

## Paths to Civic Engagement: Opportunity Structures and Marriage Immigrants' Associational Lives in South Korea\*

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*Immigrants' participation in voluntary associations has drawn much scholarly attention in recent years. However, how women marriage immigrants form their own associations and mobilize for their rights have been understudied. This study examines Filipina marriage immigrants' voluntary associational experiences in South Korea to fill this gap in the research. Drawing on ethnographic research including in-depth interviews and observations, this article identifies institutional and discursive resources that contribute to marriage immigrants' involvement in voluntary associations. Our findings are organized around three institutional settings—religious, governmental, and ethnicity-based—where marriage immigrants find possibilities and constraints that affect their associational activities. Within each institutional setting, marriage immigrants adapt discursive frames that represent social expectations and values associated with gender and ethnic identity.*

**Keywords:** *Immigrant voluntary association; Marriage immigrant; Political opportunity structure; South Korea*

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## Introduction

Immigrants' participation in voluntary associations has drawn much scholarly attention in recent years. Voluntary associations include a variety of organizations: social (e.g., hometown associations), economic (e.g., rotating credit associations or mutual aid societies), religious, and political groups (Moya 2005). Through voluntary associations, immigrants seek to socialize with fellow immigrants, look for economic opportunities, or advocate for their civil and political rights in the host society. According to Fraser (1990), voluntary associations of marginalized social groups can at least partially remedy participatory disparities caused by social inequalities along gender, class, race, and ethnic lines in dominant public spheres such as parliamentary politics.

Based mainly on the experiences of immigrants in North American and European countries, recent research has focused primarily on the role of voluntary associations in promoting immigrants' political incorporation, exploring how immigrants gain exposure to political socialization, build political trust, or carry out political mobilization through these associations (Fennema and Tillie 1999; Landolt and Goldring 2009; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). To examine the conditions under which voluntary associations develop and operate, some scholars have applied the concept of political opportunity structures (POS; Koopmans et al. 2005; Landolt and Goldring 2009); this concept concerns how collective actions are "mediated by the available opportunities and constraints set by the political environments in which mobilizing groups operate" (Koopmans 2004, p. 451).

However, the existing research, which generally draws from immigrants' experiences in co-ethnic community environments, has yet to take into account specific contexts of women marriage immigrants' organizing. Marriage immigrants are individuals who have moved to another country to marry a citizen of that country. When international marriages are interracial or inter-ethnic, which is generally the case in Korea and in East Asia more broadly, marriage immigrants are distinguished from general immigrants (e.g., economic or education immigrants) of the same ethnicity by the former group's familial ties to citizens and positions in families and communities alongside dominant group members. This means that marriage immigrants' social location is often removed from the co-ethnic setting, which, again, is taken for granted in most research on immigrant associations in North America and Europe. Seeing as most marriage immigrants in East Asia are

women, they also have to deal with or negotiate their subordinate position at home as women, in addition to being members of an ethnic minority.

Much research on marriage immigrants in East Asian countries has focused on their position as the recipients of public programs, rather than as agents or advocates for their own rights (Choo 2016; Kim 2013; Newendorp 2008). This may be because marriage immigration—or at least recognition of marriage immigrants as a population that necessitates governmental policies specific to them—is relatively new to many destination countries. Governmental and civic programs have primarily been designed to assist this population in terms of social and economic adaptation. Well-meaning native activists have attempted to aid marriage immigrants' associational activities in the name of empowerment, and a few scholars have acknowledged how marriage immigrants have formed their own associations and mobilized for their rights (Friedman 2015; Hsia 2009; Lim 2015; Roces 2003). However, to date, there has been no systematic analysis of how the host society's institutional and discursive environments shape such associational activities.

This study aims to extend the literature on immigrants' collective engagement in civil society by addressing three research questions: Through what paths do women marriage immigrants form voluntary associations? What kind of institutional and discursive resources in different institutional settings shape their involvement in voluntary associations? How does marriage immigrant women's integration as gendered and ethnicized members of the Korean family under the state's national project create certain opportunities and constraints for their associational activities? We build on Koopmans' (2004) conceptualization of two-faceted POS—institutional and discursive—to identify various resources that enable immigrants to realize their collective interests. Although scholars have mainly applied the POS framework to examine immigrant associations' political mobilization, studies have also demonstrated that the POS framework can be useful in explaining the prevailing conditions of immigrants' organizing of voluntary associations (Caponio 2005; Odmalm 2004), which are currently for civic participation but have the potential for political mobilization (Fennema and Tillie 1999; Predelli 2008).

To organize our discussion of institutional opportunity structures, we identify three distinct institutional settings—religious, governmental, and ethnicity-based. We then discuss how marriage immigrants adapt discursive frames that represent social expectations and values associated with gender and ethnic identity within each of these institutional settings.

## Institutional and Discursive Opportunity Structures

Membership in voluntary immigrant associations has been identified as an important facilitator of civic engagement because such membership prepares immigrants for volunteering and political participation (Fennema and Tillie 1999; Landolt and Goldring 2009; Mora 2013; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). For example, Mora (2013) detailed how Mexican immigrants' participation in small prayer groups within the Catholic Church provided them with forums to discuss social issues and to cultivate public-speaking skills and links to secular organizations, all of which were vital to their participation in immigrant rights rallies. Thus, much research on immigrants' civic participation has examined various factors that facilitate their participation in voluntary associations, and several recent studies have adopted the opportunity structure model to explain the development of immigrant associations (or the lack thereof), mainly in Europe (Caponio 2005; Koopmans et al. 2005; Odmalm 2004; Predelli 2008) and North America (Bloemraad 2006; Landolt and Goldring 2009). Although many of these studies have dealt primarily with institutional contexts, Koopmans (1999) has argued that the POS consists of both institutional and discursive dimensions of the opportunity structure.

Institutional opportunity structures are shaped by the structure of the political system including the host country's integration policies, legal provisions, governmental subsidies, and public services for immigrants. These conditions provide material (e.g., financial support), intellectual (e.g., organizational skills and bureaucratic knowledge), and symbolic (e.g., public recognition) resources that allow immigrants to become involved in voluntary associations (Bloemraad 2006; Caponio 2005; Moya 2005; Odmalm 2004; Predelli 2008). In addition to the governmental and non-governmental agencies of the host country, entities from immigrants' countries of origin (e.g., embassies and consulates) can also offer useful assistance and resources to support immigrants' activities as they seek to improve their situation in the host country (Anderson 2001; Itzigsohn 2003).

Benevolent natives' involvement with immigrants' associational activities can enhance the latter's essential knowledge of logistics and bureaucratic practices in the host country, as well as organizational skills, all of which are useful in immigrants developing their own voluntary associations. However, previous studies have shown that the presence of natives or native-led organizations can also lead to unintentional outcomes, especially for new

immigrant associations. For example, in her study on immigrant associations in Italy, Caponio (2005) found that when native-led organizations provided public support and services for immigrants, serving as intermediaries between the government and the immigrant communities, the relationship between the native-led organizations and the immigrant associations could become “strongly asymmetrical” and “paternalistic,” hindering the immigrant associations’ autonomous growth (Caponio 2005, p. 937).

The concept of discursive opportunity structures encompasses a variety of discursive resources, such as dominant beliefs about multiculturalism and diversity, the cultural norms of the citizens that support immigrants’ associational activities, immigrants’ political ideologies, and group-based interests and identities that are used to frame collective action (Bloemraad 2006). Discursive opportunity structures effectively allow the development of (certain) immigrant associations and influence the cognitive maps or moral schemas immigrants follow in shaping the directions of their voluntary associations (Bloemraad 2006; Predelli 2008).

Discursive resources, which circumscribe “established notions of who and what are considered reasonable, sensible, and legitimate” (Koopmans 2004, p. 451), can be grounded in cultural norms and values, such as gender ideology. Feminist scholars of political mobilization and civic engagement have contended that gender is a critical discursive resource in every important aspect of collective action, including the contextual environment, mobilizing structures, and the framing of claims (Stall and Stoecker 1998; Taylor 1999). A few studies on immigrant associational participation have also found that the gender discourse of immigrants’ country of origin influences how immigrant associations develop and operate in the host country, contributing to differential participation patterns depending on gender (Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2005; Goldring 2001; Jones-Correa 1998.) For example, studies on Latinx immigrants in the United States have shown that men often dominate leadership positions, whereas women mostly take on supportive roles (Goldring 2001; Jones-Correa 1998).

Drawing on these discussions on institutional and discursive opportunity structures associated with immigrants’ voluntary associations, this study examines the case of Filipina marriage immigrants in Korea to understand how institutional and discursive opportunity structures operate for marriage immigrants’ voluntary associational activities. To that end, we now turn to describing the Korean context that sets the foundation for these marriage immigrants’ associational lives.

## Marriage Immigrants' Voluntary Associations in Korea

In the context of rigid immigration and visa policies for low-skilled labor migrants in East Asia, marriage migration serves as an important option for female migrants to achieve stable residency status (Piper 2003). While the Korean government has permitted only temporary stays for migrant laborers, most of whom are men, it has promoted marriage immigration for women since the early 1990s. Local governments and agricultural associations arranged marriages between bachelor farmers and ethnic Koreans from China to resolve a “bride famine” in the rural parts of Korea (Lee 2008). The Unification Church (UC), which has matched Japanese women with Korean men since the 1960s, has contributed to a relatively modest but steady number of Filipina marriage immigrants coming to Korea since the 1990s (M. Kim 2012). Marriage migration has also expanded from rural to urban areas as commercial international marriage agencies have proliferated (Seol, Lee, and Cho 2006). By the first decade of the 21st century, with the further expansion of mediated marriage businesses, the population of marriage immigrants in Korea had diversified to include women from Vietnam, Mongolia, and Russia. As of 2018, more than 231,000 women marriage immigrants resided in Korea. Women from Vietnam make up the largest share (33%), followed by non-Korean women from China (20%), ethnic Korean women from China (19%), and women from the Philippines (9%) (MOGEF 2019).

Marriage immigrants have taken various paths to participation in voluntary associational activities. Initially, in the 1990s, existing native-led groups that were organized to secure labor migrants' rights provided services for marriage immigrants. Some key formal and informal organizations operated under the auspices of Korean Catholic and Protestant churches. These organizations, along with other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), provided counseling and referral services for migrant workers and their families, and their services were gradually extended to marriage immigrants (Lim 2003). Filipino/a immigrants formed co-ethnic communities around Catholic churches, which became the centers of daily and social life for both migrant workers and marriage immigrants from the Philippines in urban areas (Choo 2016). In addition to gathering at Catholic churches, Filipina marriage immigrants also gathered around local UCs (M. Kim 2012). Over time, marriage immigrants began to form their own voluntary associations for socializing and networking. Filipina–Korean

couples formed local groups, colloquially called “han-phil” associations (“han” is short for *hanguk*, or Korea, and “phil” stands for the Philippines), to socialize at regular meetings (Lee et al. 2009; Lim 2010). Filipina marriage immigrants also formed informal self-help groups to socialize, provide support, and share information.

The Korean government began to implement policies to support the integration of female marriage immigrants, culminating in the 2008 Multicultural Family Support Act. Although “multicultural families” include those with foreign-born family members tied to Koreans regardless of the gender of the foreign-born spouse, the main target of Korea’s multicultural family policy has been families with foreign-born wives and Korean husbands. To carry out the act’s mission, Multicultural Family Support Centers (MFSCs) were established in local districts and counties. MFSCs provide a variety of support and programs for multicultural families. These efforts are usually meant to assist marriage immigrants with social adaptation (language and cultural education), childbearing or childcare, and their children’s education. To balance these programs, which have been accused of “domesticating” immigrant wives, MFSCs also began offering job-related educational and informative programs and liaising with job-related regional institutions for marriage immigrants. Further, as a way to facilitate marriage immigrants’ integration, local MFSCs have promoted and supported the formation of marriage immigrant self-help groups, connecting newcomers with marriage immigrants who have lived in Korea for a longer period of time. MFSCs have also served as a conduit for marriage immigrants to reach other organizations and voluntary associations in their communities.

In this article, we seek to further the understanding of marriage immigrants’ voluntary associational activities in Korea. To that end, we closely examine how various institutional settings—religious organizations; the Korean government, as represented by MFSCs; and the ethnic-based Philippine Embassy—both facilitate and circumscribe Filipina marriage immigrants’ associational activities. As we consider how each institutional tie shapes opportunities and constraints for marriage immigrant groups, we pay attention to discursive opportunity structures by showing how family-oriented gender ideologies, norms, and social expectations surrounding foreign-born brides influence Filipina marriage immigrants’ associational activities in South Korea, and how critical framing in the embassy-affiliated setting introduces an alternative ideation.

## Method

The data for this article were drawn from a larger ethnographic field research project on the political integration of Filipina marriage immigrants in both urban and rural areas of Korea. The urban research site consisted of the national capital of Seoul and six nearby satellite cities, as well as two cities in southern provinces, and the rural site comprised three counties in the southern part of Korea, including a county we refer to as Yongju County in this article. The first author conducted field research over a seven-month period in 2014, and several follow-up visits and additional interviews were conducted from September 2017 to September 2019. For the larger study, 92 in-depth interviews were conducted with Filipina marriage immigrants, focusing on their perceptions and experiences related to political membership, concerning, for example, naturalization, voting, and political representation.

We chose to focus on Filipinas for two reasons. First, when we consider contemporary marriage migration to Korea since the 1990s, Filipinas are one of the earlier groups of marriage immigrants; thus, Filipinas have a longer history than other marriage immigrant groups in Korea, such as Vietnamese women, who greatly outnumber Filipinas. This history allowed us to trace the formation and development of voluntary associations over a longer term. Second, previous studies have indicated that the Philippine government has been active in overseeing the welfare of its citizens who live and work abroad (Anderson 2001; Rodriguez 2002). This governmental approach provides a unique context in which Filipina marriage immigrants organize themselves, and we thought this was important to examine.

This article is based on the accounts and experiences of 33 Filipina founders and leaders of Filipina/o voluntary associations. These participants provided insight into women's voluntary associational lives and the dynamics of the opportunity structures within them. Some of these interviewees were recruited at various public forums and events related to marriage immigrants, where they attended in their capacity as leaders of their associations. Snowball sampling was then used to reach additional interviewees. The interview guide covered the women's migration process and associational life, including how existing institutions such as the Korean family, local community organizations, and religious institutions, as well as the Embassy of the Philippines, influenced their associational experiences. The interviews with these Filipinas lasted from one to five hours; for some respondents,

several follow-up interviews were conducted, when necessary. Additional open-ended interviews with 39 local and central government officials and staff members of immigrant-related organizations, including MFSCs, NGOs, and the Embassy of the Philippines, were included to supplement the women's accounts. The average age of the Filipina leaders was 42 years, and they had lived in Korea for an average of 14 years. College-educated women were overrepresented among our study participants (73%) compared with the national average (57.3%; KIHSA 2010), likely because we focused on the accounts of the leaders of voluntary associations, who tend to be highly educated (Verba, Scholozman, and Brady 1995).

The interview participants provided information about various formal and informal gatherings, which allowed the first author to gain access to sites where she could observe Filipina marriage immigrants' voluntary associational activities and interactions with their husbands and with other community/government organizations. For example, she participated in various formal events such as the anniversary of the founding of these associations, helping with staging and food preparation, as well as attending informal preparatory meetings and gatherings. Analyzing the data collected from the in-depth interviews and field observations, we explored various factors that guided Filipina marriage immigrants' associational activities. We identified the emerging themes of institutional and discursive contexts, resources, and opportunities that marriage immigrants tap into. These findings fill a gap in the current literature on immigrants' associational activities.

## Findings

The majority of the voluntary associations we examined (14 of 15) identified their primary purposes as providing mutual support, promoting members' social integration, and celebrating Filipino culture. Generally, the marriage immigrant associations started as informal gatherings and self-help groups; as membership grew and their external activities expanded to include performing at local multicultural events and/or organizing presentations at schools, they sought to formalize their groups by selecting representatives and assigning different roles to their leadership bodies. Formalization also became essential because it allowed these associations to apply for financial support from larger non-profit organizations. As nascent associations with a relatively short history in Korea and little social capital, most Filipina marriage

immigrant associations started without sufficient knowledge or connections to receive operational funding, which meant that they had to rely on Korean-led groups, such as non-governmental, civic, or religious organizations working for migrants' rights.

Being affiliated with organizations that had established ties or networks provided institutional opportunities, allowing Filipina voluntary associations to gain access to various material and intellectual resources. The introduction of potential external funding sources and assistance with application procedures were valuable for the Filipina associations, which would have otherwise been unable to secure funding for their associational activities. However, as shown in previous studies (Caponio 2005; N. Kim 2012; Lim 2010), being affiliated with native organizations came at a cost in terms of the lingering hierarchical and paternalistic relationship between Koreans and immigrants in this situation.

Despite this general path, the examined Filipina associations exhibited varied practices and orientations, depending on their institutional ties and discursive influences. In the following sections, we discuss marriage immigrant associations affiliated with the UC, MFSCs, and the Embassy of the Philippines.

### *The Religious Institutional Setting: UC-Affiliated Associations*

Given that the Philippines is a Catholic country, members of the Catholic Church both from the Philippines and in Korea have been involved in aiding and advocating for Filipino migrant workers and marriage immigrants. Filipina marriage immigrants' experiences are distinguished from those of their fellow co-ethnic immigrants by their relationships with Korean family members and by their membership in the Korean state, which is deemed favorable compared with the situation of labor migrants. Additionally, unlike other Filipino/a immigrants, Filipina marriage immigrants engage in associational experiences under the auspices of the UC. The UC has matched Filipinas with Koreans since the 1990s, serving as a main pathway to marriage migration.<sup>1</sup> After Filipinas arrive in Korea, local UCs assist with

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<sup>1</sup> The Unification Church, formally known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, is a new religious movement based on Christian theology but with different interpretations. Transnational marriage is an integral part of the Unification Church, which "sought to achieve world unity through marital unions among racially and culturally different people divided by borders and historical conflicts" (Kim 2018, p. 38). As the Unification Church views the formation of the heterosexual family as essential, it is closely involved in matchmaking between

their initial settlement. Before local governments or the Catholic Church became involved with marriage immigrants, the UC was the only place where Filipinas could meet fellow Filipinas in rural provinces while learning the basics of Korean language and culture.

As their numbers grew, Filipina UC members formed a voluntary association called the Philippine Women's Association in Korea (established in 2001), which was renamed the Philippine Blessed Missionaries in Korea (PBMK) in 2011. As of 2018, PBMK had approximately 2,000 members nationwide, making it one of the largest Filipina marriage immigrant associations in Korea. The national leadership of PBMK is based in the Seoul metropolitan area, and they elect regional coordinators who run local branches across the country. Incubated in the UC, PBMK has been provided with access to the resources and support necessary for organizing a range of events, from informal local-level gatherings to larger-scale regional- and national-level programs and events.

The birth of PBMK was the result of an effort by Filipina UC members who were dealing with a unique issue related to marriage immigrants regarding marital instability among Filipina-Korean couples. Louise, the 46-year-old founder of the national-level PBMK, recalled the early days of her time in Korea when she frequently received calls from Filipinas who were contemplating leaving or had left their marriages because of familial conflicts. As the high divorce rate among international marriages was receiving a great deal of attention from the Korean public, Louise and other active Filipina UC members mobilized Filipinas from around the country to help families like theirs stay together. PBMK's efforts stemmed from their motive of managing public perceptions of Filipinas' departure from marriage, as well as the reality of this situation. Both Faier (2009) and Kim (2018) have contended that Filipinas' departure from marriage, or "running away," had negative ramifications for local Filipina communities, who bear the brunt of the aftermath—suspicious gazes, gossip, and negative perceptions of the group. Thus, PBMK organized associational activities to assuage Filipinas' group image anxiety as an ethnic minority and to help internationally married couples and their families to overcome their differences.

Louise and PBMK carried out their mission by reminding her fellow Filipinas of "the basics," which concerned the UC's core tenet regarding the creation and preservation of an ideal family (Kim 2018). Louise explained

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church members, conducting wedding ceremonies, and managing family relations (M. Kim 2012, 2018).

that PBMK's initial purpose was to educate those who received the "holy blessing" (referring to UC marriage) without a "deep understanding" of the purpose and meaning of their marriage:

Our goal was to continuously educate them so that they could maintain a life of faith and their family life. We also feared that they might separate [from their husbands] because of difficulty in language and culture, so we tried to keep them educated. During those years, we went on lecture tours almost every year, giving them [lectures on] the Divine Principle [the UC's main theological text] chapters one through sixteen because some of them had only read three or four important parts.

Louise's comments reveal PBMK's discursive opportunity structure, which was grounded in the UC's religious doctrines. Addressing general issues experienced by internationally married couples, the association incorporated their religion into their solutions, which paved the way for Filipinas' associational participation in PBMK by invoking UC-based interests and identities. It is notable that, as mentioned above, the group's name was changed from a secular designation to a religiously specific one.

Much of UC doctrine is congruous with family-oriented values and heteronormativity, which positively resonate with Korean family members. Most Koreans perceive the UC as a cult organization, so Korean husbands and in-laws expressed reservations about church activities despite having turned to the UC as a last resort to find wives. Often put off by the UC's demands for "donations" in exchange for matching and church membership, Korean husbands were suspicious of the UC. However, they often tolerated their wives' participation in the UC and PBMK because they understood that the UC's religious principles and "ideal family" values upheld patriarchal values and were meant to keep their families intact. This alignment constitutes PBMK's discursive opportunity structure, which gave legitimacy to Filipinas' voluntary associational lives in the eyes of their Korean husbands and family members, as well as other UC members.

The UC also served as an institutional opportunity structure for PBMK, providing material and intellectual resources and support. For example, using UC venues, speakers, and funding, PBMK organized religiously oriented UC seminars and programs to promote a "healthy family." More importantly, PBMK leadership utilized their organizational knowledge and experience to expand the scope of their associational activities, including non-religious associational activities that could meet the unique needs of Filipina marriage

immigrants. These activities included cultural events (e.g., singing and dancing competitions for Filipinas), educational programs (e.g., English speech contests for children), and counseling and education services to address family issues. In conjunction with this expansion within the UC, PBMK's mature membership base and ample associational experience resulted in spin-off secular associations for Filipinas. This organization's experience shows that immigrant actors who begin with specifically defined opportunity structures can find ways to broaden their activities and influence when they are equipped with the necessary know-how.

*The Governmental Institutional Setting: MFSC-Affiliated Associations*

As the core unit tasked with carrying out the Korean state's Multicultural Family Support Act to help integrate marriage immigrants, local MFSCs are the main governmental institution providing and supporting public programs related to marriage immigrants. As part of their basic services, MFSCs have promoted the formation and maintenance of marriage immigrants' self-help groups. Additionally, to encourage marriage immigrants' involvement in MFSCs' operation, MFSCs have hired marriage immigrants as translation and interpretation staff members.<sup>2</sup> Many of these appointments have been filled with those in leadership positions in self-help groups, and the involvement of these marriage immigrants has further established the relationship between MFSCs and such groups. Given the visibility and symbolic status of local MFSCs as a governmental institution for marriage immigrants, Filipinas' presence in and close connections to MFSCs has given significant meaning to Filipinas and their associations. This context makes MFSCs an important institutional setting to examine with regard to Filipina marriage immigrants' associational lives.

To appreciate how MFSCs present an institutional opportunity structure that is instrumental to Filipinas' voluntary associations, it is necessary to understand the common conditions in which civic groups establish voluntary associations in Korea. Official registration as a civic organization at a Korean government office has some basic requirements, including a list of more than 100 members and a valid physical address and phone number for the organization office, which come with standing expenses for rent and utilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Providing translation support for marriage immigrants is a specialized service offered by MFSCs since 2009. Currently, 282 staff members work at 199 MFSCs nationwide.

<http://www.kihf.or.kr/lay1/S1T250C251/contents.do> Accessed March 29, 2020.

Moreover, although local governments have set up ordinances to provide financial and administrative support specifically to independent “multicultural family” self-help groups, actually acquiring the benefits from these provisions is not easy. Local governments often required the studied groups to submit elaborate program plans and records of their past activities and to include “native Koreans” as members. These requirements became critical institutional barriers for most Filipina associations that were in an emergent, semi-formal stage, lacking sufficient funding for office space, full-time staff, or formalized by-laws translated into Korean. Therefore, registering their groups under MFSCs became an alternative way for Filipina associations to develop. This type of registration does not involve formal procedures and the accompanying requirements, but it grants access to a variety of institutional resources for Filipinas’ associational activities, such as venues for their regular meetings and programs or financial support for their operations.

The Yongju Han-Phil Association is a case in point. When the Yongju Han-Phil Association was established in 2011 as a secular voluntary association with 50 Filipina members, they considered registering at the county office. However, Analyn, the 40-year-old president of the association, had to come to terms with the fact that the group did not have the capacity to run independently without full-time staff. Analyn, who had a full-time job and family members to care for, feared that “if there was only me who took responsibility, I would need to be responsible until the end.”

Like Analyn, most of the Filipina participants had multiple responsibilities—paid jobs outside the home, care work for elderly in-laws, the demands of children’s schoolwork, and support for their family members in the Philippines. Those engaged in farming in rural areas had little discretion over their work (or leisure) schedules and were often bound to farm work. These varied demands limited individual women’s participatory capacity. This observation brings up two specific barriers to women marriage immigrants: one, the heteronormative gendered division of labor and normative gender expectations at home restricted marriage immigrants’ time for associational activities; and the other, their families’ low socioeconomic status compelled them to prioritize productive labor over involvement in organizational efforts, which would demand prolonged attention and commitment rather than merely attending events once in a while.

Filipina associations registered under MFSCs could access local governmental funding opportunities through MFSCs, which applied for such opportunities on their behalf. The Filipina associations could also run their own booths and perform at various local events and festivals; these

opportunities were often channeled through the involvement of MFSCs in Community Welfare Associations (*jiyeok sahoebokji hyeobuiche*), consultative panels of community welfare organizations and experts organized by the local government. In this capacity, however, MFSCs also became gatekeepers that shape the content of the Filipina associations' activities.

For example, the Yongju Han-Phil Association once carried out its biggest annual event with minimal expenses and time spent on the part of its leaders but with a different program than was originally planned. For the 2014 Filipino Day event, the association originally planned to have a speaker lecture on personal self-development, targeting young marriage immigrants. The association's leaders wanted to focus on the psychological well-being of newcomers, whom they observed often became depressed because of the sudden changes in their lives. The lecture was meant to help them learn coping strategies to improve their mental and emotional health. Irrespective of the Filipinas' plans, however, the MFSC connected the association with the Healthy Family Support Center,<sup>3</sup> a government organization that supports families, who provided an art instructor to run a program where Filipinas and their Korean family members created a collage using newspapers and magazines and talked about their dreams and goals for their families. This shows that the association had access to institutional resources offered by the MFSC in principle but that they could not always obtain the kind of resources they needed to realize their own plans. Instead, in this case, they had to compromise their original intentions, modifying the program to be family focused. Consequently, the Filipina members of the association felt that they were relegated to the role of participants rather than organizers.

The seemingly hierarchical relationship between MFSCs and the Filipina associations does not mean that Filipinas blindly followed MFSCs' directives. It is important to recognize that Filipina association members strategically utilized MFSCs' institutional opportunity structure for their associational activities, and they also used the discursive opportunity structure to their advantage. Some Korean family members expressed concerns about marriage immigrants' associational activities because these activities could lead to the immigrant wives being discontented with their Korean family or encourage them to pursue extramarital interests with co-ethnics. However, the Korean family members felt comfortable with Filipina associational activities carried

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<sup>3</sup> The MFSC in Yongju County shared the office space with the Healthy Family Support Center at the time of the fieldwork, and both centers were later integrated to form the Yongju Healthy Family · Multicultural Family Support Center.

out through MFSCs because of MFSCs' family-centered main objective. In other words, MFSCs' family-oriented discursive opportunity structure allowed Filipinas to not only engage in family-oriented programs and activities, but also to capitalize on Korean family members' trust in and familiarity with MFSCs.

When Filipinas saw the potential for the family-oriented discursive opportunity structure to be compromised, adversely affecting their associational participation, they took action. For example, when the MFSC director of Yongju County proposed including undocumented Filipino/a migrant workers in the center's Korean language class, Yongju Han-Phil Association leaders strongly expressed their opposition. Belle, an active member of the association, explained as follows:

Look, you know we have frequent gatherings, right? There are a lot of rumors now. Two girls, those newcomers with babies, are said to be having affairs. ... That's why it's dangerous. If we accept them [migrant workers in the same class], we will have to tell [the members], "Girls, don't hang out with the guys." And the husbands would also say, "Return home by this time; don't spend time outside the home" because they know they [Filipinas and male migrant workers] would meet every day in class. The presence of male migrant workers would make them anxious.

Belle feared that heterosocial, co-ethnic settings at the MFSC would lead to Korean husbands' increased surveillance over women's activities outside the home and to unpleasant rumors about Filipina gatherings. This approach aimed to protect the association from a situation that could damage the image of the group. However, this delineation of Filipina associations using the family-oriented discursive opportunity structure does not mean that the Filipinas were not interested in pan-Filipino organizing. Rather, they seemed to look for these kinds of opportunities outside MFSCs, such as through their affiliation with the Philippine Embassy.

#### *The Ethnicity-Based Institutional Setting: The Philippine Embassy*

Most associations in this study (10 of 15)—all except the smaller self-help groups—were registered with the Philippine Embassy, which demonstrates the strength of the connection between the Filipina associations and the embassy. In contrast to the Filipina associations that were affiliated with the UC or MFSCs, voluntary associations registered under the embassy tended to

have pan-Filipino membership that was not limited to marriage immigrants, as well as practical goals, such as professional development. In lieu of direct financial support, the embassy provided material and intellectual institutional resources, such as venues and network ties with local government offices and with other Filipino/a associations. More importantly, the embassy offered Filipino/a associations alternative symbolic resources to legitimize their existence and activities. Some associations' ties with the embassy provided them with official authority and leverage to organize activities promoting ethnic pride or empowering women to challenge their position within the family and society.

The Philippine Embassy began to pay attention to Filipina marriage immigrants around the turn of the century, when the number of marriage immigrants started to increase rapidly. The embassy decided to actively support marriage immigrants' voluntary associations because they believed that these associations could function as a bridge between the embassy and Filipina marriage immigrants. This meant that the embassy emerged as an important institutional opportunity structure for Filipinas' voluntary associations, which is in line with the findings of previous studies demonstrating the active involvement of the Philippine government in migrant Filipino communities overseas through its consular institutions (Anderson 2001; Rodriguez 2002).

In addition to assisting organizations that already existed, the embassy has promoted the formation of Filipinas' voluntary associations by encouraging these women to organize. When asked how her organization started, the founder of the City Filipino Parent Organization (CFPO), which aims to pass Filipino culture on to children, responded, "Actually, the idea [to start this organization] was not only my idea but the embassy [consul] asked me, 'Why don't you build your own group? You're already doing the regular [group meetings].'"

The embassy provided Filipina associations with the skills needed to form associations and with intellectual resources by connecting them with skilled advisors who could contribute to major association programs and activities beyond informal socializing. The consul who advised the founder of CFPO to organize the association explained,

I think one of our roles is to empower [marriage immigrants], have them get organized in their areas because, unlike the workers, the women are more fixed in their residence. ... they stay there, and eventually they become citizens. And they have more rights and capacity to help [other Filipinos] in

the future once they establish themselves.

The consul's account reveals that marriage immigrants' relatively permanent immigrant status through marriage and naturalization led the embassy to prioritize them over temporary migrant workers in their organizing and empowering efforts to keep track of and deal with issues involving Filipino/as in Korea.

As a discursive opportunity structure, the embassy's symbolic authority and recognition enabled the Filipina associations to promote their existence and activities vis-à-vis the Korean local and central government. Jovelyn, a leader of a pan-Filipino/a association in her city, made a daring move when inviting the city mayor and the Philippine ambassador to the opening ceremony of the Philippine language festival that her association organized with a Filipino/a student group. She told both parties that the other was highly likely to attend the event, although this was actually uncertain at that time; by taking this approach, Jovelyn successfully convinced the mayor to attend and caught his attention:

The mayor saw all the pictures of our activities since 2007 [at the event]. That's how the mayor got to know about our organization. Our organization is small and not yet registered [at City Hall]. But I knew the mayor would attend the event if he knew the ambassador would also be present. Even the local newspaper was there [to cover the event].

As her association was "small and not officially registered," she said it would have been impossible to get the mayor to attend the event without the embassy's involvement. The embassy's presence at the event gave symbolic weight to her association, and Jovelyn took advantage of this to attract the attention of City Hall. Furthermore, Jovelyn hoped that the mayor's acquaintance with her association would ease the difficult process of registration at City Hall, which she thought would be essential for easier access to venues for the group's future activities.

Whereas the discursive opportunity structure that Filipina associations could tap into through the UC and MFSCs was more aligned with family-oriented societal expectations of assimilating marriage immigrants into the Korean family and culture, the embassy provided alternative discursive resources with the aim of challenging such norms and encouraging associational activities celebrating Filipino culture and language. For example, in collaboration with CFPO, the embassy co-hosted a four-week Filipino language

education program for the children of Filipina–Korean couples in the summer of 2014. In announcing the launch of the program in front of the invited leaders of Filipina associations at the embassy’s Multicultural Forum, a consul specializing in education explained the program as follows:

[With this program] we’re going to show the Korean government that it’s possible that multiculturalism is not simply a one-way street. ... Korea itself can be a truly multicultural society by accepting and even adopting different cultures and different languages.

MFSCs also began to organize similar programs designed to encourage educating children about their mother’s country of origin, but they were often packaged under the discourse of “developing global talent.” The consul’s remark does not just echo CFPO’s mission of the transmission of the “Filipino language”; it also expresses disapproval of the Korean government’s approach to multiculturalism.

The embassy’s opportunity structure was especially compelling for Filipina associations attempting to make claims to marriage immigrants’ rights against the Korean government, and the embassy’s institutional and discursive resources could lead to fruitful results with regard to governmental policy. When Freya served as the vice president of a Filipino migrant workers’ group through her neighborhood’s Catholic church, she used to receive calls from Filipina marriage immigrants who were experiencing domestic violence. Because the right to residency was tied to women’s marital status, marriage immigrants were afraid of addressing domestic violence problems, viewing their residency status as being at stake. To secure the residency rights of marriage immigrants whose marriages dissolved because of domestic violence, Freya mobilized Filipina marriage immigrants and founded the Philippine–Korean Couples’ Organization in 2001. The Incheon-based association grew to have eight regional chapters. Freya knew that helping individual “runaway” cases was not enough and that the association needed to address the issue at policy level:

I said to the officers of my group that we should file an application to the Ministry of Justice in Korea. But since we’re a small association, we don’t have a voice. So, what we should do is give this petition to the Philippines Embassy, the ambassador, so that the Korean government will hear because this is from the embassy representing the Philippine government.

In 2004, the Philippine–Korean Couples’ Organization submitted a petition to the embassy signed by 116 members challenging the Korean Nationality Law, which unconditionally denied the residency rights of marriage immigrants whose marriages dissolved. The petition was sent to the Ministry of Justice by the Philippine ambassador to Korea at the time. Freya believed that the petition was at least partially responsible for the Law’s reform later in 2004, which allowed marriage immigrants to stay in Korea and pursue Korean citizenship when divorce occurred through no fault of the marriage immigrant.

The embassy’s institutional and discursive resources and support could be invaluable for fledgling or less influential Filipina associations. Above all, through their connection to the embassy, Filipina associations could elevate their symbolic status vis-à-vis Korean governmental figures and institutions and wield larger influence at local and national levels.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of Filipina marriage immigrants’ associational lives in Korea showed how institutional and discursive opportunity structures bring about a unique context for these women’s civic engagement. We demonstrated that Filipina marriage immigrants navigate each institutional setting—the UC (religious), the MFSC (governmental), and the Philippine Embassy (ethnicity-based)—and strategically utilize discursive resources to maximize what each institutional setting can offer.

Our focus on marriage immigrants’ voluntary organizing makes a number of contributions to existing discussions on POS. First, our analysis of marriage immigrants’ structured agency (Bloemraad 2006) shows that the POS framework, which has mostly been applied to established movement organizations of natives and immigrants, is also useful in analyzing nascent immigrant associations in new destination countries. We found that Filipina associations’ institutional affiliations and discursive alignment with established institutions provided them with access to material resources and intellectual support, but also determined the scope of their organizational activities. However, some Filipinas managed to expand their associational activities to go beyond the boundaries of institutional affiliations. Additionally, affiliations with the embassy facilitated Filipina associations’ interactions with local representatives and policy-related responses, indicating that the sending country’s policy toward its citizens overseas

significantly influences the civic associational lives of migrants in the host country through consular institutions.

Second, our findings highlight nuanced understandings of the discursive opportunity structure. Our attention to marriage immigrants reveals how gender ideologies are embedded in certain discursive opportunities. This does not mean that marriage immigrant associations merely co-opt the patriarchal values and heteronormative norms embedded in family-oriented religious and governmental discourses. Rather, the Filipinas in our study selectively and strategically adopted existing discursive resources available in each institutional context to maximize their collective interests, which predominantly involved fending off Koreans' negative perceptions of them based on their ethnicity and immigrant status.

Finally, our investigation into three institutional settings, especially the associations' affiliation with the Philippine Embassy, allowed us to appreciate marriage immigrants' divergent approaches to their associational lives. While gaining access to institutional resources by prioritizing religious doctrines and alleviating Korean family members' potential objections through the governmental agency's standing, they simultaneously sought alternative discourses that promoted Filipino ethnic identity and challenged the assimilationist directions of mainstream Korean multiculturalism, with the support of the Philippine Embassy. These diverse aspects of Filipinas' associational lives extend the existing literature on marriage immigrants and immigrant voluntary associations in meaningful ways regarding women's agency, ethnic identification, and discursive resistance.

Although our findings show rather limited opportunities for Filipinas' civic engagement, we believe that voluntary associations have the potential to function as a springboard for more vibrant civic and political engagement. For example, when the mayor of Iksan publicly made derogatory comments about children with binational backgrounds in 2019, marriage immigrant women's associations, along with Korean-led migrant organizations, were at the forefront in a press conference and subsequent petition to the National Human Rights Commission (*The Hankyoreh* June 28, 2019). Further, although our study focused on Filipina marriage immigrants, our findings may inform the possible contours and parameters of marriage immigrant organizing for different ethnic groups in Korea and in other East Asian countries. For example, the central role of UC and consular institutions in Filipinas' organizing may not be replicable for the organizing of Vietnamese or Chinese marriage immigrants because of these groups' different religious backgrounds and sending country practices. Also, the localized and general

integration approach in Japan, which does not specifically target marriage immigrants (Chung 2010; Kashiwazaki 2013), may produce different patterns of voluntary organizing among marriage immigrants, without the central government's targeted approach through MFSCs seen in the Korean case. Similarly, the experience and established network that enabled national-level demonstrations by alliances of NGOs and marriage immigrants in Taiwan (Hsia 2009) can be expected to produce a varied institutional and discursive environment in terms of women's voluntary associational lives. Thus, future research including systematic comparisons of women marriage immigrants' organizing in different East Asian countries will further our understanding of immigrants' civic participation.

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