and again eight out of ten female naturalized Koreans have been marriage migrants, suggesting that women get naturalized more often and mostly due to marriage; men get naturalized much less often and usually not due to marriage. For example, as of 2015, there were 88,000 female immigrants, or 68.1 per cent of the year's total naturalized Koreans, who were granted citizenship through marriage migration.

Figure 10. The number of annual naturalization (left) and the number of naturalized Koreans (right), 1991–2020



Source: Korean Immigration Service Statistics (1991–2020).

Lastly, when it comes to labour market integration of marriage migrants, almost 50 per cent of them are economically active. Table 3 using the latest survey before the COVID-19 pandemic shows the labour market status of female immigrants in the Republic of Korea by their visa type. Female immigrants were employed with various statuses of residence compared to male immigrants who resided in the Republic of Korea mostly with non-professional employment visas. There were approximately 168,000 female marriage migrants in 2019 and among them, 77,250 (46%) were economically active and 72,300 (43%) were employed. They are highly represented in elementary occupations (37.1%) and craft, machine operators, and assemblers (27.6%) mainly in mining and manufacturing and wholesale, retail trade, accommodation and food sectors.

Table 3. Female migrants' and naturalized Koreans' labour market situation by the status of sojourn, 2019

	Total (E+U+I)	Employed (E)	Unemployed (U)	Inactive (I)	Labour Force Participation	Employment	Unemployment
					Rate ($1 - \frac{I}{E+U+I}$)	Rate ($\frac{E}{E+U+I}$)	Rate ($\frac{U}{E+U}$)
Non-professional employment	28 650	28 500	0	150	99.5%	99.5%	0.0%
Working visit	106 650	75 750	4 350	26 550	75.1%	71.0%	5.4%
Professional employment	29 700	29 550	0	150	99.5%	99.5%	0.0%
Students	119 100	19 650	5 850	93 600	21.4%	16.5%	22.9%
Overseas Korean	252 000	128 250	7 350	116 400	53.8%	50.9%	5.4%
Permanent resident	95 250	62 250	4 200	28 800	69.8%	65.4%	6.3%
Marriage to Korean Citizen	168 000	72 300	4 950	90 750	46.0%	43.0%	6.4%
Other	127,050	21 150	4 500	101 400	20.2%	16.6%	17.5%
Naturalized Koreans	489,300	302 250	19 200	167 850	65.7%	61.8%	6.0%
Total	1 415 700	739 650	50 400	625 650	55.8%	52.2%	6.4%

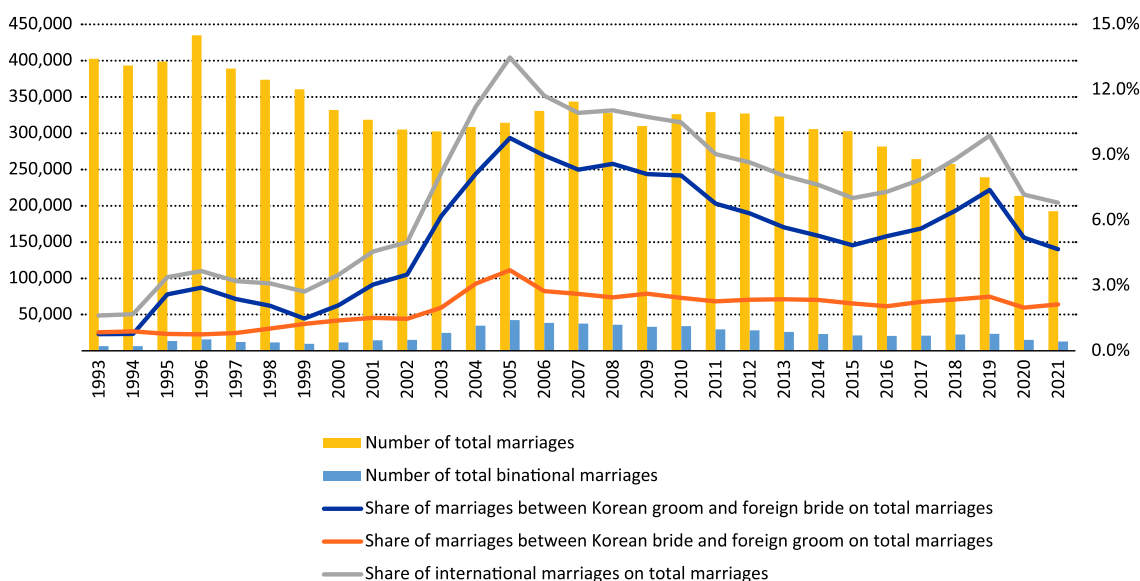
Source: Surveys on Immigrant Living Conditions and Labour Force (2019).

Note: Respondents are aged more than 14. The economically active population includes the employed (E) and the unemployed (U).

3. Impacts of COVID-19 on marriage migrants in the Republic of Korea from a gender perspective (2020–2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a much more pronounced impact on migrants' mobility and vulnerabilities. Aside from health-related impacts, many of them became trapped in immobility and unemployed, without income support or other social protection (IOM, 2021).

Figure 11. The share of binational marriages on total marriages, 1993–2021



Source: Vital Statistics of Immigrants, Statistics Korea (1993–2021).

Figure 11 shows the trends of marriage migration to the Republic of Korea with the number of total marriages from 1993 to 2021 before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The last three decades have seen an explosion (between 1993 and 2005), a decrease (between 2005 and 2015), and a slight recovery (between 2015 and 2019) before 2020 in binational marriages in the Republic of Korea. Accounting for only 1.6 per cent of marriages in 1993 (6,500 out of 402,600), the share of binational marriages increased more than ten-fold to 13.5 per cent by 2005 (42,400 out of 308,600), mainly driven by the marriages between Korean men and foreign women. In the late 1990s, the Asian financial crisis (1997) and the significant change in the Nationality Law (1998) which abolished automatically granted citizenship upon marriage to Korean nationals slowed the increase of binational marriages (Lee, 2008). However, the growth of the binational marriage brokerage business in the 2000s boosted the number of foreign brides and diversified their country of origin in the following years. Compared to 2005, the absolute number and the relative share of binational marriages almost halved in 2015, suggesting the series of successful efforts by the Korean Government to stipulate more restrictions on marriage brokerage agencies and the saturated marriage market for unmarried Korean men in rural areas.

The turnaround from 2016 is more attributed to Korean domestic marriage trends which show a continuing decrease in the number of newlyweds (Table 4). While the number of binational marriages between Korean men and foreign brides rebounded from 14,700 (4.8%) to 17,700 (7.4%) in 2019, the total marriages decreased by 21 per cent from 302,800 to 239,200. However, the COVID-19 pandemic stopped this trend.

Table 4. Marriage rates (The number of marriages per 1,000 people) by age group, 2015, 2019–2021

	Male				Female			
	2015	2019	2020	2021	2015	2019	2020	2021
Total	13.9	10.8	9.6	8.6	13.7	10.6	9.4	8.5
20–24	5.2	3.3	2.9	2.6	15.5	10.1	8.0	6.6
25–29	41.2	27.8	25.2	22.0	72.9	50.4	44.9	38.2
30–34	62.4	51.1	47.6	42.1	51.8	46.9	44.0	40.8
35–39	25.1	22.9	20.5	19.5	15.7	15.7	14.3	13.8

Source: Vital Statistics, Statistics Korea, 2015, 2019–2021.

The impacts of COVID-19 on marriage migrants appear to be multifaceted in the Republic of Korea. As exceptional measures were put in place during the COVID-19 crisis, fewer migrants entered the Republic of Korea to marry a Korean (Table 5). Compared to 2019, the number of arrivals of female marriage migrants declined by around 116,000 persons or 91 per cent in 2021. However, the drop in the share of international marriages was not drastic as expected because the number of total marriages in the Republic of Korea also plummeted in 2021. The number of marriage migrants nevertheless increased in 2020 and 2021 as they are not restricted to exiting and re-enter the Republic of Korea unlike international students or migrant workers who were severely affected by the strict border controls.

Table 5. The arrival of foreign nationals by selected visa type, 2019–2021

	Male				Female			
	2019	2020	2021	change	2019	2020	2021	change
E9 (Non-professional employment)	140 469	39 009	14 910	-89.4%	10 647	2 983	1 822	-82.9%
H2 (Working visit)	153 886	39 335	32 974	-78.6%	96 769	19 657	20 825	-78.5%
F5 (Permanent resident)	80 155	15 492	5 214	-93.5%	97 376	18 648	6 430	-93.4%
D2 (Students)	106 874	35 206	21 011	-80.3%	184 133	54 207	32 355	-82.4%
F1 (Visiting or joining family)	37 524	12 746	4 578	-87.8%	59 635	19 583	6 728	-88.7%
D4 (General trainee)	34 480	11 789	9 621	-72.1%	50 173	17 259	17 097	-65.9%
F6 (Marriage to Korean Citizen)	31 897	9 115	4 453	-86.0%	127 602	37 004	11 051	-91.3%
G1 (Miscellaneous)	9 343	3 616	439	-95.3%	4 262	1 446	46	-98.9%
F2 (Resident)	26 350	5 987	1 651	-93.7%	32 075	7 343	1 986	-93.8%

Source: Korean Immigration Service Statistics, 2021.

Table 6 below shows the labour market impacts of COVID-19 on marriage migrants. From 2018–2019 to 2020–2021, the unemployment rates the female marriage migrants almost doubled. The employment rate in 2021 also decreased by approximately 6 percentage points from 2018. However, the labour force participation rate stayed relatively stable over 2019–2021.

Table 6. Female marriage migrants' labour market situation, 2018–2021

	Total (E+U+I)	Employed (E)	Unemployed (U)	Inactive (I)	Labour Force Participation	Employment	Unemployment
					Rate ($1 - \frac{I}{E+U+I}$)	Rate ($\frac{E}{E+U+I}$)	Rate ($\frac{U}{E+U}$)
2018	90 414	44 435	2 073	43 906	51.4%	49.1%	4.5%
2019	90 484	39 254	2 408	48 822	46.0%	43.4%	5.8%
2020	99 142	43 848	3 719	51 575	48.0%	44.2%	7.8%
2021	102 173	43 479	4 319	54 375	46.8%	42.6%	9.0%

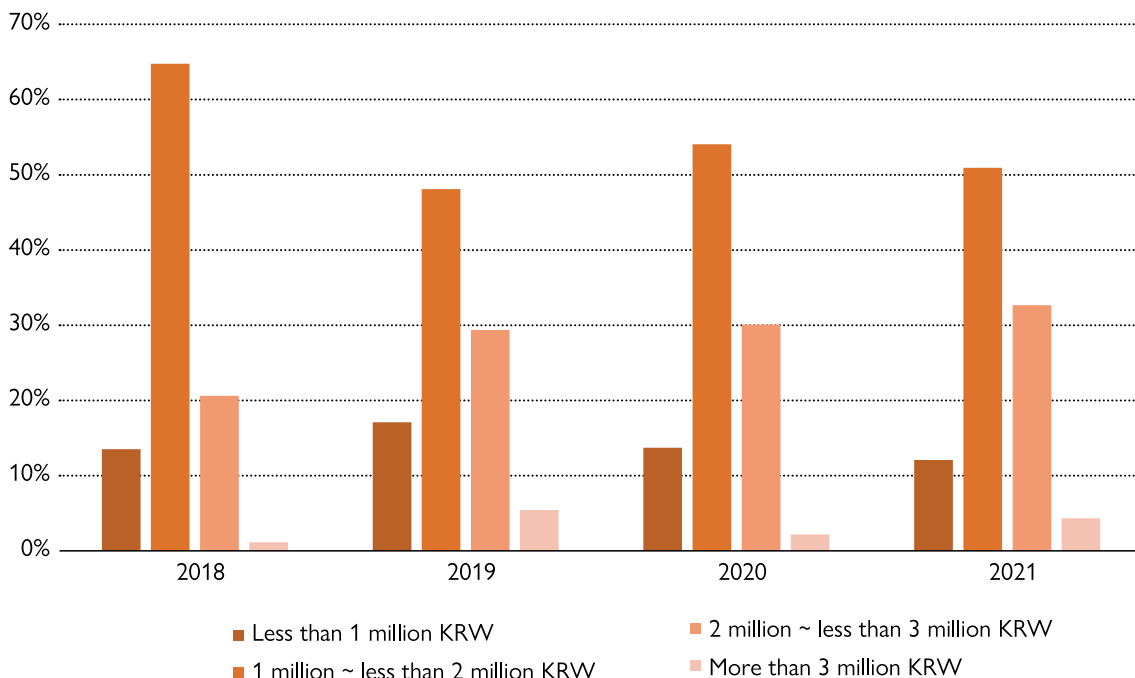
Source: Surveys on Immigrant Living Conditions and Labour Force (2018–2021).

Note: Respondents are aged more than 14. The economically active population includes the employed (E) and the unemployed (U). Previously marriage migrants who now are naturalized Koreans are not included.



Their earnings have increased since 2018. In 2018, the average monthly income of almost 80 per cent of female marriage emigrants was below KRW 2 million (around USD 1,600). However, in 2021, around 40 per cent of female migrants earned more than KRW 2 million (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Female marriage emigrants' earning distribution in the Republic of Korea, 2018–2021



Source: Surveys on Immigrant Living Conditions and Labour Force (2018–2021).

Note: KRW 1 million equals approximately USD 800.

4. Marriage migration policies in the Republic of Korea

The Republic of Korea has made not one immigration policy, but several types of immigration policies targeting specific migrant groups (Draudt, 2021). Since the increase in marriage immigrants from the early 2000s, the Korean Government established several integration policies to incorporate immigrants into Korean society. Evaluating the effect of these policies is beyond the scope of the paper. In this section, however, I present the main contents of three successive Basic Plans for Immigration Policy (2008–2012, 2013–2017 and 2018–2022) with a focus on marriage migrants and three Basic Plans for Multicultural Families (2010–2012, 2013–2017 and 2018–2022) to provide a high-level overview of marriage migration policies and briefly examine if key policy objectives have been achieved using available gender data.

4.1. Overview of Basic Plans for Immigration Policy and Multicultural Families

The establishment of major national policies on immigration and multicultural programming only occurred in the late 2000s, when the National Assembly passed the 2007 Act on the Treatment of Foreigners in the Republic of Korea, which expanded and re-organized the Korea Immigration Service and laid out requirements for the Ministry of Justice to write a Basic Plan for Immigration Policy every five years (Draudt, 2019). The following year, the Act on Support for Multicultural Families for marriage migrants and their families was approved and the first Plan for the Multicultural Family policy to strengthen the support for multicultural families and strictly manage the process of marriage and entry into the Republic of Korea was confirmed. The main policy measures are summarized in Table 7.



Table 7. The selected main policy measures of the Basic Plans

Basic Plan for Immigration Policy	Basic Plan for Multicultural Families
Broaden the education on the Korean language and culture	Tighten the control of international marriage brokerage
Emphasize social services such as childcare	Support for job education and employment
Support marriage migrants' financial dependence	Broaden the social security system
Identifying characteristics linked with unsuccessful binational marriage	Promote the protection of human rights for marriage migrants who have gone through divorce or violence
Support education and school life of immigrant children by constructing a dual-language educational environment	Strengthen the network among multicultural families and operate spouse education
Support the social adaptation and culture of the capacity of self-reliance of immigrant children through vocational education	Support marriage migrant parents to educate their children

Sources: Oh et al. (2011), Kang et al. (2018), Kang (2020).

Note: For Basic Plan for Immigration Policy, only measures targeted for marriage migrants are included.

4.2. The Results of Survey of Multicultural Family and Policy Implications

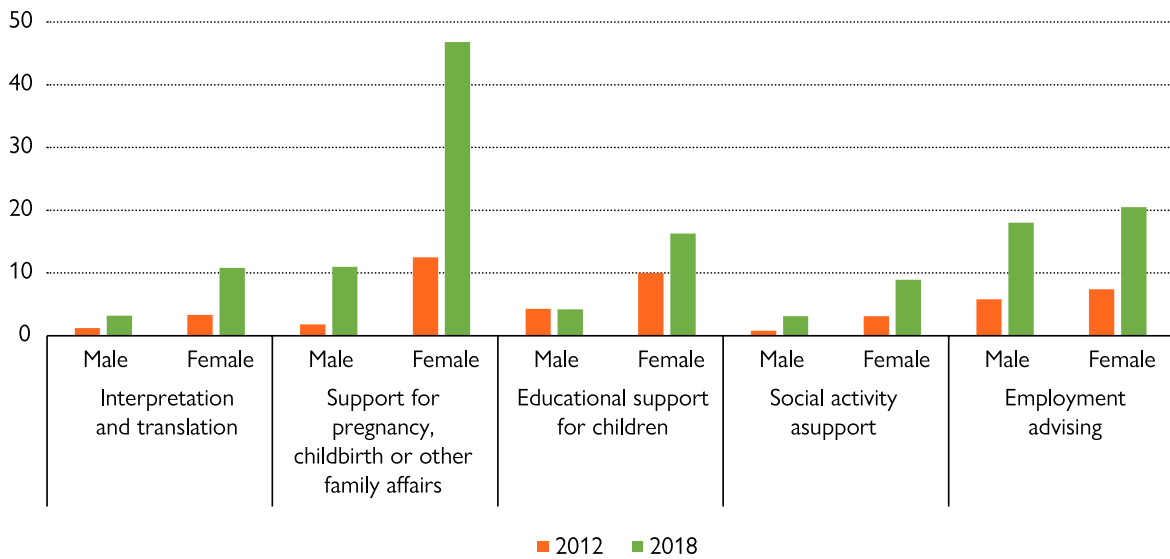
Since its pilot survey in 2005 which revealed the striking vulnerabilities of multicultural families, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family conducted a national survey of multicultural families every three years from 2009 to study the living conditions and their welfare needs for better-designed policy measures to address related issues. Variables include foreign spouses' employment status, marriage life and family relations, childcare, health, social life, and other welfare needs. In this subsection, using the survey, I present the gender gap in selected variables which would be a proxy for policy measures and outcomes. It should be noted that not all migrants in multicultural families are marriage migrants but especially the majority of female migrants in multicultural families are marriage migrants.¹⁶

Figure 13 shows the share of migrants in multicultural families who ever used services in 2012 and 2018 provided by local governments. Compared to 2012, there were more marriage migrants who participated in various programmes in 2018 for both sexes, implying that the continuous efforts through the basic plans have worked into effect over years. The increase in the share was more pronounced for female migrants, especially in support for pregnancy, childbirth or other family affairs (from 12.5% to 46.8%).

¹⁶ According to the most recent 2021 survey, among 340 thousands multicultural households in the Republic of Korea, 82.4 per cent have a marriage migrant.



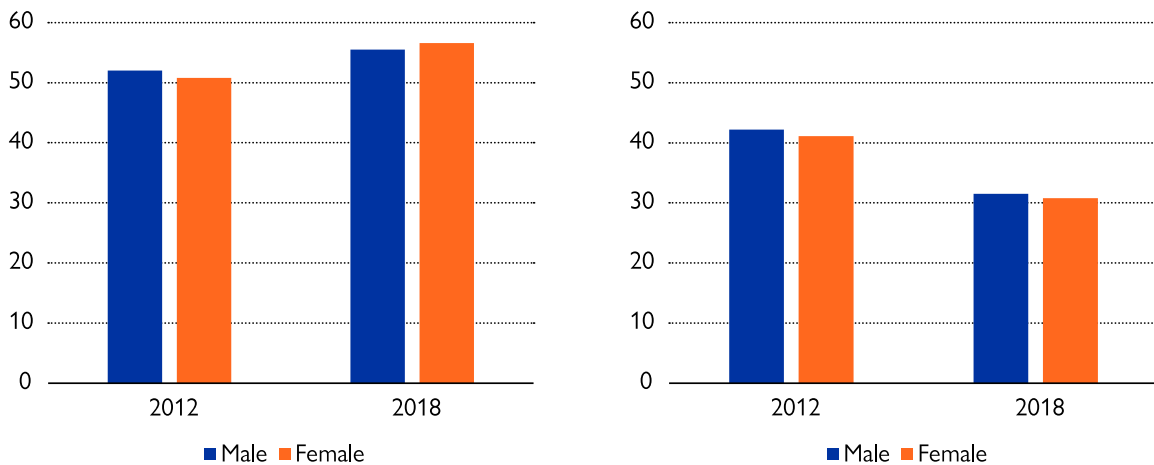
Figure 13. The share of migrants in multicultural families who have ever used public services in the Republic of Korea by sex and by programme, 2012 and 2018 (%)



Source: National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012, 2018).

Estimating the causal effect of the programmes is beyond the scope of this paper but the following figures 14 and 15 show descriptively how migrants' experience in the Republic of Korea changed over time. In 2012, more or less half of migrants in multicultural families (52% for males and 51% for females) were satisfied with their life in the Republic of Korea in general. This share went up by 3.5 and 6 percentage points respectively for the male and female migrants in multicultural families. The figure also presents that there was 10 percentage points less share of male and female migrants who felt discriminated against as a foreigner living in the Republic of Korea in 2018 (32% for males and 31% for females) than in 2012 (42% for males and 41% for females).

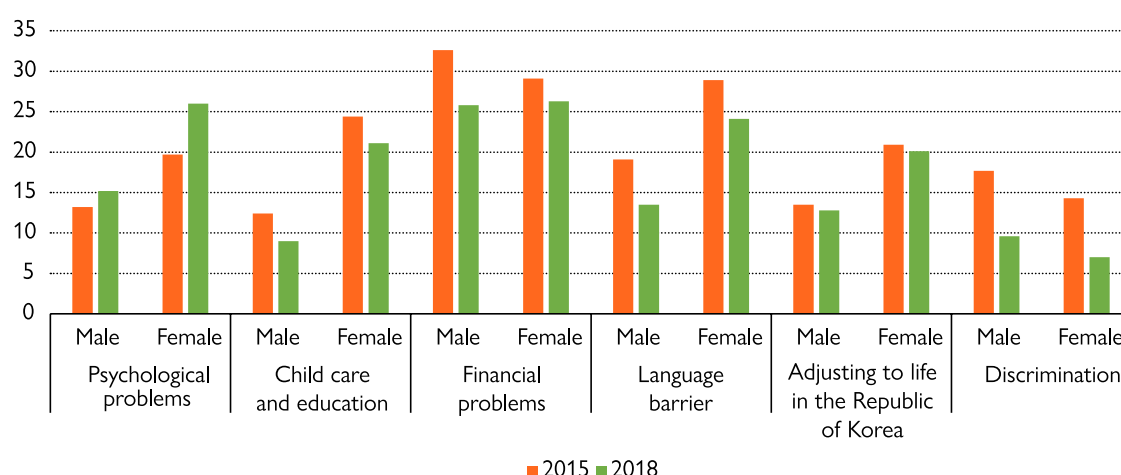
Figure 14. The share of migrants in multicultural families who are satisfied with life in the Republic of Korea (left) and those who experienced discrimination (right) by sex, 2012 and 2018 (%)



Source: National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012, 2018).

Figure 15 below identified the different types of difficulties facing migrants in multicultural families in the Republic of Korea by sex in 2015 and 2018. Except for psychological and cultural problems, other difficulties have been alleviated for both sexes. The gender gap was greater for difficulties in childcare and education (12% percentage points) and language barriers (10% percentage points).

Figure 15. The share of migrants in multicultural families who experience difficulties in the Republic of Korea last year by type of difficulties and sex, 2015 and 2018 (%)



Source: National Survey of Multicultural Families (2015, 2018).

The third Basic Plans for Immigration Policy (2018–2022) and for Multicultural Families (2018–2022) are set to end in 2022. The results presented in this section demonstrate improvements in living conditions, including increased life satisfaction and decreased perceived discrimination over the past years. However, the gender gap in these outcomes persists among migrants in multicultural families, and the utilization of policy measures remains limited for both sexes; for example, one out of ten female migrants and one out of thirty-three male migrants in multicultural families have not utilized interpretation and translation, as well as social activity support services (Figure 13).

Based on the same survey, over half (55.1%) of women in multicultural families were aware of the Multicultural Family Support Centre and utilized its services in 2018 (compared to 40.7% in 2012). Nevertheless, access to social welfare centres and healthy family centres remains limited and has even decreased since 2012, as shown in Table 8. To promote the social integration of migrants in multicultural families, it is crucial to incentivize access to these services by increasing their visibility, expanding their provision, and enhancing the benefits they offer.

Table 8. Multicultural family member's use of public services by sex (%)

	Male		Female	
	2012	2018	2012	2018
Multicultural Family Support Centre	7.1	11.9	40.7	55.1
Employment Centre	20.6	29	14.8	25.2
Social Welfare Centre	8.3	3	16.3	9.7
Healthy Family Centre	9.8	5	20.1	16.7

Source: National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012, 2018).

5. Conclusion

The feminization of international migration has been widely discussed in various disciplines. However, the availability of more gender-disaggregated migration data should be preconditioned to identify and address systematic gender inequalities related to migration (Abel, 2022).

The Republic of Korea once a country of emigration has now become a net migrant-receiving country as the number of foreign residents exploded by forty times over the last three decades. While the overall immigration to the Republic of Korea does not appear to be feminized, one of the most feminized migration patterns observed in the country is marriage migration. A series of Korean survey data gives a unique opportunity to study how this gendered marriage migration originated from social contexts in the Republic of Korea and to identify the characteristics of the main actors in marriage migration.

Marriage migration can provide a much more powerful tool for addressing the Republic of Korea's demographic challenges – a trend toward avoiding marriage and low fertility rates, than other types of immigration. Furthermore, marriage migrants are particularly important when it comes to social integration. Unlike other foreigners who leave the country after a certain period of time, they not only reside permanently in the Republic of Korea but acquire Korean citizenship to become Korean nationals. In this respect, understanding the patterns of marriage migration and the characteristics of marriage migrants is essential in establishing and implementing migration and social integration policies.

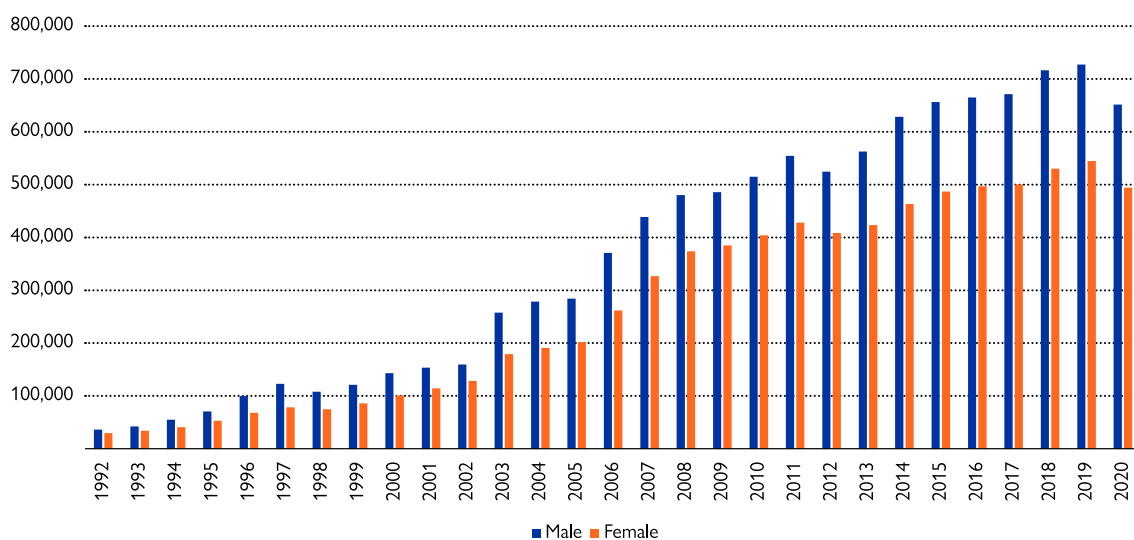
There have been many attempts to explain the causes of immigration to the Republic of Korea but a comprehensive model for marriage migration is still understudied.¹⁷ The trends, patterns, and policies documented in this paper using various quality micro-datasets will pave the way to develop a causal model in future research to better explain marriage migration decisions and marriage migrants' successful economic and social integration in the Republic of Korea.

Upon completion of the third Basic Plans for Immigration Policy (2018–2022) and for Multicultural Families (2018–2022) to end in 2022, this timely report sheds light on the importance of gender data in policy evaluation with a particular focus on marriage migrants which will lead to a successful implementation of the upcoming basic plan for the next five years.

¹⁷ Seol (2015) tries to explain why the immigrants chose to move to the Republic of Korea by foreign immigrant groups including marriage migrants and country of origin by presenting the correlation coefficients between the number of foreign immigrants and political and socioeconomic variables derived from both neoclassical economic approach and the historical-structural approach.

Appendix

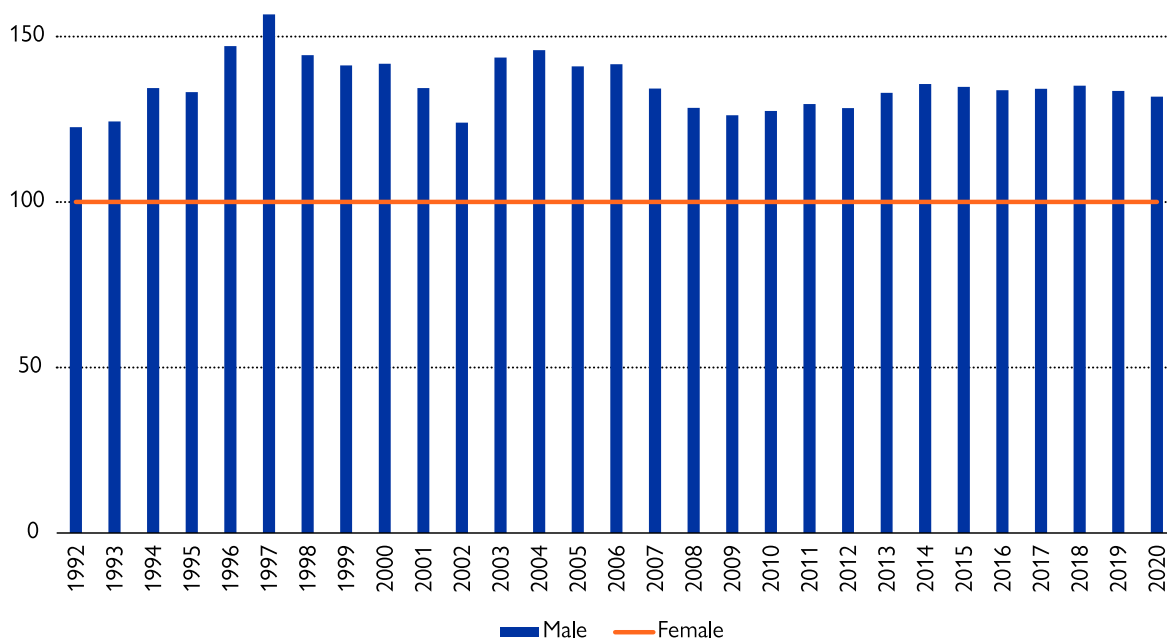
Appendix Figure 1-(a). International immigrant stock in the Republic of Korea disaggregated by sex, 1992–2020



Source: Korea Immigration Service Statistics, 1992–2020.

Note: The F4 visa (Overseas Korean visa) holders are not included.

Appendix Figure 1-(b). Sex-ratio of international immigrants in the Republic of Korea, 1992–2020



Source: Korea Immigration Service Statistics, 1992–2020.

Note: The F4 visa (Overseas Korean visa) holders are not included.

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