

# **Republic of Korean government's integration policy for international spouses**

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Excellencies, honorable guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to be invited to this workshop to discuss Korean government's integration policy for migrant women, in particular, international spouses. Today I would like to share with you the experience of the Korean government transforming itself from being a country of origin not too long ago into mainly a country of destination and the government's recent policy changes to better accommodate the increasing number of migrants in the Korean society. I hope this will give some food for thought for those countries that are going through similar changes, or are expecting such migratory changes.

## **1. Current status of International Marriage**

Korea is well known for its homogeneous population and culture, but it has started to change of late rather rapidly. According to the statistics, almost one hundred and thirty thousands (130,000) foreign women have married to Korean men between 1990 and 2004. In 2004, out of some three hundred and ten thousands (310,000) marriages that are registered, over eleven (11) percent was with foreign spouses. This trend is even more prominent in rural areas where one out of four marriages were with international spouses last year.

International spouses in Korea come from neighboring countries such as People's Republic of China, Vietnam and the Philippines, but also increasingly from Mongolia, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries.

As more and more new members with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds are settling down in the country, Korea is rapidly transforming itself from a homogeneous to multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society. For example, in elementary schools in rural areas

or cities with a sizable migrant population, it is not uncommon to have several migrant children studying along with their Korean friends. This phenomenon is expected to increase in the future, with the graying of the population and increasing demand for migrants in the Korean society.

Faced with such a unprecedented and rapid change that obviously will have a profound impact on the country, related government agencies including not only my ministry, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, but also the Presidential Committee on Social Inclusion, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health and Welfare, and so on, have been engaged in a series of research projects, inter-ministerial meetings over the couple of years. This has culminated into the Inter-ministerial Meeting to Integrate International Spouses held last April with the active participation of the President of Korea, Mr. Roh Moo-hyon. During the meeting, the Korean government has set up a wide range of policy measures to promote the integration of international spouses into the Korean society.

## **2. Problems faced by international spouses**

Before going into the details of Korean government's integration policy, let me describe some of the problems that international spouses in Korea face.

First, from the start they suffer from unscrupulous practices by some of the international marriage brokers who organise so-called marriage tours for Korean prospective grooms. Some of the brokers take advantage of the fact that both potential grooms and brides have limited, if at all, understanding of each other's language, culture and legislation concerning international marriage. Since marriage brokerage is legal in Korea, Korean grooms are lured into the possibility of getting married with international spouses without realizing that some of the sending countries have strict legislation against marriage brokerage.

Consultation with some victims of international marriage brokerage also revealed that brokers are putting the ladies in vulnerable condition, depriving their basic freedom, and even at times force them into marriage without giving proper information on their spouses. Some of the brokers were found to have imposed debt on potential brides as recruitment fees and/or living expenses incurred while they were waiting for the marriage to take place.

Both grooms and brides are also found to be suffering from the fact that, unlike their expectations, they are given very limited information or time to make the decision of their life time. Also at times, false promises or incorrect information on the partners are given by brokers to facilitate decision making. International marriage brokerage is considered an extremely lucrative business and there are estimated to be more than 1,000 agencies actively participating in the industry.

Second, due to the language barrier, different customs and cultures between Korea and countries of origin, many international spouses are marginalized in terms of access to information, work, and social support once they are in Korea. For example, it was found that more than half of the international spouses were not even aware of the existence of social security system and only about fourteen (14) percents were receiving welfare benefits when some fifty (50) percent of the international couples are eligible for such services. Some of the migrant women were also found to suffer from limited access to healthcare services, once again, due to the lack of information on such services available to them.

Third, they also suffer in the marriage. There were cases where international spouses are exploited due to their precarious legal status in the country. Before the revision of the immigration law, international spouses should normally stay in marriage for two years before they are allowed stay in the country permanently. According to a research, about thirty (30) percent of international spouses in the survey reported to have experienced verbal abuse and about twelve (12) percent of them even domestic violence, twice as high as the rate of incidence among Korean couples.

Last, but not least, the international spouses also suffer from the prejudice and discrimination from the mainstream Korean society.

### **3. Korean government's integration policy for international spouses**

The problems mentioned above, however, do not mean that all the international marriages are problematic. On the contrary, we have seen many international couples who have well integrated to the communities and lead a life as full-fledged members of the society.

Nevertheless, Korean government recognizes the need to formulate a policy to stop these aberrant practices on international marriage, some even resembling trafficking,

and a policy to support new members of the society to adapt to their new country as soon as possible.

Based on the understanding of the challenges and problems related to integration of international spouses, the Korean government has set out to become a functioning multi-cultural society wherein international spouses are fully integrated. In order to translate this vision into a reality, the following seven priority areas have been identified to further develop effective activities and programmes.

- Stop irregular international marriage brokerage
- Provide victims of domestic violence legal status to stay in the country
- Support early integration into Korean society
- Facilitate adaptation in school life of the children from international couples
- Expand social security services
- Improve the images of international marriage
- Establish an inter-ministerial cooperation mechanism

I do not wish to go into details of all the policy measures. Instead, please let me, take one example, a programme we are currently putting in place in order to empower international spouses by providing accurate and realistic information.

We recognize the paramount importance of information in making right decisions to marry and migrate to a new country. While we can not stop people from migrating to one country or another, we should strive to engage in all stages of their decision making process to provide them with accurate information that corresponds to their needs.

To this effect, we plan to set up hotline services for those who consider international marriage with Korean men. The Korean government will also distribute information brochures, set up an internet homepage, and organise information sessions, etc., in cooperation with international organizations and NGOs in select countries of origin.

While these measures are for more general public who might consider migrating to Korea, we also plan to provide cultural orientation sessions for those who are applying for a spouse visa. The orientation will focus specifically on providing vital information to their integration into the country including Korean culture and customs. At the same time, information will be made available regarding their rights and obligations under the

Korean law and various social services and assistance.

Once they are in Korea, the Korean government, through immigration office and municipal government authorities which they have to visit to register their residency, provide more specific information on the cities and area they live. To this effect, I am happy to inform you that we have already set up twenty-one (21) migrant women resource centers throughout the country in collaboration with the municipal governments and NGOs, and plan to expand such centers to forty-one (41) next year.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Korea has very limited experience receiving migrants into its society. The country however recognizes the fact that if we receive them properly and empower them with correct information, they will become an invaluable asset to Korea.

There is much to learn. Therefore I do look forward to discussing with you in the course of the workshop on your countries' experience and strategy to integrate migrants in your countries.

Thank you very much.