

**Policy Brief No. 5**

Protecting Rights and  
Reducing Stigma against  
Vietnamese Women  
Married Overseas

**Migration, Gender and Social Justice:**  
Connecting Research and Practice Networks



This policy brief has been prepared within the IDRC sponsored project 'Migration, Gender and Social Justice'

ISSN 2214-1316

Published in February 2013

Electronic copies are available at [www.iss.nl](http://www.iss.nl)

**Cover photos:**

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## Policy Brief No. 5

# Protecting Rights and Reducing Stigma against Vietnamese Women Married Overseas

### Executive Summary

Since the mid-1990s, marriage has gained significance among the reasons for migration from Vietnam, with large numbers of women leaving the country and becoming foreign brides for East Asian men, particularly in Taiwan and South Korea. Vietnamese authorities have acknowledged this phenomenon but largely overlooked its deeper roots and implications, such as: the economic role that overseas brides play for the wellbeing of their families in Vietnam through financial and social remittances; the relative freedom enjoyed by businesses in the booming and highly lucrative match-making industry; the vulnerability and lack of protection measures in their new countries and in Vietnam for migrant women and their dependents who suffer domestic violence.

### Policy Brief No. 5: Protecting rights and reducing stigma against Vietnamese women married overseas

This policy brief has been prepared within the IDRC sponsored project 'Migration, Gender and Social Justice'. It is based on research undertaken by the Institute for Social Development Studies and the University of Western Ontario, Canada, in the project 'Transnational Migration of Vietnamese women to Asia'.

For additional insight into the findings of the research, see:

- Bélanger, D. & G.L. Tran (2011) 'The impact of transnational migration on gender and marriage in sending communities of Vietnam', *Current Sociology* 59(1): 59-77.
- Bélanger, D., T.H. Khuat & G.L. Tran (2011) 'Threatening Nationalism, Patriarchy and Masculinity: Constructions of Transnational Marriages between Vietnamese Women and East Asian Men in Vietnamese Mass Media'. Paper presented at the ISDS national workshop 'Transnational Marriage Migration of Vietnamese Women to East Asia: Toward a multi-dimensional view', Ha Noi, 1 July 2011.
- Tang, Wen-hui Anna, Daniele Blanger and Hongzen Wang (2011) 'Politics of negotiation between Vietnamese wives and Taiwanese husbands'. Paper presented at the ISDS national workshop 'Transnational Marriage Migration of Vietnamese Women to East Asia: Toward a multi-dimensional view', Ha Noi, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011.
- Bélanger, D., G.L. Tran, B.D. Le (2011) 'Marriage migrants as emigrants: Remittances of marriage migrant women from Vietnam to their natal families'. Paper presented at the ISDS national workshop 'Transnational Marriage Migration of Vietnamese Women to East Asia: Toward a multi-dimensional view', Ha Noi, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011.
- Bélanger, D., H.K. Lee, T.H. Khuat (2011) 'Sweet dreams, Sour endings: Stories of Vietnamese immigrant spouses returning home'. Paper presented at the ISDS national workshop 'Transnational Marriage Migration of Vietnamese Women to East Asia: Toward a multi-dimensional view', Ha Noi, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011.

## Introduction

The practice of Vietnamese women marrying men from East Asian countries has rapidly increased since it first started in the mid-1990s. The number of Vietnamese brides in South Korea rose from 134 in 2001 to 35,000 in 2011. In 2005, Vietnamese women marrying Taiwanese men surpassed 100,000. Vietnamese women constitute the largest and second-largest group of foreign brides in South Korea and Taiwan respectively, where they account for a significant proportion of

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Vietnamese immigrants. The present number of Vietnamese brides in these two countries is about one fifth of the size of all Vietnamese labour migrants employed worldwide.

Although marriage to foreigners is legal in Vietnam, it is persistently viewed negatively by both the state and the society. Women in international marriages are blamed for being materialistic opportunists who 'sell their bodies' for money and bring shame to their families and communities. Overseas marriage of Vietnamese women has been represented in national media campaigns as a threat to nationalism and socialist ideals of marriage and family. Despite these stigmas, nonetheless, cross-border flows of Vietnamese brides are steadily growing.

This policy brief is based on research undertaken on migration of Vietnamese women to East Asia through international marriage. Research conducted between 2007 and 2011 in Taiwan, South Korea and Vietnam included a quantitative survey covering 400 households and interviews with over 100 individuals including brides, their husbands, their natal and in-law parents. Evidence collected by this research on the causes and implications of marriage migration reveals alternative interpretations that contradict widespread stigmatized visions of Vietnamese cross-border brides.

## Research findings

- *International marriage of Vietnamese women to East Asian men responds to social reproduction needs in receiving and sending countries.*

In Taiwan and South Korea, there is an increasing tendency for women to postpone marriage or not marry due to their higher education, active participation in the labour market, and wider life aspirations that go beyond

traditional wifely roles. This so-called 'wife deficit' encourages men who are unable to find wives of their own nationality to seek for foreign brides, particularly among women who share cultural similarities such as the Vietnamese. Foreign brides are expected to address the needs of these men and their families regarding biological reproduction, domestic work required for the daily maintenance of the household, and provision of care for the family, including children, elder and sick family members.

In Vietnam, the government's withdrawal from providing key social and economic entitlements has shifted the costs of social reproduction to families. At the same time, government policies have placed a strong emphasis on economic growth, despite sharply rising social inequality and abuse of power. In land-related policies, for instance, the national as well as the local state hold unconditional rights over land, and permanent individual/family ownership is not constitutionalized. These and other state policies and practices have created institutionalized risks and marginalization for rural populations. International labour migration and marriage migration have become an option for survival

*'Marriage migration ... is accessible to women of low social strata because foreign husbands pay brokerage fees whereas, to participate in labour migration, migrants themselves must pay fees between 7,000 and 10,000 US dollars to recruitment agencies.'*

for many rural communities. Marriage migration, moreover, is accessible to women of low social strata because foreign husbands pay brokerage fees whereas, to participate in labour migration, migrants themselves must pay fees between 7,000 and 10,000 US dollars to recruitment agencies.

- *International marriages of Vietnamese women to East Asian men are largely deregulated and dominated by match-making industries in sending and receiving countries that expose brides to the risk of deception and exploitation.*

The majority of Vietnamese spouses are matched with their Taiwanese and Korean husbands through the intermediary of match-making agencies that operate across national borders. In the context of poorly enforced regulations regarding the operation of match-making agencies in Taiwan and South Korea, and almost no regulation in Vietnam, both brides and grooms become vulnerable to deceptive and exploitative conducts.

Match-making agencies in Korea and Taiwan construct a positive image of brides from other less developed nations like Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam as a

traditional 'gift' that will meet the needs for social provisioning and care for husbands and their parents. Attractive advertisements of 'purchasable traditional' spouses on televisions, newspapers and street posters are visible anywhere, thus making access to match-making services easy and convenient.

At the supply end of cross-border match-making, Korean/Taiwanese agencies identify potential local brides through nationwide networks of Vietnamese agencies, sub-agencies, collaborators and various

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informers ranging from local authorities to community members and relatives. Agents in Vietnam construct Taiwanese and Korean men as desirable husbands: urban men with jobs or running their own business, middle-class or even wealthy, decent looking, independent home-owners who are not living with parents or other relatives. Many if not all these descriptions are false. Husbands, in fact, are disproportionately drawn from the lower strata of society and many of them reside in the countryside with the care for their natal families under their responsibilities.

- *Spouses may face potential conflict with the new family due to conflicting expectations regarding gender roles and responsibilities.*

International marriage inevitably involves differences in cultural norms, which can lead to clashing understandings of rights and responsibilities between Vietnamese spouses and their husbands/in-law families. A major area of conflict regards expectations on social reproduction needs: husbands and in-laws expect foreign spouses to fulfil traditional wifely roles and bear children. Yet Vietnamese women also have obligations towards their natal families and there is evidence of conflicts, even domestic violence, when they want to have jobs that will enable them to send remittances to their relatives in Vietnam. While trying to escape revitalization of patriarchy and traditional gender division of labour that have resulted from the State's withdrawal from social services, these women thus fall into even

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more rigid patriarchal regimes and traditional form of gender roles in the receiving country.

- *Despite many unfavourable structural conditions, Vietnamese spouses are strong negotiators when it comes to asserting their position within their husbands' families and host societies.*

The majority of Vietnamese spouses learn how to negotiate their position within the frameworks of rather rigid family and gender norms in Taiwanese and South Korean societies. Common strategies include learning the national languages, actively searching for paid employment and financial independence, social networking with other Vietnamese brides, and getting aware and using legal and social support available to them in their new country. Vietnamese spouses are determined to acquire permanent residence status and citizenship in order to better integrate and gain full access to rights and social entitlements offered by the host government. This active agency of Vietnamese spouses enhances their social status not only in the husband's family but also in the host community.

- *Adaptation to host societies does not mean that spouses break away from Vietnam: they often preserve Vietnamese culture and send significant financial and social remittances back to their families.*

Vietnamese spouses find ways to introduce aspects of Vietnamese culture into their new families and

*'In Vietnam, ... financial and social remittances are ... transforming traditional gender power relations, increasing the value of having a daughter and weakening son preference.'*

communities, for example by cooking Vietnamese meals or by teaching Vietnamese language to their children. They maintain regular contact with their natal family and friends in Vietnam, using mobile phones and the Internet. Some engage in home visits together with children, husbands and in-laws, or they invite their natal parents to visit them abroad or provide care for their children.

Spouses regularly send home remittances that form a substantial portion of the total family income. Families use this money to invest in production and business, education, healthcare, daily consumption and other needs. Social remittances are also valuable, as spouses provide advice to siblings about how to open and run a business, further their education and prepare for different livelihood options alternative to farming.

In Vietnam, these financial and social remittances are also transforming traditional gender power relations,

increasing the value of having a daughter and weakening son preference. Migration of women for marriage abroad, moreover, results in the so-called marriage squeeze (wife deficit) for local men, which increases the bargaining power of women on the local marriage scene.

- *Returning spouses as a result of failed marriage face severe social and institutional stigma and discrimination, making their re-integration difficult.*

A minority of failed marriages is largely due to deception from match-making agencies, inability to negotiate or adapt to host families and societies, and domestic violence. Upon returning home, these women face social stigma in their own communities. Some even experience discrimination from local authorities and encounter barriers in obtaining an identification card, residential registration or birth certificate for their child, or in accessing employment and other social entitlements. While various non-governmental and

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community-based organizations (NGOs and CBOs) provide assistance to women in situations of distress in receiving countries, no such services are currently available to them upon return to Vietnam.

## Conclusion

International marriage migration is a complex process rooted in multiple causes. Women's emigration responds to social reproduction needs in sending as well as receiving countries. The reasons behind the choice of many women to migrate for marriage abroad therefore lie in the broader social context rather than in the motivations of individuals alone. Against the widespread judgement in Vietnam that sees these women as fleeing socialist ideals of marriage and family in search for materialist rewards, they often end up in even more rigid patriarchal regimes that limit their roles to the domestic sphere. Establishing a position requires considerable effort for most women, as they negotiate multiple roles and expectations in sending and host countries. Negative images of emigrated women that predominate in Vietnam contrast with the positive impact of marriage migration on sending communities thanks to significant financial and social remittances that these women contribute to their natal families.

## Implications and recommendations

Current campaigns opposing international marriage migration cannot therefore stop the phenomenon that

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would be better addressed by providing more options in the country for women to consider. This requires long-term efforts and greater support from the state. In particular, the following actions are recommended for the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, and the Vietnamese Women Union:

- *International marriage migration and migrant brides should not be stigmatized.*

Stigma against this phenomenon on behalf of both the state and society is not curbing the flow of migrant brides. Instead, it is humiliating for the women and it overshadows the financial and social contributions they make to their natal families. In order to avoid stigma, many women hide their intention of getting married abroad, which limits their opportunities of acquiring

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sufficient information about their potential spouses or of seeking advice from family and friends and therefore can face more potential risks.

- *Match-making services should be controlled to prevent deceptive and exploitative practices.*

Stigma towards marriage migration has allowed match-making businesses to flourish and exercise their business largely outside formal mechanisms of control. This exposes women to greater risks of being manipulated, cheated or induced to make a hasty decision of marriage without being able to get advice from their family and friends.

- *More practical and comprehensive services for marriage migrants should be promoted prior to departure and in the event of return.*

Those women who aspire to marriage with a foreign spouse must be provided with adequate knowledge of relevant legislation and policies, as well as information

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about the culture of their future spouse, their legal rights as a foreign spouse. In the host country, additional efforts on behalf of Vietnamese embassies and diplomatic missions could be integrated with the services already provided by local NGOs and CBOs. Better services also need to be made available for those returning after a failed marital experience, in order to help them, and dependent children returning with them, reintegrate in their home community, to support them in attaining their full citizen rights and getting back to their normal life. To make such services available, involvement of NGOs or CBOs should be encouraged.

