



A qualitative review of immigrant women's experiences of maternal adaptation in South Korea



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ABSTRACT

Objective: to synthesise the evidence of immigrant women's experiences of maternal adaptation in Korea.

Methods: eligible studies were identified by searching MEDLINE, CINAHL, and the Korean electronic databases. Qualitative research studies, published in English and Korean addressing maternal adaptation experiences of immigrant women by marriage in Korea, were considered in the review. The suitability of the quality of articles was evaluated using the Joanna Briggs Institute's Critical Appraisal Checklist. Fifteen studies met the inclusion criteria for data analysis. Authors, purpose of the study, study design, theoretical framework, population (nationality and sample size), data collection (setting and method), and main study findings were extracted and summarised in a data extraction form for further narrative analysis and synthesis. A qualitative systematic review was performed by means of thematic synthesis. **Findings:** the literature search identified 7,628 articles, of which 15 studies, published between 2009 and 2014, were evaluated in the systematic review. Two overarching categories including five themes were identified in the qualitative studies related to maternal adaptation experiences; 'Experiences of motherhood transition' and 'Experiences of child-rearing'.

Conclusions: these findings demonstrate the importance of understanding and improving maternal adaptation of immigrant women living in Korea. This can be achieved by enhancing social support, providing culturally sensitive maternal healthcare services, and expanding opportunities for immigrant women in education, job training, and economic independence.

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Introduction

Although international migration has a long history in Asia, the number of women immigrants moving to South Korea has risen dramatically over the last few decades. Until recently, Korea was one of the few remaining predominantly ethnically homogenous nations in the world. However, drastic changes in regional demographic trends and globalisation have resulted in a rise in women's migration to South Korea for marriage, markedly increasing ethno-cultural diversity in the nation in a relatively short period of time (Choi, 2010). According to recent statistics, 10% of all new marriages in Korea are international, which is a dramatic change when compared to data from 1990, when only 1.2% of new marriages were international. The majority of these new marriages (84%) are between Korean men and foreign women (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2014). These immigrant women are predominantly from developing countries in Asia, such as China, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and the majority of their husbands are men living in rural areas of Korea with low socio-economic status (Kim, 2008; Kim et al., 2013). This diverse population of immigrant women living in Korea has been called many different names in both the Korean and English language literature in an attempt to describe their very specific social status as immigrants to Korea for the purpose of marrying Korean men. These labels include marriage immigrant women, foreign brides, women marriage immigrants, female marriage immigrants, and women immigrants by marriage. As there is no widely accepted term in the literature for this population, we will use the term 'women immigrants by marriage' and 'immigrant women' to describe this diverse group of immigrants living in Korea, and the more commonly accepted term 'multicultural families' to describe their families.

As women immigrants by marriage increase in Korea, the number of children in multicultural families are also rapidly increasing. Today these multicultural families constitute a significant portion of the Korean population, which has the world's lowest childbirth rate of 1.1 (Statistics Korea, 2014). Considering this low rate of reproduction in the Korean population, childbearing and parenting within multicultural families is widely regarded as a critical issue in Korea at this time. However, this emerging population is relatively vulnerable to poor health outcomes, particularly in the areas of reproductive and mental health. The health-screening rate for these immigrant women is significantly lower than the general population of Korean women, and immigrant women face substantial barriers to accessing Medicare benefits (Ahn, 2008). Furthermore, the overall poor health outcomes for immigrant women are likely to be exacerbated by the physical and mental demands of pregnancy and childbirth (Higginbottom et al., 2012). There continues to be a need for culturally and linguistically appropriate information and resources regarding pregnancy, birth, and childcare for this population in Korea (Kim et al., 2008b).

Maternal adaptation, or the process of transition into motherhood, appears to be a particularly critical concept to consider for immigrant women in Korea. Maternal adaptation has been described as a challenging process in any new mother's life (Song and Park, 2010), however many immigrant women must simultaneously contend with the additional process of adapting to a new marriage and life in a foreign country. Of immigrant women, 83.7% experience their first pregnancy within one year of entry into Korea, with an average of 6.6 months (Kim et al., 2008a). The first pregnancy, birth, and the adaptation to the new role of mother in an unfamiliar cultural environment, far from their family of origin, can be very challenging for immigrant women. For this reason, understanding maternal adaptation in the context of immigration is critically important for the health and wellbeing of immigrant women and multicultural families in Korea.

As described above, many of these immigrant women, almost immediately and concurrently, come face to face with multiple turning-point experiences in their life, most notably the developmental adaptation of motherhood, as well as the situational adaptation of immigration (Meleis et al., 2000). In recent years, a variety of qualitative and quantitative studies on immigrant women's adaptation in Korea have been published. Now is the time to accumulate and analyze the various studies to summarise the knowledge of the phenomenon of interest and to suggest directions for future studies and interventions to help marriage immigrants. Efforts to promote understanding of the phenomenon through systematic analysis of the accumulated research related to immigrant women's experiences of maternal adaptation will be very important in designing appropriate clinical interventions for this critical time period in the lives of these women and their families. The objective of this review was to select maternity-related qualitative research with a focus on maternal adaptation of immigrant women by marriage in Korea and to systematically analyze the results. Through this review, we sought to understand the phenomenon related to immigrant women's experiences of maternal adaptation and potential maternal and accompanying familial issues during the process of maternal transition, as well as present suggestions for improving maternal adaptation of immigrant women in Korea.

Methods

Design

A qualitative systematic review methodology was used, as described by Ring et al. (2011). The systematic review was performed by means of a thematic synthesis, through which we were able to identify recurring themes, analyse those themes, and draw conclusions with the purpose of developing analytical themes through a descriptive synthesis and finding explanations relevant to our

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