

Action Research Strategy on Marriage Migrant Human (In)security

by Mushakoji Kinhide

I wish to share with you the reasons and visions of the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA) for being especially concerned about the well-being and rights of marriage migrants.

ARENA is a network of Asian action researchers in search of alternatives to the present neo-liberal globalisation. We, in ARENA, are particularly concerned about the socio-economic, cultural, and political sources of insecurity and discrimination faced by marriage migrants in Asia, given the following observations.

Marriage migrants often experience patriarchal discrimination, shared by their societies of origin and of destination, on top of cultural conflicts they are exposed to in their new homes. In this sense, ARENA considers their cultural insecurity the most typical of cultural challenges Asian intellectuals face. This is the need to find an endogenous path to human development, keeping the positive Asian

cultural traditions, while transforming the patriarchal customs inherent in them. ARENA wants to initiate a process of dialogue with marriage migrants, involving their supporters in both the sending and receiving countries.

There is an urgent need to attend to the multiple structural factors that produce migration through marriage. The general trend of women's impoverishment in recent decades has been a great concern, especially for those addressing global migration. But when we consider women's increasing poverty in the context of neo-liberal globalisation, we should not only think of it as an economic but also as a cultural impoverishment. When the cultural dimension is included, our understanding of marriage migration can be extended to the women's desire to find a new life. But often, their desire cannot be met, because they can only migrate to another society in which the only available jobs or roles are often contrary to their deepest wishes.

Photo by: Precy Obja-an

What patterns can we identify in marriage migration?

Firstly, the women who migrate, taking marriage as a means to settle down, are often victims of economic transactions, formal and informal, which commodify them and ensure a state of chronic socio-economic insecurity. They are caught in the current feminised process of global migration, and some are even the objects of trafficking.

Secondly, the marriage migrants are often subjected to the violence implied in patriarchy and racism and complicated by cultural dysfunctions in communication. It is the interplay of gender and race discrimination that leads to domestic and social violence, making married lives unsustainable and insecure. This is why marriage migrants constitute a special category.

Thirdly, ARENA believes that marriage migrants have a special role in building a multicultural Asian community. Unfortunately, their socio-economic and cultural insecurity makes it difficult for them to act as cultural mediators. Such difficulties need to be eliminated by the cooperation between the states and citizens in both their countries of origin and of destination.

The issue is complex, and we may further deepen our inquiry by asking a few more questions such as:

- 1) In what particular way does patriarchy in a receiving country operate and affect marriage migrant women's lives? How do big age gaps, low socio-economic status, and cultural hierarchy affect power relations within the family?
- 2) By what status, identity, and stereotypes are marriage migrant

women perceived and treated in a receiving society? What are the particular socio-economic insecurities they experience? What are the key factors receiving societies need to address to improve the situation?

- 3) To substantially guarantee marriage migrant women's security, how should immigration laws be revised in line with the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, and how should we advocate for change?
- 4) Multiculturalism is a common rhetoric among receiving countries, but is the existing cultural hierarchy really compatible with multiculturalism? If not, how does it serve to justify the existing cultural hierarchy and assimilation policy? How do we resist the government-level assimilation policy?

The patterns of insecurities and unresolved issues I have raised so far do not stand as individual ones. They inter-link and inter-play in a complex way. A compartmentalised or a narrow range of deliberation and policy choices will fall short. This is why ARENA calls for an integrated, multi-layered and regional approach to this issue. In this context, when we focus on how women are exploited by the international, commercialised marriage brokerage system, we try to identify how societies concerned can regulate it differently but jointly at the same time.

Actions envisioning a fundamental change

Marriage migrants, for ARENA, are more than mere victims. They are potentially important agents of change.



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They can bring about an alternative modernity by developing cultural exchanges and multiculturalism in Asia by mediating between their countries of origin and destination, and mediating between the present and future generations. Their present insecurity, if eliminated, can be transformed into new sources of hope for a more gender egalitarian modernity respectful of cultural traditions and national identities. This is why ARENA wants to support the organisation of cross-border networks of marriage migrants and their supporters.

Therefore, should we raise the question of whether or not we could situate marriage migrant women as agent subjects instead of passive victims. Under what conditions is it valid to situate migrant women as agents instead of passive victims? What are the ways by which we could go beyond the notion of victimisation? Can we identify some already existing initiatives taken in this direction? If so, I think the agenda of empowerment of women marriage

migrants may become a priority for our joint efforts.

We also address the important subject of citizenship, and envision future citizenship. The current superficiality of various citizenship arrangements for marriage migrants poses a challenge to think of citizenship that go beyond race and gender discrimination. Newly envisioned, substantial citizenship includes all the fundamental civil and political, economic, social, and cultural rights migrant women are entitled to.

Developing action research strategy

To further concretise the above discussions, ARENA has developed an action research strategy on marriage migrants' human (in)security.

Participatory research and empowerment

The Project is a feminist participatory research based on the full participation and initiatives of the marriage migrants themselves. The researchers should refrain from making any prior assumptions on their human insecurity, their rights, and their life options. The narratives of the marriage migrants (freely expressing their reality and their dreams within the context of their life histories) must provide the base of the whole Project.

International migration system as research context

The Project should attempt to grasp the life histories of the marriage migrants in the context of the international migration system within which the participants have sought marriage as part of their migration career. The Project should trace the different phases of the participants' migration career from their

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recruitment at home, through the migratory phase where they interact with officials, civil society agents, and brokers (legal and illegal). Trafficking of sex workers provides an entry-point into marriage migration as well as legal marriage brokerage. The marriage migrants life history diverge, some continuing married lives, and others breaking their marriages, some staying and others returning home. Another bifurcation concerns child birth: married migrants with children face diverse problems whether married or separated. All these life paths are determined by

develop a dialogue on how to improve the human security and livelihood of the marriage migrants, potential marriage migrants and returnees, or divorced and separated marriage migrants.

The Research Questions

Who are the marriage migrants, and how do they see their life history and future?

The Research must begin by the identification of the participants. It is necessary to discuss how broadly the Project defines marriage migrants. It is suggested that a definition should include all relevant groups, such as trafficked migrants and separated marriage migrants. Their families (in both sending and receiving countries) and their children must also be part of the Project concern.

What kind of human insecurity arises at each stage of the life history of the marriage migrants?

It is necessary to avoid prejudging the insecurity of the marriage migrants and treating them as victims of human rights violation. Previous research studies prove that they do not perceive themselves as victims, and that their empowerment consists of making them aware of the injustice they meet simultaneously with indications on how to organise and face their problems. The focused discussions are occasions to build awareness while learning from their problems, which they name and formulate in their own words.

What are the causes of their insecurity and the agents for change?

The NGOs have a specific role in identifying the causes of the experiences

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the legal institutional framework determining immigration, and by the existence or lack of public support in communities they migrated into. The Project must try to grasp the totality of the international migration system within which the participant migrants' life experience takes place.

Action/Policy oriented research as an organisation process

The Project must seek a concrete objective, the elimination of all legal, economic, political and cultural factors which pose obstacles to women empowerment. This is where the mobilisation of concerned NGO communities in the sending and receiving countries, and the contact with the public and civil society agents must be used to



Photo by: Precy/Obja-an

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of insecurity and discrimination. In most cases, the migrants themselves are too busy facing their specific problems and are unconscious of the various obstacles (legal/institutional, economic, political, and cultural) which are at the root of the international migration system and its local sub-systems. The narratives of the marriage migrants must be interpreted with the support of broader perspectives provided by the NGO communities.

What are the laws, institutions, and practices which affect their insecurity?

To put life histories into the broader context of the international migration system, it is necessary to gather information on existing laws (including social security and education systems) and practices (such as neighbourhood human relations including garbage collection) in both sending and receiving countries. It is crucial to cast a broader net on various social systems such as the sex industry, marriage brokerage, mass media, and the local boss system.

Who are the civil society and state agents who impact their lives negatively or positively?

To develop an action/policy relevant research Project, it is essential to obtain information on who does what in influencing migrants' lives. There are clearly social agents, public and private, who play a negative role and add to migrants' insecurity. There are also public and private agents, who by their very existence, provide a sense of security and welfare (such as medical and social care institutions).

There are also agents who currently play negative roles but may be led to provide the support necessary for the empowerment of marriage migrants later on. It is necessary to build a set of

realistic action/policy recommendation addressing each of the agent groups (e.g., recommendation on the responsibilities of the media, the service industry, the schools and so on.)

What are the NGOs doing and what can they do to support marriage migrants?

The Project must involve a variety of NGOs. Some are already working in support of foreign migrants including marriage migrants. Others are working on issues closely related to marriage migrants' security, but do not realise that they have to include the marriage migrants in their activities. For example, NGOs working on public health issues such as HIV/AIDs, old-age care and rural redevelopment need to be mobilised.

Moving ahead

ARENA wishes to invite you to exchange views and experiences to develop a process of research, dialogue, and network building among marriage migrants. We hope that concerned researchers and activists will support this initiative and make this project the entry point into a process of joint action-research-and-research-action, beneficial not only to the marriage migrants but also to all women migrants. This will open new paths for cultural exchange towards the creation of a new Asian community. It will trigger a process of search for an alternative regional order that brooks no exploitation in migration and no gender violence. ■

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