



RETURN TO DEMOGRAPHICS AND THE FUTURE OF SOUTH KOREA



# How South Korean Demographics Are Affecting Immigration and Social

# Change

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South Korea has enacted several reforms to attract immigrants in response to its looming demographic woes, but some of these measures are hampered by harmful patriarchal and ethnocentric blindspots.

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Over the past two decades, South Korea's well-documented demographic challenges have driven a host of policy reforms to encourage more inbound immigration. While these reforms are promising signs of progress, some of these measures risk reinforcing and exacerbating ethnocentric and patriarchal social structures, laws, and policies that actually harm the women they are intended to help. South Korean officials need to think of immigration in more holistic and equitable terms, not merely as a way to achieve population replacement.

## Declining Fertility Rates Have Forced Innovation and Adaptation

Since 1984, South Korea's fertility rate has consistently fallen below the population replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. It reached an all-time low of 0.84 in 2020—the lowest figure in the world that year. That same year, the number of deaths in South Korea outpaced the number of births, and the country's population contracted for the first time on record. The Korea National Statistical Office projects that the country's working-age population will drop to 51 percent of the total population by 2050, while the population ages sixty-five or older is expected to reach 40 percent, similar to other countries with rapidly aging and shrinking populations such as Italy, Japan, Spain, and Taiwan.

The South Korean government has tried to address this impending demographic crisis in various ways, including by providing financial incentives for expectant couples, subsidies for childcare and eldercare, and long-term care insurance. But the boldest initiatives have been in immigration policy.

To address growing labor shortages, South Korea implemented a formal guest worker program known as the Employment Permit System in 2004 after years of demands for greater regulation; until then, the system had entailed recruiting informal foreign labor while the country's borders remained officially closed to unskilled immigrants.

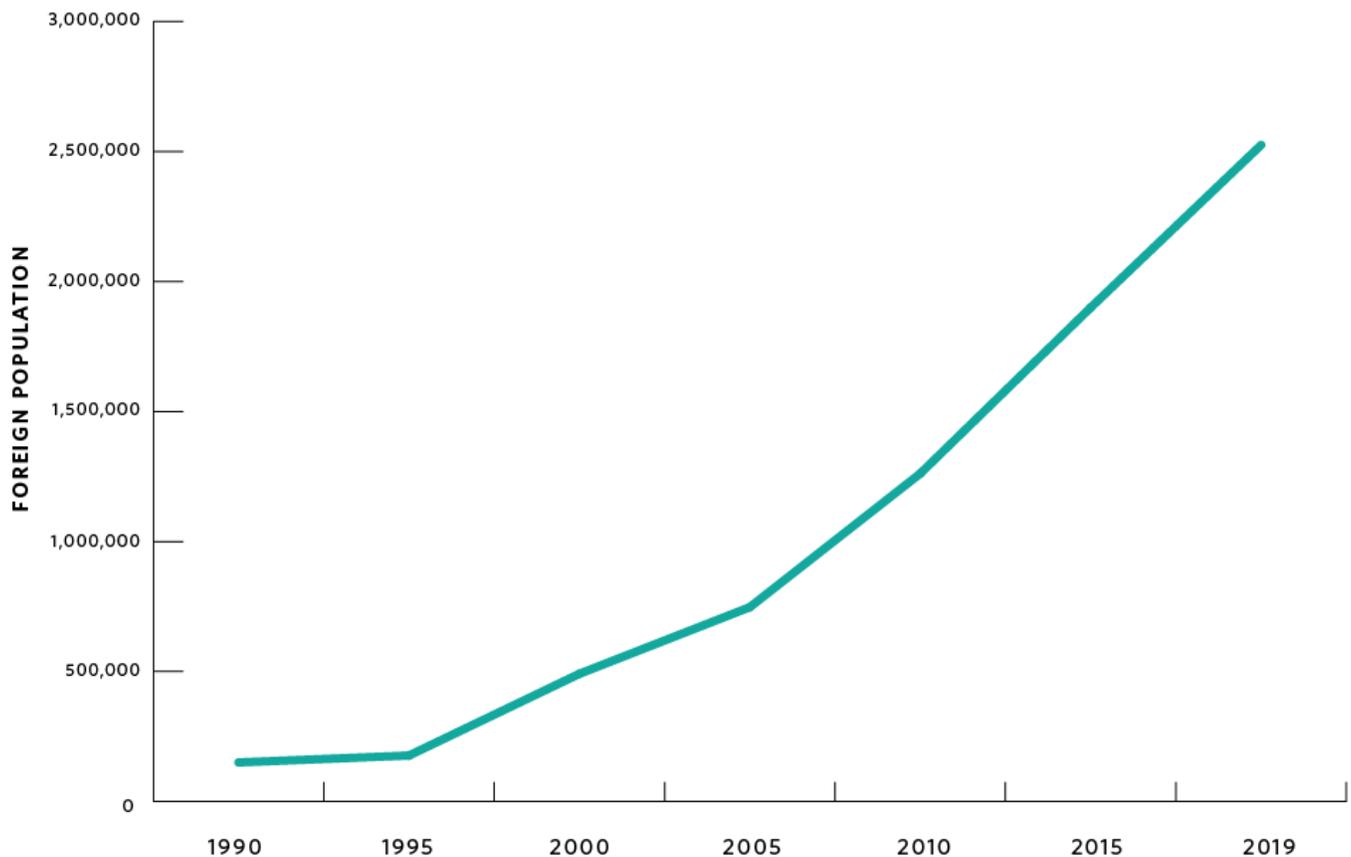
Meanwhile, local governments and agricultural associations in depopulated rural areas around South Korea tried to address the so-called bride famine by brokering arranged marriage meetings between unmarried male residents and potential spouses. These spousal candidates were recruited from a variety of places over time. Early on, they came from urban areas within South Korea. Then, following the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and mainland China in 1992, a later cohort consisted of ethnic Korean women from China. Finally, with the deregulation of the South Korean marriage industry in 1999, marriage migrants from around the world—especially Southeast Asia, China, and Russia—began entering the country in significant numbers. By 2005, international marriages in South Korea reached a peak of 13.5 percent of all marriages in the country (see figure 1). And South Korea's total foreign population has grown around fourteen-fold from less than 180,000 in 1995 to over 2.5 million in 2019 (see figure 2).

FIGURE 1

**South Korean Marriages With One Foreign National**

**SOURCE:** "Multicultural Marriages by Type," KOSIS, 1995–2019, [https://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?menuId=M\\_01\\_01&vwcd=MT\\_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M\\_01\\_01&outLink=Y&parentId=A.1;A\\_3.2;#A\\_3.2](https://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?menuId=M_01_01&vwcd=MT_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01&outLink=Y&parentId=A.1;A_3.2;#A_3.2).

**FIGURE 2**  
**Foreign Population in South Korea**



**SOURCE:** "Status of Foreign Residents by Nationality (Region)," Korea Immigration Service, 2005–2020, [https:// www.immigration.go.kr/immigration/1570/subview.do](https://www.immigration.go.kr/immigration/1570/subview.do).

While not without their challenges, these initiatives and policy changes have created opportunities in South Korea. Between 2004 and 2010, South Korea enacted a series of sweeping immigration and citizenship reforms that opened its borders to unskilled immigration, extended local voting rights to permanent foreign residents, and allowed people to hold dual nationality. (Notably, South Korea was the first country in Asia to grant permanent foreign residents local voting rights—something not even Western countries with reputations for more liberal immigration and citizenship policies such as France and Germany have done.)

The South Korean government also invested heavily in social integration programs. After the promulgation of the Support for Multicultural Families Act in 2008, the budget for programs to support immigrant spouses and what are termed multicultural families increased from about \$28 million to \$498 million in 2020. The law also paved the way for the establishment of over 200 multicultural family centers throughout the country. But the centerpiece of these initiatives—recruiting marriage migrants to address the country's demographic challenges of low fertility rates and an aging population—offers a short-term solution to underlying social problems that have plagued the country for decades.

## Conservative Policy Implementation Has Had Stark Consequences for Women

For all these encouraging signs, the implementation of South Korea's immigration overhaul has been hampered by conservative, ethnocentric inclinations that have sometimes boxed in the very women these

policies are meant to help. It is no coincidence that debates about South Korea's falling birthrates and rapidly aging population have centered on women as both the problem and the solution. South Korean women are marrying later and having fewer children, or foregoing both, to advance their careers. They are also leaving rural areas to pursue educational and work opportunities elsewhere and, by extension, shrinking the pool of marriage partners for unwed farmers, daughters-in-law to care for aging parents, and mothers of offspring who can continue the family line.

Revealingly, social integration programs for immigrant spouses, meanwhile, have focused on their roles as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers, according to the country's traditional patriarchal family structures. These programs offer classes on cooking for traditional holidays, preparing household shrines to honor their in-laws' family ancestors, and instructing immigrant spouses on Korean linguistic honorifics for conversations with their husbands and in-laws. Immigrant women have limited pathways for permanent settlement outside of marriage to a South Korean national.

The conservative implementation of this seemingly progressive legislation may be perilous for immigrant women and South Korean society more generally. Spousal visas place immigrant women in a highly precarious situation vis-à-vis their sponsoring husbands and in-laws: their legal status and rights are entirely derivative of their spousal status. Reports of growing domestic violence have galvanized public attention and advocacy for immigrant women. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family introduced a hotline for immigrant women in 2006 and began to include immigrant women and their families (under the heading of "multicultural families") in its triennial national survey on domestic violence. In 2007, the survey found that 43 percent of multicultural families experienced domestic violence compared to 40 percent of native South Korean families.

The aforementioned 2008 act to support multicultural families came with a provision specifically on the "Protection of and Support for Victims of Domestic Violence." But these protections do not extend to immigrant women without South Korean children (by citizenship) and those who become undocumented due to divorce or separation (including those who flee their husbands due to domestic violence). Because South Korea has only a handful of visas that allow for permanent settlement—including marriage migrant visas, the Overseas Korean Visa for co-ethnic immigrants, and visas for high-skilled professionals and investors—immigrant women without South Korean children (by citizenship) risk becoming undocumented upon the termination of their marriages.

It was precisely the endemic abuse associated with marriage migration that led women's organizations and human rights groups to lobby for the April 2010 dual nationality bill, which now provides an alternative pathway to citizenship for immigrant women. The bill nevertheless excludes divorced or separated immigrant women (who entered South Korea as immigrant spouses).

Moreover, subsequent surveys of immigrant spouses have indicated that the bill has not had a perceptible impact on domestic violence: a 2017 report by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK) found that 42 percent of immigrant spouses experienced domestic violence, and the Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center reported that there were twenty-one cases of immigrant spouses being killed by their husbands between 2007 and 2019. The NHRCK further noted that almost 70 percent of immigrant spouses identified domestic and sexual violence as the primary factor that threatened their residential stability. While the number of international marriages has declined over the past fifteen years—largely due to growing state regulation of the marriage broker industry since the late 2000s, culminating in a 2010 amendment to the Marriage Brokerage Agencies Act—the rates of domestic violence among multicultural families have not dropped.

On the other hand, importing marriage migrants to replace native South Korean women seeking to advance their careers minimizes the societal hurdles that women in South Korea face. South Korea continues to have among the widest gender gaps among OECD countries (and the widest gender pay gap in 2019), especially in terms of economic participation and political representation. Given these facts, the problem of gender inequality in South Korea is as dire as the country's demographic deficits. Grooming immigrant women to reproduce patriarchal gender roles will not rectify the deep social problems that can be seen as being at the root of South Korea's demographic challenges.

## Immigration Goes Far Beyond Population Replacement

South Korea's demographic trends and corresponding initiatives to address them have challenged long-held conceptions of nationhood based on claims of ethnocultural purity. Policymakers and ordinary people alike

have been forced to rethink definitions of who constitutes a citizen. South Korea could become one of the few countries in the world to get immigration policy right. As other liberal democracies have enacted increasingly restrictive measures to curb both unauthorized and legal immigration, South Korea has liberalized its immigration and citizenship policies (and has kept its borders open even during the coronavirus pandemic). No fewer than three presidential administrations from both sides of the political spectrum have put the integration of multicultural families among their top priorities. Yet immigrant incorporation must go beyond integrating immigrants into existing South Korean social categories because, otherwise, existing social inequalities and hierarchies will be reinforced.

Immigration can provide a powerful tool for addressing South Korea's demographic challenges. But its value goes beyond population replacement. Immigration policy reform and equitable immigrant incorporation policies that provide *all* immigrants, including migrant workers and immigrant women without South Korean husbands or children (by citizenship), with paths to permanent settlement and citizenship could revitalize the country's economy, society, and democracy. In less than a decade, South Korea transformed itself from a "country of non-immigration" with exclusionary immigration and citizenship policies in the early 2000s to an avowedly "multicultural society." The next step for South Korea is to enact immigration reforms that liberalize entry *and* settlement policies for more than a select handful of immigrants, so that the democratic principle of nondiscrimination is applied to all immigrants.

In the next decade, South Korea's bold immigration initiatives may well generate a more vibrant and diverse workforce, civil society, and electorate that will propel much-needed and long-awaited reforms to the country's welfare, education, and justice systems. Such a development could also strengthen diplomatic, economic, and people-to-people ties with foreign countries—especially other Asian countries—from which a growing portion of South Korea's citizenry originates.

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