



## Original Research - Qualitative

First childbirth experience of international marriage migrant women in South Korea<sup>☆</sup>Min Sun Chu<sup>a</sup>, Minna Park<sup>b</sup>, Jung A Kim<sup>c,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Seoul Women's College of Nursing, Seoul, Republic of Korea<sup>b</sup> School of Nursing, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA<sup>c</sup> Division of Nursing, Hanyang University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

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## ABSTRACT

**Problem and background:** Since the mid-1990s, a large number of foreign women have migrated from developing countries to South Korea by means of international marriages. These nulliparous foreign women may experience more difficulties in pregnancy and childbirth than native Koreans.

**Aim:** This study aimed to describe the meaning of the first childbirth experiences of international marriage migrant women marrying Korean men in South Korea.

**Methods:** This is a descriptive phenomenological study that included 10 participants using the purposive and snowball sampling in one multicultural support center in Seoul, South Korea. Colaizzi's data analysis method was used to inductively determine themes and formulate meanings.

**Findings:** The meanings of first childbirth were categorized into four themes—'coming to a crisis,' 'depending on others,' 'searching for solutions,' and 'strengthening family unity.' Inadequate antenatal care is associated with obstacles such as language barriers, social isolation, lack of knowledge, different midwifery practice and dependent lifestyle. Meanwhile, their children were a source of energy for the women to fulfill their emotional needs and improve family relationships.

**Conclusions:** Childbirth is a life-changing event for these women, in which they face challenges as well as opportunities to develop new coping skills and a new role identity in their family. It is important for healthcare providers and policy makers to identify obstacles and unmet needs to improve maternity care in light of the distinctive challenges of immigrant living in multicultural families.

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## Statement of significance

## Problem or issue

International marriage migrant women in South Korea experience more difficulties during their first childbirth than native Korean women.

## What is already known

Nulliparous foreign women who migrated to South Korea through international marriages often receive insufficient

antenatal care and information. Poor management of pregnancy-related challenges due to inadequate care and education compromise both maternal and child health.

## What this paper adds

This study has identified the meanings of the first childbirth experience of international marriage migrant women in South Korea. As they face obstacles and develop new coping skills, the childbirth experience provides both challenges and opportunities.

## 1. Introduction

The notable increase in international marriages in South Korea has created a new form of family and has also resulted in various associated issues. International married couples go through the process of marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth in a relatively short

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period of time.<sup>1</sup> International marriage migrant women are defined as foreign-born women who immigrated to South Korea through marriages to Korean men. These women, who do not have a sufficient understanding of- or ability to communicate with- their spouse may experience forceful adaptation to Korean culture, a large age gap with their spouse, and language barriers.<sup>2</sup>

International marriage migrant women are expected to become pregnant and give birth early on in their marriage.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, they have their first child during the first year after immigration, regardless of their readiness to become a mother.<sup>4</sup> There are many obstacles that prevent them from receiving sufficient antenatal care, such as financial strain, language barriers, uncooperative healthcare providers, and limited access to transportation.<sup>5</sup>

First childbirth is an act in which a nulliparous woman births her first child. Diverse strategies are needed to support healthy childbirth of international marriage migrant women in South Korea. Currently, more in-depth studies are required to understand how foreign women experience their ‘first childbirth’ after immigration. As such, the research question was: “What is the experience of first childbirth like for international marriage migrant women in South Korea?” The purpose of this study was to describe the meaning of the first childbirth experiences of international marriage migrant women marrying Korean men in South Korea.

## 2. Background

There has been an increasing number of international marriages among socioeconomically poor Asian men who have difficulty finding brides in developed Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> As such, there has been a noticeable rise in foreign women marrying Korean men, leading to an increase in international marriages in South Korea.<sup>1</sup> Statistics from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Republic of Korea<sup>6</sup> reveal that there were 18,307 international marriages between Korean men and foreign women in 2013. In particular, the majority of the women’s country of origin was China (33.1%), followed by Vietnam (31.5%) and the Philippines (9.2%).<sup>7</sup>

International marriage migrant women often choose to marry Korean men without understanding or communicating with their spouses in order to resolve financial difficulties. Moreover, the study done by Kim and Kim<sup>2</sup> pointed out that those women who experienced their first childbirth after immigration lacked knowledge of family planning, birth control, pregnancy or antenatal care. In addition, some factors such as cultural difference, language barrier and lack of understanding between couples contribute to insufficient antenatal and postpartum care.

Difficulties that they experience in a new country are related to their differences in background, culture, personal values, and lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> First, cultural differences and immigration often prevent them from receiving proper healthcare<sup>9</sup> and establishing a relationship with health care providers.<sup>10</sup> Among international marriage migrant women in Korea, those from the Philippines reported that they experienced cultural difference between Korea and their countries of origin most (71.6%), followed by Vietnam (70.6%), and China (44.3%).<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, even though Korean-Chinese wives share the same language and a similar culture with Koreans, 27.7% still identified cultural differences.<sup>11</sup> Second, a language barrier is associated with greater difficulties in maintaining good maternal health during the antenatal and parturition periods.<sup>12,13</sup> The language barrier also results in a higher incidence of postpartum depression in foreign mothers compared to their native counterparts.<sup>10</sup> As a result, pregnant foreign women are under a high level of stress physically and emotionally, causing a potential threat to the fetus and to maternal health.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, this may affect the health of the next generation.

Previous studies focused mostly on difficulties and associated factors that international marriage migrant women in South Korea experienced during childbirth. Indeed, a search from Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, Pubmed and KoreaMed yielded no previous similar studies on international marriage migrant women in South Korea. Two relevant studies<sup>15,16</sup> were conducted on Asian women and their experiences giving birth in a foreign culture. Lee et al.<sup>15</sup> examined immigrant Chinese women’s experiences in accessing maternity care, utilizing maternity health services, and addressing the obstacles they perceived in Canada. These Chinese women immigrated to Canada within the last 10 years and gave birth within the last two to six months. This study’s results showed preference for linguistically and culturally competent healthcare providers, favoring obstetricians over midwives, the need for culturally sensitive care, and the use of the use of alternative support and private services. The unique custom of these immigrant Chinese women in Canada was that they invited their parents, parents-in-law, or sister-in-law to help them adjust to the physical and psychological challenges of being a new mother. In the meantime, these family members also helped the new mother with household chores, cooking meals and bathing the baby. Likewise, Taniguchi and Magnussen<sup>16</sup> explored the meaning of the childbirth experience for Japanese mothers giving birth soon after they moved to Hawaii, USA. The study found that expatriate Japanese women recognized their own parents’ efforts in raising them and their love. Their childbirth experience helped them identify themselves as “irreplaceable” mothers for their new family and become more mature.

Even though the findings of these two studies are consistent, providing similar findings regarding early pregnancy and childbirth shortly after immigration, the characteristics of the study participants across both studies differ from the characteristics of international marriage migrant women in South Korea. Specifically, in the two studies<sup>15,16</sup>: (a) participants married a spouse from the same country of origin, and (b) immigration was a type of relocation of their own family. Given that international marriage migrant women in South Korea immigrated to marry Koreans and form a new family, they would necessarily encounter different difficulties. Thus, little is known about their experience of first childbirth while experiencing a new culture, a foreign language, and a new family during a relatively short immigration period.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Design

This qualitative retrospective study was guided by descriptive phenomenology. The descriptive phenomenology approach is considered to be the most suitable design to explore the first childbirth experience of international marriage migrant women. Descriptive phenomenology is intended to identify the essence of human experiences and is a way of reaching the true meaning of such experiences through penetrating deeper into reality.<sup>17</sup> The characteristics of descriptive phenomenology are an interest in understanding the meaning of the life-world, or the lived experience, especially focusing on the subjective consciousness to describe and clarify the essential structure of the lived world of conscious experience.<sup>18</sup> Similar methodology has been used in other studies of migrant women.<sup>15,16</sup>

### 3.2. Recruitment

The inclusion criteria for participants were that participants: (a) were foreign nulliparous women when they migrated to marry Korean men, (b) experienced first childbirth in Korea, (c) were able to communicate in Korean, (d) were able to provide signed

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