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## INTERNATIONAL DIVORCES IN SOUTH KOREA – DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

### Introduction

The family is the basic unit of every society. W. Świątkiewicz<sup>1</sup> has written that the family is the smallest but the most important particle of social life. So divorce, which is the breakdown of the family, is no longer just a personal issue, it is a social issue, that contribute to shape of society, it's demographic behaviors and social attitudes and opinions.

In 2015 the crude divorce rate was 2.1 in South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea, South Korea hereafter). In 2009 the divorce rate was higher and was equal 2.5<sup>2</sup>. According to Statistics Korea number of divorces have been decreasing from 2003. Comparing to European countries, South Korea has similar divorce rate in 2014, as for example: Spain (2.2), Germany (2.1), Netherland (2.1) and Hungary (2.2), but higher than Poland (1.7), Slovakia (1.9) and Norway (1.9)<sup>3</sup>.

South Korea belong to OECD countries. In all OECD countries it is possible to divorce, but there is considerable cross-country variation in the length and nature of the divorce process and these differences should be borne in mind when comparing divorce rates and mean durations of marriage across countries. For example, in some European countries there are regulations regarding the minimum period that spouses must have lived apart in order for a divorce to be granted. In addition, cross-national differences in trends in divorce rates may be influenced by developments in divorce regulation and legislation<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Świątkiewicz, *Rodzina w województwie katowickim. Opracowania i raporty / Family in Katowice voivodship. Studies and reports*, Katowice 1998, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Korea 2016, *Marriage and Divorce Statistics in 2015*, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/11/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=353789&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&sTarget=title&sTxt> [3.03.2017].

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat 2016, *Crude divorce rate, selected years, 1960–2014*, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php/File:Crude\\_divorce\\_rate,\\_selected\\_years,\\_1960%E2%80%932014\\_\(%C2%B9\)\\_\(per\\_1\\_000\\_inhabitants\)\\_YB16.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php/File:Crude_divorce_rate,_selected_years,_1960%E2%80%932014_(%C2%B9)_(per_1_000_inhabitants)_YB16.png) [3.03.2017].

<sup>4</sup> OECD, *Marriage and divorce rates*, 25.08.2016, <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/>

In the Lectric Law Library's Lexicon we can find divorce definition: "The dissolution of a marriage contracted between a man and a woman, by the judgment of a court of competent jurisdiction, or (Obs.) by an act of the legislature"<sup>5</sup>.

According to Korean Civil Act<sup>6</sup> there are two types of divorce in South Korea. According to the Article 834 of Civil Code, husband and wife can get divorce by an agreement or according the Article 840 they may apply to the Family Court for a divorce (Judicial Divorce) in each case of following subparagraphs:

1. If the other spouse has committed an act of unchastity.
2. If one spouse has been maliciously deserted by the other spouse.
3. If one spouse has been extremely maltreated by the other spouse or his or her lineal ascendants.
4. If one spouse's lineal ascendant has been extremely maltreated by the other spouse.
5. If the death or life of the other spouse has been unknown for three years.
6. If there exists any other serious case for making it difficult to continue marriage.

Statistics of divorce from Korean Statistical Information Service indicate that from many years mutual agreement is mainly chosen type of divorce by many people. Judicial divorces were less chosen by the parties. According to Graph 1. since 1993 to 2003 the number of divorces by agreement had been increasing. That fast increase is associated with economic crisis in South Korea in 1997 and with women's rise in education and greater workforce participation. The development in women's status decrease the number of women dependent on their husbands financially. After economic crisis many men lost a job or have low income and they couldn't economically support the family. Bad economic situation of many families pushed many people to get divorce<sup>7</sup>. In turn from 2003 to 2015 there has been observed decreasing which can be related to decreasing number of marriages in Korea<sup>8</sup>.

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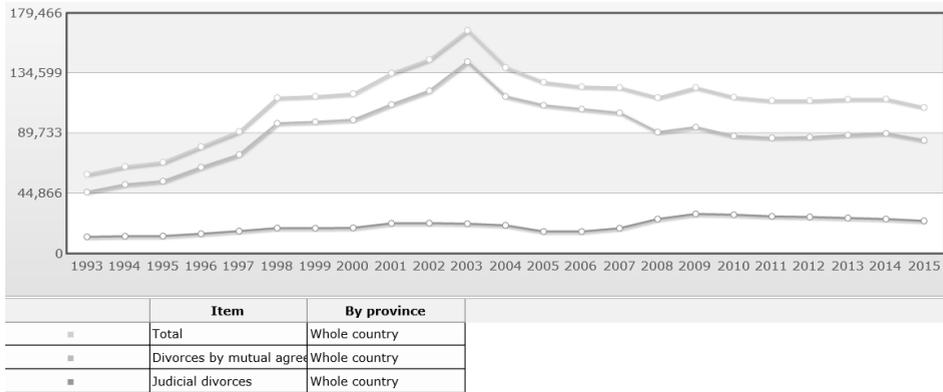
<sup>5</sup> *Lectric Law Library's Lexicon*, <http://www.lectlaw.com/def/d187.htm> [4.03.2017].

<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Government Legislation, *Korean Civil Act 2009*: <http://www.moleg.go.kr/english/korLawEng?pstSeq=52674> [3.03.2017].

<sup>7</sup> K. Hooker, S. Choun, *Divorce in South Korea*, [in:] *Cultural Sociology of Divorce: An Encyclopedia*, ed. R.E. Emery, Thousand Oaks 2013, p. 648.

<sup>8</sup> *Statistics Korea*, [www.kostat.gov.kr](http://www.kostat.gov.kr) [3.03.2017].

**Graph 1. Divorces by legal type of divorce in South Korea in period from 1993 to 2015**



Source: Korean Statistical Information Service, [http://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList/statisticsList\\_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT\\_ETITLE&parentId=A#SubCont](http://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList/statisticsList_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT_ETITLE&parentId=A#SubCont) [3.03.2017].

With the number of marriage immigrants growing, their divorce rate has increased as well. In 2005, the rate of multicultural marriages reached 13.5% of all marriages. As of 2013, ten couples out of a hundred newlywed couples included a marriage immigrant. However, multicultural couples, who have come from socially and culturally different environments, are more likely to face conflicts. In South Korea, multicultural families face a variety of challenges<sup>9</sup>.

Many researchers<sup>10</sup> point out that marriage immigrants experience cultural and lifestyle differences which become barriers of everyday life, they have language problems in daily communication and they are also more likely to live in poverty. In many cases migrant wives are victims of domestic violence. These conflicts develop into situations in which multicultural families end in divorce.

Despite altered values regarding marriage, diminished financial support between spouses, and unconventional gender roles, stigma is still attached to divorce in South Korea. According to the National Statistical Office in 2006, 60% of Koreans over 15 years old perceived divorce negatively. Although spouses choose divorce as a solution to dissatisfaction with marital life, women face other problems, such as: economic insecurity and the burdens

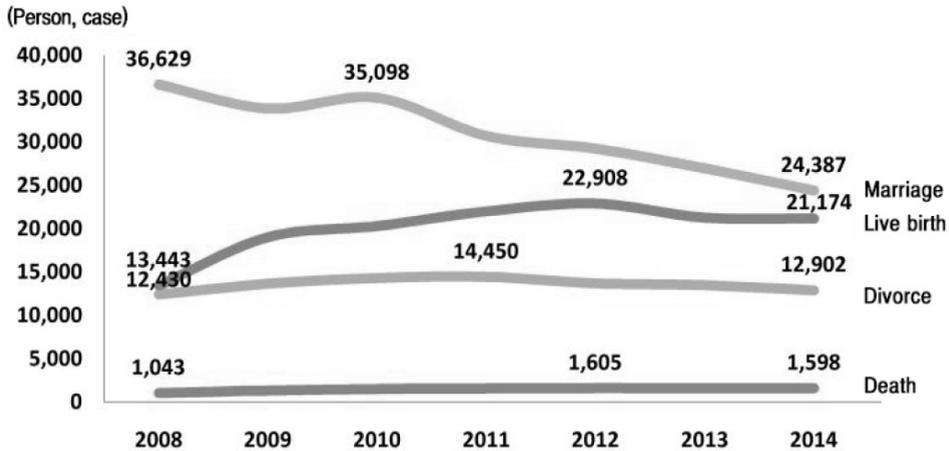
<sup>9</sup> O. Kim, *A study on the Factors Affecting Marital Conflicts of Immigrant Women*, [in:] “Korean Family Studies Association” 2006, no. 18 (3), p. 63–106, followed: S. Kim, *Divorces of Marriage Immigrants in South Korea. An Examination of Factors Affecting Divorce*, Kentucky 2015, p. 4.  
<sup>10</sup> J. Kim, *A Study on Factors Influencing Divorce Decision of International Marriage Migrant Women*, Daegu 2012, followed: S. Kim, *Divorces of Marriage Immigrants...*, op. cit.; H. Kim, *International Marriage Migrant Women in Korea*, [in:] “Public Health Nursing” 2008, no. 14 (4), p. 1225–9543, followed: S. Kim, *Divorces of Marriage Immigrants ...*, op. cit., p. 3; O. Kim, *A study on the Factors...*, op. cit., p. 63–106.

of single-parent child rearing – after divorce. Many women still hesitate to divorce for fear of losing face and potentially harming their children's futures<sup>11</sup>.

### 1. International divorces in South Korea<sup>12</sup>

The graph 2 presents Vital Statistics of Immigrants from Statistics Korea (2015 [www.kostat.go.kr](http://www.kostat.go.kr)) in period from 2008 to 2014. Along with keeping decrease of international marriages from 2008 (besides one small increased in 2010) we can observe keeping decrease of international divorces from 2012. According to data international divorces of immigrants totaled 11,287 cases in 2015, which dropped by 12.5% from 2014. The divorces of immigrants occupied 10.3% of the total divorces in 2015, dropping by 0.9% from 2014 (see: table 1 and graph 3).

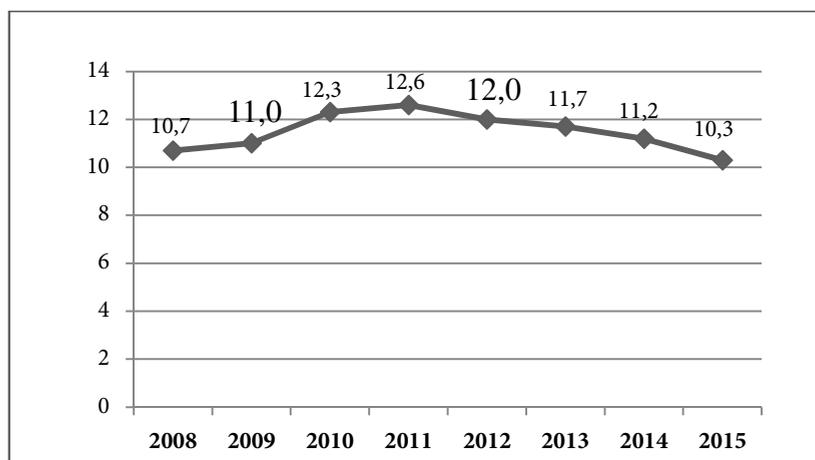
**Graph 2. Vital Statistics of Immigrants from 2008 to 2014**



Source: Statistics Korea, Vital Statistics of Immigrants in 2015, p. 2, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/3/index.board> [3.03.2017].

<sup>11</sup> K. Hooker, S. Choun, *Divorce in South Korea*, op. cit., p. 648.

<sup>12</sup> This part of the article is based on data from *Statistics Korea, Vital Statistics of Immigrants in 2015*: <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/3/index.board> [3.03.2017].

**Graph 3. Share of divorces of immigrants in period from 2008 to 2015 (%)**

Source: ibidem. The graph was formatted by the author.

Analyzing data from Table 1 we can observe that divorces of immigrants accounted about 50% of international marriages from 2012 to 2015. These data may indicate that international marriages are particularly vulnerable to breakdown through divorce. Every second international marriage ends in divorce in South Korea.

**Table 1. Vital Statistics of Immigrant from 2008 to 2015 (unit: person, case, %)**

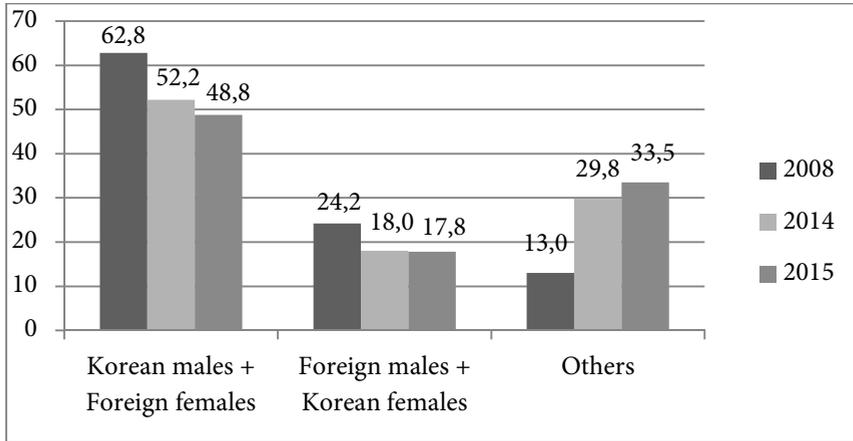
	Immigrants							Percent charge
	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	
Marriage	36,629	35,098	30,695	29,224	26,948	24,387	22,462	-7.9
Divorce	12,430	14,319	14,450	13,701	13,482	12,902	11,287	-12.5
Live births	13,443	20,312	22,014	22,908	21,290	21,174	19,729	-6.8
Death	1,043	1,506	1,557	1,605	1,558	1,598	1,744	9.1
Share of Immigrants								
	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	
Marriage	11.2	10.8	9.3	8.9	8.3	8.0	7.4	
Divorce	10.7	12.3	12.6	12.0	11.7	11.2	10.3	
Live births	2.9	4.3	4.7	4.7	4.9	4.9	4.5	
Death	0.4	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	

Source: ibidem.

Data from Vital Statistics of Immigrants (2015) show that the most of divorces of immigrants are between Korean males and foreign females. The percentage of that type of international divorce decrease from 62.8% in 2008 to 48.8% in 2015 – difference between these

years is 14%. The opposite type consist Korean female with foreign male is rather seldom – in 2008 there was only 24.2% and in 2015 the percentage decreased to 17.8% (see graph 4).

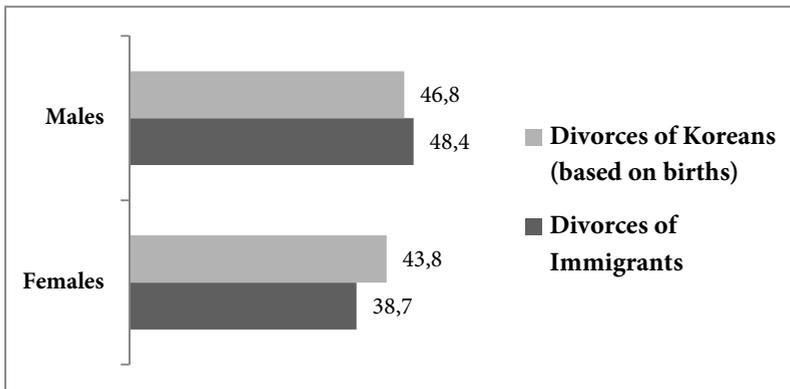
**Graph 4. Share of Divorce by type in years: 2008, 2014, 2015 (%)**



Source: ibidem. The graph was formatted by the author.

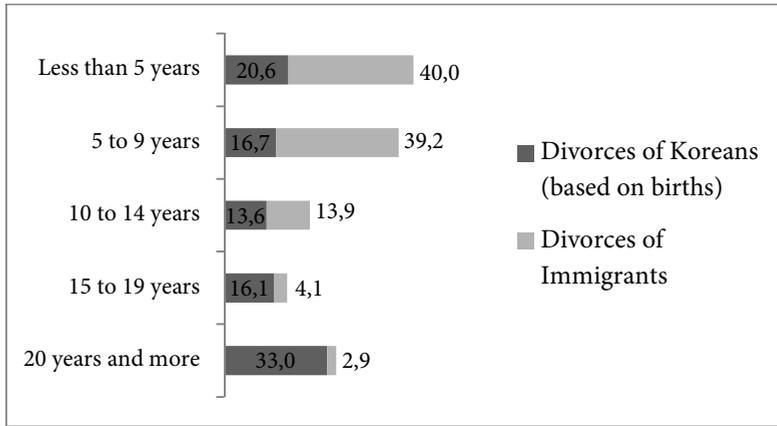
According to data the mean age at divorce of immigrants female in 2015 was 38.7 years and for males 48.4 years. The average age at divorce of immigrants was differ from the average age at divorce of Koreans. Male Koreans get divorced about one and half year earlier than immigrant males. The opposite situation was among female Koreans who were five years older than female immigrant (see graph 5).

**Graph 5. Mean age at divorce by gender in 2015 (in years)**



Source: ibidem. The graph was formatted by the author.

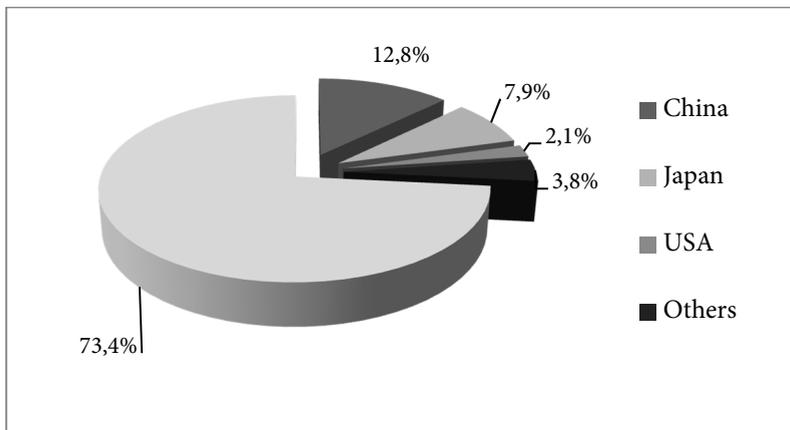
**Graph 6. Share of divorce by duration of marriage in 2015 (%)**



Source: ibidem, p. 3. The graph was formatted by the author.

Many immigrants get divorce during the first years of marriage. The divorces of immigrants whose duration of marriage recorded less than 10 years accounted for 80% of the total divorces of immigrants. According to data from 2015, 40% immigrants end the marriage through the divorce less than 5 years of marriage duration and 39% between 5 to 9 years. There was a tendency that the long marriage is the less immigrants get divorce. In the next category between 10 and 14 years duration of marriage share of divorce is much lower and amounts nearly 14%. Whereas every third Koreans also splitted up with longer probation, even 20 years and more of marriage duration – their percentage is 33%. Native Koreans also most frequently get divorced in the early years of marriage duration (under 5 years) and their percentage is almost 21% (see: graph 6).

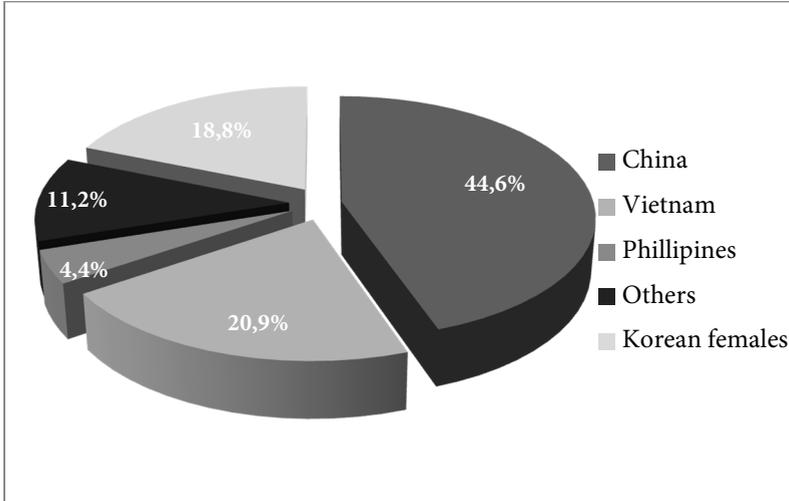
**Graph 7. Share of divorces by nationality of males in 2015**



Source: ibidem. The graph was formatted by the author.

Results of Vital Statistics of Immigrants (2015) show that the most percentage of male divorces in South Korea by nationality were Korean (73.4%), next there were Chinaman (12.8%), Japanese (7.9%) Americans (2.1%), and other males (3.8%) (see: graph 7).

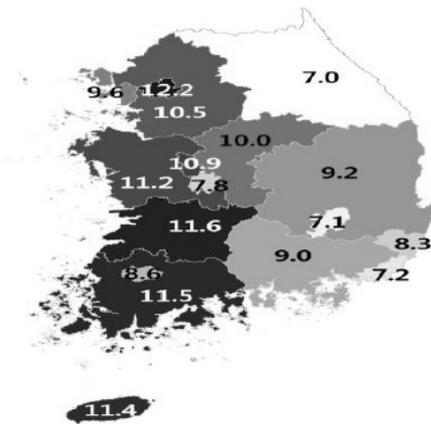
**Graph 8. Share of divorces by nationality of females in 2015**



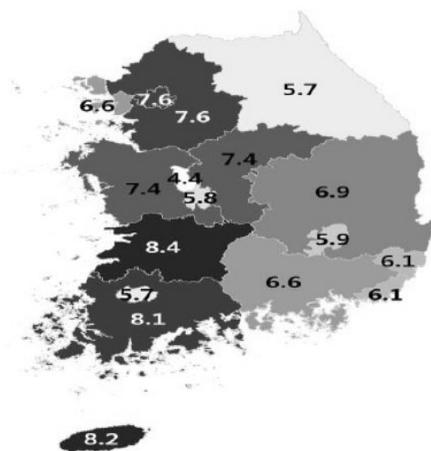
Source: ibidem. The graph was formatted by the author.

According to data female divorces by nationality are more varied. In 2015 there were 44.6% Chinese women, 18.8% Korean women, 20.9% Vietnam women, 4.4% from the Phillipines and 11.2% from other countries who get divorced with Korean Male (see: graph 8).

**Map 1. Share of divorces of immigrants by region in 2015**



Source: ibidem.

**Map 2. Share of marriages of immigrants in 2015**

Source: ibidem.

In 2015 the most percentage of immigrant divorces was on the west of South Korea, particularly in the region: Jeonbuk (11.6%), Jeongnam (11.5%), on the island Jeju (11.4%), Chungnam (11.2%), Gyeonggi (10.5%). Share of divorces in capital of the South Korea Seoul amounts 12.2% (see map 1).

The high percentage of immigrant divorces is on the region where are also high percentage of immigrant marriages. In 2015 the most percentage of immigrant marriages was on the west of South Korea, particularly on island Jeju (8.8%) and in Provinces: Jeonnam (8.7%), Jeonbuk (8.7%), Chungnam (8.1%), Chungbuk (7.8%) Gyeonggi (8.0%) (see map 2). The most immigrant marriages on the west may be the result closer distance to China border where the most of immigrant women come from.

## 2. Reasons of immigrant divorces in South Korea

There are many reasons of immigrant divorces in South Korea, such as:

- domestic differences;
- spouse's unfairness;
- mental or psychical mistreatment;
- conflict between family members;
- economic problems;
- differences in characters;
- health problems.

**Table 2. Number of international divorces by reasons in 2015, 2010 and 2000**

Reasons of divorce	Year			1990
	2015	2010	2000	
	Total divorces of immigrants 109,153	Total divorces of immigrants 116,858	Total divorces of immigrants 119,455	
Domestic differences	–	–	–	38,836
Differences in character	50,406	53,032	48,067	-
Economic problems	12,126	14,017	12,786	927
Spouse's unfairness	8,016	10,001	9,729	–
Conflict between family members	8,017	8,564	26,195	–
Mental or psychical mistreatment	4,172	5,559	5,205	–
Health problems	639	794	1,053	673
Others	22,766	23,605	15,500	5,258
unknown	3,011	1,286	920	0

Source: own elaborated based on data from Korean Statistical Information Service, op. cit.

According to data from Vital Statistics from Korean Statistical Information Service<sup>13</sup> in period from 1990 to 1999 the most frequent reason for immigrant divorce were domestic differences (in 1990 year – there were 38,836 cases). The reason had changed from 2000 till 2015 and in this period immigrants got divorced because of differences in character. Generally, through these 15 years differences in character accounted for nearly 50% of total divorces. In 2015 amount of total divorces was 109,153 cases, and in 50,406 of cases the reasons were differences in character (see table 2).

The next most frequently reasons were economic problems – many of multicultural families are exposed to poverty because of low incomes, less levels of education. In 2015 amount of divorces end by economic problems were 12,126 cases, in 2010 – 14,017, in 1990 only 927 of cases (see table 2). The number of divorces got by economic problems have been increasing mainly because of Economic Crisis in 1997 in South Korea (Hyunjoon Park, James M. Raymo 2013).

In 2000 there were also many divorces by conflict between family members (26,195). That amount has decreased three times reaching in 2010 about 8,500 cases and in 2015 about 8,000 (see table 2).

In some cases also spouse's unfairness is reason for a divorce by immigrants. In 2015 there were about 8,000 cases (see table 2).

<sup>13</sup> Korean Statistical Information Service, op. cit.

## Conclusion

The result of increasing entry to South Korea of foreign migrant workers, international marriage women and ethnic Koreans from China<sup>14</sup>, Korean society is no longer homogeneous and has become more multiracial and multiethnic than ever<sup>15</sup>.

Number of international divorces have raised concerns in Korean society. High divorce rates not only have a negative influence on the divorced couples and their family members, they also play a role in dismantling the social integration of immigrants and Korean society as a whole<sup>16</sup>.

According to presented data in the article there are systematic but slow tendency of decrease numbers of divorces by immigrants, but still is in a high level. The most frequently immigrant get divorce at the first years of marriage duration, mainly because of: differences in character, economic problems, spouse's unfairness and conflict between family members.

Along with rising international marriages, especially in period from 2000 to 2005<sup>17</sup>, Korean Government announced many legal acts, such as: The Grand Plan (2006)<sup>18</sup>, The Multicultural Families Support Act (2008)<sup>19</sup>, Marriage Brokers Business Management Act (2007)<sup>20</sup>, The First Basic Plan for Policies on Foreigners (2008–2012)<sup>21</sup>, The Second Master Plans for Supporting Multicultural Families (2013–2017)<sup>22</sup> and The Second Basic Plan for Policies on Foreigners (2013–2017)<sup>23</sup> to support multicultural families. These acts are the stepping stone towards Korea becoming a successful multicultural society.

Korean Government stated policy vision is to realize the mature global nation embracing advanced multicultural society, and their goal is to improve the life quality of multicultural families (which can have influence on decrease of international divorces) and to provide stable policies and to strengthen the support for children in the multicultural families.

Based on these achievements, we can conclude that significant progress in family policy has been made during the last 10 years in Korea. Nevertheless, family policy should

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<sup>14</sup> Statistics Korea, *Marriage and Divorce Statistics in 2015, 2016*, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/11/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=353789&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&sTarget=title&sTxt> [3.03.2017].

<sup>15</sup> I.-J. Yoon, Y.-H. Song, Y.-J. Bae, *South Koreans' Attitudes toward Foreigners, Minorities and Multiculturalism*, [in:] *Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, MA from August 1–4, 2008*, [http://www.waseda-giari.jp/sysimg/rresults/456\\_report\\_r1-1.pdf](http://www.waseda-giari.jp/sysimg/rresults/456_report_r1-1.pdf) [3.03.2017], p. 325.

<sup>16</sup> S. Kim, *Divorces of Marriage Immigrants...*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Statistics Korea*, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> H.-K. Lee, *International Marriage and the State in South Korea: Focusing on Governmental Policy*, "Citizenship Studies" 2008, no. 12 (1), p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> G.Y. Oh, *The Impact of Multicultural Family Support Center on Social Integration of Marriage Immigrant Women in Korea*, The Hague 2015, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> H.-K. Lee, *International Marriage...*, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

continue to develop and be carefully designed and implemented to integrate society and to help understanding of multiculturalism and to prevent of international divorces<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> M. Chin, J. Lee, S. Lee, S. Son, M. Sung, *Family Policy in South Korea: Development, Implementation, and Evaluation*, [in:] *Handbook of Family Policies Across the Globe*, ed. Mihaela Robila, New York 2014, p. 305; Sanghee Kim..., op. cit., p. 3.

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### **International divorces in South Korea – demographic characteristics**

The paper presents demographic characteristics of international divorces in South Korea based on data from *Vital Statistics of Immigrant in 2015* from *Statistics Korea*. According to data there are systematic but slow tendency of decrease numbers of divorces by immigrants. The most frequently immigrant get divorce at the first years of marriage duration, mainly because of: differences in character, economic problems, spouse's unfairness and conflict between family members. Many researchers point out that marriage immigrants experience cultural and lifestyle differences which become barriers of everyday life, they have language problems in daily communication and they are also more likely to live in poverty. In many cases migrant wives are victims of domestic violence. These conflicts develop into situations in which multicultural families end in divorce.

**Keywords:** international divorce, international marriage, multicultural family, multiculturalism, immigrants in South Korea.

### **Międzynarodowe rozwody w Korei Południowej – charakterystyka demograficzna**

Artykuł prezentuje demograficzną charakterystykę międzynarodowych rozwodów w Korei Południowej, opartą na danych pochodzących z *Vital Statistics of Immigrant in 2015* z portalu *Statistics Korea*. Z danych tych wynika, że systematycznie, choć powoli, zmniejsza się liczba rozwodów wśród imigrantów. Imigranci najczęściej rozwodzą się w ciągu pierwszych pięciu lat małżeństwa, a głównymi przyczynami są: różnica charakterów, problemy ekonomiczne, niewierność małżonka oraz konflikty pomiędzy członkami rodziny. Wiele badań podkreśla, że małżeństwa imigrantów doświadczają różnic kulturalnych i różnic w stylu życia, co staje się przeszkodą w codziennym życiu; mają problemy językowe w codziennej komunikacji, a ponadto częściej żyją w biedzie. W wielu przypadkach żony imigrantów stają się ofiarami przemocy domowej. Wynikiem tych konfliktów są sytuacje, w których wielokulturowe rodziny kończą swój żywot rozwodem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rozwód międzynarodowy, małżeństwo międzynarodowe, wielokulturowa rodzina, multikulturalizm, imigranci w Korei Południowej.

*Translated by Barbara Popiel*