



Marriage broker Cho Sou-yong looks at his website in his office in Uijeongbu, South Korea, in February. | AFP-JIJI

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South Korea government steps in to regulate mixed marriages

AFP-JIJI

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SEOUL – South Korea imposed new restrictions on mixed marriages this month, but critics say the authorities will do better focusing on supporting foreign spouses who struggle to assimilate in one of Asia’s most ethnically homogenous societies.

An influx of foreign brides — overwhelmingly from other Asian countries — began in earnest in 2000 and peaked in 2005 when more than 30,000 were given resident-through-marriage visas.

The trend was triggered by the large numbers of young, rural women leaving to find work and a new life in Seoul and other South Korean cities, leaving behind male-dominated communities with not enough potential wives to go around.

Since 2000, 236,000 foreign women have settled in South Korea through marriage, giving birth to about 190,000 children, according to data compiled by state-run Statistics Korea.

More than 80 percent came from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand and Mongolia — essentially “mail-ordered” through matchmaking brokers, albeit with a few days of mandatory “dating” in the woman’s country.

At first, South Korea did nothing to restrict the role of the marriage brokers, believing they were fulfilling a useful service in helping to improve a radically declining birthrate and labor force in the countryside. By 2010, however, there were increasing reports of young foreign wives being beaten and in some cases even murdered, including a 20-year-old Vietnamese stabbed to death by her mentally disturbed husband just a week after she arrived.

The same year, a law was introduced providing two-year prison terms for any broker shown to have provided false information about potential spouses, or introduced more than two women to one man at the same time. The legislation had an immediate impact, with the number of brokering agents plunging from 1,697 in 2011 to 512 at the end of 2013.

The latest regulations, effective April 1, require those applying for a resident-through-marriage visa to pass a language proficiency test, and for Korean partners to show an annual income in excess of 14.8 million won (\$14,000). Officials say this tackles the two main causes of marital strife among mixed-marriage couples — inability to communicate and low income.

“Strong state intervention is inevitable to stop ineligible people from buying foreign brides,” a Justice Ministry official said. “This is a diplomatic issue related to our national image.”

But marriage brokers argue that the new rules will only serve to raise the costs of finding a foreign bride by reducing the pool of potential matches.

“The new law doesn’t reflect reality,” said Cho Sou-yong, a broker in Uijeongbu, north of Seoul.

Most Asian brides come from poor rural families and Cho said the language requirement will require them to move to a city to take classes for several months — at their new husband’s expense.

“The new regulations also require an additional load of notarized documentation, which will also cost the Korean partner,” he added.

The challenges facing a foreign bride in South Korea go beyond practical issues of language and income and include a lingering societal antipathy to mixed-race marriages.

A recent survey by the private Asan Institute for Policy Studies found that 32 percent of Koreans saw mixed-race families as a threat to social cohesion.

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